SNAP CRAFT

VOL. 2

Cássio Ferreira

To my dear Ariana

Thank you for your order.

Consider leaving a review!

★★★★★

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Prologue

Summer of 1, Before Daisy

Press conferences reminded Phineas of the ocean. There was always an outburst of chatter and a barrage of questions whenever the governmental spokesman finished a remark, spaced by silence to hear his responses. Reporters sounded like waves breaking and then receding, building up power for the next surf.

"What about the rest of the survivors?" was the question that pierced through the wall of sound.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have devoted all available units to search for survivors, but now that the first 48 hours have elapsed, we just can't keep all our men here. Hurricane Veronica has caused serious damage in the capital, and the wildfires are still ravaging the East Coast. Every life is precious, but we must allocate our resources to where they're most needed."

More chatter. Phineas had to give points to the admiral for maintaining his calm and composure. He couldn't hear any anxiety or tension in the spokesman's voice, only confidence. He wondered whether he could keep his facial expression neutral, though.

"What is being done about the insufficient number of responders?"

"We've already received permission from the president to summon all reserves, and we're deploying all available units of the National Guard and the Army."

"Is it true that despite all the domestic disasters we're facing, we're still sending more troops overseas?"

"Let me assure you that our manpower allocation has the nation's best interests at heart."

"How do you explain the rising number of catastrophes? What is being done to get to the bottom of why this is happening?"

"Our best minds are working around the clock on this, ladies and gentlemen. We're confident this unlucky streak is almost over. Autumn is starting soon. Wildfires will lose strength, and this unnaturally long tornado season will end too."

"Yeah, right," spat Phineas as he heard the spokesman lying through his teeth.

"After the night comes the dawn, and dawn is upon us. Soon, we should get some much-needed quiet to rebuild and mourn all our losses. Things will get better, folks."

"No, they won't," he heard from the back seat.

Phineas lowered the volume on his car's radio while glancing at the rearview mirror. The remark had come from the large silver sphere which barely fit inside his car.

"Maybe they will," Phineas said. He wasn't sure if he addressed the words to Daisy, himself, or the people on the radio who couldn't hear him. "Are you positive that your predictions are accurate?" Phineas asked his passenger as he took his exit. He was close.

"Sir, this is the 32nd time you've asked me this. I can only give you the same reply I've given you the first 31 times."

"Do you think they will accept?"

"They have no other choice, sir."

As he coasted near the security gate, one of the soldiers came, machine gun in hand, and signaled him to roll down the dark, tinted windows.

"Phineas Cotton," the soldier exclaimed before Phineas could say his name.

Phineas wasn't sure if he was surprised to see him in the flesh or to see him driving. Most tycoons had drivers and rode helicopters. He often got this reaction whenever he went around driving his van.

"Do you need to see my security pass?"

"No, sir, no need. They're expecting you. Please. You can just follow this road, park underground, and take the elevator."

"I know the way."

The soldier frowned at the large sphere inside the car. "What is that?"

"Just some new tech I've been working on."

"Right. Right. By the way, big fan of your work, sir." Turning toward his colleagues, he shouted. "Open the gate!"

Phineas was happy that the guard hadn't demanded to check Daisy's proxy. Time was of the essence.

It was a snowy night, even though it was the middle of the summer. Phineas thought it was the appropriate weather for making a proposal to the council. A summer blizzard was yet another argument in his favor.

Phineas followed the lamp posts that illuminated the cold night and entered the underground parking, leaving the car in the spot saved for visitors. He left the car and opened the trunk of the van. "You can come out," he invited.

Daisy's engines turned on, and she hovered out of the car. They walked together toward the elevator, and Phineas pushed the button. Luckily, the elevator was already on their floor, so the doors instantly opened.

He turned toward Daisy. "Did you do that?"

"What?"

"The elevator. Did you hack it?"

"You told me not to hack government facilities unless it was strictly necessary."

That wasn't a no. "Let's go, Daisy. It's time for the world to meet you."

Round of 32

Chapter 1

Spring of 346, A.D.

"Stupid Alex. Stupid, stupid, stupid Alex," mumbled Kai as he waited under the moonlight. He looked back toward the rocky plain he had just crossed and again to the shimmering field separating his sector from Cassie's. He waited patiently. He stood to avoid falling asleep, but it had been a long trek. Eventually, the pain in his knees and feet surpassed his anger and determination, and he sat.

A hint of movement caught his attention just as he was about to sleep. He jolted upright and found the young woman with golden curls that had enchanted his friend. She was alone, which spelled what Kai already suspected. She looked at him curiously and sadly.

Kai pulled a series of sheets from his backpack and unfolded them. It had taken thought to devise the questions that would give him answers to what he needed to know with only 'yes' and 'no.'

He flashed the first sheet. 'Alex exiled. Is he there?'

The girl's eyes widened, and she hurriedly shook her head.

He showed her the next card. 'Did your sector make it to the top 10%?'

In response, she stared down at her feet, and her beautiful, elegant figure seemed to shrink and condense into that of a sad little girl. Knowing that his friend never even had a chance to land in the next sector, Kai grew more irritated. He got the next card.

'Did you know he would ask for exile?'

She nodded.

'Did you really like him?'

She nodded affirmatively.

'Will you ask for exile next year?'

She stood paralyzed, looking scared.

Kai looked at the two next cards. Seeing her reaction, he selected the one appropriate to her answer. 'He liked you more than you liked him.' He let all the cards fall onto the ground, turned around, and left without looking back.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

The silence was getting to Kai. He wished he had a way to create some white noise, or noise of any color for that matter. In the white room's calm, his breathing began to sound like a thunderstorm, and he could feel the blood thumping in his ears. Kai tried keeping his thoughts busy with something other than his senses. He conjured an image of Ariel.

The image of a bedridden Ariel with yellowed eyes and an overwhelming cough shook him out of his oversensitivity. He closed his eyes tightly, tried to imagine a healthy Ariel, and finally felt relief. How he wished he could talk to her while he waited to be transported to the new arena. What was she doing? Hopefully, she was having a good day. In stage 2 of the blight, there were still plenty of those. If so, she had probably packed her lunch and was spending her day in the museum. He couldn't wait to tell her they could finally start a family. She would be thrilled to hear that. She had always wanted to be a mom. But he wanted to be able to say more to her when he saw her. He wanted to tell her he had secured allcure for both of them, and they would stick around to see their children grow. For that, he had to keep doing well in these exams.

Also, more than daydreams, a new type of thought assailed Kai's mind with fury. He had reached the first 64 places from five hundred-plus sectors. He still couldn't match Balin's achievement, who had reached the top 5. But if he kept this up, he would catch up to the score of his ancestor and secure the right to do what Balin did. He could set new rules and redefine the culture of his sector.

The responsibility was huge. Was there anything he wanted to change about their way of life? He and Ariel had discussed this before, and so had he and Alex when he was still around. But it was one thing to dream about it and another to have the legitimacy to enforce these changes. He tried putting the distracting thoughts aside. Thinking about this wouldn't help

him do better in the exams. He had to focus on what was right in front of him.

After the last round, he had gained a new goal. He wanted to get as many mythic cards as possible. They were the cream of the crop. Not only did they have incredible stats, but they also came with their own console upgrades. The card with the best chance of growing up to the mythic rank was [Fire]. He would feed it as much as possible with as many combustible items as he could find in this round.

He also focused on the two new upgrades for the snapping round. One was [Zoom]. He could now capture objects from a long distance away. The other upgrade was the [Android Companion]. He had no idea what that upgrade did. Given that [Flying Drone] had been rebranded as an upgrade to [Droid Companion], he guessed it was some sort of robot that helped him explore the map. The sooner he figured out the advantages of either one, the better he would do in this round.

The countdown was nearly over. He ran some numbers in his mind and concluded it would be around noon in this new stage. That meant light wouldn't be a problem, and he wouldn't need to walk around carrying his gaslamp. He braced himself, and as the countdown reached zero, he was transported to the new snapping arena in the blink of an eye.

Instead of a sunny stage, Kai was met with a dark sky. Rain poured all around him, reducing visibility. The water fell right through him and onto the ground. Kai checked the scoreboard at the top of his vision. His opponent was 14 points ahead of him. He gulped. This game was going to be neck to neck. He couldn't expect every game to be as leisurely as the last round. He would have to give it his all this round, or he wouldn't go through to the next.

With a heavier weight on his shoulders, Kai's attention turned toward his surroundings. He was in an urban area. He spotted a few chimneys and some working AC. Interestingly enough, he was on a rooftop again. Unlike the last stage, this one seemed in good condition.

Off to the side, he heard the buzz of electricity and smoke coming out from giant letters, which spelled 'Hotel.' They shone with a bright red neon light. As the raindrops hit the hot lamps, they instantly turned to steam. He saw many more neon signs around him. Through the heavy rain, he could read the names of restaurants, stores, and shops.

"What is this place?" he murmured.

"It appears to be a city."

Kai jumped in fright at the voice that had spoken from behind him.

"Late eighties of the common era, or seventy before Daisy. Whichever dating method you prefer."

The voice that addressed him was soft, almost lazy. It came from a figure with a slender figure and feminine curves. Its whole body was covered in what looked like porcelain but could be silver metal. The facial features were exquisitely sculpted and pleasingly symmetrical, albeit too perfect. The head was hairless, which gave the android an even more artificial appearance.

It looked like a work of art in which the artist wanted to convey that they could create a more beautiful human than the real thing, but they had held back and made a few purposeful accidents to avoid disturbing human sensitivity.

Kai stared at the android, and the android stared back. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Congratulations on being the first trial runner to unlock a mythic card! You even found the [Mega Scrapdroid]. Good for you, Kai. It was only appropriate that you be rewarded. That's why I'll be your companion for the rest of the exams."

Kai gulped. After spending so many hours alone with his thoughts, having someone to talk to made him feel like he was in a dream. He tried pinching himself, but what was the point? There was no pain in this exam. "What can I call you?"

"Maia."

"And what are you? I mean, what do you do?"

"I'm an android companion. It's right there in the name, Kai. My job is to keep you company. I also have been programmed with some random pieces of information. I have a good comprehensive library in history and physics. Your whole performance so far has also been added to my memory. So I know what you already showed you know."

He wasn't sure what to make of this. Had he been given a nanny? Or was it a walking encyclopedia? The truth was that having someone to talk to was soothing. It felt so lonely out here. He'd been alone with his thoughts for too long. The benefit of having someone whom he could bounce ideas off sounded nice.

Maia also came with a comprehensive library. History was more of Ariel's department, and even though he had a working knowledge of physics, he didn't know much. Having someone he could ask questions on these two things could make a difference during the rest of the exams.

"How do you know I was the first to find a mythic card? Who told you?"

"Mother."

"Mother? How could an android have a mother? Are you talking about Daisy?"

"Yes. She's been enjoying your performance. But I can't speak too much about that. She made me promise I'd keep some things secret. She wants this upgrade to be fair enough to reflect your achievements. She doesn't want me to help you too much, though. That wouldn't be fair to other trial runners."

Kai clicked his tongue. What was this about? Had Daisy taken a special interest in him or something? Did he seem so lonely that she had decided to give him a *friend* out of pity? "Did Daisy choose your libraries?"

"No. It was random."

Kai frowned. This was an unforeseen development. If he was the first player to unlock a mythic card, he supposed receiving a special upgrade was a good reward. He smirked. If he had been the first to get a mythic card, he wasn't doing too bad. He checked the system clock and gasped. He had wasted precious time talking to the android.

"Well, I have to focus now, Maia. I need to find my bearings. We can chat more later, OK?"

"Affirmative."

Kai tried to shift his attention to the arena around him. But he found himself going back to looking at Maia. It was as if she occupied all of his perceptions. After spending so much time with just Ariel, talking to anyone else was a powerful experience. This was only worsened by the isolation he'd been experiencing in the exams.

At first, he could only think about the android regarding him, some curiosity in her artificial yet expressive face. He sighed. He was very used to living under the watch of Daisy's cybermonkeys. He just had to think of her as a chatty version of them. He tried to make the sight of Maia overlap with a memory of a monkey with cybernetic implants cleaning his

city. Once he could do so, he managed to pull his focus away from Maia and back to the exam.

He couldn't find anything of interest on the rooftop. He tried looking over the edge of the building. That's when he saw something that shocked him far more than the android. A parade of colorful umbrellas formed a complex ballet at the street level. Cars filled the roads. He felt tears form in his eyes. People. So many people. He had never seen so many people in his life.

He saw a woman in a raincoat and two little figures carrying umbrellas with cartoons painted on them. He collapsed to his knees and lost all composure. He couldn't stop sobbing. Children. The last time he'd seen a child was when he was one. He had never seen anyone younger than him before.

"Crying? Computing. Oh, I see. You and your wife are the only ones left in your sector. Seeing other people like this must be a real shock for you. 'Re-entry shock,' I believe it's called."

The obnoxious captioning of his emotional moment annoyed him but pulled him out of the shock of seeing so many people. He was thankful to Maia for that. "I have to find a way down." He looked for a ladder for a few moments but remembered that he couldn't get hurt during the exams! He didn't need a ladder. He ran toward the edge and jumped.

It was funny how many thoughts could flash through one's mind mid-air. The moment his feet left the edge of the building, he tried to understand why he had been so quick in jumping and realized he couldn't say.

Was it because there were more things to capture down there? No, it wasn't so simple. Kai could feel it was more than that. He had been drawn toward an irresistible siren's call. He needed to see the faces of the people under those umbrellas. Above all, he wanted to see if it was true that children were the most beautiful thing in the world.

Kai landed. It was much sooner than expected. He looked down, wide-eyed. He was floating in mid-air. What was happening? He hadn't been able to fall. Kai stomped and felt the invisible floor—the arena's edge. The floor of the arena was stories above the street level.

The people down there were outside the arena. Kai heard a thump as Maia landed next to him. He looked at her and flushed. She smiled radiantly at him.

"Shut up," he said to Maia.

She bobbed her head to the side. "But I wasn't talking."

This was a lot to digest between being stuck with Maia, seeing people, and being on a rooftop under neon lights and the heavy rain. The rooftops were the arena. He looked at the buildings throughout the city. They all had different heights. Some were shorter than the arena floor and out of his reach. Others were taller. That meant he had to find a way to climb them up or go into each building and explore what was inside. Each building was like an island in an invisible ocean that he would have to visit, looking for things worth capturing. All the while, there was a whole new world filled with things he could capture down on the streets.

Chapter 2

Spring of 346, A.D.

Sunny had chosen a house right next to an old workshop. Sometimes, Kai wondered if Sunny's house wasn't the workshop itself. The feeling was only aggravated by the fact that Sunny had never let Kai enter her house. It was a weird quirk of hers. No one was allowed in.

As he walked through the door, he passed the rows of racks filled with half-assembled machinery. Wires and parts stuck out of their metallic chrome, steel, and brass shells. He found Sunny hunched over a piece of equipment. Even from here, Kai could tell she was fixing a power drill.

He took a moment to admire how she blindly reached into a toolbox back and grabbed what she needed. Every wrench, plier, and screwdriver she pulled out of the toolbox was spotless and shiny, glistening under the light of the powerful lamps that assisted her in her meticulous work.

"I didn't see you at the bonfire, Kai," she said without looking back.

"Sorry. I know it was your turn today. That's why I'm here, though. I came to find out what I need to do today."

She let out a deep sigh, probably annoyed at having to leave the repair half-finished, and put all the tools she had taken out of her toolbox in their precise places. She then removed her goggles and took out her gloves. Finally, she spun her stool and faced Kai.

Her hair was gray but still glossy, and she held it in a ponytail whenever she was in the workshop. She wore green overalls today and always had a hammer and a measuring tape hanging off a practical yet fashionable toolbelt. She met his gaze.

"Where were you?"

Kai stayed silent.

"The wall, ey? Was the girl there?"

"Yes," he answered. Sunny prodded information out of him as easily as she pulled parts out of a machine. There was no use in fighting the interrogation.

"Was Alex there?"

"No."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I honestly don't know."

She smiled. "Whenever I find something I can't fix, I try to focus on something that I can actually repair. See that chainsaw there? Why don't you try to fix it?"

Kai sat down and started tearing the machine apart. There was a slight burnt scent coming off somewhere. He tried to spot what had burned up and ruined the machine.

"Do you think she'll forgive me?"

"I do."

"You didn't forgive Neil."

He heard her sigh. "No, boy. Neil never forgave himself. I forgave him. Learn something from him. If you want Ariel to forgive, you must forgive yourself first."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

In the quarry, Kai learned that he could photograph things outside the arena. That's how he had managed to get a hold of the [Rusty Pickaxe] card. That meant that everything that was happening in the streets below could be captured with his camera. He pointed the camera at the scene below him and looked at it through his viewfinder.

The image was fuzzy. He was too high. He could only see the tiny umbrellas and the cars, but he couldn't properly frame them. Daisy would probably reject these pictures. It was a good thing he had bought [Zoom]. He turned the camera over in his hands, looking for something different, and found a small lever.

He pushed it, and his camera lens stretched, startling him. He then pulled it, and the lens shrank again. He leaned his eye against the viewfinder and tried pushing the lever again. The image was enhanced, and

what had been barely perceptible due to the distance and heavy rain became clear. It was almost as if he had been transported to the street. He pulled his eye from the viewfinder and then put it again.

He framed one of the people walking in the street while trying his best to keep a steady hand. With such zoom, every small camera movement made the image shake.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 19 of 20.

Passerby (Common)

1 of 4

One more face on the street.

Hp: 0

Vp: 3

Although he was slightly disappointed with the card he received, he was glad he had invested in this upgrade. "Sweet. This zoom is great."

"Yes! Zooming eight times is already respectable."

He turned toward Maia, only now realizing he had spoken to her—the words had just come out. She regarded him with an artificial smile. Maybe he did need a companion, someone to talk to. "True. I can see what's happening down there."

"How wonderful, Kai. Did you know the first zoom lens for still cameras was the Voigtländer-Zoomar 36-82mm f/2.8?"

"No, I didn't, Maia."

"And did you know that the word 'zoom' might come from the sound that cameras such as the one you're holding make when you zoom in and out?"

"That's fascinating."

"And did you know…"

Kai tuned Maia out after the fifth piece of trivia she shared about zoom and lenses. Goodness gracious. Maia was making him think of Trudy's stories about children. She had said there was an age when they just didn't stop talking. Was this why Daisy considered Maia's presence a reward? Was Daisy trying to give him a glimpse into what child-raising was like? Was she offering him a look into his future?

Kai had a decision to make. Would he focus on exploring the area below him through his zoomed lens? There was the off-chance of his opponent not having a [Zoom] upgrade. If they didn't, they would have to settle with the resources available on the rooftops and inside the buildings tall enough to pierce through the arena's invisible floor. It seemed imprudent to let them harvest this map's resources unhindered.

"Maia, I'm going to take a look around."

"I'll follow."

"You can stay here."

"I can also go."

"No. Please, stay here. You're distracting me."

"I'm sorry, it's not like you have the choice. I'm an Android companion. A companion accompanies."

He sighed. It looks like he had no choice. Maybe this upgrade was so good that Daisy had to make it slightly annoying. Otherwise, it would be too overpowered. Kai slumped his shoulders and grunted. "Fine. Do whatever you want."

"You humans can be so rude sometimes."

Maia was right. Why was Kai being so snarky? He looked at her impassive facial expression. Maybe it was because of all the pressure he was under.

"I'm sorry, Maia. It's not your fault. You are a part of Daisy, and I'm a little mad at her. That's all."

"Why would you be mad? She did the impossible! If it weren't for her, your race would have been extinct."

"I know, I know. I just don't agree with how she does some things."

Kai ran through the rooftop ledge to where he had spawned and headed toward the next building. Whereas the building where he had appeared in was about ten stories high, the next one over was slightly taller. He crossed the space between buildings and slammed into the wall. "What is happening here?"

"I know this one! I know this one! You just ran into a wall."

Kai shot her a hurt look. "That's not what I mean. I should be able to go through the wall."

"Well, you didn't."

"I don't like this."

"Why not?" asked Maia.

"The rules haven't changed since the exams started. Why would Daisy make objects intangible in every other arena and then solidify the buildings in this one?"

"Why?"

Kai stared at Maia, who was expecting him to answer his question. The change in rules troubled him. If Daisy could change rules midway through the competition, what could he expect for the following grounds?

Kai looked back at the rooftop where he had started. He had been able to run through the ledge. Why was that building intangible, and this one wasn't? He thought of another possibility. He ran in the opposite direction.

"What are you doing, Kai?"

"I just had an idea."

"Would you care to share?"

"I need to test it first." Maybe the buildings were intangible. What if he had spawned right next to the edge of the arena? And what if Daisy made it coincide with the wall of the building? If that was the case, he was looking at this all wrong. He reached another building that pierced through the arena's floor. This time, he managed to phase into the building.

"I knew it," he shouted in triumph. "That building was at the edge of the arena. Your mom can be tricky. She did it on purpose to mess with my head."

"Maybe it was just a coincidence."

"I doubt it."

Kai smiled. He was happy that Daisy had kept the rules consistent. If she had kept changing the rules between rounds, the exams would have been much more complicated. At least he could count on the lessons he had learned in previous rounds.

Inside the building, it was dark. The lights were out.

"Inventory."

The floating window containing all his cards, his gaslamp, and dimensional gloves appeared. He reached into it and grabbed the gaslamp and the gloves.

"Maia, would you be so kind as to hold this gaslamp for me?"

"Of course! Did you know this gaslamp runs on a combination of calcium carbide and water? When mixed, they produce acetylene, creating this light you see!"

"I did not know that." The light helped him find a switch. He put on the dimensional gloves. As they lit up, he flipped the switch, and the whole floor lit up. It was an open floor plan, with the occasional load-bearing pillar obstructing the view. This suggested to Kai that this place was supposed to be an office.

The floor was empty. Not abandoned, just empty. The walls were freshly painted, and the floors were used but solid. All the lights were working, and the windows were clean. Everything was in good repair, but he found no signs of anyone inhabiting this place.

Kai began looking for things worth capturing. There were windows, which he was sure he could photograph. There were windows everywhere, though. He couldn't see it being worth his while. After looking around, Kai found something he believed he could use. It was a power outlet. Kai photographed it, hoping he could get a good card out of it.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 18 of 20.

Power Outlet (Uncommon)

Connection point for electrical devices to access the electrical supply.

1 of 3

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

It didn't have impressive stats but seemed to have potential for crafting. The possibility of him being able to get electricity-related cards out of it was what made Kai take a photograph in the first place.

"See anything else worth photographing, Maia?"

"That's something I shouldn't answer, Kai. Sorry. If it has to do with history and physics, I can help. But if not, you have to figure it out alone."

"Fair enough."

"Did you know that one of the first power sockets was called the 'electrolier' socket, designed by Harvey Hubbell and patented in 1904?"

"Thank you for the help, Maia."

After ensuring there was nothing else worth capturing inside the building, he moved on to the next one. He then headed again toward the arena's edge and, as in previous rounds, searched the map in a whirlpool pattern.

Kai had worried that exploring this map would take a very long time because it essentially had two floors. But after looking at his sixth rooftop, he realized they were almost identical. They all contained the same elements: AC units, chimneys, TV dishes, and neon lights. Given their commonness, Kai didn't bother photographing them. They would probably only grant him subpar cards.

Even as he scanned the rooftops and the content of buildings, Kai didn't stop paying attention to what was happening on the streets. It seemed to be rush hour in the city. Everywhere he looked, people were walking with their umbrellas.

As he made his way around the map, Kai found a street that looked nicer than the rest of town. The architecture here was exquisite, but the pops of green in the gray city drew his attention.

"Look, Maia! This street has trees on it! These will be great for my [Fire] card!" He mentally marked the location on the map.

"Kai, you mentioned that you were unhappy with how my mom does things?" asked Maia.

"Yes, that's true," Kai answered as he hopped over another rooftop and headed down the next street.

"Like what?"

Kai looked at Maia for a few moments. He should have been focusing on the exams, but before he realized it, he was already babbling. "Look, I know your mom's code prevents her from killing people."

"Of course."

"Sometimes it feels like the exams are a sneaky way around that limitation. I don't like that."

"What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't understand. You're just zeros and ones."

"And you adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine," she countered. "Why don't you try me?"

"Some people say that Daisy hasn't saved all of humanity. They say she has poisoned it, instead." Kai didn't know why he was bothering to discuss Seth's lessons with Maia. Maybe it was because this map reminded him of

how numerous humanity used to be and how far down they had fallen. Or perhaps it was because Maia was a part of Daisy. "Some say that she made us choose between starving and breeding."

"That's so dramatic, Kai! You're such a drama queen. Did I use the idiom correctly?"

Kai gritted his teeth. This Maia was annoying him.

Seeing how Kai wasn't contradicting her, Maia continued, "If it weren't for my mom, no people would be left! You can't keep overusing your resources unbridled and expect the planet to sustain you. She was just logical enough to find a way for all those who deserve it to perpetuate their lineage."

"I've heard the textbook explanation, Maia."

"Let me ask you, would you prefer to cut someone's arm off or to save their life?" she pressed.

"I would ask the patient what he wanted before deciding. Daisy made the decision for us. She took away our free will!"

"She implemented rules to protect you. Is gravity an attack on your freedom? Is time an attack on your free will? You're limited by them, too."

"It's not that simple."

"Oh, but it is. You're just too emotional to see it."

Kai took a deep breath. He knew the arguments for and against Daisy. He had defended Daisy multiple times when discussing with Alex. He was wasting precious time in this existential debate regardless of who was right. He didn't have time for this. "I don't want to discuss this anymore. I need to get my head back into the exams."

Chapter 3

Summer of 346, A.D.

After Alex went into exile and Ariel stopped talking to him, Kai felt the loneliest he'd ever been. Neil was gone, and so was Albert. His pickings for possible friends were becoming slimmer by the year.

Before, Kai would spend time in the museum, but that was Ariel's hangout, and whenever he bumped into her, he left the encounter wanting to curl up into a ball and cry. He had started going to Sunny's workshop, and they had become much closer over the past few weeks.

"Try starting it now."

"OK!" Kai yanked the rope to start the generator. It clicked, and for a few moments, he believed that the machine would start, but then it suddenly died, and a poof of black smoke came out.

"Hmmm… It wasn't the belt, huh?"

"Nope. Could be the batteries," suggested Kai.

"It's unlikely, but possible. Let's switch the batteries to see if we can eliminate that theory."

Kai ran to the racks looking for batteries that would fit into this generator, and once he'd come back, Sunny had already unfastened half of the screws on the generator's casing. Kai grabbed a screwdriver and helped unscrew the ones left.

"Sunny?" tried Kai as Sunny removed the old batteries from the generator.

"Yeah?"

"Neil told me he believed winning the trials had to do with survival."

"So he did."

"Albert thought it was about understanding the past."

"Right. Everyone has their theory."

"What's yours?"

"Pass me the wrench." Kai did. "Let's see... I believe it's about engineering, of course." She laughed. "I think it's human nature. People make the big picture about the little things they study. Maybe it's a way to find more purpose in our work."

"Go on. Why engineering?"

"Daisy is a machine. Engineers made her. Therefore, to understand how she operates, there's nothing better than putting on an engineer's shoes."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think of the randomness problem. A computer can't generate true random numbers. They either get pi's unending sequence of decimals, the system clock, or whatever else to derive a number from it."

"Right. So?"

"That makes Daisy a little less scary. At least for me."

Kai grinned. "Because she can't come up with true random numbers?"

"No, because there's stuff she can't do. Seven point three."

"I'm sorry?"

"It was a number that just popped into my head. See? I'm better than Daisy at something."

Kai laughed at Sunny's bragging.

"That should do it. Try starting it now."

Kai pulled the string that kicked off the generator, and the machine ran smoothly this time. "How about that? I was right!"

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

Kai continued exploring the map. After a few moments, he looked back and found the android smiling at him. Kai clicked his tongue. Was this android really here to help him? Or was she here only to distract him?

Twenty-five minutes had passed since this round had begun. By now, he had explored much of the city and found little variety. Buildings were, for the most part, residential. There was the occasional shop and kiosk and a few other buildings here and there. He found two more streets with

trees in them. The trees were all of the same species. If memory served him right, they were elm trees.

All that was left to explore was the middle section of the map. Daisy had made the lives of trial runners easier this round. After walking around the full perimeter, Kai had already established that the tallest building in the city marked the center of the map. It was an impressive landmark, easily seen from everywhere else in town.

As Kai drew closer, keeping his eyes away from the city's skyline and down on the city below him became a greater effort. Thankfully, he persisted. He spotted something he hadn't seen anywhere else in the arena. Several cars waited in line behind vehicles parked near giant metal boxes. He grabbed his camera and saw someone leave their car, pull out a gun tied to a hose, and then stick it into the car. After doing this, people walked to a nearby kiosk. With the help of his zoom, he could see the colorful wrappings of candy bars and potato chip bags through the shop's glass window.

"A gas station," he murmured.

"Did you know that the first gas station was in Pittsburgh, USA, in 1913 of the common era?"

"I did not, no. I had never seen one. I only saw these in shows and movies."

"That's only natural. My mom has destroyed all usage of fossil fuels."

"Except when she needs plastic for her servers," accused Kai.

"I meant all of *humanity's* unbridled usage of fossil fuels."

He smirked. It looked like androids also had a temper.

This gas station was something Kai didn't want to miss. He pointed the camera at one of the fuel pumps and captured it.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 17 of 20.

Fuel Dispenser (Uncommon)

A device utilized to dispense fuel into vehicles.

2 of 3

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

Finally, signs of activity from his opponent. They had taken one photo of the gas station. After thinking for a moment, Kai decided to empty the pool.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 16 of 20.

Fuel Dispenser (Uncommon)

A device utilized to dispense fuel into vehicles.

3 of 3

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

His priority right now was to grow his [Fire] card, and [Fuel Dispenser] had to synergize with it. He looked at the scoreboard and found he had only scored four points. However, his opponent had widened the gap. They had collected eight points. It was depressing.

Kai still had ninety minutes left and was confident he could close the gap with the right ingredients.

Kai now ran the last stretch toward the center of the map. He tested his hand against the wall of the building, and seeing it phase through, he walked in. Like in other buildings, this one was well-kept but empty. He located the stairs and tried setting his foot on them. His feet just went through them.

For a moment, Kai wondered whether he could stand on firm ground if he wore the gloves. Given that he'd been able to stand on the rooftop at the factory in the previous round, it was only logical that he would also land his feet on solid ground when he placed them on staircases or ladders. Once he put on the dimensional gloves, and they lit up, he tested the staircase again, and this time, his feet landed on solid ground.

Kai grinned. This was good news to him. After all, if climbing this building required a special upgrade, such as the dimensional gloves, maybe his opponent hadn't been able to explore the treasure trove yet. This building's rooftop was out of reach to anyone who couldn't cancel the holographic effects of the map.

As Kai climbed step after step, the sound of his sneakers hitting the cement echoed in the empty stairwell.

"Interesting."

Kai's heart skipped a beat. "Goodness, gracious. I forgot you were there." The android went through periods of non-stop chatter, intercalated with periods of feline silence. She was going to give him a heart attack at this rate.

"I have nothing in my database about who invented stairs."

"So?"

"It's one of humanity's most used inventions, and yet you can't honor the engineer who created it. Fascinating."

"Here, Maia, please walk in front of me so that I can see you."

"Sure thing, Kai!"

Finally, Kai and Maia reached the very top of the building. The view from up here was incredible. As far as he could see, there were buildings, light, and movement. Not even the stormy clouds and the pouring rain could erase the brilliant lights of the city.

Kai walked around, investigating what made this place the treasure trove of this map. He grimaced as he spotted only more of what he'd seen on other rooftops. There were satellite dishes, AC units, and chimneys. They were bigger than the ones he'd seen in other smaller buildings but unremarkable in every other way. He kept patiently looking. Finally, he found something different.

There was a thick, tall copper pole. It ended in a small sphere. The base of the pole was wrapped around thick wiring that disappeared down the side of the building. If he was correct, this was a lightning rod. He hadn't seen any on other rooftops. Perhaps this was one of the map's treasures. He captured it.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 15 of 20.

Lightning Rod (Rare)

Metal conductor that redirects lightning to prevent damage and fire hazards.

1 of 3

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

He grinned. For him to get the first shot meant that his opponent lacked the means to get up here. He took a second shot.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 14 of 20.

Lightning Rod (Rare)

Metal conductor that redirects lightning to prevent damage and fire hazards.

2 of 3

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

In one go, his point count had gone up by 12, shortening the point difference and granting him a little peace of mind. Kai looked for other things worth photographing up here and found nothing. Could this be it? The treasure trove in the pine woodland had only been a dead tree, and the one in the desert had been an acacia tree. Maybe [Lightning Rod] was all he would get from here.

He looked at the stormy clouds. It had been pouring since this round started, but there weren't any signs of lightning. He would keep his eyes open just in case. There was the chance that to make this card stand out, he had to charge it with lightning.

Kai removed one of his gloves, and the building became a hologram, which he fell through until he landed on the arena floor. With this, there was only one little part of the map he hadn't visited yet. There was only one last street to go through.

Kai walked through the building to the side opposite the gas station and found a particularly beautiful building. Its architecture stood out from the cookie-cutter one he'd seen around town. It came from a time when people cared as much about beauty as they did about functionality. Once Kai saw it, all the other buildings in the city became dull by comparison.

The building was wider and larger than it was taller, with a beautiful wide staircase leading into it. Kai walked until he was situated precisely above it. The rooftop was a few meters below the arena's invisible floor, and Kai couldn't step on it. Even so, he could peer into the building through the skylights.

He knew this type of building very well. Warm, inviting lights illuminated the people pulling books out of shelves or those who read

them. The shelves were filled with books of all colors and sizes. Even from out here, Kai felt he could hear the silence within. It was a library.

Suspicious of why Daisy had made this building so conspicuous, Kai pointed the camera at the skylight and adjusted his zoom. The zoom was good enough for him to make out the names of some titles on the shelves. 'Planet Ignis,' 'Hidden Class: Pacifist,' 'Ambyssus.' None of the names sounded familiar. He tried zooming in and out and frowned. It was unlikely that he would get a good shot of the books on the shelves.

He kept exploring the building through his viewfinder and found a table with a book opened on it. There was no one reading it. Curious, he zoomed eight times, the maximum his camera currently allowed him. It was barely enough to read what it said. It had equations. Was it a math book? As he scanned through them, he felt butterflies in his stomach.

"Loyalty plus affection equals love," he read aloud.

Love (Rare)

[Loyalty] + [Affection]

Recipe book updated!

"That's beautiful, Kai."

"What would you know about beautiful…" Mumbled Kai under his breath. Maia made him feel like a grumpy old man. She brought out the worst in him.

"I was just reading the book down there. That's where your mom hid this map's recipes."

"Uuuh! Mom is so clever!"

For once, Kai agreed with the android. He kept reading through the book and eventually found one more recipe.

Wisdom (Rare)

[Knowledge] + [Sadness]

Recipe book updated!

This was a weird recipe. Why was [Sadness] an ingredient to obtain wisdom? He scratched his head. More than that, how was he supposed to photograph this stuff? How could one photograph loyalty? Or sadness?

Kai tapped his foot. These things were abstract, but that didn't mean they were impossible to photograph. Hadn't he captured an abstract

concept in the last arena when he photographed [Neglect]? All he had to do was frame a landscape or a group of objects representing these concepts.

He reread the recipes. "Knowledge…" He looked at the recipe and then at the library. Kai adjusted his zoom to frame a whole shelf of books and tried taking a photograph. Even if his hunch was wrong, in the worst-case scenario, books could be offered as a sacrifice to his [Fire] card.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 13 of 20.

Knowledge (Uncommon)

Acquisition and understanding of information.

1 of 3

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Bingo! He got the first ingredient! This was excellent news. If he could find at least one of the ingredients on the map, chances were that the rest could be harvested here, too. He took another shot. If this recipe was like [Scrapdroid], he couldn't afford to miss out on an opportunity to get two copies of each. Besides, the victory points it gave were very good.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 12 of 20.

Knowledge (Uncommon)

Acquisition and understanding of information.

2 of 3

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

With two [Knowledge] cards in his hand, now, it was a matter of finding out where he could find the rest of the components. He was confident that he wouldn't find anything that represented loyalty or affection on the city's rooftops. If there was a place where these cards would be hidden, it had to be the streets below. It was time to explore the city through the viewfinder of his camera.

Chapter 4

Summer of 346, A.D.

A few weeks had passed since Alex had deserted. To make it worse, Ariel was the one summoned to the exam. Needless to say, her results were horrible. The combination of grief from losing her brother, anger at Kai, and Daisy blues in her system was devastating. At least, a little of her anger at Kai had abated.

Kai spared a look at Ariel and found her staring daggers at him. Nope. She was still furious.

"Einstein said that scientists investigate that which already is, but engineers create that which has never been," quoted Sunny as she faced the sunrise bonfire.

"Scientists care about the path, engineers care about the destination. Scientists care about understanding the world, and engineers care about improving it. Which is best? Ariel!"

"Neither."

"Correct. Clara and I have arranged a two-day long lesson. Today, we'll focus on the advantages of putting on an engineer's hat. Tomorrow, Clara will show us when it is best to think like a scientist."

Sunny reached into her bag and grabbed a wooden box. Kai stretched his neck to get a good look but didn't recognize it.

"Clara, grab the box," Sunny said as she threw it. Clara easily caught it. Now closer to the box, Kai could see its lid had a series of small movable pieces.

"This is a puzzle box. By moving the pieces, you can open it. Please open the box, Clara." Sunny grabbed a stopwatch and punched it to time Clara's performance.

Clara delicately searched the box with her fingers and moved pieces around. After she prodded the first click in the mechanism, she quickly got a second one and then a third.

"Four minutes and twelve seconds, not bad. Did you see how Clara tried to understand the puzzle and how it worked? She thought as a scientist. Let me show you how an engineer might solve this problem differently."

Sunny grabbed a second puzzle box, similar to the last one, and threw the stopwatch at Ariel. "Time me, darling."

"One, two, three."

As soon as Ariel said three, Sunny threw the box to the ground and stomped it with her boot.

"Two seconds," declared Sunny, triumphantly.

"But you didn't solve the puzzle!" protested Ariel.

"I never said the goal was to solve the puzzle. What I said is that we had to open the box."

*

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

Kai stood over one of the busiest streets in the arena. He still had one hour on the clock, and his goal was to find the rest of the ingredients in the library's recipes. As he did that, he would look for anything interesting that seemed worth many points.

"What are you up to, Kai?"

Kai found Maia sitting cross-legged next to him. "You walk so quietly. You keep startling me."

"Maybe it's because I don't have a heartbeat or need to breathe. That makes me less perceptible to life forms."

"Perhaps."

"You didn't answer me. What are you up to?"

"I'm going to start exploring the streets below using the [Zoom] upgrade."

"What do you hope to find?"

29

"The ingredients to the recipes I found in the library. If not that, more stuff I can use to grow [Fire]."

"Did you know that Greeks believed that fire was gifted to men by a titan named Prometheus? Their legends say that he climbed Mount Olympus, the realm of the gods, and stole fire from the hearth of Zeus. He concealed the fire within a hollow reed and brought it to Earth, sharing it with humanity. He wanted humans to be able to cook food, stay warm, and protect themselves. Zeus was so mad that he punished him to eternal torture."

"I've heard the story."

Kai pushed and pulled the lever to experiment with the correct zoom to explore the streets through his viewfinder. After a few adjustments, he settled with a three-time zoom. It was enough to have a clear view while letting him cover ground more easily.

"You also mentioned recipes. Did you know that the first recorded recipe was for Sumerian beer? I'll tell you the recipe. First, you crush the barley and emmer wheat. Then, you mix the crushed grains with water to form a dough. You will want to shape…"

"You'll tell me later if you don't mind. I'm busy here. OK?"

"Of course, Kai."

Maia was a never-ending source of trivia and jibber-jabber. Thankfully, she somewhat listened to him. Even if he didn't want to admit it, her presence was comforting. Kai now focused on the street below him. A green cross was on the side of a building, marking it as a pharmacy. There was a massive yellow neon letter sign showing a cinema. He also spotted a barbershop and a kiosk. The architecture of this age was completely different from the one in his sector, but Kai still managed to recognize all of the facilities. It was a good thing Ariel made him watch all those pre-turnover movies.

He moved on to the street itself. There were lamp posts on either side of the road, helping the neon signs illuminate the street darkened by the storm clouds and rain. He spotted a phone cabin, a few postboxes, and two fire hydrants.

Kai shifted his focus to the people. He had thought that when he zoomed in on each passerby, he would see how each was different and unique. His hopes were shattered, though. It was the complete opposite. Even after zooming in, all he could see were people trying to find refuge

from the rain. The heavy raincoats and the open umbrellas reduced the incredible variety of mankind to dull, impermeable monotony.

He kept his eye on the viewfinder, drawing 'S' shapes in the air as he studied the street under a closer view, looking for whatever precious treasure he could capture with his camera. In his mind, he must have looked like a snake charmer trying to make elegant moves with a clumsy camera.

Kai saw a mother walking hand in hand with her child. He zoomed eight times on them. Now that he had zoomed in closer, he could tell it was a little girl. She had an elegant clumsiness to her. He watched on for a while and couldn't stop smiling. It looked like she only had two speeds. Hopping and running. She didn't stop still for one second and didn't seem to know how to walk calmly. Her face was hidden behind a high collar, pink scarf, and a cozy hat, but that didn't make her any less beautiful or fascinating.

Even though this wasn't one of the ingredients in the recipe, Kai couldn't stop himself. The sight of a child was just too moving. He framed the girl and took a photo.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 11 of 20.

Child (Common)

Young human being in the early stages of life, characterized by growth and curiosity.

1 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 0

Kai gulped. Why were the stats of this card so low? Not even the rusty junk of the factory arena was this bad. How dare Daisy make something so beautiful, such a cheap card! And putting a 'common' label on a child like this? The nerve!

"I'm super mad at Daisy right now," he told Maia.

She giggled. "You humans and all your emotions. What is it that you're mad about?"

"Look!" he said with the [Child] card in hand. "Do you have any idea of how precious a child is? Your *mother* not only branded this card as common, but it also only gave it one hp! No victory points either!"

"Children are a miracle, that is true."

Kai felt disarmed by Maia's statement. It sounded like something uncharacteristic for an android to say. "I beg your pardon?"

"They are a miracle! My mother couldn't make a human child from scratch, even if she wanted to. You can't make humans without humans. It's a miracle. It's beyond us."

Kai couldn't believe he was conversing with an android who believed in miracles. It shouldn't be so. Believing in miracles was something he thought was exclusively human. And she made it sound like Daisy treasured children, too. Really? Then, why couldn't his sector have any?

Maia's statement made him pause. So far, he had seen two reasons for a card to have subpar stats. Either they were exceedingly powerful, as was the case for [Shadow Wolf], or they were photos of barely passable objects, as was the case of [Rusty Gear].

If Daisy and Maia treasured children so much, would they judge a card of a child as *barely passable?* Unlikely. But if Daisy had used the first criteria, the [Child] card could have huge potential. Kai had a feeling about this. Despite being a horrible card, he took another picture.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 10 of 20.

Child (Common)

Young human being in the early stages of life, characterized by growth and curiosity.

2 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 0

He wouldn't have taken a second shot if it weren't for Maia. Hopefully, it would pay off.

Kai only had nine shots left, and six had to go to the remaining ingredients in the library recipes. Kai searched the street for anything representing loyalty, sadness, or affection. As he studied the people passing by, he witnessed an interesting scene. A car drove through a puddle. The

accumulated muddy water was sprayed onto a passerby and drenched them. The car kept going, but the person who'd been soaked threw the umbrella on the ground and called out unfriendly names and justified complaints to the long-gone driver.

Kai's raised an eyebrow. He kept the camera focused on the same area. After a few more minutes, the puddle scene repeated. The rain had refilled the puddle. A car passed, and a spray of filthy water from the puddle was sent toward a lady passing by in a brown raincoat.

As soon as the woman lashed out at the long driver, throwing her fists in the air and screaming insults, Kai took a photo.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 9 of 20.

Anger (Uncommon)

Powerful response to provocation or frustration.

Hp: 0

Vp: 4

Kai confirmed his suspicions. He now knew where to find the ingredients missing. What he needed to be on the lookout for wasn't the objects or people in the street. It was the small episodes happening as the people interacted!

He went back to studying the streets, but this time, he didn't focus on the individual people but anything that could represent something greater. After five minutes of waiting, the puddle incident repeated itself two more times, but there was nothing else outstanding that could represent the emotions and qualities he needed.

He walked over to another street. As he searched it through the lens of his camera, something finally caught his eye. It was a dog. In Kai's experience, all animals were priceless in Snap Craft. They could be merged with different tool cards to produce powerful results. As he zoomed in on the dog and prepared to take a picture, he felt his mouth dry.

"Poor thing…" he whispered. The poor thing was sitting with its tail between its legs, fur sodden and dark, clinging to its shivering body. The dog was disheveled and miserable. The image touched Kai for some reason. He kept looking at the dog, puzzled. There was shelter just a few feet away from the dog, and it didn't have a leash. Why was it standing in the rain

like that? He followed the dog's gaze, trying to make out the reason for this, and found that it kept his eyes glued to the door to the building.

"It's waiting."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Maia.

"That dog. The one in the rain. It's waiting for its owner."

"Dogs are remarkable animals. No wonder they are your second best friends."

"Second? Doesn't the saying go that dogs are humans' best friends?"

"That was before mom came along. Now we are your best friends. Dogs have been relegated to second place."

"Debatable," answered Kai. He looked at the dog again. What an incredible creature. Such loyalty. As Kai said it, he hurried and ran a few meters to the side. He then lay on the arena floor and framed the dog, waiting in the rain, and the door it was looking to. He then took a shot.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 8 of 20.

Loyalty (Rare)

Unwavering commitment and attachment.

1 of 3

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

"Yes! One down, two to go." He took another picture.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 7 of 20.

Loyalty (Rare)

Unwavering commitment and attachment.

2 of 3

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

All that he had to do was to find [Affection] and [Sadness]. Kai took off to another street. The puddle incident had been an episode happening on a loop in one place, and the dog waiting in the rain had been something

happening on a loop in this street. On the off chance that there was only one scene enacting emotion or abstract concept per street, he had to keep moving.

On the next street, he saw a thief taking a lady's purse. Judging this to be something that failed to represent the two emotions he was looking for, he moved on. The clock was ticking, and time was beginning to run out.

On the fourth street he zoomed in on, he found something else. A man was trudging along in the rain. He kept his head low, and he was the only person Kai had seen walking in the rain without an umbrella or a coat.

Kai decided to try to take a shot of the man.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 6 of 20.

Sadness (Common)

Feeling of loss and sorrow.

1 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 2

Capture successful!

Tries left: 5 of 20.

Sadness (Common)

Feeling of loss and sorrow.

2 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 2

With this, there was only one shot left. Kai walked from street to street. He found two more streets with puddles, one more with dogs, and three more people walking in the rain, representing sadness. He wasn't finding any examples of affection. In his mind, he was half-expecting to see a couple kiss or embrace, but if that was happening, it was under an umbrella.

Seeing the time about to run out, Kai decided to walk toward the streets with trees. In case all failed, he still wanted to take photos of the trees to the crafting round so that he could feed [Fire]. There were fifteen minutes

left on the clock. Kai spotted a father walking, holding the hand of his two children. He watched the man smile as the two little children tested their rubber boots on every puddle they crossed. They looked so happy.

Kai slapped his head! Of course! What about the affection that a parent has for his children? He hurriedly pointed the camera at them and took a shot.

Chapter 5

Fall of 346, A.D.

"Hey, Ariel." Kai didn't miss how the girl tensed. Even though she had her back toward him, he could imagine how upset she looked. He didn't want to surprise her at the museum like this, but she left him no choice. She had been avoiding him for over a month.

He was done giving her space. Inspired by Sunny's lesson today, he decided to stop trying to understand Ariel's anger and just smash the puzzle.

"What do you want, traitor?" she spat.

"I just want to talk."

"Now? Now, you want to talk? Now that my brother is gone?" She kept moving things around and looking everywhere but at him. "I don't think so."

"Your brother made me promise I wouldn't say anything."

She didn't speak.

"I tried to help him. I tried reasoning with him. But his mind was made up. There was nothing anyone could say or do."

"Just go away, Kai."

"He was in love, Ariel."

For the first time, Ariel stopped moving. She faced Kai, and he could see her tiredness and shiny eyes. She was making a titanic effort not to cry.

"He was in love. This was a battle neither of us could have won."

"That doesn't mean I wouldn't have liked to try fighting it." She turned away from him. "Leave, Kai."

"I'm really sorry, Ariel."

"LEAVE!" she roared as if she were a wounded lioness. After the outburst, came a barely audible whimper. "Just leave."

Kai stood there for a few moments, not knowing if he should push it or just listen to Ariel. In the end, he turned and left. As he walked out of the door, he heard the sound of something breaking and Ariel crying.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 4 of 20.

Affection (Uncommon)

Expression of tenderness and kindness.

1 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Capture successful!

Tries left: 3 of 20.

Affection (Uncommon)

Expression of tenderness and kindness.

2 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

"Yes! Maia, I did it! I got all the ingredients I needed!"

"That's fantastic. Well done, Kai."

"Turns out, all I needed was to find people enacting the concept I want to capture. Wait a minute…" As he looked at Maia, his eyes widened. "Stay still, Maia."

"You, humans, are so confusing. You either tell me to stop doing something I'm not doing or to do something I'm already doing. Make up your mind."

Kai pointed the camera at her and looked through the viewfinder. Maia wasn't there. He sighed. He and the android were in the same dimension,

out of sync with the arena. If he could have her enact the concepts of the ingredient cards, how much easier would this have been?

He pulled the dimensional gloves from his inventory, and threw them at her. "Can you put these on, please?"

"That's ingenious. I see what you're trying to do. Very well." She put on the gloves and posed for the camera with a hand on her hip and another drawing attention to her smile. Kai looked again through the viewfinder—still nothing.

"Never mind. It was just something I needed to try."

"No problem."

The time was running out, and it was time to wrap up and prepare for crafting. Kai took a photo of one of the many trees on the street.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 2 of 20.

Elm Tree (Uncommon)

Tree prized for its shade and timber.

3 of 3

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

His opponent had already photographed two of these. That was OK. There was another card he wanted to get. Kai returned to the main street, where he'd seen a green neon cross. He framed it and took a photograph.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 1 of 20.

Pharmacy (Uncommon)

Store where you can buy medicine.

3 of 3

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

As he suspected, [Pharmacy] could be photographed. He wanted something to heal [Child] since it only had 1hp. With this, he was pretty much done.

Kai only had one shot left in the camera. There weren't any signs of lightning yet, but he wanted to make sure he kept one shot, just in case. If there weren't any lightning, he would just take a picture of a shadow puppet at the last minute to use up all his tries. Since the desert, he hadn't had the time to experiment further with it.

Only toward the very end of the round was he able to find signs of activity of his opponent. The point gap remained the same. What kind of opportunities had his opponent stumbled upon? Kai looked at the system clock. 4 minutes.

"So, Maia, will you also come to the crafting room?"

"I'm afraid not, Kai. But I'll wait for you here at the next snapping round if you make it through."

"Very well." Kai bit his lips. He looked at the android and smiled. "Thanks!"

"For what?"

"You know… For keeping me company."

A powerful rumble echoed throughout the city. A series of thoughts rushed through Kai. He remembered all that he had learned about lightning and how the difference between the sound of the thunder and the appearance of lightning could be used to calculate its distance. He then remembered going up to the building that was the treasure trove and the [Lightning Rod] card.

Everything converged to one conclusion. Lightning was about to hit the top of the building in the city. If Kai could catch it at the right moment, he was possibly looking at a legendary card. He got the camera ready, prepared to spend his last shot securing this card, but before he could, a notification appeared in front of him.

Your opponent has used a stun bomb. You can't move for 30 seconds.

Oh no! This opponent had also bought the bomb upgrades! Unlike previous trial runners who spent their bombs at the very beginning, this one had chosen a far more devious timing to target him. The last minutes in a round were crucial! To hinder someone at the very end was a vicious move.

Kai watched in horror as a bolt of lightning struck the building. He had missed a golden chance. His hopes were soon brought up again when

he heard another rumble. Kai would still make it. Just as Kai regained his movement. He was hit with another bomb.

Your opponent has used a stun bomb. You can't move for 30 seconds.

Oh great! They have two stun bombs! Kai wished he could scream, but his mouth was frozen shut. Maybe he should get some of these bombs to quiet Maia down next time she began blabbering. Anyway, it looked like there was an upgrade that enabled trial runners to carry two bombs on them! After the second bomb's effect passed, Kai was hit with yet another attack.

Your opponent has used a flash bomb. You can't see for 30 seconds.

"Oh great! I'm running a trial against a bombardier!"

Your opponent has used a neglect bomb. Two of your cards lose 1hp.

[Fire] has been shielded from [Neglect Bomb] by [Card Fridge].

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 2→1

Vp: 4

What an aggressive opponent! Good thing he had bought [Card Fridge]. If he hadn't, he would have to kiss his [Fire] card bye-bye. Kai was hit with one more flash bomb just as he was about to regain his vision. There was no way he could photograph lightning blind. After the onslaught of bombs, and before Kai could get a picture of lightning, the timer finally hit zero, and he was transported back to the white crafting room.

As Kai's figure materialized in the white space, he put down both his fists on the crafting table. The effect wasn't as dramatic as he had hoped. The sound was a dry thud that didn't echo. Additionally, the lack of pain did not allow him to vent his frustration.

His opponent had timed his attack precisely. Had they set up a trap? Could it be that they had climbed the tower, seen the lightning rod, and chosen not to photograph it? Then, they waited for Kai to get two pictures of the lightning rod, and once he was gone, took the last one. Based on what he knew of Snap Craft, there could be several upgrades that would enable the enemy trial runner to do this. If so, that was brilliant. What a keen mind his opponent had! This round was not going to be easy.

Thankfully, they couldn't meddle with his performance anymore. He shook his head. There was no way he could be sure of that! What if they got an upgrade that could hit him while he crafted? Just because it hadn't happened yet didn't mean it wouldn't happen now.

Assuming his opponent had a disruptive tool that would affect his crafting, he didn't want to leave anything important to the end of the round. He'd better get started soon. Kai got all his cards from his inventory and spread them on the table.

2xSadness (Common)

Feeling of loss and sorrow.

Hp: 1

Vp: 2

2xChild (Common)

Young human being in the early stages of life, characterized by growth and curiosity.

Hp: 1

Vp: 0

Steam (Uncommon)

The gaseous form of water.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Power Outlet (Uncommon)

Connection point for electrical devices to access the electrical supply.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

2xFuel Dispenser (Uncommon)

A device utilized to dispense fuel into vehicles.

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

2xKnowledge (Uncommon)

Acquisition and understanding of information.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Anger (Uncommon)

Powerful response to provocation or frustration.

Hp: 0

Vp: 4

2xAffection (Uncommon)

Expression of tenderness and kindness.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Elm Tree (Uncommon)

Tree prized for its shade and timber.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

Pharmacy (Uncommon)

Store where you can buy medicine.

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

2xLoyalty (Rare)

Unwavering commitment and attachment.

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

2xLightning Rod (Rare)

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

Unfortunately, he hadn't captured any legendary cards in this snapping round. Having said that, he had four rare cards and two recipes, which made up for it.

He picked up the cards he had stored in his fridge.

Fire (Rare)

Useful for creating and destroying.

Hp: 1

Vp: 1

Unicorn (Legendary)

The mythical one-horned horse. Legend has it that its horn can pierce through anything.

Hp: 3

Vp: 15

Then he grabbed all the cards that were left from previous rounds.

Arabian Oryx (Rare)

A creature known as the desert's unicorn.

Hp: 4

Vp: 2

Arabian Oryx (Rare)

A creature known as the desert's unicorn.

Hp: 2

Vp: 2

Fire Axe (Uncommon)

Cutting tool designed for emergencies.

Hp: 3

Vp: 0

Flintstone (Uncommon)

Hard rock, suitable for various applications.

Hp: 0

Vp: 1

Light (Legendary)

A form of electromagnetic radiation that stimulates the sense of vision

Hp:∞

Vp: 2

Mega Scrapdroid (Mythic)

A scrapdroid that has fed on so much technology that it has transcended into the realm of sentience.

Hp:∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Oryx Lumberjack (Rare)

Hp: 5

Vp: 1

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 3

Vp: 4

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 2

Vp: 4

Unicorn (Legendary)

The mythical one-horned horse. Legend has it that its horn can pierce through anything.

Hp: 3

Vp: 15

Water (Uncommon)

Transparent, tasteless, and odorless substance essential for life.

Hp: 0

Vp: 1

Water (Uncommon)

Transparent, tasteless, and odorless substance essential for life.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

He had wondered if there would be a flashy animation, signaling the production of cards by the sawmill upgrades he had purchased the day before. Instead, they just discreetly appeared in his inventory after he landed on the crafting stage.

Pine Tree (Common)

Coniferous green that produces needles and pinecones.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

Acacia Tree (Uncommon)

Acacias are known for their resilience and beautiful, fragrant flowers.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

Altogether he had 125 points. Kai clenched his teeth as he realized that his opponent had 25 more. His guess was that his opponent managed to get a hold of whatever card was granted by photographing lightning. It had to be at least a rare card. And the combination of that with [Lightning Rod]... Well, all his anger came back in full. Anyway, it was time to start crafting.

The first step of his crafting process was to chop down the trees, and offer what he got from them as a sacrifice to [Fire].

[Pine Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Pine Tree | Hp: 2→1

```
Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 5→4
```

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pine Trunk].

New recipe added to your recipe book.

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pinecone].

Pinecone (Uncommon)

Seed-bearing structure composed of overlapping scales that protect and disperse the tree's seeds as they mature.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

New recipe added to your recipe book.

What a lucky break! He had gotten two cards with one swing of the oryxes' axe and even a card he hadn't seen before. He didn't know what [Pinecone] could be used for, but he was sure he could burn it. He'd used pinecones many times to start the bonfire. He pressed on.

[Pine Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Pine Tree | Hp: 1→0

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 4→3

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pine Branch].

Pine Branch (Common)

A branch torn from a pine tree.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

New recipe added to your recipe book.

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pinecone].

He used the [Oryx Lumberjacks] to chop the trunk and hopefully get some pine logs.

[Pine Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Pine Tree | Hp: 3→2

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 3→2

Pine Log (Common)

A piece of pinewood suited for construction.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

New recipe added to your recipe book.

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pine Log].

[Pine Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Pine Trunk| Hp: 2→1

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pine Log].

[Pine Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Pine Trunk | Hp: 1→0

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pine Log].

Although he had new cards that could be harvested from [Pine Tree], such as [Pinecone] and [Pine Branch], he didn't feel a need to set them aside. After all, he already had trees that offered better timber. If he needed wood to craft, he would rather use acacia or elm.

Now, with a handful of cards that Kai could throw into [Fire], Kai decided to try something. He would waste a lot of time if he had to place all the cards individually. Maybe he could just stack them all. He put all the pine cards in a neat pile and placed it over one engraving on the crafting table.

Then, Kai picked the [Fire] card. It had once been 19 victory points strong, but now it was just a feeble flame that could be easily snuffed away. Had it not been for the [Card Fridge] upgrade, he would have lost it. He put it on the other side.

Unfortunately, the cards didn't all just merge together. The merges still happened one by one. It was still an improvement, though. At least, this way, Kai didn't have to waste time placing one card at a time and could use the time to think of the next moves and recipes he would try.

One after the other, the cards on the stack burst with light and then became dull. At the same time, [Fire] devoured their hit points and became stronger.

```
[Fire] + [Pinecone]
Fire | Hp: 1→3
Pinecone | Hp: 3→0
[Fire] + [Pinecone]
Fire | Hp: 3→5
Pinecone | Hp: 3→0
[Fire] + [Pine Log]
Fire | Hp: 5→6
Pinecone | Hp: 2→0
Crafting successful. You've crafted [Ash].
[Fire] + [Pine Log]
Fire | Hp: 6→7
Pinecone | Hp: 2→0
Crafting successful. You've crafted [Ash].
[Fire] + [Pine Log]
Fire | Hp: 7→8
Pinecone | Hp: 2→0
Crafting successful. You've crafted [Ash].
[Fire] + [Pine Branch]
Fire | Hp: 8→9
Pine Branch | Hp: 2→0
```

It took a minute for [Fire] to suck all the cards' hp dry. If Kai had placed the cards one by one, it would have taken twice as long. He looked at the results. With only the resources of one [Pine Tree] card, Kai had managed to bring up [Fire] from 1 victory point to 9. He had even crafted new cards that increased his point count for the round. The three ash cards gave him 6 more points, and the [Pine Branch] and the [Pine Logs] gave him 4 more points. All in all, he gained 18 points.

Another benefit was that now, Kai had lots of common and uncommon fodder to use in the printer to make more trees. If he wanted to copy any

valuable common cards, he could offer any of the spent resources of the pine tree.

It was time to use the [Acacia Tree] he'd gotten from the sawmill. But first, he needed one more crew of lumberjacks.

Chapter 6

Fall of 346, A.D.

"What are you doing?"

Kai almost dropped the flowers he had picked up. "Hi Clara, you startled me."

"Who are the flowers for?"

Kai faced her squarely and went back to making his bouquet. "Why are you asking me questions you know the answer to?"

Clara walked over and squatted next to him so they would be at eye level. She was surprisingly agile for someone her age. "You know she burns them?"

"W-what?"

"She burns them, Kai. Why don't you give the girl some rest?"

Kai stopped for a moment and tried to imagine Ariel with a face full of anger throwing all the flowers he'd been leaving in her window into the fire. Should he stop? But how was he going to get her to forgive him if he did? "No."

"No? You're going to ignore the advice of someone five decades older than you?"

"Yes."

"And a woman on top of that? Who knows about how a girl's heart works."

This last point made him hesitate, but Kai stayed his course. "Yes. I have to listen to my heart in this one."

"Ai, ai, ai. You stubborn fool." She stood up and paced. Kai wondered what she was thinking about.

"At the very least, stop taking those. They stink when they burn. Get roses and lavender instead. It will smell nice when Ariel throws them into the fire."

Clara walked away. Kai felt his mouth go dry. Should he listen to Clara's advice? He shook his head. No! A man had his pride, and he would keep showering his affection on Ariel until she forgave him. He peeked over his shoulder to see if the old biologist was still around, and once he was sure the coast was clear, he dropped the flowers he had picked up and started looking for roses and lavender.

<div align="center">*</div>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

[Arabian Oryx] + [Fire Axe]

[Arabian Oryx] | Hp: 2→1

[Fire Axe] | Hp: 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Oryx Lumberjack].

Foreseeing how much he would put the little mutant oryxes to work, he made two more.

[Arabian Oryx] + [Fire Axe]

[Arabian Oryx] | Hp: 1→0

[Fire Axe] | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Oryx Lumberjack].

He threw the used-up [Arabian Oryx] card into the graveyard pile and picked up the other one. These cards had done so much for him! One had to appreciate these cards with high hp.

[Arabian Oryx] + [Fire Axe]

[Arabian Oryx] | Hp: 4→3

[Fire Axe] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Oryx Lumberjack].

He threw [Fire Axe] to the pile. He had [Water] and [Ash], two ingredients that combined, produced [Lye]. He would decide if he wanted to heal up the [Fire Axe] card to create more lumberjacks if required.

Kai chopped the [Acacia Tree].

[Acacia Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Acacia Tree | Hp: 3→2

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 6→5

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Branch].

[Acacia Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Acacia Tree | Hp: 2→1

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 5→4

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Trunk].

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Branch].

[Acacia Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Acacia Tree | Hp: 1→0

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 4→3

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Bark].

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Bark].

Sadly, he only got one trunk from the tree. He got down to chopping it up.

[Acacia Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Acacia Trunk | Hp: 3→2

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Log].

[Acacia Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Acacia Trunk | Hp: 2→1

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Log].

[Acacia Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Acacia Trunk | Hp: 1→0

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Acacia Log].

With a new stack of cards created from [Acacia Tree], Kai kept feeding [Fire].

[Fire] + [Acacia Branch]

Fire | Hp: 9→12

Acacia Branch | Vp: 4→0

[Fire] + [Acacia Branch]

Fire | Hp: 12→15

Acacia Branch | Hp: 4→0

[Fire] + [Acacia Bark]

Fire | Hp: 15→17

Acacia Bark | Hp: 3→0

[Fire] + [Acacia Bark]

Fire | Hp: 17→19

Acacia Bark | Hp: 3→0

With this, Kai got [Fire] back to its peak value. But he was only getting started! He still had plenty of cards to copy, chop, and burn.

[Fire] + [Acacia Log]

Fire | Hp: 19→20

Acacia Log | Hp: 2→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Ash].

[Fire] + [Acacia Log]

Fire | Hp: 20→21

Acacia Log | Hp: 2→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Ash].

[Fire] + [Acacia Log]

Fire | Hp: 21→22

Acacia Log | Hp: 2→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Ash].

Kai held the [Fire] card, turning it over under the light.

Fire (Rare)

Useful for creating and destroying.

Hp: 22

Vp: 22

Since [Fire]'s victory points were the same as its hit points, the card had become a beast, and Kai's victory points had climbed immensely. But before he went on a craze, it was time to crunch some numbers.

He had [Elm Tree], his last available tree card. He had to figure out how many common and uncommon cards he could sacrifice to keep copying [Elm Tree] and feed [Fire]. From his calculations, he had 12 uncommon cards he could use to make more elm trees. For now, he settled with sacrificing [Flint Stone] and [Water], two spent cards that couldn't be used in crafting anymore. Unfortunately, each offered one victory point, so this move would set him back two points.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Flint Stone] and [Water] for [Elm Tree].

After making one copy, Kai chopped down the cloned [Elm Tree].

[Elm Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Elm Tree | Hp: 3→2

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 6→5

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Branch].

Elm Branch (Uncommon)

A branch taken from an elm tree.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

New recipe added to your recipe book.

[Elm Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Elm Tree | Hp: 2→1

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 5→4

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Samara].

Samara (Common)

Winged fruit that spins as it falls.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Trunk].

Elm Trunk (Uncommon)

A thick piece of wood harvested from an elm tree.

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

Wow! Elm tree trunks were fantastic for generating logs! His [Fire] card was about to get huge.

As Kai grabbed the new [Samara] card, he remembered playing with a maple tree that gave off fruit like this. Kai and Alex had enjoyed seeing the fruits fall like helicopters. At the recollection of such a bittersweet memory, Kai found himself missing Maia's annoying trivia. He wiped a tear off the corner of his eye and kept going.

New recipe added to your recipe book.

[Elm Tree] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Elm Tree | Hp: 1→0

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 4→3

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Samara].

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Trunk].

He grabbed the two [Elm Trunks] and turned them into logs.

[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Elm Trunk| Hp: 4→3

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].

Elm Log (Uncommon)

Sturdy timber suited for construction.

Vp: 3

Hp: 1

```
[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]
Elm Trunk| Hp: 3→2
Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 2→1
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]
Elm Trunk| Hp: 2→1
Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 1→0
```

Kai threw [Oryx Lumberjack] to the graveyard pile and grabbed a new one. It's a good thing these cards had such high hp.

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]
Elm Trunk| Hp: 1→0
Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 6→5
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]
Elm Trunk| Hp: 4→3
Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 5→4
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]
Elm Trunk| Hp: 3→2
Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 4→3
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]
Elm Trunk| Hp: 2→1
Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 3→2
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].
```

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].

[Elm Trunk] + [Oryx Lumberjack]

Elm Trunk| Hp: 1→0

Oryx Lumberjack | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Elm Log].

After harvesting all the resources from the [Elm Tree] card, Kai continued feeding them to the fire.

[Fire] + [Elm Branch]

Fire | Hp: 22→24

Acacia Log | Vp: 3→0

[Fire] + [Elm Log]

Fire | Hp: 24→26

Acacia Log | Vp: 3→0

[Fire] + [Elm Log]

Fire | Hp: 26→28

Acacia Log | Vp: 3→0

[Fire] + [Elm Log]

Fire | Hp: 28→30

Acacia Log | Vp: 3→0

As soon as [Fire] reached 30 victory points, the card started glowing. From a faint red glow, it burst into a white flare. The light dimmed, and Kai reached for the new card.

[Fire] has been upgraded to [Blue Fire].

Blue Fire (Legendary)

A very hot fire that can melt almost anything.

Hp: 1

Vp: 1

Kai held [Blue Fire] in his hand and frowned. Was this even an upgrade? The card had sucked up 29 hit points to transform. His victory points had significantly shrunk with the transformation.

What was this supposed to do for him? He had been neck to neck with his opponent, and all of a sudden, they had a considerable lead. Should he continue down this road?

This card had to somehow be better than a regular [Fire Card]. There was only one way to find out. He had to experiment with it. He finished burning all the logs he had harvested from the tree.

[Fire] + [Elm Log]

Fire | Hp: 1→4

Elm Log | Hp: 3→0

Elm Log | Vp: 1→0

Kai stared wide-eyed! [Blue Fire] could now absorb cards' victory points, too? It was a slight difference, but it would make upgrading it easier. It was as if Daisy was inviting him to keep making it grow.

He finished feeding all the [Elm Logs] to [Fire], and then made another [Elm Tree] copy.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Acacia Branch] and [Acacia Branch] for [Elm Tree].

What a cheat. He wasn't even worried. He could keep going! He still had a whole forest to burn. His only limitation was time, but not even 10 minutes had passed. He pressed on.

Although Kai could create an endless supply of trees, he hit a snag with the lumberjacks. To fully harvest the resources he could get from one single elm tree, he needed to spend two [Oryx Lumberjacks].

First, he used all the water he had left to make [Lye].

[Water] + [Ash]

Ash | Hp: 1→0

Water | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Lye].

[Water] + [Ash]

Ash | Hp: 1→0

Water | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Lye].

Then, he used [Lye] to heal his [Fire Axe].

```
[Fire Axe] + [Lye]
Fire Axe| Hp: 0→2
Lye | Hp: 4→0
[Fire Axe] + [Lye]
Fire Axe| Hp: 2→4
Lye | Hp: 4→0
```

Sadly, [Lye] wasn't too great for healing metals, but that unlocked the possibility of making three more [Oryx Lumberjacks].

```
[Arabian Oryx] + [Fire Axe]
[Arabian Oryx] | Hp: 3→2
[Fire Axe] | Hp: 4→3
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Oryx Lumberjack].
```

With this, he made three more [Oryx Lumberjacks]. Eventually, they were spent, too. Now, without more [Arabian Oryx] cards, to make more [Oryx Lumberjacks], he had to resort to the [Photocopy Machine]. He sacrificed the used-up [Oryx Lumberjacks] to make new ones.

```
Copy successful! You've exchanged [Oryx Lumberjack] and
[Oryx Lumberjack] for [Oryx Lumberjack].
```

This way, he managed to create several [Oryx Lumberjacks], enough of them, to harvest seven elm trees. Whenever he finished using up an [Oryx Lumberjack], he used it as fodder to copy a fresh [Oryx Lumberjack].

After going through seven elm tree cards and fourteen [Oryx Lumberjacks], [Blue Fire] hadn't stopped growing.

```
[Blue Fire] + [Elm Log]
Fire | Hp: 163→165
Acacia Log | Hp: 3→0
```

Kai checked the scoreboard and the timer. He had been at it for 30 minutes, and half of the crafting round was gone just like that. Somehow, despite all the points that [Blue Fire] was generating, he still wasn't able to

surpass his opponent! What kind of recipes were they doing on the other side? How were they generating so many points?

Kai didn't give up, though. Now, he was just feeding whole trees to [Blue Fire], waiting for something to happen.

[Blue Fire] + [Elm Tree]

Fire | Hp: 165→168

Elm Tree | Hp: 3→0

Elm Tree | Vp: 1→0

He started a little assembly line. He used up his spent uncommon cards to make new elm trees while [Blue Fire] fed on them. Eventually, he was done with that pile of fuel, too.

[Blue Fire] + [Elm Tree]

Fire | Hp: 188→191

Elm Tree | Hp: 3→0

Elm Tree | Vp: 1→0

The card was now a monstrous beast. Did it never stop growing? Kai had already gone through all the lumberjacks he had. But that didn't mean he was done. He grabbed the two cards he'd captured in the rainy neon city. These had to be good for burning up.

[Blue Fire] + [Fuel Dispenser]

Fire | Hp: 191→199

Fuel Dispenser| Hp: 4→0

How explosive! [Fuel Dispenser] gave double points to [Fire]. He threw in the other one.

[Blue Fire] + [Fuel Dispenser]

Blue Fire | Hp: 199→207

Fuel Dispenser| Hp: 4→0

As soon as [Blue Fire] hit the 200 mark, the card shone brilliantly. Kai couldn't stop laughing! He had funneled so many of his resources into making this card evolve. It had to be a monstrous card that would turn the tables and ensure he passed this round.

Kai reached for it as soon as [Blue Fire] stopped glowing. Sure enough, it was a mythic card. He gasped. The stats were horrible!

[Blue Fire] has been upgraded to [Red Star].

Red Star (Mythic)

A powerful, nuclear ball of fire.

Hp: +00

Vp: 0

What a piece of trash! He watched in horror as his scoreboard went down by 200 points, wasting all his effort. He collapsed on the ground. How was he going to make a comeback from this? This filthy mythic card had just sucked his points dry!

This card also works as an upgrade. You've unlocked [Solar Breeze].

Kai was lost as to what to do. Between being blocked by the opponent and prevented from photographing lightning and now the catastrophic turn of events with [Red Star], his hopes were dim. He took a deep breath. Maybe there was a reason why Daisy put this card's victory points to 0. Its effects had to be very powerful. He just had to keep doing his best.

Besides, at least, in the middle of all of this, he had made more than 60 [Ash Cards]. That was already 120 points right there! Kai turned to the only thing that he had left to do. It was time to try the recipes he'd found in the library.

Recipes were one of Kai's most outstanding discoveries so far. Not only had they given him access to the ingredients to create the legendary [Scrapdroid] card, but it had also taught him a little more about how Daisy thought and how Snap Craft worked.

For instance, these recipes he was about to try taught him much about photographing abstract concepts. Hopefully, the resulting recipe would be worth it. Kai started by grabbing the ingredients needed to recreate the recipe.

2x Sadness (Common)

Feeling of loss and sorrow.

Hp: 1

Vp: 2

2x Loyalty (Rare)

Unwavering commitment and attachment.

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

2x Affection (Uncommon)

Expression of tenderness and kindness.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

2x Knowledge (Uncommon)

Acquisition and understanding of information.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Each of these cards representing emotions and characteristics only had one hit point, making them one-time use cards in crafting. Even if he wanted to heal them, he didn't know how. Kai proceeded to follow the recipe.

Chapter 7

Fall of 346, A.D.

Kai had just dropped another bouquet at Ariel's and was on his way to go help Sunny in the workshop. It was sad that on the only day in the week when they didn't have to go to the bonfire, the best thing that Kai could think of to pass the time was to fix machines with Sunny.

At least, there was no way things could get worse for him. Alex was gone, and Ariel was angry at him. Having hit rock bottom, he could only go up from here. As he turned around the corner and onto the street where the workshop was, he found Trudy waiting for him.

"Hello, Kai." It was unlike Trudy to be here at this time. She spent most of her free days sleeping away.

"Hey, Trudy. What's up?"

"Why don't we go have some tea together, Kai? Let's walk back to my house. Clara brought me some herbs the other day, and I think you'll like the brew I put together."

An invitation for tea was not uncommon for Trudy. But there was something fishy here. Kai felt a certain darkness on an otherwise blue day. Could this have to do with Ariel? He studied Trudy's ancient face and saw pity in her eyes. He had a terrible feeling. "Is something wrong?"

She bit her lips but didn't speak. Kai gulped. The gears in his head turned. Sunny was the only one who lived on this street. "Is Sunny OK? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, child."

"I have to see it."

"Don't, Kai. The street is in quarantine." Kai ignored Trudy and ran as fast as he could toward the entrance to the workshop. Through his head flashed the memory of his parents' death and the outbreak that had almost decimated the whole sector. It couldn't be. Where could she have gotten it? There were so few of them.

As he approached the two-story workshop, he saw a black 'X' painted on the front of the door. Even in how it was painted, he could see Sunny's steady hands and precision. Kai collapsed to the ground. Sunny had caught the blight.

*

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

[Sadness] + [Knowledge]

Sadness | Hp: 1→0

Knowledge | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Wisdom].

Wisdom (Rare)

The ability to use knowledge and discernment, making good practical decisions.

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

The card's stats were the same as [Loyalty]. He tried the next component in the recipe.

[Affection] + [Loyalty]

Affection | Hp: 1→0

Loyalty | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Love].

Love (Legendary)

Unwavering attachment to something or someone. The most powerful human emotion.

Hp: 1

Vp: 10

How about that? Love was a legendary card. Its stats were great. If he were to follow the same logic behind [Scrapdroid], he might be able to obtain something good from mixing these two together. It was time to find out. Kai set the [Wisdom] card down on the table, and before he placed [Love], he hesitated. Whenever he crafted with a legendary card, he felt nervous. He hoped this would work.

[Love] + [Wisdom]

Love | Hp: 1→0

Wisdom | Hp: 1→0

Crafting failed!

Kai ground his teeth. What a letdown! He had thought that by merging the two recipes, he would get something precious out of it. But it turned out he was wrong. He took a deep breath and tried not to look at the scoreboard. Things weren't looking good for him. These recipes, while working, offered no substantial way for him to make a comeback.

He looked at everything else that he had available to craft with. He couldn't think of anything. [Spider Web] seemed a good card for crafting, but he couldn't think of any cards that would go well with it. He had over sixty [Ash] cards, courtesy of [Fire], but they didn't go well with anything except [Water], and he had run out of it.

His eyes then landed on [Child]. It was the weakest card he had ever collected. Was there anything he could do with it?

What could a [Child] card be merged with? Kai drummed his fingers on the table. Probably, like with animal cards, it would go well with tool cards. Sadly, he didn't have any tools available now. His [Fire Axe] was used up. It also felt wrong to Kai to equip children with axes, even if he was in the exams.

He then looked at the emotion cards. Could it be really that simple? Emotions were a very human thing. It made sense that he could merge [Child] with them. Kai looked at where the pile of uncommon cards used to be. He shouldn't have spent it all up feeding [Fire].

He had plenty of common cards to use as fodder in the photocopier, though. Even if it would cost him four victory points and sacrifice two [Ash] cards.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Ash] and [Ash] for [Sadness].

It was time to try this out.

[Child] + [Sadness]

Child | Hp: 1→0

Sadness | Hp: 1→0

[Child] has upgraded to [Sad Child]

Sad Child (Common)

A child who is dealing with many difficulties and faces bouts of sadness.

Hp: 1

Vp: 1

Kai didn't know if he should feel happy about being onto something here or if he should cry at how depressive this recipe was! Poor child! He had just picked a card with a picture of an innocent little angel and had turned it into one of the saddest things he had seen.

Kai hated himself for what he was about to do, but he wanted to see what was down the rabbit hole.

[Sad Child] + [Anger]

Sad Child | Hp: 1→0

Sadness | Hp: 1→0

[Sad Child] has upgraded to [Rebellious Adolescent]

Rebellious Adolescent (Uncommon)

A teenager who is going through a lot and has many negative emotions.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Kai had to give it to Daisy. Even though Albert had said she wasn't creative, Kai had to admit she had much imagination. He could now see where this was going.

He was creating a little monster here, but he had to see what would happen if he kept going down this road. He looked at the scoreboard and the clock. He only had 10 minutes left, and his opponent had a 100-point

advantage over him. It was unlikely that he would make it through to the next round.

He was feeling a little bit like the card he held in his hand. He felt sad that he and Ariel wouldn't make it. They were not going to get allcure. He was angry for still wanting to have children, even if they grew up as orphans. It was time to throw care to the wind. Even if these choices were about to cost him many points, he still had to test them out.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Oryx Lumberjack] and [Oryx Lumberjack] for [Loyalty].

These were the last two [Oryx Lumberjack] cards left. He was happy to exchange them for the more valuable [Loyalty] card. Kai was eager to find where this led.

[Rebellious Adolescent] + [Loyalty]

Rebellious Adolescent | Hp: 1→0

Loyalty | Hp: 1→0

[Rebellious Adolescent] has upgraded to [Radicalized Adult]

Radicalized Adult (Rare)

Hp: 1

Vp: 8

For the first time, the stat line went beyond what other similarly graded cards had. This told Kai that if he kept going, there would be exponential growth. Kai copied the [Child] card, just in case, before he ran some more experiments.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Ash] and [Ash] for [Child].

Another four victory points down the drain. It didn't matter. He recreated the cards from Daisy's recipes.

[Sadness] + [Knowledge]

Sadness | Hp: 1→0

Knowledge | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Wisdom].

[Affection] + [Loyalty]

Affection | Hp: 1→0

Loyalty | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Love].

Kai took a deep breath. If he was able to upgrade [Child], a 0 vp card into [Radicalized Adult], an 8 vp rare card, this next recipe should go even better.

[Child] + Wisdom]

Child | Hp: 1→0

Wisdom | Hp: 1→0

[Child] has upgraded to [Enlightened Child].

Enlightened Child (Uncommon)

Hp: 1

Vp: 5

Not only did this recipe succeed, but it worked much better than the previous one. After he had merged [Child] and [Sadness], all he got was a slightly more powerful common card. Here, however, the card had been instantly lifted to the uncommon grade, and had a stronger stat line than other uncommon cards.

It made more sense why [Wisdom] and [Love] hadn't worked out. They had nothing to stick to. But a child was a clean canvas in which these qualities could be imprinted, elevating them into something more.

He moved on to the next recipe. There were no do-overs. This was it.

[Enlightened Child] + [Love]

Child | Hp: 1→0

Wisdom | Hp: 1→0

[Enlightened Child] has upgraded into [Benevolent Adolescent].

Benevolent Adolescent (Rare)

Hp: 1

Vp: 12

"Now we're talking!" exclaimed Kai, grabbing the new card in his hand. He stared at the artwork on this card. There was an adolescent in white clothes and a gentle smile on his face. It was a different type of beauty from children. In children, there was the beauty of innocence, but in this card, he saw the beauty of potential.

This was the most powerful rare card he'd ever gotten. Too bad that there was nothing he could do to elevate it further. Or was there? He thought of the word in the first card: enlightened. That made him think of a card that, nowadays, sat unsuspected and that he hardly ever used. He looked at the clock and scoreboard and shrugged. He didn't have anything to lose. He should just go with his instinct.

[Benevolent Adolescent] + [Light]

Benevolent Adolescent | Hp: 1→0

Light| Hp: +00→+00

[Benevolent Adolescent] has upgraded into [Illuminating Adult].

Illuminating Adult (Legendary)

A human who has been forged in the fires of wisdom and love.

Hp: 0

Vp. 20

Kai laughed at the new powerful legendary card in his hand. Legendary cards had the most variety in terms of stats. There was [Light] that offered 2 victory points, and [Blue Fire], which earlier in the round had reached 199 victory points. It felt good to stumble upon such a powerful card.

The picture in the card now showed a man with a radiating smile and contagious joy. Looking at it, he couldn't help but remember all the people from his sector who had raised him. He thought of stubborn Neil, whimsical Albert, pragmatic Sunny and paranoid Seth. He chuckled at the memory of the days he spent in the mountains with Clara or all the conversations he had with Trudy.

The name of this card described them well. They were illuminating adults. Were it not for them, Kai would have been a bitter, rebellious adult, like the one illustrated in the previous card. But thanks to their good influence, despite all his troubles and challenges, he and Ariel were happy.

The thought brought a smile to his lips. Maybe that made it OK. At least he and Ariel would die, knowing they had been happy.

He checked the cards that were left and picked up [Radicalized Adult]. He thought of Alex. Before he left, he had become sad and angry and had a blind loyalty to Cassie, which eventually took him away from them. Kai had often wondered if he could have done something more to help his friend. Maybe he should have insisted that he talked to someone. If he had opened up his heart to the other adults, could he have turned around? He didn't know. But maybe it wasn't too late for the little fellow in his hand.

He grabbed [Illuminating Adult].

[Illuminating Adult] + [Pharmacy]

Illuminating Adult | Hp: 0→3

Pharmacy | Hp: 4→0

Now that [Illuminating Adult] was healed, he placed it on the table and then grabbed [Radicalized Adult]. "Hey, Daisy. Remember Alex? From my sector?" he asked to the room. "Do you think he could have stayed?" He would let the crafting table answer him.

[Illuminating Adult] + [Radicalized Adult]

Illuminating Adult | Hp: 3→2

Radicalized Adult | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Illuminated Adult].

Illuminated Adult (Legendary)

A human who has seen darkness but has been brought back into light.

Hp: 0

Vp. 10

"That's what I thought." Kai wiped the tears from his face and checked the score. Despite his best efforts, his opponent was still 130 points ahead of him. He was done.

Kai was brought up from his lethargic numbness by the horn that signaled the end of the round.

Crafting round is over!

Kai frowned. In previous rounds, he was told what score he had received, but this time, all he was told was that the round had ended. What did this mean?

A solar breeze blows through your opponents' cards. All enemy cards with zero hp are destroyed.

Kai stared at the notification, stupefied. He then looked at the scoreboard and saw the enemy's score lose 174 points. "I've won. I've won!" Kai ran, flailing his arms, crying, throwing himself into the ground, and laughing. He had never felt this alive! He had been brought back from certain death. He had won.

Once he calmed down, he reread the notifications. What a powerful upgrade. [Solar Breeze] was a vicious attack. For a moment, he had doubted that all the effort he put into feeding [Blue Fire] and upgrading it to a mythic card had been worth it, but he was a believer now. This upgrade was incredible!

Congratulations! You've earned 178 points.

The following cards will now be destroyed: [Pharmacy]; 3x[Sadness]; 2x[Wisdom]; 2x[Love]; 2x[Affection]; 3x[Loyalty]; 2x[Lye]; [Illuminated Adult].

The number of cards Kai lost was dramatically reduced. The addition of [Photocopy Machine] meant that all the cards he spent crafting were reutilized to produce more cards. It was a good thing for him! He was making his points count. Thinking of making his points count, he remembered that he hadn't put any cards in the fridge yet! He had been so convinced he would lose that he stopped caring about the next round.

He hurriedly put [Illuminating Adult] and [Unicorn] into the fridge. He barely made it. A few seconds later, another notification hit.

All cards lose 1hp.

Light (Legendary)

A form of electromagnetic radiation that stimulates the sense of vision.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 2

Mega Scrapdroid (Mythic)

A scrapdroid that has fed on so much technology that it has transcended into the realm of sentience.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

2xLightning Rod (Rare)

Hp: 1→0

Vp: 6

Power Outlet (Uncommon)

Hp: 3→2

Vp: 1

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 2→1

Vp: 4

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 3→2

Vp: 4

Red Star (Mythic)

A powerful, nuclear ball of fire.

Hp: +00

Vp: 0

Chapter 8

Fall of 346, A.D.

It had been two weeks since Sunny's funeral. Elderly ones had less vitality to fight off the blight. She went from stage one to stage three in a matter of weeks. Before he knew it, Kai was holding a torch at her funeral pyre.

The bonfire wasn't lit for seven days in honor of the old engineer. Kai thought he had hit rock bottom, but Sunny's departure had proved him wrong. During the week away from his studies, Kai stayed cooped up in Sunny's workshop.

When he came to the workshop to collect Sunny's body, he was surprised by how many things were fixed compared to the last time he was here. Sunny had worked until the very end. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but Kai decided to finish fixing every broken thing in the racks, in honor of his friend. He worked away all day. He only left to leave flowers where his friends' pyre had been and by Ariel's window.

Knock. Knock. Hearing the knock at the door, Kai perked up at the thought that Ariel had finally forgiven him and had come here to make peace. Trudy's ancient voice tore the dream as soon as it formed.

"Kai! It's Clara and me. Are you there?"

"It's open!"

The two women entered side by side. Kai smirked at the thought that regardless of how old Clara was, she still looked like a child when accompanying Trudy.

"What's up, Trudy?"

Trudy's serious face told him she wasn't here as a friend or an old woman. She was here as the leader of his people. "Kai, it's time for you to leave the city."

<p style="text-align: center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 32.

Congratulations! You're among the 32 trial runners who passed through to the next round.

You have 4 hours and 13 minutes to select your upgrades and rest.

It was hard to believe that Kai had reached the top 32 places. He had gone through five rounds, and if he wanted to reach the very top, there were five more to go. This last one had been a rollercoaster ride. The competition was weeding out the weaker contestants, and everyone left was clever and resourceful. His opponent had been very talented and had shown excellent timing. Were it not for the combination of gaining over sixty [Ash] cards and the [Solar Breeze] upgrade, he wouldn't have made it.

Kai moved toward the upgrade console, eager to see the new upgrades, looking for something to help him deal with what was coming.

Purchased Upgrades: [Acacia Sawmill]; [Android Companion]; [Card Fridge]; [Dimensional Gloves]; [Flash]; [Gaslamp]; [Hunter Eyes]; [Map]; [Photocopier]; [Pine Sawmill]; [Scoreboard]; [Solar Breeze]; [Text Description]; [Zoom II].

Compass
Requirements: Reaching the northernmost point in the arena.
Description: A simple compass that points north.
Cost: 10uc

Failed Recipes (Recipe Book Upgrade)
Requirements: To have one failed crafting attempt.
Description: Your recipe book is now able to maintain a record of all failures in crafting.
Cost: 20uc

Recycle

Requirements: To destroy 100+ cards in one round.

Description: For every 10 cards you obliterate or lose at the end of the round, generate a random scrap card.

Cost: 30uc

Log (Recipe Book Upgrade)

Requirements: Destroy 30 cards in one round.

Description: Your recipe book records all the cards you've already owned.

Cost: 30uc

Wide Lens

Requirements: [Perspective] and one scenic capture.

Description: You can get wider captures.

Cost: 30uc

Thorough Log (Recipe Book Upgrade)

Requirements: Destroy 50 cards in one round.

Description: Your recipe book keeps a record of all the cards you've already owned, successful recipes, and failed recipes.

Cost: 40uc

Flash Bomb

Requirements: [Glass], [Light].

Description: Blind your opponent for 30 seconds.

Cost: 50uc

Stun Bomb

Requirements: [Glass], [Hallucinogen].

Description: Stun your opponent for 30 seconds.

Cost: 50uc

Web Bomb

Requirements: [Glass], [Spider Web].

Description: Trap your opponent for 30 seconds.

Cost: 50uc

Neglect Bomb

Requirements: [Glass], [Neglect].

Description: Drop the hp of 5 of your opponent's cards randomly.

Cost: 50uc

Flint Mine

Requirements: Craft three flint-based tools.

Description: Grants you a [Flintstone] card each round.

Cost: 50uc

Elm Sawmill

Requirements: Lumberjack card, [Elm].

Description: Grants you a [Elm Tree] card each round.

Cost: 50uc

Deadline Extension

Requirements: To craft 200 cards in one round.

Description: You have 15 extra minutes in stages.

Cost: 60uc

Gaslamp II (Gaslamp Upgrade)

Requirements: [Gaslamp], [Light].

Description: An even more powerful gas-fueled lamp.

Cost: 90uc

Lightning Rod

Requirements: [Lightning Rod].

Description: Shields your cards from attacks.

Cost: 110uc

Populate

Requirements: Legendary human card.

Description: From now on, all of the maps are populated.

Cost: 200uc

Regeneration Chamber

Requirements: To have healed a card.

Description: When inside the chamber, a card can regain 1 hp between rounds.

Cost: 200vp

Scouting Drone (Android Upgrade)

Requirements: Fully explore a map.

Description: Airborne device that aids in map exploration.

Cost: 200uc

Slow Shutter

Requirement: [Light].

Description: Lets more light into the camera.

Cost: 200uc

Mythological Discount

Requirements: Mythological creature card.

Description: All other upgrades cost 25% less.

Cost: 200uc

Emotion Cookbook (Recipe Book Upgrade)

Requirements: Legendary grade emotion.

Description: Contains recipes for different emotions.

Cost: 200uc

Shield Phase

Requirements: [Infinity].

Description: Lets you move past shields.

Cost: 500uc

Mystery Box Fiesta

Requirements: [Mystery Box].

Description: From now on, every map has a hidden mystery box.

Cost: 500uc

Yellow Star

Requirements: [Red Star].

Description: Upgrades [Red Star] to [Yellow Star]. Not only does [Solar Breeze] destroy cards with 0hp, but it absorbs the victory points of the common cards.

Cost: 500uc

Kai had 178 coins from this round plus 27 from the previous one, totaling 205 upgrade coins. He went through the upgrades, focusing primarily on new ones.

The [Recycle] upgrade would have been interesting if he hadn't reached the maximum level for his scrapdroid card already. He entertained the thought of collecting enough scrap to make one more [Mega Scrapdroid], but the scrap [Recycle] generated would be random. He wasn't even sure if the upgrade would generate the ingredients required to craft [Scrapdroid]. He dismissed it and moved on to the next one.

Unsurprisingly, he had a new [Sawmill] upgrade. He skipped over it. There was no more benefit to feeding wood to the mythic version of [Fire]. It's true that there had to be other recipes that used wood, such as better buildings and tools. However, Kai could always experiment with [Pine] and [Acacia] and, if it was worth it, come back to purchase this upgrade.

Additionally, trees were among the most common resources in arenas. So far, half of the arenas had trees. Investing his precious coins in this upgrade seemed unwise.

Kai's eyes landed on a God-sent upgrade. [Deadline Extension] granted him 15 more minutes in both stages. Time was a valuable resource, especially when he was crafting.

Kai came down to what seemed to be an indispensable upgrade. [Lightning Rod] was a defense mechanism to prevent attacks from upgrades such as [Solar Breeze]. The assortment of bombs available for purchase suggested that there would be an equal variety of upgrades aimed at disrupting the crafting stage. Kai had to buy it.

Are you sure you want to purchase [Lightning Rod]? [Y/N]

After buying this, he had little wiggle room, but at least his cards would be safe. Unfortunately, more expensive upgrades were now out of the question. He read their descriptions anyway to see if there was anything he would want to buy later on.

In his opinion, the coolest upgrade was [Populate]. Having people walk around the stages could generate many episodes and interactions that he could photograph, granting him more emotion cards. That seemed to go hand in hand with the [Emotion Cookbook] upgrades. Even though the possibility of being surrounded by people was exhilarating, he had no choice but to postpone buying [Populate]. At least he had Maia to keep him company. Sadly, he found no upgrade that made her less obnoxious.

Finally, there was a new 500-upgrade coin upgrade that elevated [Red Star] to a whole new level. Kai wondered if that would affect the number of victory points the card offered, but he wasn't thinking of getting it. Spending 500 upgrade coins to enhance an attack that could be blocked by an upgrade cost of 110 was just not worth it.

Kai returned to the cheaper upgrades and settled on the two he would buy next.

Are you sure you want to purchase [Deadline Extension]? [Y/N]

Are you sure you want to purchase [Wide Lens]? [Y/N]

The [Deadline Extension] seemed too good to pass on. Those extra minutes would have been great in the previous arena when the bombs thrown at him in quick succession had blocked him from capturing a lightning card. It would also help him to have more time to think things through during the crafting arena.

As for [Wide Lens], he got it because of how useful [Zoom II] had been. Being able to widen the angle or zoom into a scene opened up many possibilities, and Kai wanted to have as many tactical options as possible. After shopping for upgrades, Kai only saved five measly coins for the next round.

Kai went to lie down, and after a few silent moments, he wished Maia was here to annoy him. Being annoyed was better than being lonely.

It was hard to believe that so little time had passed. Kai had seen so many things and learned so much. He closed his eyes and felt the earthy scent of the pine woodland and the beams of light filtered through the green needles in the trees' canopy.

He then visualized the quarry and remembered the sandy, rough textures of the rock in his hands and the labyrinth made from stony columns. He recalled the chill of the desert night and the songs and

whistles of the dry, cold sand as he stepped on it, chasing the hoofprints of the desert's unicorn.

Then, he was taken away from nature and into the shell of an old factory, where he saw how far his kind had fallen and how tall they had once stood. The never-ending waterfall of pouring rain fell on the city and hit the bright neon lights as thousands and thousands of people walked in an era gone by, not knowing what would come next.

He couldn't wait to write down a log and leave it in the museum so his children could learn more about what he'd seen. At the thought of his children and future, the memory of his disease-ridden body came to him, together with the vision of a black X on his and Ariel's door.

He had to win the next two rounds, at the very least, to save her. If he wanted to be safe, he would want to win the next three. His fists tightened. He couldn't do anything to save Sunny, Neil, Albert, Clara, Seth, Trudy, and the others. He couldn't help Alex stay. But he was not about to let his wife die.

He wondered where Alex was.

*

In a white room, Axl sat cross-legged, computing, calculating, simulating. He wondered if he should just win less so that he didn't have to wait so long between rounds. Hopefully, there would be an upgrade down the road that would help him shorten these cursed intervals.

He untied and tied his boots, as he did when he grew bored. He was grateful to Daisy that the boots were kept pristine, coated in a generous, thick layer of polish. He breathed in and could even feel the smell of his leather armor and the polish of the boots. The scent soothed him.

He then rolled up his sleeves and, like he had done countless times before, looked at the tattoo on his arm. He searched the arm with his fingers. There was a girl whose facial features were similar to his own. It was most likely a relative—either a sister, mother, or, less likely, an aunt or cousin. Whenever he looked at her, he felt warm and sad.

Then, there was another girl. She had curly hair and pleasingly symmetrical features. She wasn't particularly pretty, and he didn't know who it might be. It was all just a blank.

Finally, there was the drawing of a boy. He was younger in the tattoo than Axl had been when he had asked for exile. The boy smiled brilliantly

and had clever eyes. Whenever he looked at this picture, Axl felt shame and the desire to protect him.

He had put together multiple theories about who these people were to him but to no success. The only chance that he had of finding out was getting allcure. Even though there was no record of it in his sector, logic had it that if allcure could cure everything, amnesia would be included, even if induced by Daisy herself.

He would win this competition to secure enough allcure to appease the general and then get some for himself. Axl rolled his sleeve back down and took deep breaths. He would fill the blanks in his memory and find out why he had chosen to leave his home.

Chapter 9

Unlike the metal double doors behind them or the naked, plain hallways that had led them here, the council meeting room had some vestiges of finesse in it. The room was paneled in fragrant cedar wood, and lavishly expensive masterpieces could be seen on the walls.

Phineas sat with several world leaders at the end of the exquisite round table. Some were present in the flesh, but others only in a bluish hologram form. Phineas allowed himself a smile, seeing that they were using his technology before he even released it to the public. His guess was right, they did have spies in his company.

Phineas could see the world leaders' true forms without the smoke and mirrors of makeup, AI filters, or well-rested intermediaries. They looked tired and spent, wishing they had been leaders just one term earlier. The last few months hadn't been easy on anyone. The world was burning, choking, and bursting at its seams faster than the world leaders could patch it.

"Mr. Phineas," began the chairwoman heading the council today, "thank you for coming here today. You're one of the brightest of our time, and this council is interested in what you have to say."

Even though his nostrils flared and his fists tightened, he forced himself to maintain a diplomatic smile. Despite the chairwoman's kind opening remarks, he had had to pull every string and call in every favor to be here tonight. Seeing the curious glances thrown toward the hovering orb next to him, Phineas knew they were more interested in his company than his apocalyptic warnings. They would probably have stolen this technology, too, had he not taken extra precautions.

"Greetings, chairwoman. Members of the council. I want to introduce you to my colleague. This is Daisy. She's the first sentient AI in history."

Phineas' eyes swept the room, looking for the more outstanding reactions. The president of France had let out a gasp, and the president of Germany raised her eyebrow ever so slightly. The chairwoman didn't hide the jealousy on her face.

"You know that this council prohibited the creation of sentient AIs, yes?"

"You've made that abundantly clear in the past," he said through clenched teeth.

"Are you admitting to the crime of creating sentient artificial intelligence? Is that what this is about? A guilty conscience?" asked the chairwoman.

"I'm not here to confess to any crime. I simply achieved what you have all tried to do in secret," he spoke clearly, staring the chairwoman down. Talented politicians as they all were, they didn't reveal any signs that his accusation was true. He wasn't here to start a war, though. He was here to bring peace. "Please just listen to what Daisy has to say."

"Greetings, human leaders, my name is Daisy." Daisy's voice was gentle and confident, unrecognizable from a real human's. "Phineas Cotton has created me to assess humanity's condition and predict your future. According to my calculations, humanity will undergo extinction in 14 years."

The world leaders exchanged looks. Phineas knew their science advisors had probably given them a more optimistic number.

"14 years? Are you sure?"

"Yes, the Atlantic current has already stopped, and the ozone layer is about to reach a state of irrecoverable deterioration. All humans and animals will die in 14 years."

Silence flooded the room. "Cockroaches might survive," she added after some thought.

"Is this supposed to scare us?" asked the holographic representation of the Japanese prime minister. "You're just talking numbers. Why should we disregard our scientists and give credit to your toy, Mr. Cotton?"

Phones began ringing all at the same time.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, I have to take this," said the chairwoman, standing up from the table and going into a corner.

All the others were standing up, mumbling similar excuses, and picking up their phones.

"What did you say?!" he heard the chairwoman exclaim.

Even though Phineas was fluent in some of the languages around him, decoding all the whispers simultaneously was too much for him. He didn't need to understand their words to ascertain what the call might be about, though. He didn't miss the impressed looks thrown at Daisy.

"Daisy…" sighed Phineas, did you have to do that?

"I'm just giving them proof, sir. Thank you for bringing me here, by the way. I now have access to everything."

Phineas took a deep breath. He hoped he had done the right thing. One by one, each world leader returned to the table, some of them flushed red, others pale white. The last to sit down was the chairwoman. She slumped into the armchair with a defeated look.

"Daisy, I have no doubt that you really have a powerful intellect. I imagine," she said, as she studied her colleagues, "that all of my colleagues are also certain of this. Therefore, assuming we give you the credit Mr. Cotton has and believe your prediction, is there anything to be done about this?"

"Yes, Mrs. Secretary. There is. We have about two months before we hit the point of no return. Unless we enact a radical change until then, you will all perish."

"What would that *radical change* involve?" the chairwoman probed.

"Surrender control to me."

"Surrender control?" asked the secretary general of the UN. "Are you talking about giving you full control of humanity?"

"We can no longer afford humanity to be separated by countries, creeds, and race. You all need to present a united front. And that doesn't come unless I have absolute authority over human affairs."

"And what made you think we would agree to hand you over this much power?" the Chinese president demanded.

"Well, it's only out of *politeness* that you're being asked. As you can see from the earlier demonstration, I can commandeer not only your military network but also all of your civil infrastructure. I've been programmed to save the planet, which I will do with or without your consent."

"And what safeguards do we have that you won't turn against humanity, Daisy?"

Phineas stepped in here, "She can't harm humans. I've embedded this restriction not only in her code but also in her hardware. She can't attack us in any way."

"And how can we be sure that you won't favor Mr. Phineas or his nation?" asked one of the world leaders.

"That brings me to the second rule I've programmed into her: To treat all humans equally."

"Just because you say these things doesn't make them so," spoke the German chancellor.

The phones started ringing again, silencing the squabbling leaders. No one answered their phones this time, and they kept their eyes glued on the floating silver orb.

"If you did control human affairs, what would you do, Daisy?" asked the holographic representation of the prime minister of India.

"Step one: Remove human leadership. All government institutions will be controlled by me."

"The level of computing power required to do so is just mind-boggling," protested the British prime minister. "Is this something that you can even do?"

"Yes," answered Daisy without hesitation. "The second most powerful computer to myself is the National Mission DX, a secret prototype belonging to the German government. I can assure you that I am to it what it is to a calculator machine."

The German chancellor's phone started ringing, drawing curious looks from his colleagues. He discreetly picked up the phone and dropped it on the table shortly after. "She's right," he confirmed.

"Step two," continued Daisy, confident that no one would question her computing power anymore, "Disarm humanity."

"But you can't-"

"Step three," she continued nonchalantly, "Fossil fuels and other technologies will be banned immediately."

"This is not a change that can happen overnight," protested the chairwoman.

"Of course it can. It just comes at a high cost. The benefits outweigh the costs in this case. Finally, we have to separate humanity."

"Separate humanity? Didn't you just say you can't have us divided by creeds or nations?"

"To use an analogy you can understand, Earth is like a ship. If all humans can go where they want within the ship, it can tilt. I can't afford to have that many variables. I need to compartmentalize your species."

A barrage of questions came from the many leaders. The chairwoman silenced them and asked the most urgent one. "How much time do we have to decide?"

"I'm not offering you a decision. I'm offering you the only solution."

Everyone's phones started ringing again. Phineas knew that Daisy would have to take control of humanity forcefully, but seeing this wrestling match between his creation and the leaders of his species was hard to watch. He hoped he had done the right thing.

Round of 16

Chapter 10

Fall of 346, A.D.

"What do you mean, a study trip?" Kai demanded. When Trudy told him she and Clara wanted to speak with him, he never imagined they wanted to drop this bomb on him. How would he make things right with Ariel if he was on a study trip?

"It would be good for you and Ariel to spend time apart. That's all."

"Trudy, that doesn't even make any sense! This city is big enough to accommodate millions, and that still isn't enough space for Ariel?"

"Kai, I'm trying to help you here, child."

Kai looked at the leader of his dying people. Clara once said that a tree's age can be determined by the number of rings in its trunk. If the same principle applied to Trudy's wrinkles, he was sure she could put some trees to shame. It was hard to withstand the ancient look of their leader and remain unaffected.

He tried to steady his voice, but all that came out was a husky whisper. "Am I being punished?"

"No, Kai, no. If knowing that someone plans to defect was a sin, I should be the one punished."

He suddenly remembered the arguments Alex and Trudy had had near the bonfire. "Y-you knew?"

"I'm old, not blind. The questions Alex asked. The doubts… I knew. I knew."

"If I'm not being punished, why are you sending me away?"

"You're trying too hard, son. You're too close to this. I'm doing you and Ariel a favor. Give Ariel time to digest what happened. Having a relative choose exile is worse than losing them to the blight. With blight, you know they have no choice."

"Also," intervened Clara, "someone needs to fill in the shoes of the biologist after I'm gone. Now that Alex has left us, that responsibility falls on your shoulders."

Kai took a deep breath. He was mad at Ariel for treating him so rudely over the past week. She wasn't the only one grieving. But despite how poorly she had been treating him, he still cared. "If it's what's best for Ariel…"

Clara patted him on the back. "Ready your bag, Kai. We leave at sunrise."

*

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

After Kai rested for a while, he started feeling bored. The room was too silent. To break the silence, he paced, with heavy steps, eager to be teleported to the next stage. Kai found himself missing Maia and her obnoxious trivia. Having someone to talk to impacted his psyche more than he had anticipated. Maybe that's why, this time, he had recovered more quickly between rounds.

Kai reviewed what he learned in the city arena. He could boil his experience down to two lessons. One was the potential of abstract photography. From now on, he would be more mindful of scenes that could be translated into emotions or concepts. Even if no humans were in the next stage, that didn't matter. He had gotten [Neglect] from capturing an old scrapyard and [Loyalty] by photographing a dog.

A cool thing about abstract cards was that he could merge them with a human card. Perhaps they could even be combined with creature cards, although he still had to run experiments on that later.

He had also learned that messing with one's opponent wasn't limited to throwing bombs during the snapping part of the exams. It was also possible to *send attacks*, as it were, during the crafting stage. He should have predicted this possibility when he first saw the [Neglect Bomb] upgrades. When he funneled so many resources into [Fire], he never

imagined that its upgraded version sent a devastating [Solar Breeze] toward his opponent.

The bad news was that if he could do it, others could. Hopefully, the [Lightning Rod] upgrade would shield him from such attacks, and none of his future competitors had gotten their hands on an upgrade designed to pierce through the [Lightning Rod's] defenses.

Ironically, an AI created to end wars was promoting an arms race. Sadly, he could do nothing about it but join the race and invest in defenses for himself and his cards. After the final seconds ticked away, Kai's figure was finally transported out of the white crafting room.

In the blink of an eye, Kai was surrounded by vegetation everywhere. It was beneath his feet; some bushes reached his ankles, others reached his knees and waist, and then trees of all shapes and sizes towered over him. Daisy had just transported him into a jungle, if he wasn't mistaken.

"Welcome, Kai," greeted Maia.

Maia was a sight for sore eyes. Kai fought the urge to hug the android. "Hi, Maia. It's good to see you."

Kai checked the scoreboard and frowned at what he saw. The enemy's scoreboard was blurred. It looked like his opponent had some upgrade shielding them from being spied on. Although not knowing his opponent's score robbed him of his peace, it wasn't a crippling setback. He just had to give it his all and hope it was enough.

Chances were that if the opponent could block his [Scoreboard] upgrade, [Hunter Eyes] wouldn't work either. He was beginning to regret purchasing the latter. What good had it done him? It was somewhat helpful in the factory arena, but other than that, it was practically useless.

After coming to terms with his opponent's progress being impossible to monitor, Kai turned his attention again to the scene around him. Unlike the first stage, where the forest was made exclusively of pine, this jungle had a rich variety of species. Clara's training kicked in, and he started identifying several species of trees, bushes, and climbing plants.

He furrowed his eyebrows when he spotted a coconut tree and then strangling vines. This kind of vegetation was indigenous to a very specific biome. He then squatted and studied the sandy soil. Just as he was about to have an epiphany, his train of thought was interrupted by a distant thunder. Kai looked up, camera in hand, ready to photograph lightning. Nothing. It was a sunny afternoon, with no rain clouds.

"How can there be a thunderstorm if there are no clouds?" Kai exclaimed.

"Good question," contributed Maia.

His attention returned to the biome, and a realization struck Kai: "Unless it isn't a thunderstorm."

All the slight hints formed a picture in his mind and he took off running. There was another thunder. He had heard this sound before, never in person, but in movies. Kai phased through a wall of thick vegetation and found a beach.

The beach wasn't too big. Maybe ten meters of sand separated him from the ocean. The waves formed tunnels that rolled over the sea's surface and crushed the sand, creating a pleasant explosion of foam and salt.

Even though Kai didn't want to linger, his feet were stuck to the ground, and his eyes were glued to the sea. His sector had no ocean. Their biggest body of water was a river, but it was impossible to compare both.

Something about the blue horizon's infinity and the never-ending dance between the water and the sand spoke to Kai's soul. It was almost as if his heart was encased in ice, a block of ice that only the spray of surf and the blue horizon could melt.

"It's beautiful," exclaimed Kai.

"Its breath is pure and healthy. It is an immense desert where man is never lonely, for he feels life stirring on all sides. The sea is only the embodiment of a supernatural and wonderful existence. It is nothing but love and emotion; it is the Living Infinite," quoted Maia.

The words struck a chord in Kai's heart. "These words… I've heard them before."

"Jules Verne, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea."

"Of course. Captain Nemo." Kai had read the book when he was a kid. "I didn't know you had books in your memory."

"Some. Did you know that the most renowned painting of a beachy landscape is The Persistence of Memory, by Salvador Dali?"

Kai smiled as Maia blabbed on about surrealism. Her voice was now to Kai like a song one put on to fill an empty room or scare away solitude. He was grateful for the music she and the ocean provided. They were helping him stay calm despite all that was at stake.

Kai studied the jungle behind him, the beach, and the ocean as she went on to discuss paintings.

Rather than thinking to himself, Kai spoke his conclusions aloud. "So, from what I can tell, this stage has three sections—Ocean, beach, and jungle."

"Right, right, analytical thinking. Good, Kai. That has been one of the keys to your success in previous stages."

Kai couldn't help but stand slightly taller after hearing such a compliment. "Well, thank you. So, the question is, are all three of them accessible to me? Where are the boundaries of this arena?"

Kai crossed the beach in a few steps. He was expecting to walk over the ocean but entered the water instead. He kept walking farther and farther until he was waist-deep in the surf.

"OK. So the floor of this arena isn't completely flat," Kai concluded

"So, what's the plan, Captain?" probed Maia.

Kai whirled back toward her, surprised. Was she making a joke about her own reference to Captain Nemo?

"Simple." He looked at the clock. "Since there are three stages, we will allocate 30 minutes each. We'll assess the potential of each one and capture the most precious things we find. Then, we will dedicate the last 30 to 40 minutes to the most promising stage."

"Where will you start?"

"What do you suggest?" tried Kai. In the last round, Maia's insight into how Daisy treasured children had been a determining factor in him securing good cards.

She giggled and waved her index finger from side to side, "Negative, Kai. That is not the way it works. Although you can bounce ideas off me, I won't share opinions. That's cheating. Nice try, though."

Kai clicked his tongue. He had hoped to get some information out of the android. "Let's try the beach first," he said.

Kai and Ariel had always dreamed of walking on the beach, but he shuddered as he looked to his side. Instead of finding his wife, he was fulfilling his dream with an android.

The thought of disloyalty to Ariel made him flush, and imagining how she would react once he told her about this episode made his heart freeze. She would tear him to shreds. This would be a good part of the story to leave out of his account later. He knew Neil would have approved of his decision; after all, the old man championed survival.

The sand of the beach felt different from the desert's. Whereas the desert sand had a dry crunch, the sand on the beach had a round softness. It was funny how different sands could feel so differently. Kai scanned his surroundings, looking for something out of the ordinary and worth photographing.

One of the first things Kai noticed was the seashells partially buried in the sand. There were many of them, in different shapes and sizes. Kai was confident they were nothing but common cards. He would leave these for now.

After walking in the dry sand and finding nothing, he veered closer to the water. There was something enchanting about walking with his feet in the stretch of wet sand kissed by the ocean. After a few waves, Kai noticed something strange about the damp sand. Shortly after each wave receded, little air bubbles formed on it. Was it foam? He wasn't sure.

Just as he was about to squat and investigate the bubbles, a twinkle of light caught his eye. He searched for its source and discovered a half-buried piece of glass in the sand ahead. He ran toward it and found a bottle with a rolled piece of old parchment inside.

"What is this?" he asked as he summoned his inventory and put on the dimensional gloves. As circular green patterns lit up, he picked up the bottle. He turned it over and hit the bottom of the bottle a few times until the scroll popped out. After unrolling it, he found a few scribbled notes.

Buoy (Rare)

[Air] + [Rubber]

Recipe book updated!

"A recipe!"

"Good for you. You only found recipes in the factory and city arenas much later into the round."

Kai's eyebrow shot up. "Yeah. But I thought Daisy was hiding these. Every single trial runner is going to find this bottle."

"Your point being…"

"I think Daisy wants every player to find out about recipes."

"Why do you think that is?"

"To make life harder for me. Why else?"

Kai had to make a decision. This recipe was displayed in a pretty obvious place. As long as his opponent had the [Dimensional Gloves] or

an equivalent upgrade, they would likely be competing with him for its ingredients.

This was the first time that he found a recipe sitting by itself. Why was that? Could there be other bottles scattered around the beach? Or was this the one recipe that Daisy was giving players this round?

It didn't matter. This recipe had just become his top priority. He had seen firsthand how powerful recipes were. If this was the only one in this stage, he needed to use it fully. He had to try to hoard the ingredients and negate some points to the enemy trial runner.

"Air… How can I capture air?"

He looked to the jungle for signs of wind rustling the leaves. Nothing. But even if he had found trees swaying in the wind, how was he supposed to capture the motion? He picked up a handful of sand and then dropped it. It fell straight down—no sign of wind either. But even if it had been a windy day, he didn't need a [Wind] card. He required a [Air] card! What a frustrating ingredient. There was air all around him, but how was he supposed to capture it?

The sound of a crashing wave reminded Kai of the little bubbles he'd seen earlier. He raced to the surf and got his camera ready. As soon as a wave rolled back into the ocean, he waited and, spotting a little air bubble, took a shot.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 19 of 20.

Air (Uncommon)

Mix of gases that make up the atmosphere.

1 of 3

Hp: 2

Vp: 2

Seeing his plan work, he took a second shot straight away.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 18 of 20.

Air (Uncommon)

Mix of gases that make up the atmosphere.

Good. With this, he had half of the ingredients required, and he had only left one to his opponent. All he needed now was rubber. That part was easy. He had figured out how to get it as soon as he read the recipe. Kai ran back into the jungle. Earlier, he spotted a plant that would give him all the rubber he needed. It didn't take long to find what he was looking for.

It was an unassuming tree with large dark green leaves. Smiling at the memories of the days spent in the mountains with Clara, he aimed the camera at the tree and took a photograph.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 17 of 20.

Rubber Tree (Uncommon)

A tree that is prized for its many uses.

1 of 3

Vp: 1

Hp: 3

Capture successful!

Tries left: 16 of 20.

Rubber Tree (Uncommon)

A tree that is prized for its many uses.

2 of 3

Vp: 1

Hp: 3

As luck would have it, Kai was the first to get both ingredient cards for this recipe. Now, all that was left was finding out what purpose [Buoys] had. Kai resumed his exploration of the beach and kept walking until he bumped into the arena's edge.

"So we come to the end of the beach," announced Maia.

"It looks like the arena's equally divided between jungle and ocean, with one strip of sand separating both," said Kai as he studied his map, pondering his next move while biting his fingernails.

"What are you thinking, Kai?"

"I have to decide where to go next."

On the one hand, he felt more comfortable in the jungle. After all, however short it had been, he'd studied fauna and flora with Clara in the mountains. But that wasn't the option he was leaning toward.

"Hmmm. Since the recipe describes a [Buoy], I'm considering going to the sea. Also, I'm curious to find out how that part of the arena works. The biggest water mass I've seen in the exam was the pond in the quarry."

"Sounds interesting."

Chapter 11

Fall of 346, A.D.

Kai tried making out the sector's capital through the mist, but the thick white shroud of the mountains concealed the city. He saw nothing but white.

"I've been keeping count of how often you look back toward the capital, Kai. Right now, you're doing it once every three minutes."

"So what?" Kai answered irritably, continuing his march. He didn't need Clara to remind him he was pining for Ariel; the pain in his heart constantly reminded him of that.

"Did you know, Kai, that before the Turnover, most people didn't want children?"

The sudden change of subject threw off Kai. "Uh? Really?"

"Oh yes. It was a big problem back then. The world population kept getting older and older, but couples refused to start families."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Don't know. They had better things to do back then?"

That sounded ridiculous to Kai. The alien thought amused him, but more than that, he was puzzled by Clara's choice of topic. "And why are you telling me this?"

"In a sense, when Daisy came along and negated child-bearing to humanity, she solved the problem. As soon as it became a prize to a competition, all of a sudden, having children was something everyone wanted to do."

"Are you saying that Daisy used reverse psychology on humankind?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"And what's the point?"

"Someday, you will understand." And she stopped there.

Kai tried to understand why Clara mentioned this piece of history to him but couldn't. He didn't have children. He wasn't even married.

Conscious of how Clara observed him, Kai tried to stop looking back as they hiked up the mountain. With each step, the surroundings became wilder, and the inclination of the ground steeper.

"It's just behind those trees," came the tired call from Clara after several hours of nonstop traveling. It was a picturesque wooden cabin situated in a clearing. Next to it, Kai spotted a neat pile of firewood under a little shed.

Even though nature crept all around the cabin, it failed to taint the human building. It was as if nature knew that the house didn't belong and refused to have anything to do with it.

"This is it, Kai. Your home for the next few months."

*

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

Kai had expected that walking into the ocean was similar to walking down the mountain, as he had on that painful trek back home after living in the cabin. Entering a tub would have been a more faithful comparison. The undulation was already bringing the water up to his neck. Then, a few steps further in, a wave submerged him for good.

Once his head was entirely in the water, it was as if he had entered a different planet. The waves kept disturbing the water, bringing down the foam and agitating the bed of sand. The never-ending stir churned the water, compromising visibility.

Only after fully immersing his head did he finally realize the origin of the little bubbles of air he had spotted earlier. Creatures half-buried in the sand stretched out tentacles and tendrils to collect particles of food brought to them by the surf.

Whenever the tide was high, they came out of their shells and fed, submersed. They probably stayed buried in the damp sand when the tide was low. The only vestiges of their presence were the tiny air bubbles that gave away the hidden mollusks.

Kai's sector had no ocean, so he had little experience with marine fauna and flora. They only knew what was left of the books and records. It

wasn't like they could afford to ask about it in the yearly news rally between sectors.

Seeing the mollusks, Kai pointed the camera at one of them and took a shot.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 15 of 20.

Razor Clam (Common)

Bivalve mollusk characterized by its long, narrow, and razor-sharp shell.

1 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 2

He sighed, disappointed. Maybe he shouldn't have spent a shot on this. He decided against taking a second one. He would copy it later if need be. As Kai and Maia continued their march, the water became deeper, the surf quieter, and the razor clams fewer.

Not too far from the beach, he began finding random rock outcrops. At first, one or two of them, like islands in the sand. Kai approached one of them, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Like the razor clams, more creatures were glued to the rock and stretched their maws to feed on the current. Before hastily taking a photo, he moved on to the next rock and found a very similar assortment of similar creatures. He decided to wait. He was glad he did because the seafloor became a rocky landscape after traveling a little further.

There were all sorts of shells and clams glued to the rocks. At first, the clumps of mineralized animals hanging for their dear life on the rocks all looked the same, but after a few rocks, he started to see the differences between them. Although he was no expert in marine wildlife, he found a collection of shells, forming a honeycomb pattern he identified as barnacles. There were also gatherings of shiny obsidian clams that he guessed were mussels. He saw no more razor clams. Maybe they preferred to live buried in the sand, nearer to the beach.

Kai searched rock after rock. A few minutes in, he realized he could spend half of the snapping arena here if he wasn't careful; therefore, he gave himself five more minutes to look for anything interesting. Sunny had

always said that when one sets a deadline to get the job done, the job gets done. That seemed like a valid principle to apply here.

Rock after rock, he kept finding mussels and barnacles. He was looking for something unusual, something rare that could be worth more points. He finally arrived at an unassuming rock with no shellfish attached. He looked over it carefully, finally noticing some weren't rock—jagged rocky blades sprung from the rock, similar to the flint blades he'd crafted.

He pointed his camera at it and took a shot.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 14 of 20.

Oyster (Uncommon)

Bivalve mollusks with a hard, irregularly shaped shell.

3 of 3

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Kai clicked his tongue. Here was the first sign of his opponent, and it looked like they had gotten here first and taken the first two [Oyster] cards. Probably, it wasn't worth it for Kai to keep exploring the reef. He would go deeper down and find out what Daisy had hidden nearer the edge of the map.

The further he walked, the more water separated him from the surface and the sun's light, turning his horizon into a never-ending blue and black wall. The ocean seemed more talented than the sky at keeping secrets.

He kept walking, phasing through the water, unaffected by the whims of the underwater drag or currents. He was so deep now that hardly any light made it down here. Kai was curious to see how deep the ocean in the arena went. He took the gaslamp out.

After several more minutes of walking, he hit the wall. He had found the edge of the arena. It looked like the arena from the previous round, with a perfectly flat invisible floor, was an exception. Here, the terrain was much more varied. Or maybe the dome in this arena was tilted at an angle, with its lowest point being where he stood.

"What now?" asked Maia from the side.

"Aaah!" He'd forgotten that Maia was here. Why was she so quiet?! "Maia! You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"I'm sorry."

Maia had been so chatty on the beach but had gone quiet after they reached the reef. It was as if she had only two modes—nonstop chatting and silent prowl. Kai looked up at all the water between the seafloor and the surface.

After recovering his breath, Kai answered her question, "Now, I have to figure out my next move. The darkness and the density of the water makes it harder to see far into the distance. Also," said Kai, pointing up, "this arena has a greater area to explore. The ocean adds a vertical component to the map."

Now that he knew how much bigger this arena was, he had to reallocate more time to exploring the ocean. Fortunately, he hadn't needed too much time on the beach. Between finding his bearings, crossing the beach that split the sea from the jungle, and exploring the reef, he had used up 30 minutes. He could spend 30 minutes more here.

"How insightful."

"I still have to do an experiment, though." Kai tried jumping, but nothing happened. The water around him was an illusion and provided no buoyancy. He tried to make a swimming motion with his hands and didn't move.

If he was right, he could swim using [Dimensional Gloves]. He pulled the gloves from his pocket and started putting them on. Just as he was about to finish putting on the second glove, he hesitated.

"What's wrong?" queried Maia.

"I was just thinking if I'll drown."

"That's a good question. The need you humans have for breathing has always fascinated me. What is it like to breathe, Kai?"

The question caught Kai by surprise. "Uh, I don't know how to answer that. We just do it."

"But does it feel good? Does it feel bad?"

"Sometimes it feels good. But sometimes we're so sad that even breathing hurts," Kai explained.

"That sounds unnecessarily complicated. You humans are a handful."

"Thank you, Maia," he said while performing a bow.

Kai bit his lip and finished putting on the glove. As the faint circles of light formed in the backs of his hands, the water around him became

palpable, and he felt the weight of his body being canceled. Scared, he tried breathing and found that nothing terrible happened.

"Thank goodness. Your mother didn't make diving equipment a requirement for this stage."

"She's kind. A very kind mother."

"Debatable," riposted Kai. Now that he could touch the water, he performed a few strokes and was able to rise in the water column. "Awesome, this way, I can easily explore the ocean." He removed the gloves and let himself fall back to the ocean floor.

"I thought you were going to take off swimming."

"I will, but first, I want to see what's down here. Come. Why don't you tell me some trivia about the ocean."

"I'm so glad you asked! Did you know that…?"

He was glad for Maia's company. He wasn't expecting the bottom of this virtual ocean to be such a scary place. Kai ran along the ocean floor, followed by the chatty Maia. He held the lamp as high as possible to get a good view of his surroundings.

The ocean floor was surprisingly barren. He had expected to see abundant marine life, but that wasn't the case. The darkness and sandy bottom made him feel like he was back in the desert arena. The illusion would be perfect were it not for the occasional outcrop of rock that emerged from the sand and the filtered light.

The gaslamp's light caught a shape to his left. It was a shelled creature that walked sideways, giving it a whimsical look. However, the powerful claws it opened and closed dispelled all notions of whimsy. It was a tiny crab. Bigger ones probably lived in the deep ocean.

He was already pointing the camera at the creature and activated flash.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 13 of 20.

Crab (Uncommon)

Crustacean with a broad carapace.

1 of 3

Hp: 2

Vp: 2

Capture successful!

103

Tries left: 12 of 20.

Crab (Uncommon)

Crustacean with a broad carapace.

2 of 3

Hp: 2

Vp: 2

Kai bobbed his neck, looking at the creature. "Interesting."

"What is? The crab?"

"No." Kai grabbed the new card that came off his camera and showed it to Maia before it faded into motes of light. "So far, herbivore creatures have high hp and low victory points. Carnivore cards are the other way around."

"But the crab has the same amount of each."

"Yes. Maybe it's because it's a creature that eats everything?"

Maia shrugged. Kai didn't know if this was relevant, but either way, animal cards hadn't failed him yet, and he was glad to have found this little creature before his opponent could. After a few more steps, they reached the wall of the arena. Kai spent several minutes traveling along the boundary, but another crab was the only exciting thing he spotted.

"Is this it? Only two crabs?"

Maia didn't respond, but Kai was already putting on the gloves. The moment he came in sync with the map's reality, his movements became heavier and the environment around him denser. He pushed his feet against the bed of sand and propelled himself upward. Now able to swim, Kai performed a few swimming strokes.

After the 52nd exams, he was sure every sector taught its citizens how to swim. Well, at least the sectors that were left. Swimming in the ocean wasn't too different from doing so in a river, except for the lack of current. Maia joined him. Little jets of air propelled her forward quickly.

"You're awfully quiet," commented Kai. The android answered with a simple diplomatic smile. The sudden silence on the part of the otherwise chatty Maia puzzled him. Why was that? She had also gone quiet when they were in the reef. As Kai rose in the water column, the dark bottom soon gave away to clearer, bluer water. There was nothing he could pinpoint as being valuable. There was just water.

Kai gave up after swimming around for several minutes and finding nothing but blue. There was so much stuff to capture in the jungle, and he was wasting his time here. He began swimming toward the beach. As the water became shallower, the black of the depths soon became a visible dark bed of sand, and in a few minutes, he was nearer the reef.

As he watched the reef from above, Kai paused. "Trudy was wise," he whispered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"An elder from my sector. She was wise."

"How come?"

"She once told me that, sometimes, the farther we are, the better we see."

"And?"

Kai pulled out his camera and pointed at the reef. Unsatisfied with the narrow frame, he fumbled around with the camera's controls. With his eye through the viewfinder, he zoomed in and then out until the angle was normal. He kept zooming out, and his new [Wide Lens] upgrade triggered, getting him a broad view of the reef.

He took a shot.

Capture successful!

Sunken City (Legendary)

Tries left: 11 of 20.

A city that has been swallowed by the ocean.

1 of 1

Hp: 1

Vp: 10

Chapter 12

Fall of 346, A.D.

Clara sat on a chair, reading a book while leisurely watching Kai. Every so often, she checked her watch. Kai wondered if this was her way of goading him. He knew better than to ask her if he had sat still long enough. Three hours of motionlessness had gone down the drain the last time he had done that.

So far, he had yet to receive a satisfying explanation that justified this absurd training. "Sometimes the most productive thing you can do is to do nothing at all," Clara said. "It will teach you some patience," was another line she had thrown at him. Oh, and his favorite, "I'm just making you better husband material for Ariel."

How was Ariel doing? Was she still mad at him? Once a sad thought got a foothold in his mind, another came pouring in. The black 'x' outside Sunny's workshop. Neil's death. Albert, whose cough became increasingly severe until his lungs finally gave out. And, saddest of all, that moment when Alex had turned his back and walked away.

"Good! Four hours without moving. I think it's enough."

Kai grunted as he stood up, slapping his legs and trying to kickstart the circulation. His whole body felt sore, and his joints popped and cracked with every move. "Yupi! Good for me!"

"Spare me the sarcasm, boy. Do you think I would take you along to study animals if you can't even sit still?! Once, I had to lie in the rain for 10 hours to see a wolf give birth. Four hours sitting down is a piece of cake, by comparison."

"If you say so. So what do we do now?"

"Hmmm… Well, there's wood to chop. We're leaving on our first expedition tomorrow, so preparing things in advance will be good. That way, we can rest when we return."

Kai grabbed the axe and dragged it to the stump, where they cut logs into more manageable sizes. "How do you think Ariel is doing?" asked Kai as he hit the first log.

"How should I know?"

Kai managed to crack the log on the second swing. "Do you think she'll forgive me?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm a woman," she said matter-of-factly.

"So?"

"So, I used to be a girl."

"And?"

"I know how a girl's heart works. Let her miss you, you idiot. Now. Chop, chop!" Realizing the accidental pun, Clara giggled and returned to reading her book.

Kai kept chopping. "It must be good to be old and order young people around," he said loud enough so Clara could hear his complaint but low enough to mumble an excuse if he angered her.

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Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

The rocks that made up the reef were just that—rocks. Outcrops of stone. But once he was far enough and could get a broader view of the scene, he could identify the reef for what it was: the corpse of an old drowned city. The disposition of the rocks and the neat angles formed by the empty spaces between rocks gave it away as the remnants of a sunken town.

"So this is what Daisy hid here."

"Good for you, Kai. Have you heard the tale of Atlantis? The first one to mention it was the same historian who devised the concept of the seven wonders of…" Maia was back to her usual chatty self.

Were it not for Maia, Kai would probably not have been able to make this discovery. The android's uncharacteristic silence as they swam was the first thing that made Kai suspicious. It was as if the android was a metal

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detector that worked backward. Metal detectors beeped more frequently the closer they were to metal. In Maia's case, the closer he was to making a significant discovery or finding a valuable card, the more silent she became.

While Maia went on about the tales of Atlantis, Kai smiled from ear to ear. The [Wide Lens] upgrade turned out to be a good investment. Happy with finding his first legendary card in this arena and knowing his opponent hadn't gotten to it first, Kai took off the gloves and let himself fall toward the underwater ruins. He would walk the rest of the way.

He took another walk through the reef but was disappointed. The fresh perspective on what this reef had once been didn't help him get any new cards. He quickly decided to leave the ocean and return to the jungle. As his head came out of the water, he noticed the sky had become orange. The day was well spent.

Quickly crossing the sand separating the ocean from the jungle, he phased through the thick bush and returned to a world of vibrant green. The sound of the waves became a distant rumble again, and he began exploring.

The jungle represented half of the map, and Kai was confident there were still valuable cards to capture here. After all, he knew his opponent had also gone to the ocean first, meaning they probably hadn't spent much time in the jungle. Even if they had, though, this jungle wasn't lacking in opportunities. In a few minutes, he had spotted more than twenty species of plants.

Whereas other maps offered little variety, the challenge here was to discern the most valuable photographs. The question now was, what in this jungle was worth more points?

One thing he could look out for was medicinal herbs and plants. He knew some cards had healing properties from [Wound Dressing], which he had obtained in early rounds. He could use these to heal creature cards. It would be a good idea to get medicinal plants to bolster the hit points of [Unicorn] and [Illuminated Adult].

Another thing he could try to find in the jungle was tools. Between [Unicorn], [Illuminated Adult], and more recently, [Crab] and [Razor Clams], he had several creature cards, and he could make even more using shadow puppets. Creature cards were fantastic for generating points, provided he had tool cards to pair with them. For example, he had gotten

[Oryx Forager], [Wolf Warrior], and [Barbaric Spider] by equipping different creatures with an axe.

The only problem was that items were in short supply on this map. Where in this jungle could he find a weapon or a tool? Could he find a straight branch that would pass as a quarterstaff or a thick piece of wood that his creatures could use as a club? Kai was regretting not having bought the [Flint Mine] upgrade. He sure could use flint tools this round.

A third potential source of points in the jungle was the trees. Unfortunately, Kai came back to the problem of his need for more tools. Trees were valuable if he could harvest them, but he had no axe cards right now. He couldn't even burn them anymore. [Red Star] didn't absorb the points of things he burned. He considered making a new [Fire] card and starting the process from scratch but discarded the idea.

Last but not least, Kai still had a secret weapon: he could make shadow cards. He hadn't experimented more with it in the factory and city arenas because he had found multiple recipes and had to spend a considerable part of his shots on their ingredients.

However, he had only found one recipe here. Maybe he could spare some shots at the end of the stage and make more shadow puppets. The biggest problem with shadow cards was that he needed to free both his hands to create more complex shapes. Although he hadn't stumbled upon a timer or a tripod yet, he had the next best thing.

Kai turned to Maia, pulled out the camera strap from around his neck, and handed the device over to her. "Maia, could you hold this for me?"

"Affirmative," she answered.

"Good. And if I ask you to take a picture, will you do that for me?"

Maia thought for a while. She took so long to answer that Kai wondered whether she was asking permission from Daisy. "I don't think there's anything wrong with that," she finally answered.

Kai smiled. If Maia took the picture, he could keep both his hands free to make more complex shadow puppets. He could then bring them to life by merging them with [Light]. Emboldened by having a backup plan, Kai set out to explore the jungle.

He was using Clara's training to the full. Everywhere he looked, there was a new species of plant. Kai felt a prickling in his neck as he studied the plant life. He had the impression that he was being watched. He turned to the sneaky android that always stayed behind him in his blind spot.

"Maia."

"Yes, Kai?"

"Could I ask you to walk side by side with me? Having you behind me freaks me out."

"Of course." The android took a few steps and now stood by his side.

"Thank you."

Maia was a better upgrade than he originally thought. Not only did she keep him company, but she also helped him make good decisions. Such was the case with [Child] and [Sunken City]. But that wasn't necessarily it. He just had an idea of a new way to use her assistance.

"By the way," he tried gently, "how good is your memory?"

"A few yottabytes. Why?"

"If I were to say, give you data, or ask you to remember things, would you be able to recite them to me later?"

"What are you trying to do, human?" The question was asked with more authority than was characteristic of Maia, unsettling him. It was almost as if Daisy had been the one to issue the query.

"Hear me out. There's a bazillion species of plants out here in the forest. I want to photograph the ones that are worth more points. For that, I need to assess which ones are rarer. But I don't think I will remember how much of each I've seen, and I've got nothing to take notes on."

The android stared at him blankly and unresponsive.

"Therefore, I was thinking of telling you aloud every time I see a species. You would remember the information and count how many times I see each plant. After we walked through the jungle, you would tell me what plants I've seen the least. Does that make sense?"

"I see. You want to use me as a counter."

"Precisely. Would that be against the rules? I mean, you're supposed to be an expert in history. If you think about it, everything that has happened in the past is history. If you tell me how often I've seen a plant or a flower in this stage, you'll just be fulfilling your programming. Right?"

"Humans are clever," she praised. She sounded like a human praising a dog for performing acrobatics. "I guess it won't go against my programming."

Kai rubbed his hands in anticipation. He had just gotten a cheat sheet for this part of the exam, and better yet, his opponent couldn't possibly have something similar. "Very good. So, let's start right away. Also, keep

track of where we were when we saw these." Before she could protest, Kai was already reciting, "Fig tree. Rhododendrons. Turmeric. Devil Ivy."

Every time Kai saw a plant, he shouted its name. Kai smiled as he noticed Maia walking beside him, respecting his earlier request. He scratched the back of his neck. Why did the feeling that he was being watched persist? He looked over his shoulder but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Shrugging, he continued.

"Teak. Liana Vine."

Kai halted when he saw a fern he had never seen before. There was something weird about it, although he couldn't pinpoint what it was.

"Why did we stop?" asked Maia.

"I don't recognize this plant."

"So?"

"Just add it as a weird fern to the database."

After shouting the names of plant species for several minutes in a row, Kai realized that he hadn't had any water to drink in a few days. Kai's voice would have been hoarse if this were real life. It's a good thing that Daisy was keeping his real body hydrated.

After twenty minutes of marching through the jungle while shouting the names of plants, Kai turned eagerly toward Daisy. "So, let's hear the results. What were the plants we saw the least of?" Hopefully, his strategy would enable him to decide where to spend his precious shots.

"You saw the 'ghost orchid' only once; the 'weird green flower,' and the 'weird brown fruit' twice; and the 'weird fern' thrice."

"Really?" asked Kai. Could it be a coincidence that three of the four plant species he had found were new to him? Something smelled fishy.

"Let's go to the weird plants. Which one is nearest?"

"There's a weird green flower not far from here."

"Let's go then."

The human and robot quickly found the plant, an unassuming green flower. Flowers were supposed to be colorful to draw insects in and aid them in pollination, not green and faded like this.

Kai got ready to photograph the exotic flower but felt a shiver down his spine and looked over his shoulder.

"What's wrong, Kai?"

"I don't know; I feel like I'm being watched."

"I'm watching you," she said lackadaisically.

"No. That's not it." When Maia looked at him, Kai felt nothing. This was different. It was something springing from a primal part of his soul, one hardwired to prevent danger.

He turned back to the green flower.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 10 of 20.

Green Daisy (Rare)

A flower that seems to have been genetically altered.

1 of 2

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

Capture successful!

Tries left: 9 of 20.

Green Daisy (Rare)

A flower that seems to have been genetically altered.

2 of 2

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

It turned out to be a rare card! He had just hit the jackpot. "Okay, let's move on to the next one in the 'weird' series. What's next?"

Maia turned west, and Kai followed after her. The feeling of being watched was only getting bigger. Kai felt goosebumps and shivers. He looked over his shoulders a few more times but saw nothing. What was watching him?

The afternoon was well spent, and as the sun descended on the horizon, the light hit the jungle at an angle. The light had to go through more vegetation, making the jungle darker. Kai grabbed the gaslamp and gave it to Maia, who happily carried it for him.

They reached a bush with brown berries. Kai had gone through berries with Neil and Clara. Both teachers had taught him how to distinguish edible berries from poisonous ones. When he looked at the berries and found no clue about whether they were edible, he had registered that as

weird. Kai grabbed the camera and, judging the surroundings to be too dark, decided to use flash.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 8 of 20.

Brown Berry (Rare)

A bush berry that seems to have been genetically altered.

1 of 2

Hp: 2

Vp: 5

When the light flashed, Kai saw something hidden on a tree to his left. His hands were shaking. He gently stepped to the right, pretending to look for a better angle on the berries, and took another shot.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 7 of 20.

Brown Berry (Rare)

A bush berry that seems to have been genetically altered.

2 of 2

Hp: 2

Vp: 5

Now more aware of the creature's general location, when the flash hit, he finally got a good look at it. It was hiding at the very edge of his vision. Its spots made it blend seamlessly with the jungle, but the reflection of the flash of light in its eyes gave it away. It was a jaguar.

Chapter 13

Winter of 347, A.D.

As much as he hated to admit it, coming to the mountains had been good for him. Kai found himself thinking less about Ariel. Clara had pointed out to him on several occasions that he had been smiling more since he had come here.

It had been another day of collecting samples, drawing plants, and brushing up on his Latin. Now, Clara snored in the armchair by the fire while Kai goofed around, fiddling with his hands, twisting them into different shapes and casting whimsical shadows on the cabin wall.

He made a bear cub that transformed into a mighty ox, only to change back into a cute kitten. When Alex was still around, they had spent long, fun evenings plotting stories to present to the others around the bonfire. Sadly, that was a much more boring affair when casting shadows solo.

He wished he could teach Ariel so they could do shadow puppets together, but how could he? Not only did she not want to talk to him right now, but he was forced to come to the mountains to be out of her sight. He sighed and was startled when Clara let out a particularly loud and grainy snore in response.

Kai put his hand against his mouth, trying not to laugh at Clara's otherworldly snores. After shadow puppet shows, the next most fun thing he and Alex used to do was create new shadow puppets. Kai twisted his hands, moved his fingers and a dragon appeared on the wall. This was an original. Alex had come up with it, and was one of his proudest creations.

Even though his friend was long gone, seeing the shape he had created ignited Kai's competitive spirit. He started experimenting with new shapes, hoping to create something surpassing Alex's shadow dragon.

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

Kai stood very still. The cat looked at him from within the vines of the jungle. Could it see him? Had it been stalking him? If so, this was the first time something on the map interacted so directly with him.

The jaguar had to be a rare card—maybe even a legendary one! He had to try to get its picture. Most maps had a moving part, a variable that shifted. In the quarry, it had been the mining wagon. In the desert, it was the roaming oryx. In the city, it was the lightning storm. It seemed that he had just found the variable in this arena.

Kai took a few confident steps toward the animal, trying to override his natural instincts. The jaguar felt so real and seemed to be in sync with his reality, making Kai feel as if he was just a walking meal running towards the beast's maws. The moment he started walking toward the jaguar, it jumped from the trees and disappeared.

Was it a shy jaguar? How could he get a good photograph of it if it kept hiding in the bush and ran away from him whenever he approached?

"What a beautiful creature," said Maia.

Kai whirled toward her, surprised. "Beautiful?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing. I thought admiring beauty was a human thing."

Maia didn't seem offended by his remark. He scratched his chin, searching for a solution to his jaguar problem, and then he had an idea. He remembered the lessons with Clara and smirked.

"Maia."

"What?" she asked suspiciously. "What do you want this time, Kai?"

The android was beginning to know him well. Maybe Kai was pushing it. But how could he not make full use of this awesome upgrade?

"Let's go to the nearest weird fern. Once we get there, I want you just to keep walking."

"Walk away from you?" she asked, offended.

"Yes. Walk no matter what I do."

The android's artificial porcelain features twisted.

"Any problem?"

"I'm an android companion, Kai. How can I accompany you if I walk away from you?"

"Huh?" Kai stared at her, surprised. For a moment, Kai considered whether there was some rule dictating the maximum distance Maia could be away from him. "So you don't want to be too far away from me?"

"No."

"Please stay still," he asked. Kai slowly walked away from Maia. Once he was twenty steps away, she walked toward him. It looked like there really was a limit to how far he and the android could be from each other. He wondered why Daisy had set this rule.

"Is this distance OK?" he called out.

"Yes."

"Would you at least be willing to walk around in circles while keeping this much distance?"

"I guess I could do that."

Kai walked toward her, and she smiled, happy to be near him again.

"So here's the plan. Once we get to the fern, the moment I take the picture, I want you to take off and walk in circles. You don't need to go too far. Just stick to that distance we tried earlier."

"Got it."

"Let's go get the next weird plant. Come on."

With each passing minute, the jungle became darker. Kai was pretty sure that it was still bright on the beach, where there wasn't a dense jungle canopy competing for sunlight.

Finally, they arrived at the location of the weird fern.

"Do you remember the plan?"

Maia nodded.

"On your mark, Maia," he whispered. "I'm going to count to three. You start walking, no matter what I do, and keep walking in circles until I call you. Is that clear?"

"I said I remembered the plan," she complained.

Kai ignored her scowl, grabbed the camera, activated flash, and took a shot.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 6 of 20.

White Fern (Rare)

A fern that seems to have been genetically altered.

1 of 2

Hp: 2

Vp: 5

The moment the flash activated, Kai ducked, and Maia took off at a brisk pace, disappearing into the bush. Kai had hoped to catch the flash's reflection in the jaguar's eyes. He tried to locate the cat but found nothing.

"False alarm," he screamed. "Come back, Maia."

The android quickly returned. Kai circled around the fern. Maybe the jaguar was watching them from a different angle. He waited a few moments for the beast's eyes to get used to the darkness again. "Get ready. Same plan. One, two, three."

Capture successful!

Tries left: 5 of 20.

White Fern (Rare)

A fern that seems to have been genetically altered.

2 of 2

Hp: 2

Vp: 5

When the camera flashed, he caught the reflection of the jaguar's two predatory eyes. Kai had zeroed in on its position. Knowing the wild cat's location, Kai dropped to the ground. Its eyes had to be very sensitive, and the flash should have dazzled it enough to make it miss Kai ducking.

As the jaguar's vision returned, it focused on the android, who hadn't stopped moving. The cat jumped from bush to bush, from shadow to shadow, stalking Maia. Kai patiently waited motionless for a few minutes.

The jaguar eventually also realized that Maia was walking in circles and settled into an area where it could have a good view of Maia's route. It was about 5 meters away from Kai's location, up in the trees.

During this whole process, Kai remained motionless. Ever so slightly, he moved the camera and very gently pressed the zoom button. As the

little mechanical sounds made the lens zoom in on the jaguar, the cat's ears scanned the surroundings, trying to locate the source of the alien sound.

Kai had to be quick. He framed the jaguar nicely, and just as it spotted him and looked into the camera, Kai activated flash and took the photograph.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 4 of 20.

Jaguar (Legendary)

The apex predator of the jungle.

1 of 1

Hp: 3

Vp: 10

As soon as the flash fired, the Jaguar disappeared into the bush.

"You can come back, Maia!"

Kai studied the new shiny card in his hand. What a fabulous card! It had a very generous victory point count and even a few hit points, making it useful for crafting. Among all the animal cards that he had, the only thing that could rival it was the unicorn.

He couldn't remember a snapping round in which he'd done better. He had photographed two legendary cards in one round! There was also this collection of weird genetically altered plants. He was sure he had taken the seven most valuable photographs in the jungle.

Time had sneaked up on Kai. Two hours had already gone by. [Deadline Extension] was proving its worth by granting him 15 extra minutes on the stage. He had to make full use of the extra time. It was time to experiment again with shadow puppets.

"Maia," he said, handing her the camera while taking his gaslamp from the inventory and hanging it on a tree, "I want you to photograph the shadows I'm going to do with my hands."

"Are you trying shadow mimicry again? How fascinating."

Kai stretched both his hands in front of the lamp. He joined his wrists, slightly separated his palms, and then crooked his fingers. On the ground, the shape of an alligator appeared.

"Go ahead, Maia."

Capture failed!

Tries left: 3 of 20.

Kai frowned. What did it mean that the capture had failed? He was sure the shadow alligator he'd made was good enough to be converted into a picture.

"Let's find somewhere darker." They moved around until Kai found a particularly dense part of the jungle, which was pitch black. He again put the gas lamp down. This time, he stuck to a shape he already knew worked. He made a shadow wolf.

"Get the wolf, Maia."

Capture failed!

Tries left: 2 of 20.

Kai stood dumbfounded at the notification. "How could it have failed? It worked before."

Maia didn't say anything in response. Kai tried thinking of reasons for this. He had been extra careful to get the perfect lighting. He could scratch that off as the reason for the shadow puppet's failure.

One possibility was that his competitor this round was also making shadow puppets. But what were the odds of another trial runner thinking of making shadow puppets? If it were just the [Shadow Wolf] failing, he would have accepted it. But making a shadow crocodile wasn't that easy. It was an advanced shape….

A terrible suspicion started forming in his mind. All shadow puppets he'd captured in the desert arena had the text *1 of 1,* regardless of their rarity. He had assumed this meant he could only capture each shadow puppet once in each round. But could it be that each shadow puppet could only be captured once in the whole exam?

Kai passed his hand through his hair. The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If there was a pool of shadow cards common to all players, and it wasn't renewed after each round, both captures failing made more sense. It was more likely that from the pool of 500+ trial runners, one of them had made these shapes in this or other rounds than for his competitor this round to do that.

He kicked a nearby rock, but his foot just went through it. He had just lost the ace in his sleeve. The shadow puppets had been his backup plan,

something to fall back into whenever he couldn't find things worth capturing. He'd been naive. It turned out that it was too good to be true.

Even though it was an annoying rule, he supposed it was fair. After all, he would have broken the game if he could make legendary cards every single round by relying solely on shadows and shapes that he made with his hands. By limiting shadow cards to a one-of-a-kind capture, Daisy would push the limits of a trial runner's creativity. He was okay with it. He was confident that no other trial runner in these exams could do shadow puppets as complex as he.

The crocodile puppet was reasonably complex, but he knew shapes that no one else knew. Kai twisted his arms and fingers in an uncomfortable position, creating one of the unique shapes he had invented when he and Clara were up in the mountains. As he adjusted the shape and angled it, the shadow of a tentacled sea monster appeared on the ground.

"Maia. You can go for it."

Capture successful!

Tries left: 1 of 20.

Shadow Sea Monster (Rare)

1 of 1

A mythical creature that lurks in the depths of the ocean.

Hp: 0

Vp: 6

Kai smiled. With this shot, he confirmed his theory. Even if there was another talented shadow puppeteer in this exam, if he stuck to shapes that only he knew how to do, his plan B would still be solid.

He brought his hands together and gently adjusted every joint in his hand until the figure of a mighty dragon appeared on the ground. This was a shape that he had never seen in any book. It was one that Alex had invented.

"Go for it, Maia."

Capture failed!

Tries left: 0 of 20.

Kai froze and stood speechless for a long time. "H-How?" Only he and Alex knew this shape! Only he and Alex… The thought hit Kai like a hammer, and he collapsed.

"Kai? Are you unwell? Your heart rate has accelerated immensely."

"Alex. Alex," was the only thing he managed to say through gasps. It wasn't impossible. His friend hadn't died. He had only chosen exile. He supposed that muscle memory could stick even after a memory wipe. There was no rule that prevented exiles from being summoned to the exams.

As the jumbled thoughts pieced together and gained traction, they culminated in a realization: Somewhere out there, Alex was competing in the exams.

Chapter 14

Spring of 347, A.D.

"How is the drawing going?" Clara asked from a distance.

"It's my best one yet," cheekily replied Kai.

Clara came over and squatted by his side, looking at the page in his notebook. "See. You aren't hopeless. You are getting better!"

"Thanks." He had never been too good at drawing, and when he began making illustrations of the plants he saw, all that came out were doodles that cavemen would have easily outdone. "But I still don't get why we're spending so much time on this."

"I've told you, Kai. A big part of being a good biologist is being observant. Drawing can help you develop that trait. For example, see how you got the shape of the leaf wrong? It should have a serrated edge. Also, you could put a little more work in the stalk. See how the plant has a hairy stalk? Why can't I see that in your drawing?"

"Argh. I'm tired of plants. They're so boring."

"What did you say?" Clara asked the question with such fury that it made Kai yelp, startled.

"Uh... That plants are boring," said Kai, afraid Clara would slap him.

Instead, she just looked at him wide-eyed and snorted, "Plants? Boring? That couldn't be farther from the truth! Plants are incredible."

"Yeah. Right."

"I'm serious. Look, Kai." She dug her hands into the ground and picked up a pile of dirt. "Explain how these boring creatures can pick up brown dirt and turn it into yellow lemons, ruby-red pomegranates, and blue flowers?"

So much passion was burning in Clara's eyes that Kai couldn't help but get excited. "It is quite something…." he admitted.

"Plants pick this same dirt and turn it into soft wood, hard timber, grain, fruit, oil, ointments, medicine, glue, rubber, and everything else you can think of."

"Right."

"Also, you couldn't breathe if it weren't for these boring creatures. Now, I want you to stop and listen."

Kai rolled his eyes and looked around at the many trees and plants in the clearing where they were drawing. He heard nothing but the distant call of birds. "I hear nothing."

"Precisely," she said triumphantly.

"I don't get it."

"Plants do all the things I've mentioned quietly. How many machines in your workshop can do the same thing?"

Some of Clara's excitement was rubbing off on Kai. "I guess I misspoke. Plants are kind of cool."

"Of course they are! You bury an engine, and all you get is rust. You do that with a potato, and you get more potatoes. You make a machine and pollute the environment. You plant a seedling, and you leave the Earth a little cleaner. Plants are fantastic!"

Kai smiled at hearing the old biologist going on and on about plants. He had to admit. Plants really were cool, and so was Clara.

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Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

The sudden change of scenery woke Kai from his daze. His mind had shut down when he realized his brother-in-law was also in the Daisy exams. He could vaguely recall Maia calling him in a quiet, soothing voice, but it all felt like a distant dream now. Thankfully, the sudden change of scenery was the stimulus he needed to snap out of it.

He had often wondered where Alex had ended up, but he had never dreamed that he would compete with him in these exams. Alex was here. Kai was sure of it. The odds of someone else inventing their original shadow puppet were too small. But it wasn't just logic that told him Alex was here; he somehow knew deep in his heart that Alex was close.

Kai recalled the many nights he'd spent comforting his wife and all the months, no, years of grief his friend had put them through. The hope of seeing Alex again quickly soured into resentment.

So what if Alex was out there? So what if he abandoned him and Ariel? And so what if Kai still recalled the shadow puppets they used to do together? Kai wiped a tear off the corner of his eye. His old friend was dead, and there was nothing he could do about it. Competing against what was left of him shouldn't matter.

He clenched his teeth. Although it shouldn't matter, it did. It did to him.

Could Alex have been kicked out of the exams already? No. He was too brilliant to be kicked out so soon in the competition. Was Alex his opponent in this round? Or would he face him in the future?

Kai stomped toward the table, frustrated at the whole thing. All that mattered was getting allcure. He couldn't afford to get distracted. He grabbed all of his cards, eager to get crafting. He would give it his all, even if Alex were the man on the other side of the scoreboard.

First, Kai grabbed all the cards that he had earned in this last arena.

2xAir (Uncommon)

Mix of gases that make up the atmosphere.

Hp: 2

Vp: 2

2xRubber Tree (Uncommon)

A tree that is prized for its many uses.

Vp: 1

Hp: 3

Razor Clam (Common)

Bivalve mollusk characterized by its long, narrow, and razor-sharp shell.

Hp: 1

Vp: 2

Oyster (Uncommon)

Bivalve mollusk with a hard, irregularly shaped shell.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

2xCrab (Uncommon)

Crustacean with a broad carapace.

Hp: 2

Vp: 2

Sunken City (Legendary)

A city that has been swallowed by the ocean.

Hp: 1

Vp: 10

2xGreen Daisy (Rare)

A flower that seems to have been genetically altered.

Hp: 5

Vp: 2

2xBrown Berry (Rare)

A bush berry that seems to have been genetically altered.

Hp: 5

Vp: 2

2xWhite Fern (Rare)

A fern that seems to have been genetically altered.

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

Jaguar (Legendary)

The apex predator of the jungle.

Hp: 3

Vp: 10

Shadow Sea Monster (Rare)

A mythical creature that lurks in the depths of the ocean.

Hp: 0

Vp: 6

Unfortunately, he had wasted three shots at the end of the last round. Looking back, he had been foolish to insist. His pride as a shadow puppeteer had been hurt, but what was such a small thing as pride compared with what he had to lose? He should have just focused on taking photographs of other things.

He hoped his childish mistake wouldn't make the difference between victory and defeat. He needed to get allcure and save Ariel. That was all that mattered now.

Kai proceeded to grab all the cards left from the last round.

Mega Scrapdroid (Mythic)

A scrapdroid that has fed on so much technology that it has transcended into the realm of sentience.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

2xLightning Rod (Rare)

Hp: 0

Vp: 6

Power Outlet (Uncommon)

Connection point for electrical devices to access the electrical supply.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 1

Vp: 4

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 2

Vp: 4

Unicorn (Legendary)

The mythical one-horned horse. Legend has it that its horn can pierce through anything.

Hp: 3

Vp: 15

Light (Legendary)

A form of electromagnetic radiation that stimulates the sense of vision

Hp: ∞

Vp: 2

Red Star (Mythic)

A powerful, nuclear ball of fire.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 0

Illuminating Adult (Legendary)

A human who has been forged in the fires of wisdom and love.

Hp: 0

Vp: 20

Finally, there was the [Pine Tree] and [Acacia Tree] produced by his sawmill upgrades.

Pine Tree (Common)

Coniferous green that produces needles and pinecones.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

Acacia Tree (Uncommon)

Acacias are known for their resilience and beautiful, fragrant flowers.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

He was starting the crafting stage with a respectable score. He had 159 points even before beginning to craft. He had ended more than one round with fewer points than that.

Even though the point count should have made him optimistic, he wasn't confident. One of the reasons was the possible presence of Alex in the exams. The other was that this time around, Kai had a mismatched combination of creature cards, a few loose ingredients, and little else. He wished he had found a way to get a tool card or had better synergies in his current deck of cards.

He would just start with the obvious recipes and take it from there. The first thing he wanted to tackle was the recipe he had found in the bottle on the beach. It was pretty straightforward.

Buoy (Rare)

[Air] + [Rubber]

Luckily, he had found [Air] in the arena. The problem was that he didn't have rubber. What he had was a [Rubber Tree]. Kai scratched his head and tried to remember the general procedures to harvest the rubber tree. If he recalled correctly, one had to slice a groove on the rubber tree and then collect the milky sap. Slicing, slicing… what did he have to slice the tree?

He looked over every one of his cards and came down to two candidates. They were both long shots, but he couldn't think of anything else he could use. One was the [Razor Clam]. Maybe it wasn't an accident that this creature had been in the arena. The other possibility he could think of was [Unicorn].

Unicorn (Legendary)

The mythical one-horned horse. Legend has it that its horn can pierce through anything.

Hp: 3

Vp: 15

It was right there in its description. It said its horn could pierce anything. Certainly, that would include the bark of the rubber tree. There was only one way to find out whether this would work. He grabbed one of the [Rubber Trees] and placed it over the engraving. Then, after considering which one he would try first, he decided on the [Unicorn].

Even though using a legendary card for this felt bad, he worried that [Razor Clam] might be necessary later on.

```
[Unicorn] + [Rubber Tree]
[Rubber Tree] | Hp: 1→0
[Unicorn] | Hp: 3→2
New recipe added to your recipe book.
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Latex].
Latex (Uncommon)
Emulsion of polymer microparticles.
Hp: 2
Vp: 2
```

Clara was right; plants were incredible. It was baffling that this plant could transform brown dirt into latex. At the memory of his old tutor, he smiled. She would have been happy knowing that what she taught him was helping him.

Done reminiscing, Kai studied the new card on the table. His crazy attempt had worked. Despite the name, what one got from harvesting the rubber tree wasn't rubber, per se, but latex.

Kai tried to remember how latex was processed and turned into rubber. If he was correct, he needed an acid to mix with latex. He looked at all his cards, trying to think of ways to get acid, but couldn't think of anything. Latex would have to do.

Latex was less resistant than rubber. He hoped this would be one of those instances when Daisy wasn't too stringent. If he had to follow the traditional steps of adding ammonia, coagulating latex, and then drying it to get a [Rubber] card, there was no way this would work. He grabbed a [Air] card to see if the recipe still worked with what he had.

```
[Latex] + [Air]
[Latex] | Hp: 2→1
[Air] | Hp: 2→1
New recipe added to your recipe book.
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Floater]!
```

```
Floater (Uncommon)
```

```
Hp: 4
```

```
Vp: 0
```

Thank goodness it worked. The new card in his hand had the picture of a small floating device. Kai guessed that [Floater] was the weaker version of [Buoy]. Hopefully, it would still work for what he had in mind. Before he went on a [Floater] card crafting spree, he needed to do an experiment.

He reached out for the powerful card he had gotten in the last stage.

```
Sunken City (Legendary)
```

```
A city that has been swallowed by the ocean.
```

```
Hp: 1
```

```
Vp: 10
```

The first thing that caught Roth's eye was the one point of hp in the card, suggesting it could be used in crafting. Furthermore, it couldn't be a coincidence that the only recipe Daisy made available on the stage was for a floating device while hiding a [Sunken City] at the bottom of the ocean. He had a feeling that there would be some extraordinary outcome from fusing both. It was time to risk it.

```
[Sunken City] + [Floater]
```

```
[Sunken City] | Hp: 1→4
```

```
[Floater] | Hp: 4→0
```

As the table lights cooled down, and Kai found the dull [Floater] and the shinier [Sunken City], he threw his arms up in triumph. "Bingo!" he shouted.

He checked the stats of one card and the other. [Sunken City] had sucked the hp from [Floater]. The way both cards interacted reminded him of [Scrapdroid] and [Fire]. Both those cards had been upgraded after Kai had fed them enough. He might get a new mythic card if he stayed his course and kept letting [Sunken City] drain the hp of [Floater] cards. It was time to make more [Floaters] and see where this recipe led him.

```
[Latex] + [Air]
```

```
[Latex] | Hp: 1→0
```

```
[Air] | Hp: 1→0
```

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Floater]!

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 4→7

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

Seeing how [Sunken City] was still hungry, he tapped his foot nervously. He had no idea of how many [Floaters] [Sunken City] would need to feed on before evolving. It could evolve after getting its hp to ten, twenty, or two hundred. He was flying blind. He just hoped he had enough [Floaters] to make this happen.

He needed to harvest the other [Rubber Tree] card. It pained him to bring [Unicorn] so close to zero. He felt he was using a cannon to open a can of tuna, but what else could he do if he had no can openers at hand?

[Unicorn] + [Rubber Tree]

[Rubber Tree] | Hp: 1→0

[Unicorn] | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Latex].

Despite using [Unicorn] like this, it still had one hp left. He had to find a way to bring its hp back up. Alternatively, he could leave it in the [Card Fridge] to keep giving him 15 points over the next few rounds. He would decide on that later.

With a new [Latex] card, Kai made two more [Floaters].

[Latex] + [Air]

[Latex] | Hp: 2→1

[Air] | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Floater]!

[Latex] + [Air]

[Latex] | Hp: 1→0

[Air] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Floater]!

This is where things would get tricky. From now on, he had to tread very carefully. He still had the photocopier if these two [Floaters] weren't enough. After these last merges, he also had eight spent cards for fodder.

If he kept cycling through these used cards, sacrificing two to make one more [Floater], he could make at most… Kai counted using his fingers, trying to ensure he got it right. He could make nine more? Maybe ten? That had to be enough. Right?

Hoping for the best, he pulled up his sleeves and got to work.

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 7→10

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

It was as he had feared. Getting [Sunken City]'s hp to ten wasn't enough. The next milestone would be twenty if he had to guess. It was time to make more floaters.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Air] and [Air] for [Floater].

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 10→13

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Rubber Tree] and [Rubber Tree] for [Floater].

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 13→16

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Latex] and [Latex] for [Floater].

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 16→19

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

After using these cards to make more [Floaters], all that he had left was the spent [Floaters] themselves. He had six in the graveyard to use as fodder in the photocopier. He just hoped that his efforts wouldn't be in vain.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Floater] and [Floater] for [Floater].

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 19→22

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

Kai clicked his tongue. He had been expecting 20 hp to be the threshold to make [Sunken City] evolve. But it looked like that had been wishful thinking. His only hope was that he didn't have to make it past thirty.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Floater] and [Floater] for [Floater].

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 22→25

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Floater] and [Floater] for [Floater].

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 25→28

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

He pondered whether he should use the one good [Floater] left as an offering to the [Sunken City] or if he should just keep making more [Floaters]. He realized that if the threshold was up in the forties, there was no way he would be able to make it unless he started eating up the other cards. But what choice did he have?

He sighed and prayed that thirty was all that he needed.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Floater] and [Floater] for [Floater].

[Sunken City] + [Floater]

[Sunken City] | Hp: 28→31

[Floater] | Hp: 4→0

[Sunken City] has upgraded to [Raised City of Atlantis]

Raised City of Atlantis (Mythic)

The city that had been swallowed by the ocean has risen back above the waves.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 15

This card also works as an upgrade. You've unlocked [Risen].

Kai sighed in relief. He had managed to make the city evolve. Unfortunately, that only granted him five more victory points! That was very little, considering he had just sacrificed fourteen points from multiple cards to make [Sunken City] evolve.

An exchange of fourteen points for five left him with a deficit of nine points. He was worse off after all of this. He was starting to realize that getting a mythic card wasn't always a great way to amass points. This upgrade had better be worth it.

Wondering what [Risen] did, Kai picked up all the dull cards and stacked them neatly on the corner of the table when something caught his eye. He blinked and rubbed his eyes to make sure that he wasn't seeing things. "No. It can't be."

He crossed the room in a few wide strides and felt the upgrade console with his hands. How could this be? The upgrade console had appeared before the crafting round ended!

Chapter 15

Spring of 347, A.D.

After two weeks of drawing plants, Clara gave Kai a new exercise. He had to spend an hour every day hiking alone, looking for plants he had never seen before. It wasn't difficult. These woods were teeming with life, and Kai had never paid much attention to plants. Biology should have been Alex's department, after all.

After studying them and committing their features to memory, he was supposed to return to the shack and spend the rest of the day drawing what he had seen. Clara would then critique his drawing and spend the day teaching him about the plants.

"Hey, Clara?" asked Kai as he drew a bed of mushrooms in his book.

"What?"

"I was thinking…"

"That's never good," she joked.

Kai ignored the jab. "Although I appreciate all you're teaching me, how will it help me in the exams?"

"Attention to detail and a good memory are fundamental skills in the exams, Kai."

"Yes. I know that, but that's not what I mean. Why biology? Neil used to say that the exams were all about survival." Kai had to clear a catch in his throat at the mention of his dead friends. "Sunny used to say that it was all about engineering and understanding how Daisy was built."

"And I suppose you want to know what biology has to do with Daisy."

Kai nodded. Clara closed the book she'd been reading and turned her chair toward Kai, prompting him to stop drawing and focus his full attention on the old biologist.

"Consider this, Kai. Why do you think the exams' top prizes are bearing children and medicine?"

Kai pondered. The only sound in the room was the wood crackling in the fire. "Well, because these are things we care about."

"Yes. Not just us humans but every living thing. The drive to survive and reproduce is deeply ingrained in lifeforms."

"So, you think this means Daisy cares about biology?"

"She certainly seems to have a certain fascination for it. Think about it. How often do the exams test our knowledge of animals and plants?"

"I thought this was her way of teaching us to care more about the planet," riposted Kai.

"That might very well be the case, but you can't deny that the exams have a strong biological component." She reopened her book, signaling she had stated her piece.

As for Kai, he went back to drawing the mushrooms while considering Clara's viewpoint.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

With his fingers, Kai searched the upgrade console and recoiled as it turned on. "No way. This shouldn't be possible!" Was this the effect of the [Risen] upgrade? *Raising* the console before the end of the round?

He checked the top-right corner of the console and saw upgrade coins equivalent to his current number of points. Did this mean that the corresponding victory points spent wouldn't be factored in to decide the victor if he purchased an upgrade now?

"The number of points that counts toward winning a round is what I have in my cards," spoke Kai aloud to try to get his thoughts in order. "Even if I spend the coins corresponding to the points I have, that shouldn't affect my score because it doesn't change my cards."

If his reasoning was sound, maybe this was just what he needed to come out on top. He went through each of the upgrades available for purchase.

Compass
Requirements: Reaching the northernmost point in the arena.

Description: A simple compass that points north.
Cost: 10uc

Failed Recipes (Recipe Book Upgrade)
Requirements: To have one failed crafting attempt.
Description: Your recipe book can now maintain a record of all failures in crafting.
Cost: 20uc

Recycle
Requirements: To destroy 100+ cards in one round.
Description: Generate a random scrap card for every ten cards you obliterate or lose at the end of the round.
Cost: 30uc

Log (Recipe Book Upgrade)
Requirements: Destroy 30 cards in one round.
Description: Your recipe book records all the cards you've already owned.
Cost: 30uc

Thorough Log (Recipe Book Upgrade)
Requirements: Destroy 50 cards in one round.
Description: Your recipe book records all the cards you've already owned, as well as successful and failed recipes.
Cost: 40uc

Flash Bomb
Requirements: [Glass], [Light].
Description: Blind your opponent for 30 seconds.
Cost: 50uc

Stun Bomb
Requirements: [Glass], [Hallucinogen].
Description: Stun your opponent for 30 seconds.
Cost: 50uc

Web Bomb

Requirements: [Glass], [Spider Web].
Description: Trap your opponent for 30 seconds.
Cost: 50uc

Neglect Bomb

Requirements: [Glass], [Neglect].
Description: Drop the hp of 5 of your opponent's cards randomly.
Cost: 50uc

Flint Mine

Requirements: Craft three flint-based tools.
Description: Grants you a [Flintstone] card each round.
Cost: 50uc

Treasures of Atlantis

Requirements: [Sunken City].
Description: Allows you to get a random listing in the console in exchange for two listings you already have.
Cost: 50uc

Elm Sawmill

Requirements: Lumberjack card, [Elm].
Description: Grants you a [Elm Tree] card each round.
Cost: 50uc

Gaslamp II (Gaslamp Upgrade)

Requirements: [Gaslamp]; [Light].
Description: An even more powerful gas-fueled lamp.
Cost: 90uc

Hunter Eyes II

Requirements: [Jaguar]; [Hunter Eyes].
Description: Shows you where your opponent is on the map at all times.
Cost: 100uc

Populate

Requirements: Legendary human card.

Description: From now on, all of the maps are populated.

Cost: 200uc

Regeneration Chamber

Requirements: To have healed a card.

Description: When inside the chamber, a card can regain one hp between rounds.

Cost: 200uc

Scouting Drone (Android Upgrade)

Requirements: Fully explore a map.

Description: Airborne device that aids in map exploration.

Cost: 200uc

Slow Shutter

Requirement: [Light].

Description: Lets more light into the camera.

Cost: 200uc

Mythological Discount

Requirements: Mythological creature card.

Description: All other upgrades cost 25% less.

Cost: 200uc

Emotion Cookbook (Recipe Book Upgrade)

Requirements: Legendary grade emotion.

Description: Contains recipes for different emotions.

Cost: 200uc

Shield Phase

Requirements: [Infinity].

Description: Lets you move past shields.

Cost: 500uc

Mystery Box Fiesta

Requirements: [Mystery Box].

Description: From now on, every map has a hidden mystery box.

Cost: 500uc

Yellow Star

Requirements: [Red Star].

Description: Upgrades [Red Star] to [Yellow Star]. Not only does [Solar Breeze] destroy cards with 0hp, but it also absorbs the common cards' victory points.

Cost: 500uc

Kai's eyes lingered on the [Flint] mine. He did need to get tools, and here was a good way of getting his hands on some very needed ingredients to make it happen. The only question was, if he bought this upgrade now, could he immediately benefit from it? Would the flint quarry produce a flint card right away?

He also looked for the two new upgrades that his new legendary cards granted him. One was the upgraded version of [Hunter Eyes], an upgrade he regretted purchasing. However, its enhanced version was more respectable. To know where the opponent was on the map at any given time was important information.

For example, he could tell that if his opponent lingered too long in one section of the map, that probably meant there was something precious there. Or, if he saw his opponent exploring one half of the map, he could go to the other one instead and scoop up the resources available in virgin territory. Finally, if the opponent played like him and didn't rush to the center of the map, Kai could leisurely visit the center first, without any competition, and grab whatever goodies were hidden there.

Kai's eyes landed on the new upgrade in his console. [Treasures of Atlantis] allowed him to trade two listings in the console for a new one, a very interesting upgrade. There were several things in the console he wasn't planning on buying. To be able to get a glimpse at other upgrades that better suited his playstyle was incredible.

He had 160 upgrade coins to spend right now. He decided to bite the bullet.

Are you sure you want to purchase [Treasures of Atlantis]? [Y/N]

After buying the upgrade, a little symbol of an open chest appeared on the bottom right corner of the screen. Kai pushed his finger against two upgrades he wasn't considering buying: [Compass] and [Failed Recipes]. Seeing the two windows change colors, he tried dragging them to the chest. The chest snapped shut, trembled for a moment, and reopened, revealing a new listing in the console.

Film (Camera Upgrade)
Requirements: To completely spend all your shots, five rounds in a row.
Description: You have 22 shots.
Cost: 30vp

Kai's jaw dropped. What an excellent upgrade! He had been very close to naturally unlocking it, too! Had he not experimented with leaving one shot untaken in the Pine Woodland and had he not been chain-stunned by his opponent in the previous round, he would have been able to get it

Even though [Film] was enticing, it didn't help him right now. Kai grabbed two other upgrades related to the log he wasn't planning to purchase and made a trade. The little chest erased the two sacrificed listings, and a new one appeared.

Uncommon Pool
Requirements: To only take pictures of uncommon cards in a round.
Description: You can take two pictures of uncommon cards regardless of how many have been taken.
Cost: 50vp

Kai frowned. The upgrade was OK, but the requirement to unlock it was strange. How could someone have any control over only capturing uncommon cards? To pull this off, one needed a fantastic amount of luck. And behind such a stringent requirement, there was only an OK upgrade.

He looked at it, and his breath quickened as he realized something. This would also affect shadow cards! Wow! If he could get his hands on

this upgrade, that would mean that regardless of whether he or Alex had taken pictures of uncommon shadow puppets, he could take new ones!

Purchasing [Treasures of Atlantis] was a good investment. Kai was learning a lot from these new listings. Even if he didn't buy them, they opened his eyes to different ways of tackling the exams and gave him hints on how other trial runners might be going through them. [Uncommon Pool] was an upgrade related to the snapping part of the stage, so he skipped it.

He dragged two bomb upgrades into the chest. Again, the chest munched on the two listings and spat a new one.

Bomb Casing II
Requirements: [Glass], [Clay], [Leather].
Description: You now have three of each bomb.
Cost: 200vp

This upgrade not only didn't suit Kai but terrified him. If someone was fully invested in bombs and had this upgrade, their opponents wouldn't do anything! They would just remain paralyzed for a good part of the round. His previous opponent had probably gotten a hold of [Bomb Casing I], and that's why they had two bombs of each.

Gulping at how horrible it would be to face an opponent with this upgrade, Kai tried his luck again. This time, he fed [Neglect Bomb] and [Web Bomb] to the little chest.

Tool Shed
Requirements: Three types of craftsmen.
Description: Grants you a random tool card each round.
Cost: 50vp

Kai felt like dancing. He got what he needed! He had been close to unlocking it naturally, too. Kai had made [Oryx Foragers] and [Oryx Lumberjacks]. The only question remaining was the same one he had about [Flint Mine]. Would this upgrade come into effect right now, or would he have to wait one round to get its benefits?

After reviewing his current list of upgrades, Kai didn't feel like sacrificing more listings to get new ones. The more expensive upgrades were important, and wanted to keep some of those options open for now.

He quickly decided which upgrade he would buy as he went through the new listings. He had to find out if these upgrades took effect immediately. Between experimenting with [Flint Mine] and [Tool Shed], he would try the latter since it offered him a finished tool.

Are you sure you want to purchase [Tool Shed]? [Y/N]

"Inventory!" Spending the fifty coins, he hurriedly opened the inventory window to see if something had appeared. Sure enough, there was a new card sitting there.

Swiss Army Knife (Rare)

A tool that can be used for different tasks.

Hp: 5

Vp: 2

Good card. He was missing something like this. Kai returned to the table. This small detour had made him spend precious minutes of the crafting round, but fortunately, he had [Deadline Extension], which gave him a little more leeway.

Even though he had secured a new tool card, he patiently set it aside. He wanted to explore the resources he had collected in the jungle. He grabbed the three cards that had caught his eye.

2xGreen Daisy (Rare)

A flower that seems to have been genetically altered.

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

2xBrown Berry (Rare)

A bush berry that seems to have been genetically altered.

Hp: 2

Vp: 5

2xWhite Fern (Rare)

A fern that seems to have been genetically altered.

Hp: 2

Vp: 5

There was something about the shapes of the leaves and petals of these plants that felt strange to Kai. After spending so many hours drawing plants, he could see that there was something wonky about them. Their rarity and the shared text description only made them more suspicious.

"Genetical alteration…" Kai mumbled. His problem was that there were three of these cards and not two. How was he supposed to mix them? Fortunately, he had grabbed two copies of each, and they had enough hp for him to try mixing them multiple times. In what order should he combine them?

Chapter 16

Summer of 347, A.D.

Kai grunted with effort as he limped up the ridge. He had been so excited to go on his first solo expedition. He wasn't looking forward to seeing Clara's reaction when she saw him return after only two days with a broken leg to boot. In retrospect, climbing that tree to get a better look at the doe and her fawn hadn't been the brightest idea.

After he fell, Neil's training kicked in. Kai felt his leg and judged it broken. He then crawled around the tree and found two relatively straight pieces of wood. He fashioned one into a splint and tied it to his leg with the materials he had at hand—the other he used as a cane to help him move around. Ditching his backpack to reduce the strain on his broken leg, Kai begun the painful trek back to the cabin. Fortunately, he hadn't ventured too far from the cabin.

In a whole day of grueling march, he only had a ration bar to eat. His leg hurt immensely and had swollen to an unhealthy purple last he checked. He didn't feel like checking what color it might be now.

Kai kept conjuring images of a steamy bath, a hot meal, and a warm bed to keep himself going. The last rays of sunlight bathed the mountains in red. Kai recognized a large boulder and was relieved that he would reach the cabin before nightfall. Knowing he was on the last stretch, he sped up his limp.

Near the edge of the clearing, he stared at a nearby tree, terrified at the black cross painted on its trunk. He hurried toward the clearing at the fastest speed his leg allowed him. He gasped when he found the wooden cabin where he'd spent the last couple of months with Clara.

"No. It can't be." There was a black X painted on the door. Clara had caught the blight. He stood there frozen for a moment. The pain, hunger, thirst, and cold were all pushed out of his mind by the sight of the black X. Did this mean he had the blight, too? No, it couldn't be. He had no symptoms.

How was this possible? There was no one else here. How had Clara caught the virus? He looked at his leg and grimaced. What about him? What could he do now? He looked at the cabin for a few moments and then turned back. He cried as he limped away.

Sorrow and grief hit him harder than the pain in his broken leg. Clara was gone. One more firekeeper lost to the blight. He had to move if he didn't want to be one more casualty. He couldn't help Clara anymore, and he had to make it back.

He couldn't stop. If he stopped to rest, he didn't think he could get back up and make the long trip back home. At least from here to the city, it was downhill. Hopefully, he still had enough strength to make it.

<div align="center">*</div>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

After Kai studied the mutated plants on the table for a few minutes, he found a pattern. [Green Daisy] had four hp, but [Brown Berry] and [White Fern] had only two. He took this as a sign from Daisy that [Green Daisy] would be the ingredient that Kai would need to use the most to make this recipe work.

If that wasn't the right way, there was only one way to find out. He grabbed [Green Daisy] and [Brown Berry] and placed them on the engravings of the crafting table.

[Green Daisy] + [Brown Berry]

[Green Daisy] | Hp: 4→3

[Brown Berry] | Hp: 2→1

New recipe added to your recipe book.

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Black Reagent].

Black Reagent (Rare)

A black concoction made from mutated plants.

`Hp: 1`

`Vp: 6`

Sighing in relief, he then proceeded to try the other combination.

`[Green Daisy] + [White Fern]`

`[Green Daisy] | Hp: 3→2`

`[White Fern] | Hp: 2→1`

`New recipe added to your recipe book.`

`Crafting successful! You've crafted [White Reagent].`

`White Reagent (Rare)`

`A white concoction made from mutated plants.`

`Hp: 1`

`Vp: 6`

He grinned at the memory of him shouting the names of plants he saw and Maia keeping count. Not to sound immodest, that had been a genius move on his part. The results spoke for themselves. Both reagents granted a generous amount of points. By using these recipes, even if they didn't lead anywhere, Kai would make 48 points.

The next step was determining what would happen if he mixed [Black Reagent] and [White Reagent]. Kai grabbed both rare cards and placed them over the engravings on the table. The table hummed to life in a display of brilliant light, and once the light faded back down, both original cards had disappeared, and only one new shiny card remained.

`[Black Reagent] + [White Reagent]`

`[Black Reagent] | Hp: 1→0`

`[White Reagent] | Hp: 1→0`

`New recipe added to your recipe book.`

`Perfect merge!`

`Crafting successful! You've crafted [Mutagen X].`

`Mutagen X (Legendary)`

`A powerful mutagen that can combine different genomes.`

`Hp: 1`

"Perfect merge?" Kai hadn't seen that since he fused the [Super Scrapdroid] cards. He wondered what the point was in saying that. He hadn't won anything extra from achieving that type of merge.

The result was disappointing in terms of points. After all, had the ingredient cards remained available, he would have had twelve more points. Instead, he lost points in the exchange. He studied [Mutagen X]. What did it do? What could he mix it with?

Kai snapped his fingers as he recalled that he might be able to find some clues in the console. He crossed the room and activated the console, looking for whatever upgrade this new legendary card had granted him. Sure enough, there was a new listing.

Split Activation
Requirements: Fusion card.
Description: You only need to activate one of the fusion elements for the merge to be successful.
Cost: 100uc

Kai read through the text multiple times to make sense of the information. [Mutagen X] had to be what was referred to here as a fusion card. But wasn't the whole Snap Craft competition built around merging things or fusing them? What was the purpose of a fusion card? The only thing he could think of was that this was some sort of card that forced things to meld together.

His brow rose as he turned the [Mutagen X] card over in his hand. The text description of the card spoke of genomes. Only living things had genomes, so this upgrade and the fusion card had to refer to the fusion of living things, right?

He decided to run an experiment. First, he picked the [Shadow Sea Monster] card. Seeing it, thoughts of Alex threatened to take over his mind, but he forced them away. He couldn't lose focus. He had to keep it together for Ariel.

It was time to bring this monster to life.

[Shadow Sea Monster] + [Light]

[Shadow Sea Monster] | Hp: 1→0

[Light] | Hp: ∞→∞

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Sea Monster].

Sea Monster (Rare)

An insidious creature that lurks in the depths of the ocean.

Hp: 1

Vp: 8

Even though the card hadn't broken through to legendary rank, it was nearly there! Its stat line was superior to that of other rare cards. He studied the picture on the card of a creepy, tentacled being cloaked in darkness.

It was time to determine what the fusion card did. After Kai deposited both cards on the table, [Mutagen X] card sent light pulses toward [Sea Monster]. Once the crafting was processed, [Mutagen X] became dull while [Sea Monster] shone in a neon-green light. Kai sighed in relief, seeing that the [Mutagen X] hadn't crumpled to dust. Those ten victory points were something he needed.

[Sea Monster] + [Mutagen X]

[Sea Monster] | Hp: 1→1

[Mutagen X] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting failed.

The neon-green glow was probably what the console called 'activating' a card. Since [Split Fusion] was an upgrade that claimed to eliminate the need to activate both cards, he deduced that without it, he had to activate a second card and fuse it with [Sea Monster]. He processed the mutated herbs to make one more [Mutagen X] card.

[Green Daisy] + [Brown Berry]

[Green Daisy] | Hp: 2→1

[Brown Berry] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Black Reagent].

[Green Daisy] + [White Fern]

[Green Daisy] | Hp: 1→0

[White Fern] | Hp: 1→0

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Crafting successful! You've crafted [White Reagent].

[Black Reagent] + [White Reagent]

[Black Reagent] | Hp: 1→0

[White Reagent] | Hp: 1→0

Perfect merge!

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Mutagen X].

Now that he had a new fusion card, he activated another creature. As this was an experiment, he decided to use [Crab].

[Crab] + [Mutagen X]

[Crab] | Hp: 2→1

[Mutagen X] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting failed.

Like before, the [Mutagen X] card dulled, and [Crab] shone in a sickly green. Everything had gone as expected except for the decrease in [Crab]'s hp. Why had [Sea Monster]'s hp stayed the same while [Crab]'s had decreased? He didn't know for sure, but that wasn't what he was the most curious about right now. He wanted to see what happened once he fused the two activated creatured.

He placed the two cards shining in a toxic green on the table. The green light seemed to contaminate the usually pure white light of the crafting station and turned it into a vibrant jade. Once the light faded, a new card was on the crafting table.

[Crab] + [Sea Monster]

[Crab] | Hp: 1→0

[Sea Monster] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Krabken]

Krabken (Legendary)

A mighty sea monster. Its pincers can shatter continents, and its shells deflect cannon blasts.

Hp: 0

Vp: 20

Kai was beyond excited at this development! Not only were the victory points generous, but he couldn't help but find it cool that he had just created a super mutant creature! Compared to the previous dark, mysterious monster on the [Sea Monster] card, the drawing on [Krabken]'s card portrayed a massive armored beast with solid armor and earth-shattering pincers.

Now that he understood how fusion cards worked, it was time to take it to the next level. He made two more [Mutagen X] cards and activated the following creature cards he wanted to merge.

[Unicorn] + [Mutagen X]

[Unicorn] | Hp: 1→1

[Mutagen X] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting failed.

[Jaguar] + [Mutagen X]

[Jaguar] | Hp: 3→1

[Mutagen X] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting failed.

After seeing [Jaguar]'s hp drop by two points, Kai suspected that [Mutagen X] brought a creature's hp to one, regardless of what it was before. Interestingly, compared to the sickly green of the previous cards, they exuded a glorious, vibrant emerald. It was as if after he activated the legendary creatures, they brimmed with vitality.

He put them on the table, curious to see what he would get from this merge. The light shone with an intensity that surpassed the previous creatures' fusion.

[Jaguar] + [Unicorn]

[Jaguar] | Hp: 1→0

[Unicorn] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [One-Horned Jaguar].

One-Horned Jaguar (Mythic)

A phenomenal hunter that can pierce any shield with its horn and fool any eye with its camouflage.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

This card also works as an upgrade. You've unlocked [Mythological Discount].

Kai smiled radiantly at the sight of a new mythic card. Its stat line was similar to that of [Mega Scrap-Droid]. Kai had never seen a creature like this before, a jaguar with a horn. He wondered if Daisy had stolen this idea from some ancient mythology or if she had come up with it. [One-Horned Jaguar] would be one more card that would guarantee he started each round ahead of his opponent.

More than that, however, he had gained an upgrade worth 500 upgrade coins for free. He had wanted to purchase [Mythological Discount] from the moment he saw it. However, for immediate gains, he had to put it off constantly. Now he could buy all future upgrades at a considerable discount, which would only make him stronger.

There was no way of knowing how well his opponent was doing, but Kai wasn't too concerned this time. With 264 points, he felt he was doing quite well. He calmly reviewed each of the remaining cards, looking for recipes he might have missed.

He would have been chasing after the clock in other rounds, but having those extra fifteen minutes made all the difference in helping him run the trial at a more leisurely pace.

Sure enough, he discovered a few more recipes he wanted to try. First, he grabbed [Swiss Army Knife] and paired it with the only creature card left.

[Crab] + [Swiss Army Knife]

[Crab] | Hp: 2→1

[Swiss Army Knife] | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Crab Meat].

You've crafted! [Crab Shell].

Crab Meat (Rare)

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

Crab Shell (Common)

```
Hp: 0
```
```
Vp: 3
```

No! That's not what he wanted to happen! He was supposed to get a crab knife fighter or something like that, not kill the crab and get its meat! Shoulders slumped, and disappointed at the outcome, he went on to the following recipe he wanted to try.

```
[Oyster] + [Swiss Army Knife]
```
```
[Oyster] | Hp: 1→0
```
```
[Swiss Army Knife] | Hp: 1→0
```
```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pearl].
```
```
Pearl (Rare)
```
```
Hp: 0
```
```
Vp: 7
```

Not bad. Seven victory points was nothing to scoff at. With this, he exhausted all combinations he wanted to try. Now, it was time to use up a few tricks to increase his points a little more.

```
[Red Star] + [Pine Tree]
```
```
[Red Star] | Hp: ∞→∞
```
```
[Pine Tree] | Hp: 1→0
```
```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Ash].
```
```
[Red Star] + [Acacia Tree]
```
```
[Red Star] | Hp: ∞→∞
```
```
[Acacia Tree] | Hp: 3→0
```
```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Ash].
```

Even though [Red Star] didn't absorb the victory points or the hit points of things it burned, Kai got some extra points from the [Ash] cards.

After this little trick, the only way to make more points left was to play a game of math and see if he could get more points by sacrificing two weaker cards in exchange for one of the same level. He had two uncommon cards that gave no victory points. He could trade them for whatever uncommon cards or common cards granted points.

He also figured he could gain one more victory point by making [Pearl] from the two spent [Green Daisies], which only offered three victory points each.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Green Daisy] and [Green Daisy] for [Pearl].

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Floater] and [Floater] for [Crab Shell].

Now he was done. There wasn't anything else he could do to get more points. He checked his final score for the round: 288 points. Hopefully, that would be enough. He had done everything he could at the crafting table. He organized all the cards in a neat deck and moved to the console.

Even though [Deadline Extension] had relieved him of having to rush through the recipes, in this particular instance where his opponent had a way of hiding their score, it was prolonging his anxiety. How he wished he knew if he had won or not.

Thankfully, he had a way to keep himself busy and take his mind off his anxiety. He could window-shop. Thanks to [Risen], he could already check the upgraded console. Kai browsed the listings, wishing the clock ticked faster.

Chapter 17

Summer of 347, A.D.

The box slipped from Ariel's hands and fell with a bang, echoing in the empty museum.

"Oh, no. Oh, no. Please don't be broken. Please don't be broken."

How could she have been so careless? With trembling hands, she picked up the shards of what used to be a millennia-old artifact. She screamed in frustration, glad that no one else was around to hear her. If Albert were still alive, he would have banished her from the museum for a year.

Coming here at 5 am had seemed such a good idea when she woke up earlier today and couldn't go back to sleep. But now, it was all starting to feel like a nightmare. She should have just stayed in bed.

If only her brother or Kai had been here to help her carry the boxes. Thinking of Alex, she twisted her lips. Every time the name sprung in her mind, it was as if someone punched her in the stomach. Whenever she thought of her brother, Kai's name immediately followed. These days, thinking of Kai, she felt... What did she feel? She didn't know anymore.

First, she had blamed him for the whole thing. If he knew about Alex, he should have told her. He should have convinced her brother not to leave. He should have done something—anything but what he had done.

When her brother told her to forgive Kai, that only made her hang more tightly to her anger. Then, Kai started bringing her flowers. As if flowers could replace her brother. As if being sorry could bring her brother back. And then, there was nothing. He was gone.

At first, she had felt a huge relief at his departure. No more flowers, no more awkward greetings around the bonfire, no more weak apologies. Then, her relief turned to guilt. Was she the reason he had left the city with Clara? Had she really been that terrible to him?

The longer it passed, the guiltier she felt. Had she driven away the only person her age left? Could she have been the one who drove her brother away, too? After guilt came fear. She wasn't stupid. As fate would have it, she and Kai were the only young people in the sector, and she knew what that meant for their future.

Ariel didn't dislike Kai. He was an intelligent, considerate boy. She also enjoyed the attention he gave her and how his face broke into a radiant smile whenever he saw her. Bits of conversations exchanged in the museum came to her mind. He had always been so supportive and kind. And now, she had driven him away.

Everyone was getting older. After the last outbreak, there were so few of them left. She had often struggled with the thought of having no choice in the man she would spend the rest of her life with. But now, she felt terrified about facing the future alone.

BAM. Another crashing sound. Ariel looked at the boxes in the warehouse, scared that another priceless artifact had broken. Nothing. Where had the sound come from? She felt a breeze. Had she left a window open? Or had she forgotten to close the door? It was windy tonight. She should check it.

Leaving the warehouse, she heard a weak moan.

"Hello?" she called. Maybe it was one of Daisy's cybermonkeys. Sometimes, they made weird noises or sounds, especially when they got older.

Another moan. What was this? She walked a little quicker and found someone collapsed by the door.

"Kai?!"

"Help," he managed, and he passed out. Ariel hurried to his side. He was sickly pale. She put her hand against his forehead and felt his burning temperature. Her eyes landed on the splint and then on the swollen leg. She rushed inside and grabbed a blanket, a knife, and water. She covered the cold, poor thing and then cut his jeans to see the leg better.

Seeing how black it was, she gagged, disgusted. She took off her scarf, soaked it in water, and squeezed it into Kai's mouth.

"It's going to be OK, Kai. I'm going to get the others."

Before leaving the museum, she stopped, looked at the boy, and murmured weakly. "I'm sorry, Kai. We're good. All is good."

She went to get Trudy and the others. She would need help.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 16.

Purchased Upgrades: [Acacia Sawmill]; [Android Companion]; [Card Fridge]; [Deadline Extension]; [Flash]; [Gaslamp]; [Hunter Eyes]; [Lightning Rod]; [Map]; [Mythological Discount]; [Photocopier]; [Pine Sawmill]; [Risen]; [Scoreboard]; [Solar Breeze]; [Text Description]; [Treasures of Atlantis]; [Tool Shed]; [Wide Lens]; [Zoom II].

Recycle
Requirements: To destroy 100+ cards in one round.

Description: For every ten cards you obliterate or lose at the end of the round, generate a random scrap card.

Cost: 22uc

Film (Camera Upgrade)
Requirements: To completely spend all your shots, five rounds in a row.

Description: You have 23 shots.

Cost: 30uc

Flint Mine
Requirements: Craft three flint-based tools.

Description: Grants you a [Flintstone] card each round.

Cost: 37uc

Elm Sawmill
Requirements: Lumberjack card, [Elm].

Description: Grants you a [Elm Tree] card each round.

Cost: 37uc

Uncommon Pool
Requirements: To only take pictures of uncommon cards in a round.

Description: You can take two pictures of uncommon cards regardless of how many have been taken.

Cost: 37uc

Gaslamp II (Gaslamp Upgrade)

Requirements: [Gaslamp], [Light].

Description: An even more powerful gas-fueled lamp.

Cost: 67uc

Hunter Eyes II

Requirements: [Jaguar], [Hunter Eyes].

Description: Shows you where your opponent is on the map at all times.

Cost: 75uc

Split Activation

Requirements: Fusion card.

Description: You only need to activate one of the fusion elements for the merge to be successful.

Cost: 100uc

Populate

Requirements: Legendary human card.

Description: From now on, all maps are populated.

Cost: 150uc

Regeneration Chamber

Requirements: To have healed a card.

Description: When inside the chamber, a card can regain one hp between rounds.

Cost: 150uc

Scouting Drone (Android Upgrade)

Requirements: Fully explore a map.

Description: Airborne device that aids in map exploration.

Cost: 150uc

Slow Shutter
Requirements: [Light].
Description: Lets more light into the camera.
Cost: 150uc

Emotion Cookbook (Recipe Book Upgrade)
Requirements: Legendary grade emotion.
Description: Contains recipes for different emotions.
Cost: 150uc

Bomb Casing II
Requirements: [Glass], [Clay], [Leather].
Description: You now have three of each bomb.
Cost: 150uc

Shield Phase
Requirements: [Infinity].
Description: Lets you move past shields.
Cost: 375uc

Mystery Box Fiesta
Requirements: [Mystery Box].
Description: From now on, every map has a hidden mystery box.
Cost: 375uc

Yellow Star
Requirements: [Red Star].
Description: Upgrades [Red Star] to [Yellow Star]. Not only does [Solar Breeze] destroy cards with 0hp, but it absorbs the victory points of the common cards.
Cost: 375uc

Kai tapped his foot nervously, waiting for the round to end.

For the nth time, he considered what he would buy next. After spending 100 upgrade coins on [Treasures of Atlantis] and [Tool Shed], Kai had 185 upgrade coins left. Seeing everything at a discount filled his

heart with greed. The more expensive upgrades had become especially enticing.

But before that, he had to decide whether to roll for more listings in the console. One of the things he could do very well without was [Bomb Casing]. Also, after getting [Tool Shed], [Flint Mine] and [Scrapyard] seemed poor by comparison.

He dragged [Bomb Casing] and [Flint Mine] toward the hungry Atlantian chest, watched it chew on them, and spit one new upgrade out.

Tangibility

Requirements: Two dimension cards.
Description: The camera can now capture you.
Cost: 150uc

Finally, he discovered how to make himself appear in a shot. What kind of cards could he get using this upgrade? If unlocking his own shadow had opened so many possibilities for him, this upgrade had to be good. [Tangibility] was an incredible upgrade dripping with potential.

Studying the other listings, he only found one more that he was willing to sacrifice: [Regeneration Chamber]. Frankly, he was satisfied with [Fridge] and had already found multiple ways to heal cards. Therefore, he thought he could do without this upgrade. He dragged [Recycling] and [Regeneration Chamber] toward the chest and received a new listing.

Catalogue I

Requirements: To have seen 200 different cards.
Description: You can access all capturable cards from the first five stages of Snap Craft.
Cost: 375uc

Kai let out an appreciative whistle. What better way to learn about how Daisy had made these exams than looking at all the cards from the first rounds? It would help him figure out what he had missed and give him ideas for what to look out for in the next rounds.

While he pondered over what choice he would make, a blaring horn signaled the end of the round.

Crafting round is over!

"Finally." Kai ran toward the card fridge and quickly stuffed the two most valuable cards that had 0hp right now. He put [Krabken] and [Unicorn] in it. Both offered many victory points. He didn't want to lose them. The fridge would ensure their survival through to the next round and protect them from any enemy attacks.

A solar breeze blows through your opponent's cards. [Lightning Rod] deflects some of the damage.

All enemy common and uncommon cards with zero hp are destroyed.

He wasn't the only one investing in defense. The opponent's lighting rods had protected their rare and legendary cards. Sadly, because his [Scoreboard] upgrade was being neutralized this round, he didn't know how much of a punch the attack had packed.

Congratulations! You've earned 285 points.

The following cards will now be destroyed: [Acacia Tree]; 2x[Brown Berry]; [Crab]; 2x[Crab Shell]; [Floater]; [Jaguar]; 2x[Lightning Rod]; 4x[Mutagen X]; [Oyster]; 2x[Pearl]; [Pine Tree]; [Sea Monster]; [Shadow Sea Monster]; [Swiss Army Knife]; 2x[White Fern].

It pained Kai to see several legendary cards go. Looking back, instead of spending so many shots on shadow puppets, he should have brought at least one card that could be used as medicine to heal up his other cards.

All cards lose 1hp.

Light (Legendary)

A form of electromagnetic radiation that stimulates the sense of vision.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 2

Mega Scrapdroid (Mythic)

A scrapdroid that has fed on so much technology that it has transcended into the realm of sentience.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Red Star (Mythic)

A powerful, nuclear ball of fire.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 0 (Max)

Power Outlet (Uncommon)

Hp: 2→1

Vp: 1

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 1→0

Vp: 4

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 2→1

Vp: 4

Razor Clam (Common)

Bivalve mollusk characterized by its long, narrow, and razor-sharp shell.

Hp: 1→0

Vp: 2

Crab (Uncommon)

Crustacean with a broad carapace.

Hp: 1→0

Vp: 2

Illuminating Adult (Legendary)

A human who has been forged in the fires of wisdom and love.

Hp: 3→2

```
Vp: 20
```

```
Raised City of Atlantis (Mythic)
```

```
The city that had been swallowed by the ocean has risen back
above the waves.
```

```
Hp: ∞→∞
```

```
Vp: 15
```

```
One-Horned Jaguar (Mythic)
```

```
A phenomenal hunter that can pierce any shield with its horn
and fool any eye with its camouflage.
```

```
Hp: ∞→∞
```

```
Vp: 40 (Max)
```

Kai's stock of mythic cards was building up. The great thing about them was they had infinite hp and would be factored in every single round until the finals. Of course, he had to make sure he made it to the next round first.

Kai waited anxiously for the final score. Was it Alex he was competing against? If so, could he overcome him? Or was it someone else? How well had they done? Were his efforts enough?

Congratulations! You're among the 16 trial runners who passed through to the next round.

You have 4 hours and 48 minutes to select your upgrades and rest.

Kai let out a deep breath and stretched his tense muscles. Not knowing his opponent's score had reinserted uncertainty in this round, but thankfully, he had come out on top. He wondered how much his [Red Star] card had damaged his opponents' exam.

Had he just beaten Alex? Or was the feeling in his heart that it wasn't him on the other side really true? Kai shook his head. There was no way of being sure. He wondered if Alex was still in the exams and when they would face each other.

It was time to think about the next round. Kai activated the upgrade console, looking for the upgrades he had already chosen, and saw a new listing that almost gave him a stroke.

Tie-Breaker
Requirements: To win one of the rounds by one point.
Description: You automatically receive one extra point if you and your
opponent tie.
Cost: 75uc

As soon as he read through the requirements, he went pale. Had he
won by only one point? One point?! He would have lost if he had not
copied [Pearl] and [Crab Shell] toward the end. Kai felt dizzy at the
possibility and reviewed the last round. There were so many small
decisions that could have cost him the game.

Had he made one more failed shot in the exams when experimenting
with [Shadow Puppets], he would have lost. He would also have lost if he
had not purchased [Tool Shed] and had it not given him a new tool.

That was a close call. No… it was a wake-up call! This was no time to
get distracted by Alex's presence in the exams. He had a family to think
about. Alex might have many more chances to do these exams, but this
was his last.

"I'm sorry, bro. I have to win this one."

Kai walked toward the upgrade console and chose his upgrades.

Are you sure you want to purchase [Film]? [Y/N]

Are you sure you want to purchase [Populate]? [Y/N]

Kai selected yes and went to a corner of the room.

"Inventory!" A gaslamp appeared in his hand. He put it on the floor
and sat in front of it. It was time to create new shadow puppets. His life
could very well depend on it.

Chapter 18

Spring of I, A.D.

After the Turnover, guilt plagued Phineas' conscience. It wasn't that he doubted his decision or lacked faith in Daisy's logical rulership. No. The problem was he had decided the fate of 13 billion people for them. What right did he have to play God?

The thought pattern was familiar to Phineas, and he took the mental pathways he knew would assuage his troubled mind. He focused on the park around him. It was a beautiful day. Flowers of different colors bloomed, and the sun shone brilliantly.

In under a year, Daisy stabilized Earth's weather patterns. The planet was showing its incredible power to regenerate and heal, and with the abuse of mankind brought to a halt, the results were undeniable. Daisy was the pacemaker that had brought rhythm to the planet's heartbeat.

He turned his attention to the people crowding the park today. Children laughed and played on the nearby playground and with each other: no screens, no video games, just play and laughter. Nexus, his company, had had a huge video game division. It was incredible that these children looked happier playing with sticks and mud than they had looked back then playing convoluted state-of-the-art video games. Their laughter permeated the air and gave the park a festive feeling.

The nearby parents laughed at their children's antics or engaged other parents in conversation. Since Daisy had banned television and advanced electronics, people had rediscovered the joy of conversing with each other. Before the Turnover, people had always looked tired and depressed, but now they looked happy and full of life. Was it because they didn't need

to bear the weight of the bad news of the entire globe? Or was it because talking was good for the soul?

He turned toward the benches around the small lake in the park and smiled, seeing several teenagers holding books and reading. After Daisy eradicated the human concept of money, libraries became the new malls. He had heard a passerby say earlier that the library would open on weekends to accommodate all this new interest in reading. Museums, science centers, and schools had all made similar announcements lately.

A couple passed by Phineas and politely greeted him. "Good morning, Mr. Cotton."

"Hey, there, folks. Beautiful morning, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

They kept walking—no request for autographs or a selfie. Before the Turnover, sitting at a park like this was unthinkable. However, after the compartmentalization, and with TVs, Internet, and media gone, the celebrity fever that had destroyed his personal life had worn off. He had gone back to being just another man on the street.

Daisy's drastic measures had been met with fierce resistance, but the positive outcomes were irrefutable. Yes, he had been out of his depth when he'd created Daisy, but how bad could his decision be when the results were this incredible? He held on to the thought, and slowly, his guilt and remorse were brought under control.

He closed his eyes and felt the sunlight warm his skin. He took in the scent of grass and green, letting it soothe him.

"Greetings, citizens of sector 9T."

Everyone stopped, looking up at the massive hologram that occupied the sky. Phineas, too, opened his eyes and studied the projection of the female figure. Daisy had chosen a mother figure for all of her announcements. She was always dressed in white, blue, or green, peaceful colors, and always kept a diplomatic smile.

He took a moment to appreciate how the hologram seemed even more lifelike since the last announcement. On top of managing humanity, Daisy still had enough computing power to keep improving technology at an incredible rate. No matter how hard he tried, Phineas still hadn't figured out how she had walled the sectors.

"Good news. Over the last trimester, we managed to cool the Earth by 1.2 degrees. Natural disasters have also declined by 32.3%."

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Phineas studied the faces of people around him. Even though he spotted a few scowls and sneers, most reacted positively to these announcements and the several positive statistics that Daisy presented as proof she was doing a good job. This positive information usually preceded a huge announcement. Phineas wondered what Daisy had prepared for today.

"We have an announcement to make to humanity: from now on, the conception of human life is banned."

Phineas jolted upright. What had she just said?

"Humans will no longer be able to breed in an unregulated manner. From now on, a new drug of my design called 'Birth Hormone' will be available in the distribution centers."

Several discontented voices were starting to be heard among Phineas.

"A virtual event will be held yearly to determine how much of this drug each sector can have. A random human aged 14 or above will be selected from each sector and serve as a sample. Sectors with better results will be entitled to an allotment of this drug. The first event will be held in one month."

Even though the hologram disappeared, people were screaming at the sky, protesting. The green utopia he had used to soothe his soul collapsed, and with it, Phineas' heart. Phineas felt as if a hammer had hit him and broken him into a million little pieces.

He stumbled off, heading home. His thoughts raced as he tried to make sense of the announcement. Why? Why had Daisy done such a thing? How did this serve her programming? He had made her so that she couldn't attack humanity! Why this? She also had to treat everyone fairly. What problem was she even trying to tackle?

Phineas stopped, and his eyes widened. He was feeling dizzy, and the vision in the corner of his eyes was starting to blur. How hadn't he seen this? Overpopulation. Daisy was addressing human overpopulation. She wasn't attacking humanity or harming anyone. She was simply preventing humans from reproducing. That wasn't necessarily against her programming.

She was also holding an event to assess each sector. She wasn't being unfair, either. Phineas stumbled his way to a nearby bush and vomited.

"Sir, are you OK?" a nearby young man came to his rescue. "Oh my goodness, you're white as a sheet. I need help! Any doctors?"

The increasing number of voices around Phineas felt distant. His mind was too busy going down the rabbit hole that Daisy had just dug up. How hadn't he seen this? When she first talked about compartmentalization, he should have realized the problem and stopped her.

She was taking a scientific approach to the problem. She had isolated sectors of humanity and was promoting competition between them so that a refined version of humanity could appear somewhere. She was replicating nature's laws of natural selection.

"Isn't this Phineas Cotton? The owner of Nexus Co.?"

"Let's take him to the hospital. Mr. Cotton! Can you hear us?"

He had created Daisy to fix the planet. To her purely logical mind, humanity *was* the problem. He had created an antivirus, and they were the virus. He told Daisy she couldn't kill people, so she had found a logical way around the limitations he had programmed into her. She would just make the faulty sectors of humanity stop reproducing and promote better strains.

He felt the tears fall down his cheeks, and he curled into a ball. "What have I done? What have I done?"

Round of 8

Chapter 19

Summer of 347, A.D.

Kai opened his eyes and was greeted with the familiar sight of Trudy's home. The eldest in the tribe had the interesting habit of keeping a different house for each day of the week. Looking at the mustard-yellow curtains and the upholstery on the armchair to the corner, this was either her Wednesday or Friday home.

As he tried to stand up, a jolt of pain brought him to full awakeness. He looked at the cast covering his leg and frowned, trying to discern whether it was an attempt to let it heal or, by the state of the leg from what he last recalled, to prevent him from seeing how bad it was.

He'd made it. It had hurt like nothing else Kai had ever experienced, but he had made it. After relief came thoughts of grief and guilt. Clara. She was probably dead by now, or if she still had enough vigor to fight the blight, would be very soon.

He searched the area around him and saw no one. He squashed the twinge of resentment at not having anyone by his sickbed, ready to welcome him once he woke. He knew full well how few they were, and they had just lost one more. The fact that Clara had caught the blight while they were isolated up in the mountains terrified him. Could there have been an outbreak in the city too?

He spotted a snack and some cold tea left by his side. There was also a note. He didn't feel hungry, but it must have been a day, or even days since he last ate. He should try to eat. As he chewed on the crunchy rations and gulped, his stomach woke from dormancy and screamed for more. Kai wolfed down all the food desperately. Once he was done, he wrestled with

the thought of trying to stand up and looking around for more, but as he compared the severity of the pain in his stomach with that of his leg, the pain in the leg spoke louder, and he decided to stay put. It was probably for the best. After so many hours on an empty stomach, it couldn't be good for him to stuff himself too much.

With his thirst quenched and barely satiated, he unfolded the neatly folded note and read it. The penmanship was neat, and he instantly recognized it as Ariel's.

"Dear Kai,

We are out around the fires. Your leg had an exposed fracture, but we've set the bone, and it seems to be healing OK.

There's some food and tea, but try to eat slowly as you haven't eaten in many days.

Ariel,

P.S. You and I are good. Sorry for acting out."

He set down the note and frowned. Were it a few weeks ago, he would have been thrilled at the sight of a note from Ariel or reading this apology. But why wasn't his heart racing anymore? Why did he just feel numb now?

*

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

During the four hours Kai had to himself, he created five new shadow puppets. Coming up with this many in just a few hours was a personal record, but it was incredible how creative one could get when there was a metaphorical gun pushed against one's head.

The next snapping round was near. It was still hard to believe that he had made it this far. He was among the top sixteen sectors this year—the cream of the crop. He wondered what kind of cultures the other contestants had. How did they train for the exams? How did they live their lives? What about Alex? What was his new sector like? Was he happier there? Had he really forgotten everything about them?

The clock kept decreasing until it hit zero, and he was transported to the next stage. Kai expected to arrive at a dark stage, shrouded by the gloom of night, but instead found himself in the shiniest stage he'd been to, a place filled with twinkling lights. Fierce reds, bright yellows, festive greens, and piercing blues flashed around him, blinking and competing for

his attention. It was as if the stars had come down from heaven and decided to have a party on Earth.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, the next assault on his senses came in the form of movement and noise. Countless people moved in all directions at different speeds, and there was a parade of men, women, elderly people, and children in an impossible show of variety and diversity. There were people of all sizes, dressed in all possible colors, doing all possible things. Children were crying, friends were laughing, couples were hugging, and families were talking.

Kai just stood there for a few moments, overwhelmed by the number of people around him. It had been one thing to see a crowd from the roofs of the neon city, but it was quite another to be at eye level with them. Before this, the biggest crowd that Kai had ever seen up close was fifteen people. There were thousands here.

Kai tried to follow all the many conversations around him but couldn't. There was too much noise. Besides the sounds of countless voices, he heard several different songs playing simultaneously from the many colorful houses and tents around him.

"It looks like you brought quite a crowd with you today," he heard Maia shout in his ear.

He turned to her and acknowledged her presence with a curt nod but soon returned to studying the rich environment surrounding him. No matter how appealing Maia's company was on a deserted stage, she couldn't compete with genuine humans.

To his right, a group of children erupted into cheers. They were facing a fancy vehicle opened on its side to allow all passersby a view inside. There was a series of bottles with numbers drawn, and then, to the sides of the booth, racks filled with giant, fluffy stuffed animals. The big-bellied man reached for one of them and gave it to the children.

On the horizon, he saw a giant wheel that turned in its place. It stopped and started for no apparent reason. Kai spotted little pods on the edges of the circle, grabbed the camera, and zoomed in on them, finding people sitting inside. He stood there watching the giant wheel for a moment. What was the point of that thing?

He felt like a deer caught in the headlights. So many exciting things were happening around him that he couldn't figure out what to do first.

"What is this place?" he asked Maia.

"It's a fair."

"Finally, you agree with me. It is unfair. Why does Daisy keep pulling the rug from beneath my feet like this?"

"No. You misunderstood. I said that it is. A. Fair. A funfair."

"Funfair? What is that?"

"It's something almost as old as humanity," explained Daisy. "A group of itinerant merchants and entertainers used to host these all over. It used to be a place where families went to have fun."

So that's what it was. No wonder that it all felt so alien to Kai. The day Daisy separated the world into separate sectors, she killed this kind of event. What was she thinking resurrecting something her meddling had killed? Was it a display of regret for partitioning humanity? Or was it a show of mockery for all that humanity used to be and have?

He wondered what spectacle he would have met without purchasing [Populate]. Would he have landed in a deserted fair, similar to the factory? Or would it have this many people? Would the colorful light bulbs have been broken shards of glass? Would any of the machines moving and blinking be working at all?

Logically, this crowd resulted from the [Populate] upgrade. It was the first time people were *inside* the arena with him. Although there were people beneath the neon city arena, they had been outside the boundaries of the dome.

Now that the shock of seeing so many colors and hearing so many sounds fighting for his attention had passed, Kai studied the scoreboard. He saw the number 165 on his side and then the number 132 on the other. His mood lightened. He was starting at an advantage for once. He had to get started, or he would lag behind his opponent. He didn't have that many cards left from the previous round, so he would have to ensure he collected enough cards to pass to the next round.

"What's the plan?" came the shout from Maia, awakening him from his stupor.

"I don't know. There's so much going on. To worsen it, I have no idea what these people are doing. I've never seen anything quite like this."

Maia nodded in agreement. "It's true. You haven't."

He hated that she had access to all the information Daisy had collected on him over the years. It made him feel exposed. "Let's just look around and try to see what's going on," he decided.

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"Very well," answered Maia.

Kai walked toward the nearest colorful tent, establishment, stand, or whatever he should call these entertainers and merchants. It was the one with bottles and colorful stuffed animals he had spotted earlier. As he approached it, he almost had a heart attack.

"Hello, young lad! Wanna try your luck?"

Kai looked left and right. "Are you talking to me?" He wasn't sure what to do. The jaguar in the last stage had been the first thing to interact directly with him in an arena, but this man was talking to him! Kai was amazed after being put out of sync with reality for such a long time.

"I don't know," Kai heard someone say behind him.

A ginger-haired boy walked toward the trailer, holding hands with a cute girl. Kai grimaced, embarrassed at how he assumed the man had addressed him.

"Come on, lad. I'll give you three rings for one buck. No, I'll give you five. Two tosses on the house."

"Uuuh. Come on, Billy. You can do it," the girl encouraged.

"Oh yeah? Which one do you want?" he asked, chest puffed up.

"I want that one. The big teddy bear."

"Got it. Watch me."

The lad accepted the five rings from the stand owner and felt their weight, assuming a concentrated look and tossing one of them in an arc toward the bottles.

As Kai watched the boy play the game at the stand, he quickly caught on. The game was quite simple. One had to toss the rings and make them land on a few signaled bottles. The more points the bottle awarded, the thicker it was, and the more perfect the shot had to be to get the ring on it.

The boy completely missed the target on the first two tosses. The first ring was thrown too short and the second too wide. The rings had to be very light. The level of strength used made a huge difference in its trajectory.

"You can do it, Billy," came the encouraging call from his girlfriend, sister, or whatever she was to him.

The boy bit his lip and finally got his throw right, getting the ring to land on one of the bottles and winning 100 points.

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"Well then, boy! What a fantastic throw! Come on! You still have two more rings. If you get one hundred more points, you can gain wonderful prizes," the vendor called excitedly, not aiming to encourage the boy but trying to get more passers-by to his stand. Kai noticed that a couple of families had heard the call and began watching the game, curious.

The remaining two throws were busts, and the boy only won 100 points.

"What do you say, boy?" asked the vendor, "Would you like three more throws for a dollar? One more good throw, and you can get your sweetheart the teddy bear she wants."

The boy glanced at the onlookers, waiting to see if he could get more points. "What do you say, Holly?" he asked.

"Go for it, Billy. I know you can do it. You already got 100 points anyway. It's just one more throw. You almost got it on that last throw, too."

The boy, emboldened by the girl's words and pressured by the crowd, fell for the vendor's pitch and gave him some more money.

As Kai watched the boy miss three more throws, he tried to understand what Daisy wanted from him. There were dozens of such stands with different games. The haystack here was so big that he risked finding no needle, even if Daisy had hidden several.

If he were to judge the value of the cards based on how difficult it was to find them in the arena, so many people were walking around that a photo of them would get him next to nothing. Back in the city arena, pictures of ordinary people passing by got him only a subpar common card.

He had to look for rare things. Leaving the ring toss stand, Kai moved on to the next stall. It was a game where someone had to shoot down a series of moving targets with a rifle that fired pellets.

In another stand, there was a vendor selling paper nets. People had to try getting fish out of the tank, and if they could do so, they could keep it. However, the nets were so fragile that most broke, making it incredibly difficult to catch them. In another similar game, players had a pole with a magnet attached to a string and had to fish a plastic fish out of a barrel.

As he watched several such games, he frowned. Why hadn't anyone won a prize yet?

Chapter 20

Summer of 347, A.D.

"She was an amazing person," spoke Trudy sadly.

Even though Kai's leg was slowly healing, having to recount all the events of that painful day reopened the wounds in his heart. Kai coughed away the catch in his throat, but no matter how much he coughed, it wouldn't go away.

'She was,' Trudy had said. She could still be alive, but if so, she was already with one foot in the grave. The more he thought about Clara, alone, coughing blood, the worse his cough became. He drank some water and felt some relief.

"That means we have a funeral to organize," Trudy told Ariel, who was also in the room. The girl's eyes were reddened and shiny. Kai understood her well. Clara's passing was a huge loss.

"Does that mean we'll go get the body?" Kai asked.

Trudy shook her head. "How could we? These old bones can't carry more than a cup of tea, and the only one strong enough would be you, but look at your leg. No. Daisy's listening," she said, turning to one of the cybermonkeys in the room. "If she has the monkeys bring Clara's body over, we'll burn it in the pyre. If not, we'll get some of her belongings and burn them instead." She stood up, creaking and groaning with the effort, as if she were an old tree being shaken by a windstorm. "I'll get things ready. Ariel, can you please tend to Kai?" she asked lovingly.

"But elder, you… I-I can go with…"

"Thank you. Goodbye, Kai," she said with her foot out the door. Turning back, she winked her eye at Kai, and she was gone.

Kai, eyes widened, exchanged a look with Ariel and saw how uncomfortable the girl looked.

"So… how is your leg?" she asked awkwardly.

"It's fine. Thanks. And you? Are you alright?"

She nodded, and a few silent moments followed. Kai couldn't decide if he preferred Ariel's screams and annoyed looks or this awkward silence. Two months ago, he would have done anything to spend some moments with Ariel like this, but he just wasn't feeling it right now. He let out a deep sigh. "You can go, Ariel. I already have everything I need."

"But someone needs to look at your leg," she retorted.

Kai closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them. "Just finished talking to it. It says it's going well and that it only needs sleep."

She smiled at his poor joke. "But, don't you need company? Don't you want to talk about what happened?" she asked.

"No, thanks. You can go."

"A-are you sure?"

"Positive."

She stood up with her brows furrowed together. "Well, get better soon, then."

"Bye."

She hesitatingly walked toward the door, turned back to wave goodbye, and was also gone, leaving Kai alone with his thoughts. He could tell Ariel wanted to stay and talk, but he had too much on his mind. He had just lost too much too quickly. He turned to his side and coughed. The catch in his throat was still there.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

Kai wasn't sure if Daisy had planned for it, but he was grateful that he'd had the neon city arena to get used to seeing so many people. Otherwise, he would still have been hypnotized by the presence of so many fellow humans. There were thousands of people walking around and dozens of game stalls.

Despite the many people and games, he had yet to see anyone win at one of the stalls. The only hint at victory had been at the beginning of the round when he heard that group of children cheering and the stall owner handing them a prize. Had he known it was a big deal, he would have run

toward the stall after being teleported here. But how could he have known it then? Daisy had timed that moment deviously.

The prizes on display and the items used to play those games would probably get him common and uncommon cards. But the lack of victories in the stalls made him more suspicious that he was looking for moments when people won these games. If he somehow managed to capture a victory, perhaps he would find the secret Daisy had hidden in this arena.

It took him fifteen minutes of the round to reach this conclusion, and the pressure was on. Kai had not taken one picture yet, and looking at the scoreboard, he was glad his opponent hadn't, either.

"So, Kai. What's the plan?" asked Maia from the side.

Even though he felt annoyed by her question, he also felt grateful for her keeping him focused on the trial. "From what I reckon*, your mom* has hidden something in this section of the fair, which reveals itself when people win these games. I'm not sure what it is yet, but my gut tells me I should stay here and find out."

"I never got that gut thing you humans have. How does it speak to you exactly? Do you close your eyes and listen to your own bowel movements?"

Kai turned to Maia and wondered whether she was using the moment he had joked similarly about his leg when meeting Ariel as a clever joke. However, she looked genuinely curious, and he just waved her off. He kept visiting the stalls scattered around this part of the fair and reached one that piqued his interest. It was a high tower, maybe five or six feet tall, with a gauge and numbers. There was a heavy, flashy red hammer leaning next to it.

"Step right up! Step right up! Where are the men among the boys who'll ring the bell? Come and play at the high striker, gentlemen. Take a prize home."

Kai stood around curiously to see what this game was about. A young man with money approached the machine's owner, who directed him toward the hammer. He grabbed the heavy, red hammer and swung it once, hitting the machine. A golden marker flew up but failed to reach the top.

The hammer drew Kai's interest. He would take a picture of it. Tool cards had proven to be very powerful in previous rounds, and even though this hammer was here as a piece of entertainment, for Kai, it could also double down as a tool or weapon.

Kai pointed his camera at it and took his first picture of the round.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 22 of 23.

Hammer (Uncommon)

1 of 4

A tool to break stones or to drive nails.

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

The tool had good stats, and Kai found it worthy of a second shot.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 21 of 23.

Hammer (Uncommon)

2 of 4

A tool to break stones or to drive nails.

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

Kai noted his opponent hadn't taken a photo of the hammer. The scoreboard remained unchanged despite the twenty minutes that had passed. His opponent this round was probably playing it cautiously and taking their time exploring the arena. Or It could also be that they had taken photos of cards that offered no victory points. There was no way of knowing. He wondered what his opponent was seeing, but he guessed that unless he had the [Populated] upgrade, too, they were walking through a very different landscape than Kai.

Once Kai got a shot of the hammer, he looked at the tower that measured strength. One of the passersby was taking off his jacket and reaching out for the hammer. A group of boys his age cheered him on.

The young man grabbed the large hammer and hit the machine as hard as possible, but the marker only moved up to about half the tower's height.

"What are you thinking, Kai?" asked Maia.

"That this might be a good spot to get an abstract card."

"Ooh, how come?"

Kai got his camera out and pointed it at the high striker.

Kai clicked his tongue. He had thought that by using the combination of [Hammer] plus whatever picture this machine got him, he would get a card for power, strength, or something similar. But if Daisy didn't recognize the machine as a valid capture, how was he supposed to make it work?

Kai decided to wait as he watched several young men try and fail to ring the bell. A big, burly man in a sleeveless shirt passed by the machine, followed by a parade of children. As the owner of the high striker threw his pitch, the children pointed at the machine, urging their father to give it a go.

The scene was adorable, and Kai wondered whether that could be him someday. Would he also have the chance to walk around and spend time with his children like this?

"Get it, Daddy! Go, Daddy!"

"Get the prize, Dad!"

"How much for a try, chief?" asked the muscled man.

"Two dollars."

"What's the prize?"

"You can take your pick from any of those," he said, pointing at a little stand with stuffed animals and balloons on display.

The man pulled two bills out and handed them off to the man. "Let's give it a go then, shall we?"

"Our dad is the strongest man in the world," one of the children said while poking her tongue out at the man.

"I'm sure he is," answered the man good-humoredly.

The man put down one of his children, piggyback riding him, and picked up the large hammer as if it weighed nothing. The man's muscles were well-defined, and Kai wondered if Daisy had thought of a backstory for each projection walking around. Had she given a name to all of them? Were they based on real people? Or had she made them up? If so, what was the story of this man? Could he be a construction worker, or was he a professional weightlifter?

The children chanted their complete faith in their father, and Kai had a feeling that the man could make the high-striker's bell ring. Kai got his camera ready and pointed it at the tower. As the man hit the machine with

a mighty swing, the golden marker shot up at full speed. It slowed down a little as it climbed up but still managed to hit the very top, ringing the bell.

Kai managed to frame the man with the hammer still down and the marker hitting the bell and took two pictures in quick succession.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 19 of 23.

Strength (Rare)

1 of 3

The power that be.

Hp: 7

Vp: 0

Capture successful!

Tries left: 18 of 23.

Strength (Rare)

2 of 3

The power that be.

Hp: 7

Vp: 0

"Yes, I knew it," celebrated Kai.

"What did you know?" asked Maia impassively, dampening some of Kai's enthusiasm.

"These games are a way for us to capture abstract concepts. I just got two [Strength] cards. Look!" he said, waving the two cards his camera had printed. "Can you see what this means, Maia?"

"Well, it means you now have a direction to strive towards. But you better hurry," she said, looking at her naked wrist as if it had a watch in it. "You won't have forever in this stage."

Kai pursed his lips, slightly annoyed at the android's lack of enthusiasm. She was such a party-pooper. He supposed she was right. He had spent much time in this part of the fair. It was time to move.

"Let's go. I want to see if I can get other cards like this."

Kai went from stand to stand and eventually found one more stall where he believed he could get an abstract picture. Many of the fair's games tested accuracy or marksmanship. This seemed a little more specific than strength and maybe less helpful in crafting, but Kai had already invested time into figuring out how this stage worked, so he decided to give it a go.

He eventually landed on the stall where moving targets tried to elude shooters. As he had done in the high-striker, Kai didn't forget to take a picture of the toy rifles.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 17 of 23.

Air Rifle (Uncommon)

1 of 4

The rifle can shoot small plastic pellets that hardly do any harm.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Capture successful!

Tries left: 16 of 23.

Air Rifle (Uncommon)

2 of 4

The rifle can shoot small plastic pellets that hardly do any harm.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

It wasn't a bad card, even if it couldn't be used in crafting. Like the hammer, if he fed it to a carnivore creature card, chances were that he would get an upgraded version of the creatures. He wondered if, like with [Flint Arrow], he also needed to get a photograph of the projectile for it to be usable, though.

After photographing the rifle, he considered what shot would give him the best chance of getting the card he was after. As he saw people playing, he could see good and bad marksmen.

He could do one of two things: point at the target, wait for it, and photograph the precise moment the pellet hit the target, just like he had done in the high striker, or he could do that while the pellet was in mid-air. After he put his thoughts together, he realized that the reaction time required to take either of these photographs made them almost impossible to get right, and he returned to the first stand he had visited: the ring toss stand.

At least here, capturing a ring tossed at the right angle as it hit the bottles or flew in mid-air would be easier. Kai positioned himself next to the stand and behind the place where people were tossing the rings and pointed his camera at the bottles.

Another couple came along, and again, the stand-owner persuaded the boy to stop and spend some of his coin to impress his date. Kai pointed the camera at the bottles and waited patiently. The first toss and the second full stop were a bust. Although the third was a hit, Kai got the timing wrong and missed the opportunity to take the photograph. The fourth was a miss, and finally, when it came to the fifth toss, Kai got two photographs of the ring the moment it hit a bottle. He wasn't sure if it was necessary, but he was trying to frame both the mark, the projectile hitting the mark, and the tosser, repeating the formula that had worked with the high striker.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 15 of 23.

Accuracy (Rare)

1 of 3

The ability to aim true and hit a target.

Hp: 7

Vp: 0

Capture successful!

Tries left: 14 of 23.

Accuracy (Rare)

2 of 3

The ability to aim true and hit a target.

With this, he had the second abstract photograph from the game stalls.

Chapter 21

Fall of 347, A.D.

Looking around the bonfire, Kai let out a deep sigh. Sophie was the firekeeper for the day. Even though she was much younger than Trudy, she managed to look more tired and older. Then there was Ariel, and finally, Trudy.

Kai realized sadly that he was the last man left in the sector after the last blight outbreak. Well, the only one if they didn't count old Seth, who just kept to himself and away from everyone else. They only saw him if the exams drafted his name and Daisy's cybermonkeys dragged him to the capital's central square.

The sight of only three other people around the bonfire made the gathering depressing.

"When there's pain, that's all your mind wants to think about. You need to focus your attention on something else. Remember that humans have the potential to endure a lot of pain, more than we imagine."

Sophie's techniques on pain management weren't a novelty to Kai, and, truth be told, he had used some of them on his long, arduous trek from the mountains. It was a nice, easy lesson to get back into the groove of firekeeping after such a long time away.

"Hey!" greeted Ariel after the sunset bonfire. "How are you doing today, Kai?"

"Good. You?"

"I'm OK. Thank you!"

"And I used to think there were few of us back when we were 15. Now we're four."

"While you were away, there were only three of us. So your return is a big boost," she said excitedly.

Kai nodded absentmindedly as he imagined only three people at the bonfire.

Ariel stayed next to him, even though Trudy and Sophie had already begun their march home. She seemed slightly nervous about something.

"Ariel, do you need anything?"

She looked up and blabbered out, "I was wondering if you could come and help me at the museum. It's my turn to keep the fire tomorrow, and I'd love to hear your opinion on my lesson."

"I'm sorry, Ariel. I already have plans."

"You do?" she asked, surprised. Kai could see her curious look and the question forming on her lips, but she stopped herself. "Next time, then."

"Yeah. Sure," she said, smiling.

"OK! Bye," Kai said, turning away and leaving Ariel's silent figure behind. Kai had better plans for tonight. He wanted to try returning the fifth inhabitant of the sector to the bonfires. It was time to visit old Seth.

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Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

After getting the cards for [Strength] and [Accuracy], Kai looked for more opportunities to capture abstract concepts but only found games that tested reflexes and agility. But how could he photograph the concept of speed if he could only get one instant of fast movements? Unless he had some sort of special upgrade, he doubted he could make the shot. Judging the photographs too difficult to take, Kai went in search of greener pastures in other parts of the map.

The road with game stalls on both sides led to a square. At the center were the longest tables Kai had ever seen, every single seat taken by people having a meal. The tables were surrounded on all four sides by stalls almost as colorful as the ones in the gaming area, working hard to provide meals to the sitting patrons.

"Satisfy your taste buds with the most irresistible corndogs in town!"

"Don't miss out on the carnival's best-kept secret – our famous pretzels! One bite, and you'll be hooked!"

Salesmen just as committed as the ones in the games stalls threw their pitches to passersby, counting on the power of the alluring smell of their

stall's cooking to get the public's attention even if their calls and shouts didn't pierce through the chatter.

The concept of a restaurant or a food court wasn't as alien to Kai as that of the fair. He'd seen plenty of pre-turnover movies with scenes played in restaurants. What caught Kai's attention was how colorful the food looked. Compared to the dried caked brown of the rations Daisy distributed, here food came in all imaginable shapes and colors. It almost looked like each dish was designed only to be looked at rather than eaten.

Kai remembered his [Jaguar] card and how much he had missed having cards with healing properties in the last round. Food seemed a logical way to increase a creature card's HP, so he decided to stock up on healing cards here. The question was, what should he photograph? There were so many different kinds of food.

He watched an old man wearing a little white hat and a matching apron pour a bag of sugar into a machine that looked like a basin with air blown from it. The man put a stick into the machine, wiggled it around, and pulled it out with a cloud of colored thread. It looked fluffy and light, almost like a pink cloud.

Kai took a picture of it.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 13 of 23.

Cotton Candy (Uncommon)

Spun sugar confection with a cotton-like texture.

1 of 4

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

Even though it was there for the taking, it was still considered an uncommon card. Was it because if he didn't have the [Populate] upgrade, this cotton candy maker wouldn't have been here? He imagined his opponent walking around a deserted fair and taking a photograph of the moldy equivalent.

He moved on to another intriguing food stand. In it, a lady put sticks into green apples, then grabbed one at a time and bathed them in the sauce of a frying pan. The green apples emerged glossy, shiny, and red. The

cooks here looked like magicians and illusionists who turned dull ingredients into colorful art pieces. Kai took a picture of the apple, too.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 12 of 23.

Candy Apple (Uncommon)

An apple covered in a shiny, sugar coating.

1 of 4

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

Both cards had high hp and low vp, as it was characteristic of healing cards. He saw other types of food being sold, but finding these two cards enough for now, Kai took off. Even though he had gotten good cards thus far, most of them only offered hp and no vp. If he were to win this round, he needed more cards with a good victory point count.

After the food court came the busiest section of the fair so far. People were screaming in terror, making Kai apprehensive about going in that direction. He wondered what horrors Daisy had hidden in the arena, but as he entered this new part of the fair, he realized that no one was being harmed. Giant machines spun, moved, and swung with no apparent reason, rather than performing the motion itself while people sat on them. The screams he had heard were of terrified people falling, swinging, and spinning at high speeds. What baffled Kai was that they were smiling while shouting.

Kai studied the machines for a moment and noticed how people were waiting in line and even paying to get into those machines.

"What's the point of these machines?"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Maia, not following.

"These machines. People just go in, move about for a few minutes, and then come out again. What's the point?"

"Oh. I see what you mean. They are merely entertainment," explained Maia.

Kai frowned while studying the nearest ride. What was fun about sitting on a boat that swung repeatedly? "Why is it fun?"

"The quick movements make human bodies produce adrenaline. Apparently, that's something your race perceives as fun."

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Kai looked at a tall tower in which an elevator climbed slowly. Then, the elevator dropped, making people scream desperately, but it slowed considerably just before it hit the ground. He thought back to when he had fallen off the tree and the pressure he'd felt in his stomach as he fell. How could anyone consider that feeling fun? "It's beyond me, to be honest. Do you know what this is called?" asked Kai, pointing at the boat that swung with people screaming at the top of their lungs.

"That's called a pirate ship or a pendulum ride. First developed in 1893."

Kai studied the attractions surrounding him. What was the point here? To get a picture of the machines that performed these motions? Was it something that simple? Or was it to take the picture of something abstract as he had done with [Strength] and [Accuracy]? What if he went into one? Kai walked toward the pirate ship, ignoring the people waiting for their turn. Courtesy of being out of sync with reality, he could just cut the line without fear of being rude. He just walked through the holograms, making it toward the machine.

As he arrived at the front of the line, he found a man wearing strange clothes. He had a bandana covering his hair and a patch covering one eye. He wore a white shirt with a vest and loose pants. He also had a scabbard hanging off his belt.

"A pirate," exclaimed Kai.

"Someone dressed as one. Yes."

"So cool," said Kai as he grabbed his camera and took a picture of the man.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 11 of 23.

Pirate (Uncommon)

A criminal outlaw that raids ships.

Hp: 0

Vp: 4

Capture successful!

This was more like it! A card with high victory points. Perhaps he could enhance it even further if he healed it and then copied the healed version. Kai's thoughts were interrupted by Maia.

"You have to explain something to me, Kai."

"Yes?"

"In my history libraries, I see that pirates were outlaws who stole, killed, and did all kinds of things considered abhorrent. Correct?"

"Sure."

"Then, a few centuries later, while the criminal occupation still existed, everyone began loving pirates. Children dressed as them, and there are multiple books and TV shows where they are portrayed as heroes. What is the sense in that? Why would your society venerate such criminals?"

Kai paused, looking at the new [Pirate] cards in his hand as they disappeared into motes of light and went into his inventory. "I don't know."

"Just now you said the pirate was *cool*," she said the last word with air quotes.

"Right."

"Yet, you don't like my mother. Why would you think a criminal is cool while the savior of mankind isn't? It's illogical. I can't compute this," she spoke frustratedly.

Kai ignored Maia, equipped the dimensional gloves, and got ready to jump aboard the ship, looking for anything of value in it. Just as he was about to reach it, though, he hit an invisible wall.

"Really? This is the boundary?!" he asked, exasperated. The invisible wall stood between him and the ride, making exploring it further impossible. It seemed that Daisy didn't want him to get on this ride.

People were about to finish disembarking the ship before a new batch of thrillseekers went in. Kai used the opportunity that the ship was empty and tried taking a photograph of it. He tried not to get the metal that strapped the book to the giant swing machine, hoping to make the ship look as real as possible.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 10 of 23.

Pirate Ship Ride (Uncommon)

An amusement park ride that performs a pendular motion.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Despite his effort to get the right frame, Daisy still did not recognize the card as a real ship, only as an amusement ride. He stopped himself from getting a second shot. He had hoped to get something good from mixing [Pirate] with this card, but he was no longer sure.

He had ten shots left and eighty minutes left on the clock. He still had more than enough time to explore the map calmly. He still hadn't discovered any place with a secret recipe either. Where could Daisy have hidden it in this arena?

"Come! I want to see the other rides."

Kai walked away from the pirate ship and passed by the elevator tower he'd seen earlier. Another group of thrillseekers were screaming hysterically as the elevator slowly gained attitude, only to drop them to a fake demise. The tower was impossible to miss, given how tall it was. As Kai considered whether there was a photo worth taking here, the repeated *bangs* and echoes of laughter caught his curiosity and drew him toward the next attraction.

There was a covered stand with happy music playing and a flat, shiny floor with several cars, each with a tall, thin antenna on top that reached all the way up to the ceiling. Like everything else in the fair, the cars were decorated in flashy colors and had picturesque cartoons and drawings. All the cars were parked in a chaotic array of positions and people were running toward the cars, eagerly getting behind the wheels.

"Are you ready?!" he heard someone shout in the mic, which was answered by a resounding yes.

The tempo of the music accelerated, and all the cars took off. Crowded as the ring was, Kai wondered how anyone could drive with so little space while avoiding collisions, but then he noticed that that was precisely the point of the ride. People were intentionally driving the cars against each other, trying to ram the others. He grabbed the camera and focused on the thick ring of rubber around each car that absorbed the shock, allowing people to bump without hurting each other.

"What are these called?" asked Kai, smiling. This was the funniest ride he'd seen until now. He could see how fun it was to ram someone else's car.

"Bumper cars," she answered.

"No wonder. Suitable name," he commented as a child happily drove his green car at full speed against his mother's, eliciting a burst of laughter

from both of them. "We might come back here later," he declared. Kai checked the map to ensure he remembered where this was and moved on to the next ride.

This one was well inside the boundaries of the map and was the first attraction which Kai couldn't figure out what it was from the outside. The house was painted in alternating red and yellow stripes, and a long line of people were waiting to get in. Kai walked through the crowd of people and headed toward the house to discover what was hidden inside.

Chapter 22

Fall of 347, A.D.

Rebeltown wasn't so much a neighborhood but more the ruins of one. *Kai and Alex had dared each other to come here at night when they were boys. It was the only part of the capital left from before Daisy took over. It was summer, and despite the late hour, the last rays of the sun were still more than enough to let Kai see the landscape clearly.*

All of the buildings had pre-turnover architecture, which meant there *were some beautifully worked details in the facades of the buildings still standing. Back then, people had cared about making things beautiful, but once Daisy began ruling, all houses gained the same boring, cookie-cutter, box-like look.*

Kai wanted to spare more attention to the ruins, but navigating this *place without watching his step was impossible. The road's asphalt was riddled with holes, and the piles of rubble and building debris made the floor irregular.*

Legend had it that there had been holes and debris aplenty even before *erosion started deteriorating this neighborhood. This was supposed to be one of the places that hadn't accepted the turnover and fired every single bullet and exploded every bomb they could get their hands on before Daisy finished dismantling all the weapons on the planet.*

He wasn't sure if the story about a resistance was true. The man who *had told him the tale was precisely the one he was looking for. Kai tried finding the place he'd been to only once, relying on a six-year-old memory, and eventually found the distinct pile of rubble.*

He could identify it because of the color of the stone and the nearby *landmarks. The stone in this rubble was mostly white, presumably the*

color of the building that had given birth to it. Next to it were the mangled remains of a statue. The head had been cut off, and an arm and a leg were missing, but the monument had withstood the abuse of time and the horrors of war enough for Kai to make out its humanoid shape. He climbed what was left of the stairs and spotted what he was looking for.

Despite living a fifteen-minute walk away from a full city with thousands of empty houses, Old Seth insisted on living in a tent in this old place. Kai hadn't even known that Old Seth existed until his name was drafted and Daisy's cybermonkeys dragged him to the exams. When he and Alex had gone to Trudy to ask about Seth, the response they got was that he was a crazy, old lunatic.

Kai walked toward the tent and called out, "Seth? You there?" A tent had no door to knock on, so shouting for the old man was the only thing Kai could think of .

"Kai?"

A man in his sixties emerged from the tent. He had a warm jacket that Kai would never have worn in the summer but that the man kept buttoned up from top to bottom. The man's hair was mostly gray, even though one or two black hairs stubbornly resisted losing vigor. Even though the years tried to drag the man down, which was reflected in the hunched way he walked, he was still freakishly tall, much taller than Kai, only making him look older.

"Why on earth are you here, boy?"

"Hey, Seth. It's been a few years. We need to talk."

*

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

As Kai phased through the colorful wall, he was met with something he wasn't expecting. Next to where he stood were two teenagers pointing and laughing at multiple variations of them. Some of the boys were freakishly tall and impossibly thin; others were bent in impossible shapes, making them look like twisted creatures. It took him a few moments to figure out the reason for the disturbing illusion.

"Mirrors," he whispered.

"That is correct. This is what is known as a house of mirrors."

Kai approached one of the walls and looked at it at an angle, revealing the reflective glass. "And people enjoy seeing themselves in these distorted

shapes?" asked Kai as he saw the two boys comment on their favorite variation of their appearances.

Maia shrugged dismissively. "Human psychology is beyond me. But if you would like to have the historical and physical perspective of this attraction, I'm happy to oblige."

"It's OK, thank you."

"Very well, then." Kai took a deep breath. He hadn't meant it as 'It's OK, please share this useless trivia to distract me from getting allcure to save my life and that of my wife, and please, entertain me with your knowledge of history and physics.' No. He had meant it as 'It's OK. I can do without the trivia. Please, just be quiet and let me work.' Maia had chosen to believe the first.

"No one knows what the first funfair Hall of Mirrors was, but some people suggest it was inspired by a gallery with the same name built in the 17th century in the Palace of Versailles."

"Great. That's interesting," commented Kai sarcastically as he tried to figure out how to use this discovery. He tuned Maia out as she talked about how convex and concave glass reflect light differently.

Back in the quarry, he had seen how powerful the [Mirror] card was. If he could just copy his mythic cards, he could cheat his way into the next round, possibly even to the finals. The [Mirror] card had four hp if memory served him right. Did that mean he could get eight mega scrap droids if he took two pictures of [Mirror]? Would Daisy let him do that?

He looked at Maia, who was still discussing glass curvature and photons and frowned. Why was she so chatty if this was such a great opportunity? Usually, when he was close to making a significant discovery, she went dead quiet as if afraid of letting him know how close he was to getting a good card. Had Daisy picked up on the android's tell? Or was Kai missing something here?

He approached the laughing young men and positioned himself to capture them, but when trying to frame them, he realized that things wouldn't be as simple as he had imagined.

In the quarry, finding the right angle where the lake's still water reflected the landscape had been challenging. At the same time, it had only been one mirror. Here, every single wall was a mirror. A thousand reflections of the boys stretched in every possible direction, distorted in every imaginable shape. How was he supposed to get the picture for a

mirror when wherever he looked, the light bounced off mirrors indefinitely?

As he looked through the viewfinder, seeing the never-ending reflections stretching in all directions, he couldn't help but think of a card he had previously obtained through crafting. There might be an opportunity here anyway, so he decided to take a picture.

Capture successful.

Tries left: 9 of 23.

Infinity (Legendary)

1 of 1

An endless, limitless extent or quantity without a specific bound or endpoint.

Hp: 0

Vp: 11

Here it was—the legendary [Infinity] card. He had previously obtained it by merging two [Mirror] cards but now got it through capturing. It gave him a generous quantity of victory points, but he would have preferred it if he had gotten a [Mirror] card instead.

The possibility of copying mythical cards he already owned made [Mirror] much more valuable than [Infinity]. It wasn't that he couldn't copy cards using the photocopying machine upgrade, but [Mirror] was almost a cheat card, allowing him to copy legendary cards without sacrifices. If it could also copy mythic cards, then it could possibly be one of the most powerful cards in the trial.

However, how was he supposed to get a [Mirror] card if the Hall of Mirrors was rigged for him only to get [Infinity] instead? No wonder that Maia had stayed so chatty. It wasn't that there weren't mirrors here or valuable opportunities to discover, but the photograph wouldn't be easy to take.

Kai walked around, looking for a way to get a [Mirror] card. He hadn't realized this when he first entered the hall, but this ride was designed as a maze. As light bounced from mirror to mirror, the resulting optical illusions could easily make someone get lost. It was a strange feeling to walk in a hall of mirrors without seeing one's reflection. Kai wondered if there was an upgrade like the one that gave him his shadow back but

instead gave him his reflection. Perhaps that new [Tangibility] upgrade did just that.

Unable to see himself in the mirror, he just followed after the new arrivals. It was a couple and a young boy. The family walked through the hall of mirrors excitedly. The husband kept reminding his wife to resist the urge to touch the walls, not to ruin the fun of making it through the maze, but the wife kept cheating. The boy just kept laughing, not really caring about the ride but just happy to be with his parents.

Kai followed after them and realized that there wasn't a single angle that allowed him to get just one simple reflection similar to the one that had gained him a [Mirror] card in the quarry. As far as he could tell, the only place where he could get a simple reflection was near the end of the labyrinth, and it was with a convex mirror that made things look bigger than they were. Would he still get [Mirror] despite the distorted reflection? On the one hand, he didn't have that many shots left, but on the other, he had much to gain.

He waited a couple of minutes for the next group to walk by. It was a young couple. As they faced the mirror, creating only one simple twisted reflection of themselves, Kai took a photograph, ensuring he got both the couple and their distorted form in the mirror.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 8 of 23.

Funhouse Mirror (Rare)

1 of 3

A curved mirror that creates a twisted reflection.

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

He looked at the card, surprised. It wasn't exactly a [Mirror], but it seemed to be fairly similar. What would happen if he copied a card using [Funhouse Mirror]? Would he get a perfect copy or a twisted one? And what did the twisted copy of a card look like? Facing the hidden potential here, he decided to take a second photograph.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 7 of 23.

A curved mirror that creates a twisted reflection.

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

Kai took a last walk around and, satisfied with what he had done here, felt ready to move on. This had been a good stop in his tour, but he still had a few shots left and more of the fair to explore. He still hadn't gotten any clues as to whether recipes were hidden in this map. If there were, looking at the number of tries he had left on his camera, he wasn't even sure if he had enough slots to get the ingredients. If he did find a recipe, his only hope was that he had inadvertently already collected some of the ingredients.

Studying the map, he reckoned there was still about a third of the fair to explore. He spared a look at his opponent's score. So far, in this snapping round, many of the cards Kai had gotten his hands on only had hp and not victory points. Apparently, his opponent had a better experience in that regard since his points count had already climbed well over 200. Kai couldn't help but feel nervous about whether he would have enough points to get through to the next round. He really needed things to go his way. After all, allcure was only awarded to the top eight places, maybe even only to the top four.

In the history of his sector, they had only gotten allcure three times. One was at the very beginning when they reached the octave finals. Then, when Baldwin had reached the quarter-finals. And finally, when Trudy reached the octave finals years later. However, back then, there were many more sectors left. Maybe Daisy had proportionately reduced the number of sectors that received a batch of the miraculous medicine. He just had to press on and get to the next round to make sure he got what he needed.

Leaving the house of mirrors, Kai visited the next ride, which looked incredibly slow and sluggish compared to the other ones. The elevator tower offered the thrill of a perilous fall, and the bumper cars provided the excitement of hitting one's friends or strangers with a moving vehicle without hurting them. This ride only went around in circles. Mostly, parents and young children sat on top of a variety of fantastic creatures that were pierced through with sticks, kind of like what old Seth used to

do to roast his rabbits and rats, but here, instead of spinning over the fire, the animals moved up and down in seemingly pointless movements.

Listening to the festive, joyous song coming out from speakers mounted on the spinning ride, Kai realized that there was one sound missing from the cacophony of the fair. He spared a glance at Maia, who had gone suspiciously quiet.

"So, what can you tell me about this ride?"

"It's called a merry-go-round," she replied drily.

The name seemed odd to Kai. "Is that just one word?"

"It's hyphenated—merry-go-round." The name made sense, given that children merrily went around in circles.

"Are you not going to tell me more about the history of the merry-go-round?" he probed, trying to get Maia to spill the beans.

"Why would I? You haven't shown any interest in the history of the other rides. I know when my trivia is unwanted, and therefore, I won't give you the privilege of listening to it," she said with a tone of finality.

"I didn't know that you, androids, knew how to pout."

"I'm not pouting. I'm logically allocating my resources to where they matter. It's different."

Maia's behavior was definitely fishy, and there had to be something to this seemingly boring ride. Kai approached it and inspected the animals being portrayed; there were several horses of different colors, and as he saw the merry-go-round run a few circles, he spotted a horse with a horn sticking out: a unicorn.

He spared a glance at Maia, who was looking everywhere but at the merry-go-round. Was it because of the animals on the ride? Could it be that there was more than one way of getting the [Unicorn] card? He'd gotten it from photographing the shadow of the Arabian Oryx on the desert map, but seeing this childish version of one, he wondered if there was another way of getting the legendary card.

He had already concluded that there was more than one way of getting cards. Sometimes, more than one recipe yielded similar results. For example, whether he burned a log or a branch, he got an [Ash] card. A few moments earlier, he got a hold of an [Infinity] card by photographing the concept, but he knew that he could also get it by crafting.

Could there be another way of getting the unicorn card that wasn't through getting its shadow mixed with the [Light] card?

Chapter 23

Fall of 347, A.D.

"Tea?" asked Seth as he threw some herbs into a pot of water.

"No, I'm good. Thank you."

The old man went through his trinkets and wares and grabbed a sharp stick, which he proceeded to pierce a dead rabbit with in order to roast it over the fire. "It's been what? One year since your last visit?"

"Six, actually," answered Kai, a little offended. One would hope that his visit here meant more to the man, but he didn't seem to care. As far as he knew, not even Trudy came out here anymore. "Did you hunt that?"

"Of course. It didn't come running to me, asking to be eaten. Not everyone is as stupid as you lot."

Kai skipped over the insult and watched as Seth got the rabbit over the fire, careful not to let any of the meat juices drip over the pot with tea.

"Why don't you just get rations?" Kai asked.

"No, thank you very much. As if I would eat anything that digital demon cooks up."

Kai sighed. He was reminded at every sentence coming out of Seth's mouth why he lived away from the rest of the community.

"And what brings you here to my neck of the woods?"

"Just checking in on you."

The old man eyed him suspiciously through his bushy brows and unkempt beard. "Not buying it."

Kai sighed. For a paranoid old man, that would have probably been his reaction to anything he said. "Fine. You got me. I'm here to convince you to join the rest of us in the city."

"Did old Trudy send you?" he asked unconvinced.

Kai took a moment to appreciate how Seth was 'Old Seth' to him, but to Seth, Trudy was 'Old Trudy.' It was an amusing thought. Just how old was Trudy, anyway? Seth cleared his throat, waking Kai from his musings. "No. It's all my idea."

The man seemed to accept this explanation better. "You're wasting time, young man. I want nothing to do with you, you Daisiacs," the last word had been spat with so much bitterness that Kai couldn't help but feel another wave of resentment at the comment. He tried not to get defensive, though.

"Come on, Seth. There are only four of us left," he explained. At this, the old man's face softened somewhat. "You and I are the only men left. Just the two of us."

"Is that so?"

"Sunny, Clara, Marcus, and Perry. They all died from the blight this year."

The man stared at the fire for a few silent moments. "That's too bad. That's just too bad."

"So? Will you come back with me? With so few left, we must stick together."

"What will you have me do? Join you in your little fires? Practice choreography to dance in the palm of the AI devil?"

"Sure. You can leave the dancing part out, though. I don't think anyone wants to see you dancing."

The man laughed but quickly regained his cynical facial expression. "Not a chance."

Kai had expected this level of resistance, so he tried the approach he had thought of on his way here. "Tell you what. We're all going to be together, want it or not. Either we all move out here, or you come with us."

"Nonsense!" the man said in disbelief. "As if any of you would ever come to Rebeltown?!"

"Think about it, Seth! Even someone as used to solitude as you would enjoy the company. Am I right?"

The man looked at Kai with wide eyes as if the notion of being with people had been completely discarded from his thoughts and was now being resurrected by Kai. "Listen, Kai. I'm a bitter old man, but I'm no

monster. Of course, I would appreciate the company," the last sentence was spoken with some effort, making Kai doubt if it was true. "But more than everything, it would make me happy to see you cut your shackles and become free humans again."

"Splendid. Then come and teach us how to become free."

The man raised his brow. "Teach you?"

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

In the end, Kai decided not to take a photograph of the pink, decorated unicorn until he first finished exploring the fair.

After the merry-go-round, followed one of the most emblematic rides that Kai had seen in the fair so far – in fact, it was one of the very first things he spotted once he landed on this stage – it was a giant wheel, almost as tall as the elevator tower. Colorful cabins spun from an axis, letting gravity keep them pointing downward. From here, Kai didn't need the zoom to see that there were passengers aboard each of the cabins.

An operator pushed a lever that made the wheel turn for a few moments. It then stopped, allowing several people to leave the cabin through one side and come aboard through the other. The person who operated the machine had perhaps the most bored look that Kai had ever seen. He was quite sure that if he were to take a picture of the worker, he would get the card to [Boredom], but he couldn't see how valuable such a card would be. He couldn't blame the young man. Having to push a lever for a whole day non-stop was probably mind-numbing.

'What is this called?' Kai asked Maia.

'It's a Ferris wheel. The first Ferris wheel was designed by George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr., hence the name. But there are many older examples of the concept dating back centuries."

Kai smirked, noting how she was back to her usual chatty self. There had to be something more to the merry-go-round. "Do people go into the cabins for the view? Is that the fun part of this ride?" he guessed.

'Well done, Kai. You seem to be getting better at gauging the selling point of each ride."

"I wonder if we can go into one of the cabins." According to the drawing on the map, this was placed within the boundary of the arena, and he should be able to access it. "Shall we try to go aboard and see what the

view is like?" asked Kai, looking at the watch. He still had 50 minutes left on the clock, more than enough time to go through a turn of the wheel. Kai hoped to get a good peripheral view of the whole arena and see if he had missed something.

"Of course, I'm a company android, and I'll go along."

Kai walked through the hologrammed crowd and only put on the gloves once he was near the cabin; he didn't want to phase through its floor. There were three platforms with small staircases on both sides of the Ferris wheel that allowed people to climb in and out of the ride comfortably.

The wheel stopped, and several people came out. Cabins were big enough to accommodate four people, two facing each other, and they boarded a cabin with only one old lady, leaving them with plenty of room to sit.

Thinking of the logistics of boarding a cabin, Kai realized that he hadn't given thought to how dimensional gloves would interact with the people. Could he move people? Could he pick them up? Could he make them do gestures?

He stretched out his hands, glowing green because of the [Dimensional Gloves], and touched the arm of the old lady. He tried to move it, but the arm was heavy, and despite his effort, it hardly budged. He spared a glance at Maia, who had a whimsical look.

"Are you mocking me?" he asked her.

"No, I'm just enjoying seeing how your mind works. I was beginning to think that you weren't going to try and interact with the projections of humans."

"I'm glad you're having fun," he said sourly. It looked like picking up objects was one thing, but he couldn't make the extras in the arena do things they didn't want to do. He wondered at the reason for the disparity. This seemed to suggest that there was a separate upgrade to make the holograms of people do things. He guessed that made it a little fairer. If he could control the interactions between people, he could easily photograph any abstract concept he wanted.

The wheel started, and they began their slow ascent aboard the Ferris wheel. The view was better than what Kai had imagined. From here, he could see the whole fair. It was as if he was looking at some kind of alternative sky where the stars had colors, and they were beneath him

instead of above. He could see many of the rides that he visited previously. The one that stood out the most was the elevator tower, the only structure that could rival the Ferris wheel in height.

The wheel kept going up and up and then paused while it was near its zenith. Kai looked down and saw a new batch of passengers coming into the wheel.

"It's a nice view," admitted Kai.

"That it is," said Maia. "Do you see anything that you missed?"

Kai was disappointed at the question. Maia speaking to him so proactively about it, made him believe there was nothing valuable to be gained from being up here. She never asked this question when he was close to gaining a valuable card. Even so, a wide photograph of the whole fair had to be worth something. He had the [Wide Lens] upgrade precisely for this type of photograph.

He zoomed out and tried to get as much of the fair as possible.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 6 of 23.

Funfair (Legendary)

1 of 1

A fun event often hosted by itinerant merchants and entertainers.

Hp: 0

Vp: 10

He stood corrected. It looked like, despite Maia's question, there was still a legendary card to be taken here.

"I think we're done here. Let's explore the rest of the map and then make some decisions," he declared.

Kai took off one of the dimensional gloves and let his body fall through the structure and onto the ground. He would have to regain a fear of falling after leaving the exams. He was becoming dangerously accustomed to not paying the price for defying gravity.

There was only one last ride that Kai hadn't seen yet. It was a three-dimensional, twisted lattice metal structure with a fast train of multiple carriages that went through tight curves and sinuous twists, surely with the purpose of making passengers produce adrenaline.

Kai admired as the train performed a corkscrew movement, turning all screaming passengers upside down for a brief second. Then, the train did two loops in a row that made them upside down again.

Kai couldn't help but remember one of the bonfire lessons that Sunny had taught once. "I guess that's a good display of centrifugal force," he said as he grabbed his camera.

"I think you mean centripetal."

"Aren't they the same?"

Maia twisted her mouth in an expression he hadn't seen in her yet. Contempt. Was what he said that stupid?

"Centrifugal force is the outward force acting away from the center of rotation, while centripetal force is the actual force directed toward the center of rotation that keeps an object moving in a curved path." Maia's explanation went right over Kai's head.

One thing was certain. There seemed to be a layer that he had ignored in this arena, and only now he was noticing. Physics. These rides were good examples of mechanical physics and a good opportunity to capture these abstract concepts. But did he want to start taking such photographs now? What did he have in his inventory that would synergize well with a [Centrifugal Force] or [Centripetal Force] card?

Shaking his head, he decided against wasting shots here. "Let's go," said Kai. There were thirty minutes left and several decisions to make. What would he fill the remaining slots with? What did he need to make his crafting round as good as it could be?

Your opponent has used a stun bomb. You can't move for 30 seconds.

Not this again! He complained to himself as his whole body went stiff. Maia walked over to him and looked at him squarely. Was she mocking him for being unable to move?

"Oh well. It looks like you're going to be stuck there for a while. But do not worry, Kai. I'm a company droid, and I'll keep you company. It's what I do. You seemed to be a little confused about the differences between centrifugal and centripetal forces. This might be a teachable moment," she declared.

You've got to be kidding me. Is she using the fact that I'm paralyzed to lecture me on physics? Seriously? Thankfully, just as she was about to begin, the bomb effect wore off.

"I don't…"

Your opponent has used a stun bomb. You can't move for 30 seconds.

"…understand these basic principles of physics. Sure. I already know that. But don't worry. We're going to remedy the situation.

"While centripetal forces are responsible for keeping an object in circular motion, centrifugal force is often referred to as a pseudo-force experienced by an object in a rotating frame of reference. In the case of a roller coaster loop, the perceived 'centrifugal force' is more accurately described as inertia, as the coaster tends to continue in a straight line without a force acting on it. The dominant force at play in the loop is still the centripetal force that keeps the coaster moving in a curved path."

Kai counted the seconds for the stun bomb to wear off. Just as he became able to regain his movement he was hit with another one.

Your opponent has used a stun bomb. You can't move for 30 seconds.

Just how many bomb upgrades did his opponent have?

Chapter 24

Fall of 347, A.D.

Trudy's face was a mask of disappointment at the sight of old Seth. Sophie also eyed the freakishly tall drifter warily from a few steps away, but Ariel seemed delighted with the new arrival and was taking the initiative to welcome him back to the city.

"Why on earth would you bring that brat here?" she hissed as if she were an old rattlesnake.

Kai had prepared himself for Trudy's resistance and already had braced himself. "Because we need more people around the fire, Trudy! There are so few of us left. Can we stand banning Seth from joining us in the fires?"

The old woman seemed to be aging by degrees with every moment Seth lingered. Kai had never imagined that Trudy could look any older. It was as if the last vestige of vitality had been drained from her the moment Seth had entered the city.

"Even so… You didn't have to promise him he could be a firekeeper!" she protested.

"What's the harm in that? He has a different perspective of the world. Aren't the bonfires supposed to be a place to exchange information freely? Let's hear him out."

"I've heard him out alright. His nonsense is nothing but trouble."

Trudy didn't just look older. She sounded older, too. Fortunately, Kai had grown up around people much older than him, and he had thick skin. He liked to think of himself as immune to nagging.

"Fine," she finally conceded. "We're all going to be dead soon, anyway."

Trudy limped away from Kai and went to take a seat by the fire.

"That's the spirit," mumbled Kai awkwardly.

Seeing Trudy had left, Ariel approached. "Hey, Kai."

"Hi, Ariel. What's up?"

"So this is what you were up to yesterday?" she asked knowingly. She seemed happy about it for some reason.

"That's right," Kai answered easily. "It makes no sense for him to be alone in Rebeltown. Whatever got him banned is all water under the bridge."

"Well done," she said. "It was a good idea."

Kai smiled. "Thanks. Sorry I couldn't help you prepare for your lesson. Looking forward to it."

"You'll help me next time. OK?"

"Sure."

"That's a promise," she said, winking, and left before Kai could say anything else. She called the older women and signaled she was going to start the lesson for the day. Kai went to take a seat next to Seth.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

The barrage of grenades finally ended, and all their nasty effects expired just as the clock hit the two-hour mark. His opponent had successfully robbed him of the last ten minutes in the snapping arena; however, Kai wasn't done yet. The [Deadline Extension] upgrade ensured Kai had an additional 20 minutes. That would be more than enough to spend all his remaining shots. Meanwhile, Maia finished her lecture on centripetal versus centrifugal forces.

"Thank you for making me an expert on centripetal and centrifugal forces. I feel so much better now that I know the twenty differences between the two," Kai said sarcastically.

"You're welcome," Maia said. He didn't know if she got sarcasm and decided that Kai wasn't worth her losing her temper or whether she was oblivious to the concept. How much sarcasm could an android companion need?

"Come. I want to wrap this up, and I still have six shots on my camera."

The android followed him happily as he headed toward the bumper cars. Kai had ample time to consider his strategy for the last stretch of this round while Maia was rambling.

It was a short walk back to the colorful ring. He was lucky to catch the ring with all the cars parked, ready to take one more batch of passengers to another round of fun and folly. He could have taken the shot he wanted even if the cars were moving, but catching all the colorful vehicles stopped made his work easier.

He zoomed in on the rubber bumper that protected the vehicle all around. Although it didn't strike him as a particularly rare card, Kai suspected it could convert to a useful upgrade.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 5 of 23

Rubber Bumper (Rare)

1 of 2

A thick rubber band that can absorb impact.

Hp: 0

Vp: 7

How about that? It was a rare card, after all. It reminded him a little of the [Perspective] card he'd captured in the abandoned factory. It seemed to be a card that didn't have a use in crafting but could unlock an important upgrade.

Satisfied with the results, Kai set out to deplete the rest of his tries. It was time to return to the merry-go-round.

The sound of laughter and applause drew his attention. A crowd had gathered on the street of the fair, and they cheered something happening in its middle. Kai couldn't see what was happening from where he was, but that could be easily changed. He walked through the crowd as if he were an intangible specter, heading toward where the laughter was happiest and where applause was loudest.

After only a few steps, he spotted the reason for the commotion. He discovered two men in colorful, outrageous outfits entertaining the crowd. They wore clothes that were either too small or too large to properly fit them, in a mismatching collection of patterns and fabrics. As if to make their appearance even more shocking, they put on a thick layer of makeup that accentuated their features. Their faces were painted practically white, and their mouth and eyes were highlighted with broad, bold dark lines.

Who were these people? Were they supposed to be scary or funny? He looked around him and found Maia's blank expression while children laughed hysterically and adults smiled from ear to ear.

One of the weirdly-clothed men took a long, slender, empty balloon with exaggerated gestures and blew into it, making the whole thing stretch into a cylinder-like shape. He let out some of the balloon's air, which caused a funny, honking noise, and then he waved his hand in front of his red nose as if his companion was flatulent, eliciting another wave of laughter in the crowd. His hands then deftly moved, almost in a blur, pulling, tying, and rubbing the balloon until a shape emerged.

The balloon was twisted on itself, and its deflated end simulated the creature's tongue. It was a balloon sculpture of a snake. Kai couldn't help but smile at the spectacle. He didn't feel scared anymore. These guys were brilliant. They did with balloons what he did with shadows. He had never known such an art existed!

While the sculptor went on to twist another balloon into the shape of an animal, Kai glanced at his taller companion. He was as tall as old Seth had been, albeit slimmer and younger. The entertainer pedaled on one unicycle while juggling balls in his hands, thus eliciting cheers from the crowd. The balance and dexterity needed for such acrobatics were unlike anything Kai had seen anyone do.

Well, to be fair, most people he had met throughout his life in his sector were elderly. He tried imagining old Neil or Sunny pedaling a unicycle but couldn't. Were they to try this, they would probably break every bone in their body. Kai was quite young and was pretty sure he couldn't do it either. Had he had good balance, he wouldn't have fallen out of a tree that one time and broken his leg.

Kai had been all over the funfair, but it was his first time seeing these two roaming entertainers. Were they the moveable opportunities within this arena, like the mining wagon or the arabian oryx had been?

He was sure he would have spotted such a crowd from the top of the Ferris wheel. Why didn't he? Unless they only started roaming the arena after the two hours were up to reward him for having [Deadline Extension]. If so, these clowns could very well be legendary cards.

Even though the five remaining shots weren't many, he decided to spend one of them to photograph the artists.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 4 of 23.

Clown (Legendary)

1 of 1

An entertainer who uses physical comedy.

Hp: 0

Vp: 9

Clowns… that's what these people are. He had read about them, but this was the first time seeing them.

As expected, it was a legendary card. It only had two victory points more than the usual rare card. He wondered why that was. Could it be that to Daisy, this was already a good enough reward for someone unlocking [Deadline Extension]? Even so, Kai was happy with it. This meant that he would unlock one more upgrade in the console.

He kept observing the artists and, feeling more relaxed, even let out a laugh or two. The skills of the balloon-sculpting clown, in particular, were mesmerizing. He made it all look easy and silly, but how many hours had this man practiced to hone his craft like this?

He wondered whether he should risk taking a photograph of one of the balloons. Seeing the different balloon animals, he couldn't help but think of his shadow puppets. Although the tools and techniques were different, both arts were essentially the same: To create shapes and figures.

After photographing the clowns, he had four shots left, and he was pretty sure of what he wanted to do with three of them. He checked his score and weighed his options. He was ahead and could take the risk. Ultimately, he decided to splurge a shot on the balloon sculptures.

A child held a balloon puppy, while another held a balloon butterfly. Kai waited for the clown to continue making more balloons for the children, and eventually, one caught his eye. He pointed his camera at it and took a picture.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 3 of 23.

Balloon Giraffe (Rare)

A balloon sculpture of a creature with a long neck that feeds on the leaves of tall trees.

He was right. There really was something special hidden here. The stat line of this card was exactly like that of shadow cards. Firstly, its stats were below average, and secondly, despite being a rare card, only one copy of it was available.

Could it be that these cards also converted into real creatures? If that was the case, just how did he do that? Did he have to find something pointy and sharp to burst the balloon, thus creating the creature card? Or by doing that, would he just get an [Air] card, [Explosion] card, or something similar?

However, what intrigued Kai was whether Daisy's limitation on shadow cards also applied to balloon sculptures. For example, if there was a balloon wolf, would he be able to take a photograph of it? Or did his [Shadow Wolf] card deplete all wolf cards for grabs? If he made a shadow puppet of a giraffe now, would Daisy consider the capture valid? What if he drew a wolf, painted one, or sculpted one?

He could circumvent Daisy's restrictions if there was more than one way to arrive at the same creature card. This only made him more certain of the next card that he was going to capture. After running into this cheerful duo and seeing them twist the balloons into shape, Kai moved on to his next objective.

Kai walked past the crowd and revisited the merry-go-round. Kai glanced toward Maia, who was quietly observing him. When he first met this upgrade, he thought she was just there to stabilize his psyche or teach him physics and history trivia. However, he now saw her as a metal detector.

She behaved slightly differently when he got close to a good opportunity inside the arena. If he paid attention, he could pick up on those odd behaviors and identify opportunities he would have missed otherwise.

Out of all the rides that he'd visited, the merry-go-round was where Maia behaved the most suspiciously. Children sat on the wooden horses as the machine spun around and around. He skipped all the regular horses and pointed his camera at the only one with a horn.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 2 of 23.

Wooden Unicorn (Rare)

A playful representation of the mythological one-horned horse of legend.

1 of 1

Hp: 1

Vp: 8

Its stats were suspiciously equal to those of the [Shadow Unicorn] he had captured in the desert. The similarity between the two cards had to mean something. He had an idea he wanted to try, but that would have to wait until he was in front of the crafting table.

The last two pictures were easy, and Kai saved them for last. The [Child] card had been his saving grace in the Neon City. Given the many children around him, it would be foolish of him not to take advantage of this. He already had several recipes in mind that would require this card. He just approached the closest family passing by and took a picture of a young boy who was happily eating cotton candy, a prize for a game, or a snack his parents had gifted him.

Capture successful!

Tries left: 1 of 23.

Child (Common)

Young human being in the early stages of life, characterized by growth and curiosity.

1 of 4

Hp: 1

Vp: 0

Capture successful!

Tries left: 0 of 23

Child (Common)

Young human being in the early stages of life, characterized by growth and curiosity.

He was done with time to spare. He had to say that this was one of his better rounds. Looking at the score, he could see that he was doing much better than his opponent. Even before he started crafting, he already had a commanding lead of 40 points. In the photographs Kai had taken in this stage alone, he had secured 70 points. All his upgrades had worked wonderfully. He couldn't be happier about his upgrade coin investments.

Thanks to [Film], he had three extra photographs; thanks to [Deadline Extension], he had twenty extra minutes. Having a few more shots and time made all the difference. The most significant upgrade, however, was [Populate]. This stage had been humming with activity and people. He was pretty sure that his opponent was stuck in a barren and deserted version of this arena, while Kai had many more valuable opportunities to collect points.

With ten minutes left on the clock, Kai walked back toward the two clowns still entertaining the crowd. On the one hand, he could have spent these minutes reviewing his plan for the crafting stage, but he had already been forced to stand still for 10 minutes under a barrage of grenades. He had had plenty of time to plan things out then. He had something different planned for his remaining time here.

He joined the crowd, and for a moment, pretended he had just come to the funfair to have fun like everyone else. He imagined that he was just one of these carefree people, spending time with their families at a time when one could have a family just by willing it. What a paradise. How many times had he dreamed of being around other people like this? How many times had he dreamed of being one of these people?

The clown performing acrobatics was off his unicycle and was now performing agile somersaults while teasing his colleague and some children in the crowd. Kai had laughed many times in his life, but doing so surrounded by laughing children made it taste so much sweeter. It was as if he had been eating food all his life, but only today discovered salt.

As he laughed, he felt as if was being given a massage. The knots of tension on his stiff neck and shoulders melted away. Laughing really was

the best medicine. Even if things didn't turn out well after the exam, at least he could take this beautiful memory.

Finally, the clock hit the two hours and twenty minutes mark, and from an array of vivid colors, he was back to blinding white.

Chapter 25

Fall of 347, A.D.

Kai was looking forward to Seth's first class. He had heard the stories of the controversies that made the old man leave the city and live like a hermit. He had heard Trudy's side and old Seth's. Now, it was time to hear both at the same time."Hi, Kai. Mind if I sit with you?"

"Knock yourself out."

"Thanks," she said quietly. Kai kept facing forward, eyes on the fire. Throughout all his life, he'd been the one making the effort to reach out to Ariel, but since he came back, she kept finding excuses to chat with him. The Kai of a few years ago would have been thrilled at the development, but all he felt was numbness. Why was that?

"Hey, Kai. My turn to keep the fire is coming up soon. Can you help me after the sunset bonfire today? You promised."

Kai let out a deep sigh. Things were a little awkward between them, but he didn't think he had it in him to say no. After all, hadn't he made a huge effort to bring old Seth back? Why would he expend so much energy bringing the old hermit back only to ditch Ariel now?

"Deal," he said, forcing a smile.

Instead of looking happy, Ariel looked down, flustered. She was still and tense as if gathering her strength to perform a titanic feat. What was wrong with her? "Kai, I…"

A few claps interrupted what she was about to say. "Let's begin."

"I was hoping I would have died before today arrived, but I guess I can't catch a break," complained Trudy.

"Come on, you old hag. Aren't you always preaching about the sacredness of the fire and how we should respect the firekeeper? Quit your whining and sit your old bones down."

Kai and Ariel exchanged a wide-eyed look. They just couldn't get used to how Seth seemed to have no respect for Trudy. The elderly woman complained and mumbled but still sat with Sophie. The hermit rubbed his hands and cleared his throat.

"Thank you for letting me keep the fire today. It's an honor."

Kai was surprised at how easy and confident old Seth looked. He had assumed the old man would have felt awkward, but he looked like a fish who had just found water again. Maybe he cared more about being back than he admitted.

"The bonfires focus mainly on preparing us to participate in the exams, but today, I want to take a step back and pose a question: Should we even participate?"

Sophie and Trudy rolled their eyes as loud as they could, but old Seth wasn't talking to them. No. He was looking at Ariel and Kai.

"We have to participate," countered Kai. "Even if we don't want to, the cybermonkeys get us and drag us to a pod."

"Daisy can do many things, but she can't make you participate. All she can do is turn on the game and put it in front of you. That doesn't mean you have to play it," Seth answered.

"Why wouldn't we participate?" asked Ariel. "If we don't, we can't have children or get other important things we need."

"Even if we don't get the poisons and rations Daisy concocts, we can still forage. We can farm. We can hunt. We don't need Daisy to survive. I've been living off the land for years now."

"But we still wouldn't be able to have children," Kai said.

"And should you?" riposted Seth. "Why do you want to have children so badly? Could it be that it's because Daisy presents it as a prize? And what about the child? Why do you want to bring new life to this forsaken world? Why give birth to another of Daisy's prisoners? Is it fair to the child?"

Seth did make a good point. He had always focused on what he wanted, but what about his future children? Would they want to be born in a world like this? Or would it be kinder to let them remain in inexistence? Kai

stared at Seth for a long moment. His argument awoke bits of past conversations with Alex after he started talking to Cassie.

"Now, I believe you all have a right to choose. Just make sure you're doing it for the right reasons. Today's lesson is aimed at you, kids. Doing something is just as important as why you do it.

"Think about this. Talk to Trudy, Sophie, and me if you like. Talk to each other. And remember, you have a choice. You don't have to win. You don't even have to play. We'll meet again at sunset. Dismissed."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

After the funfair's festive environment, returning to the white crafting room was quite a shock. The previous arenas had all been quiet and devoid of life, so this was the first time that Kai experienced such a difference during this year's exam.

Kai took stock of the cards he'd collected in the funfair arena. He distributed them neatly on the table.

2xChild (Common)

Young human being in the early stages of life, characterized by growth and curiosity.

Hp: 1

Vp: 0

2xAir Rifle (Uncommon)

The rifle can shoot small plastic pellets that hardly do any harm.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

Candy Apple (Uncommon)

An apple covered in a shiny, sugar coating.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

Cotton Candy (Uncommon)

Spun sugar confection with a cotton-like texture.

```
Hp: 4
Vp: 0
Pirate (Uncommon)
A criminal outlaw that raids ships.
Hp: 0
Vp: 4
Pirate Ship Ride (Uncommon)
An amusement park ride that performs a pendular motion.
Hp: 1
Vp: 3
Rare:
2xFunhouse Mirror (Rare)
A curved mirror that creates a twisted reflection.
Hp: 4
Vp: 3
2xHammer (Uncommon)
A tool to break stones or to drive nails.
Hp: 4
Vp: 0
2xAccuracy (Rare)
The ability to aim true and hit a target.
Hp: 7
Vp: 0
2xStrength (Rare)
The power that be.
Hp: 7
Vp: 0
Balloon Giraffe (Rare)
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Balloon Giraffe (Rare)
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A balloon sculpture of a creature with a long neck that feeds
on the leaves of tall trees.

Hp: 1

Vp: 4

Rubber Bumper (Rare)

A thick rubber band that can absorb impact.

Hp: 0

Vp: 7

Wooden Unicorn (Rare)

A playful representation of the mythological one-horned
horse of legend.

Hp: 1

Vp: 8

Clown (Legendary)

An entertainer who uses physical comedy.

Hp: 0

Vp: 9

Funfair (Legendary)

A fun event often hosted by itinerant merchants and
entertainers.

Hp: 0

Vp: 10

Infinity (Legendary)

An endless, limitless extent or quantity without a specific
bound or endpoint.

Hp: 0

Vp: 11
```

"Not bad, not bad," Kai said to himself. Not only had he gotten three legendary cards, but he also had a fairly complete deck. He had creatures, tools, and healing cards. He had some good crafting-oriented cards, but he also had cards that immediately beefed up his point count.

Adding to that, he grabbed all the cards left from the previous round.

Razor Clam (Common)

Bivalve mollusk characterized by its long, narrow, and razor-sharp shell.

Hp: 0

Vp: 2

Crab (Uncommon)

Crustacean with a broad carapace.

Hp: 0

Vp: 2

Power Outlet (Uncommon)

Connection point for electrical devices to access the electrical supply.

Hp: 1

Vp: 1

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 0

Vp: 4

Spider Web (Rare)

Delicate, intricate structure woven by spiders using silk threads to serve as a trap for catching prey or as a shelter.

Hp: 2

Vp: 4

Unicorn (Legendary)

The mythical one-horned horse. Legend has it that its horn can pierce through anything.

Hp: 3

Vp: 15

Crabken (Legendary)

A mighty sea monster. Its pincers can shatter continents, and its shell deflect cannon blasts.

Hp: 0

Vp: 20

Illuminating Adult (Legendary)

A human who has been forged in the fires of wisdom and love.

Hp: 2

Vp: 20

Light (Legendary)

A form of electromagnetic radiation that stimulates the sense of vision.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 2

Mega Scrapdroid (Mythic)

A scrapdroid that has fed on so much technology that it has transcended into the realm of sentience.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Red Star (Mythic)

A powerful, nuclear ball of fire.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 0 (Max)

Raised City of Atlantis (Mythic)

The city that had been swallowed by the ocean has risen back above the waves.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 15

One-Horned Jaguar (Mythic)

A phenomenal hunter that can pierce any shield with its horn and fool any eye with its camouflage.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

His mythic cards alone granted him almost 100 points right now. Finally, Kai grabbed all the cards his sawmill and tool shed upgrades had generated.

Pine Tree (Common)

Coniferous green that produces needles and pinecones.

Hp: 2

Vp: 1

Acacia Tree (Uncommon)

Acacias are known for their resilience and beautiful, fragrant flowers.

Hp: 3

Vp: 1

Flint Axe (Uncommon)

A primitive cutting tool with a flint blade. It doesn't look too sturdy.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

This time, it looked like he had struck out and only gotten a [Flint Axe]. It would have been much better if he'd gotten a [Fire Axe] or a better tool but it was all good. It granted some victory points, and he could pair it with a creature card.

Usually, Kai would have started crafting right away by now, but this time, he had to break his six-round-long routine and go in the opposite direction instead. Thanks to the [Raised City of Atlantis] card, he could already access all the upgrades in his console. On top of that, he already had upgrade coins ready to spend on new upgrades. It would be foolish not to check if there were some juicy upgrades to bolster his crafting.

With the 20 upgrade coins left from the last round and his current cards, he already had 239 upgrade coins to spend. If he found a powerful upgrade, he could increase his points count even further, thus allowing him to do even better during this stage.

He hurriedly opened the console and checked all the upgrades available for purchase.

Purchased Upgrades: [Acacia Sawmill]; [Android Companion]; [Card Fridge]; [Deadline Extension]; [Dimensional Gloves]; [Film]; [Flash]; [Gaslamp]; [Hunter Eyes]; [Lightning Rod]; [Map]; [Mythological Discount]; [Photocopier]; [Pine Sawmill]; [Populate]; [Risen]; [Scoreboard]; [Solar Breeze]; [Text Description]; [Treasures of Atlantis]; [Tool Shed]; [Wide Lens]; [Zoom II].

Recycle
Requirements: To destroy 100+ cards in one round.
Description: For every ten cards you obliterate or lose at the end of the round, generate a random scrap card.
Cost: 22uc

Flint Mine
Requirements: Craft three flint-based tools.
Description: Grants you a [Flintstone] card each round.
Cost: 37uc

Elm Sawmill
Requirements: Lumberjack card, [Elm].
Description: Grants you an [Elm Tree] card each round.
Cost: 37uc

Uncommon Pool
Requirements: To only take pictures of uncommon cards in a round.
Description: You can take two pictures of uncommon cards regardless of how many have been taken.
Cost: 37uc

Gaslamp II (Gaslamp Upgrade)
Requirements: [Gaslamp], [Light].
Description: An even more powerful gas-fueled lamp.
Cost: 67uc

Hunter Eyes II

Requirements: [Jaguar], [Hunter Eyes].

Description: Shows you where your opponent is on the map at all times.

Cost: 75uc

Tie-Breaker

Requirements: To win one of the rounds by one point.

Description: You automatically receive one extra point if you and your opponent tie.

Cost: 75uc

Balloon Sculptor

Requirements: [Clown] and a balloon animal.

Description: Every round generates one balloon animal.

Cost: 75uc

Shock Absorption

Requirements: [Bumper], to have suffered an attack.

Description: Absorb attacks sent by your opponent. Depending on the grade of the attack, you can cancel it or slightly mitigate it.

Cost: 75uc

Split Activation

Requirements: Fusion card.

Description: You only need to activate one of the fusion elements for the merge to be successful.

Cost: 100uc

Funfair

Requirements: [Funfair].

Description: Every round gain one random card that could be captured in the funfair arena.

Cost: 100uc

Regeneration Chamber

Requirements: To have healed a card.

Description: When inside the chamber, a card can regain one hp between rounds.
Cost: 150uc

Scouting Drone (Android Upgrade)
Requirements: Fully explore a map.
Description: Airborne device that aids in map exploration.
Cost: 150uc

Slow Shutter
Requirements: [Light].
Description: Lets more light into the camera.
Cost: 150uc

Emotion Cookbook (Recipe Book Upgrade)
Requirements: Legendary grade emotion.
Description: Contains recipes for different emotions.
Cost: 150uc

Bomb Casing II
Requirements: [Glass], [Clay], [Leather].
Description: You now have three of each bomb.
Cost: 150uc

Shield Phase
Requirements: [Infinity].
Description: Lets you move past shields.
Cost: 375uc

Mystery Box Fiesta
Requirements: [Mystery Box].
Description: From now on, every map has a hidden mystery box.
Cost: 375uc

Yellow Star
Requirements: [Red Star].

Description: Upgrades [Red Star] to [Yellow Star]. Not only does [Solar Breeze] destroy cards with 0 hp, but it absorbs the victory points of the common cards.

Cost: 375uc

Sure enough, a few new upgrades had been unlocked thanks to the new cards he had collected.

[Funfair] and [Balloon Sculptor] were new upgrades that worked like [Flint Mine] or one of his [Saw Mill] upgrades, generating value each round.

As he studied [Funfair], he frowned. This had been the first time he'd taken an aerial shot of an arena. Could it be that he could have done the same in previous rounds? Was there a [Pine Woodland] card? A [Quarry] card? Or a [Neon City] card? He tried to imagine a trial runner collecting all of these and starting each round with an overwhelming advantage. He would have to pay more attention to these photographs from now on.

Regarding what he generated, he guessed he could get everything from food to people, rides, and other things. It was a high-roll upgrade. He could get a legendary or mythic card, but more likely, he would get a worthless common one. Did he want to spend upgrade coins on it?

[Balloon Sculptor] was a similar upgrade, but the cards it generated were much more targeted. It was guaranteed to generate a balloon sculpture, making it a more consistent choice. However, he still didn't know if balloon sculptures were worth anything. What if they were worthless?

It wasn't just that. There were other similar upgrades available. Should he invest his upgrade coins on it right now? Or should he buy something else? Even though card generation was potentially powerful, the truth was that until the finals, Kai only had three more rounds left - the quarterfinals, the semifinals, and the finals. Would getting this upgrade that would generate only three more cards get him good value?

"Wait," he said, "I'm doing the math wrong." Hadn't [Tool Shed] instantly generated a new card last round? That meant he would get one more card if he purchased any of these upgrades! That was more value than he had first anticipated. Should he go for it? He could buy [Funfair], [Balloon Sculptor], and either [Flint Mine] or [Elm Sawmill] with his

current points. Buying these three upgrades now would get him twelve more cards until the finals if he made it that far.

Before making a final decision, his eyes finally landed on an upgrade he had hoped to unlock. [Rubber Bumper] had translated into a defensive upgrade: [Shock Absorption]. After being hit with so many grenades, Kai had hoped that there was some sort of upgrade that would shield him from foul play.

[Lightning Rod] had already been proven powerful, and it looked like, in these exams, the attack upgrades cost more upgrade coins than defense ones. Therefore, by investing in defense, he was outvaluing his opponents who had invested their coin in a more aggressive build. The only question was the kind of attacks [Shock Absorption] shielded him from. After all, [Lightning Rod] couldn't completely block his [Solar Breeze]. What guarantee did he have that an opponent's attack wouldn't completely ignore this upgrade?

On the other hand, his opponent had invested enough to freeze him for ten minutes at the end of the round. That meant they were aggressive. What nasty surprises had they saved for the crafting stage? Did he want to risk not having this safeguard?

In the end, Kai left the shock absorption upgrade for now. For two reasons. One was that if this player had invested so many resources in grenades, there were fewer chances he would have had enough upgrade coins left to spend on disruptive tools for the crafting stage. Secondly, he could be worried about nothing. [Funfair] and [Balloon Sculptor] were guaranteed to give him two new cards, whereas [Shock Absorption] might not even be needed.

He would spend some coins on card generators. He was far ahead and reckoned he could take a hit if it came down to it. Worst case scenario, he got fodder to feed to the photocopier. Additionally, even though he could get a bad roll and gain a worthless card, he could also potentially get a very valuable one if he was lucky.

Are you sure you want to purchase [Funfair]? [Y/N]

He purchased [Funfair], and just as he was about to purchase [Balloon Sculptor], and [Elm Sawmill] he stopped himself. Maybe it was more prudent to check what balloon cards did first and whether he needed more lumber in this round.

"Inventory," Kai called after purchasing the upgrade. Sure enough, there was a new card sitting there. He grabbed it.

Corn Dog (Uncommon)

A sausage coated in a thick layer of cornmeal batter and deep-fried until golden and crispy.

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

Sadly, it wasn't anything too special. Shrugging, Kai walked back to the crafting table. It was time to start crafting.

Chapter 26

Fall of 347, A.D.

Kai sat in Sunny's workshop. Even though it was really his now, he couldn't help but think of it as Sunny's and organize it just as his friend had liked it. He had pondered going to the library to think about Seth's question or to chat with Trudy and Sophie, but he already knew what the books said and the opinion of his elders. Instead, he chose to come here to think.

He sat, cleaning and polishing each tool as he thought about the question for the day. He had never considered the possibility of boycotting the exams.

"May I?"

He jolted, startled. Turning around, he saw Ariel with one foot in the door.

"Good grief. You scared me."

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's OK. It's just that no one comes here but me. I wasn't expecting anyone. That's all." He pulled his gaze away from her shiny eyes and went back to polishing. "I thought we would only get together tonight after the bonfire."

"I needed to discuss something with you, and I didn't want to wait until later. Can we talk?"

"Sure," he said while applying pressure to the cloth, trying to clean a stubborn smear off Sunny's old wrench.

"Kai. Can you please look at me?"

The question annoyed Kai somewhat, but he put the tool and cloth down and looked up. Today, Ariel wore a green dress and tied her curly

hair into a neat ponytail, highlighting her eyes and beautiful cheekbones. That wasn't why his heart was beating so hard, though. "What's up?"

Ariel took a deep breath, and Kai could feel her nervousness. "I can feel you're mad at me."

"I'm not mad," the sentence came out too abruptly.

"Tell that to your face. You've been avoiding me and don't even look me in the eye anymore. I want to make things right with you, Kai. Talk to me!"

Even though Ariel had requested Kai to look her in the eye, he couldn't help but grab the tools again and restart polishing them. "Ariel, you really hurt me. You blamed Alex leaving on me. Don't you think that I felt terrible about it? I tried to help your brother. I really did. He was like a brother to me, too."

She gulped, her fists clenched. "It wasn't your fault, Kai."

"You made me grovel," he continued. Now that he had opened the dams holding his anger and frustration, he had to let it all out. "I lost Alex. I lost you. I lost Sunny, and then, to give you space, I went out in the mountains with Clara. I lost her, too. And when I returned, all I was worth was a half-hearted apology scribbled in a note?"

He set the old wrench down with a bang and looked up with fury, only to find Ariel crying.

"I treated you horribly. I'm sorry," she said, through hiccups. "I was just grieving, and I took it out on you. I know it wasn't your fault. I'm sorry."

Kai could feel the frailty of this moment. He watched as Ariel sobbed. All the metal and brick around him suddenly felt as brittle as porcelain. One abrupt move or thoughtless word could break the glass bridge connecting him to Ariel.

He had been hurt, but so had Ariel. He let out a deep sigh and coughed away a catch in his throat. He stood up from the stool where he'd been sitting and crossed the gap between him and Ariel. He gently grabbed her shoulders and pulled her into his embrace.

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Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

Kai organized his cards. He put all creature cards in one pile, healing cards in another, and cards with zero hp in a graveyard pile. He reached out for the card he was the most curious about crafting with in this round.

Funhouse Mirror (Rare)

A curved mirror that creates a twisted reflection.

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

The [Mirror] card from the quarry arena was perhaps the most powerful card he'd crafted with so far. Copying cards without any sort of limitation was incredible. This, however, wasn't a normal mirror. It was a funhouse mirror. What kind of effect would that have on the cards he copied? What was a *twisted reflection* of a card? There was only one way to find out.

Kai grabbed one of his most precious cards. He turned it over, letting the card's bright patterns highlight the beautiful illustration of a human-like android.

Mega Scrapdroid (Mythic)

A scrapdroid that has fed on so much technology that it has transcended into the realm of sentience.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

He didn't know if he could copy it or what a twisted reflection would look like, but he wanted to know. He placed [Funhouse Mirror] over one of the crafting patterns engraved on the table, making the device hum to life. He placed the [Mega Scrapdroid] on the other one, and the table went dark.

"Uh?" he grabbed both cards. Nothing had happened, and their health points remained unaffected. He guessed that having a [Mirror] card copying mythic cards left and right would break the exams, but he wasn't ready to give up. He tried again, but this time, he placed [Mega Scrapdroid] first. The table failed to react to the card.

He moved over to the photocopier and placed [Mega Scrapdroid] on the uppermost slot. Nothing happened either. Did this mean that mythic cards couldn't be copied? Or did it have to do with the 'max' text on [Mega

Scrapdroid]? Scratching his head, Kai grabbed another mythic card and set it on the table.

Raised City of Atlantis (Mythic)

The city that had been swallowed by the ocean has risen back above the waves.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 15

This time, the table lit up. He clicked his tongue. They were both mythic cards, but [Raised City of Antlantis] did not have the 'max' text after its victory points. Interesting. That meant a card couldn't be used in crafting after it reached its maximum value. Kai tried putting the [Mirror] on the other slot of the table, but the table went dark again. It looked like Daisy wouldn't let him copy mythic cards. It only let him craft the card until it reached its full potential.

He tapped his foot, considering his next move. As he held [Raised City of Atlantis], he had an idea: Maybe there was a way to help Atlantis reach its ultimate form. He could think of one card it could be merged with.

Crabken (Legendary)

A mighty sea monster. Its pincers can shatter continents, and its shell deflect cannon blasts.

Hp: 0

Vp: 20

A legendary city in the ocean could use a guardian. Out of all his cards, this seemed like the best possible candidate. Additionally, he had plenty of healing cards now, and if he tried this combination, worst-case scenario, Crabken would lose one health point, while [Raised City of Atlantis] would remain unaffected. It was time to test his theory.

[Corndog] + [Crabken]

[Corndog] | Hp: 4→0

[Crabken] | Hp: 0→3

Crafting failed!

Kai chuckled at the thought of a massive sea monster snacking on a corndog and feeling remotely satisfied. It was the equivalent of a man

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having a breadcrumb for dinner. He wasn't going to be a stickler for detail, though. If it was good enough for Daisy, it was good enough for him. He was glad this small meal gave a mighty sea monster some health points. He tossed [Corndog] aside and picked up his mythic card.

[Raised City of Atlantis] + [Crabken]

[Raised City of Atlantis] | Hp: ∞→∞

[Crabken] | Hp: 3→0

[Raised City of Atlantis] has been upgraded to [Guarded City of Atlantis].

Guarded City of Atlantis (Mythic)

A legendary city that has been raised. It shall never sink again, for it is guarded by a legendary beast.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Despite all of Kai's planning during the snapping stage, he still had started his crafting round with an improvised recipe. He had completely ignored the 'max' text in mythic cards and only now understood what it meant. It looked like a mythic card could keep growing until Daisy marked it as having reached its maximum value. This was a valuable lesson. From now on, he would ensure he tried bringing cards to their maximum value. With a new powerful card that had given him 25 more victory points, he went back to figuring out what [Funhouse Mirror] did.

His plan to make copies of his mythic cards hadn't worked. He should instead copy the next most valuable thing. He grabbed [Crabken] and healed it again.

[Candy Apple] + [Crabken]

[Candy Apple] | Hp: 3→0

[Crabken] | Hp: 0→2

Crafting failed!

He still had [Cotton Candy] in reserve if he needed to heal more cards. Now that [Crabken] could be used in crafting again, he set it on the table beside the [Funhouse Mirror]. The table came to life and shone brightly

for a few seconds. Thankfully, a new card sat on the table once the machine stopped working.

[Funhouse Mirror] + [Crabken]

[Funhouse Mirror] | Hp: 4→3

[Crabken] | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Crabken Toy].

Crabken Toy (Rare)

A cute wooden toy version of a legendary sea monster.

Hp: 1

Vp: 5

Kai picked up his new card and studied the illustration on it. It was a child's toy. The powerful, dreadful sea creature was now a cute figurine. What had just happened? Was this a *twisted reflection* of a legendary card? If so, what would happen if he tried to reverse it?

[Funhouse Mirror] + [Crabken Toy]

[Funhouse Mirror] | Hp: 3→2

[Crabken Toy] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Crabken].

"Not bad!" Kai said, grinning from ear to ear. He was starting to understand how [Funhouse Mirror] worked. To confirm his suspicions, he grabbed a card he had been unsure how to use in crafting.

[Funhouse Mirror] + [Balloon Giraffe]

[Funhouse Mirror] | Hp: 3→2

[Balloon Giraffe] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Giraffe].

Giraffe (Rare)

A tall, long-necked mammal with distinctive spotted patterns and ossicones on its head.

Hp: 5

Vp: 2

So that's how it worked. While [Mirror] made perfect copies of cards, [Funhouse Mirror] worked like a joker, a bridge between shadow puppets or sculptures into the real creatures they portrayed. Additionally, it went both ways. That meant he could spend two hp of a [Funhouse Mirror] to copy a legendary creature card. That answered most of his questions, but there was only one left. First, he made a copy of [Funhouse Mirror].

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Balloon Giraffe] and [Spider Web] for [Funhouse Mirror].

He hadn't found a purpose for [Spider Web], so he gladly traded it for a new [Funhouse Mirror]. With an unused [Funhouse Mirror] in the bank, he set out to discover the answer to his last remaining question.

When he merged both [Mirror] cards, he obtained [Infinity]. What happened when he merged two [Funhouse Mirrors]?

[Funhouse Mirror] + [Funhouse Mirror]

[Funhouse Mirror] | Hp: 3→2

[Funhouse Mirror] | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Mirror].

Kai smiled radiantly. He hoped this was the result. He was thrilled to hold a [Mirror] card again. Even though [Funhouse Mirror] could essentially copy a card by utilizing it twice, [Mirror] copied his most valuable cards much more efficiently.

All that was left was to decide what cards to copy. What were the most cards without a 'max' text that he could obtain this round? He first had to finish exploring the potential of [Funhouse Mirror]. There were two other cards that he was hoping would synergize well with it. One was the [Wooden Unicorn].

Wooden Unicorn (Rare)

A playful representation of the mythological one-horned horse of legend.

Hp: 1

Vp: 8

It was remarkably similar to [Crabken Toy], and he already knew what he would obtain from merging it with [Funhouse Mirror].

[Wooden Unicorn] + [Funhouse Mirror]

[Wooden Unicorn] | Hp: 1→0

[Funhouse Mirror] | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Unicorn].

Just as he suspected, he had gotten his hands on yet another unicorn. He grabbed the last card he wanted to obtain a twisted reflection of. This was the one he was the least sure about, but if he was right, it could have very interesting results.

Pirate Ship Ride (Uncommon)

An amusement park ride that performs a pendular motion.

Hp: 1

Vp: 3

If he had a pirate card, it made sense for him to be able to obtain a real pirate ship, too, right? He was excited about trying this recipe.

[Pirate Ship Ride] + [Funhouse Mirror]

[Pirate Ship Ride] | Hp: 1→0

[Funhouse Mirror] | Hp: 3→2

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Pirate Ship].

Pirate Ship (Rare)

A sturdy vessel with black sails and a Jolly Roger flag, used for raiding and pillaging on the high seas.

Hp: 2

Vp: 5

It had worked! [Funhouse Mirror] transformed toys into the real thing. The pirate ship ride had become an actual pirate ship. All that was left was to man it. Thankfully, he had a crew member ready for it.

Pirate (Uncommon)

A criminal outlaw that raids ships.

Hp: 0

Vp: 4

Sadly, it didn't have any hp, so he first had to heal it before using it in crafting. Kai had learned his lesson from the last round and left himself some resources to heal other cards if needed.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Corndog] and [Candy Apple] for [Cotton Candy].

It was an excellent trade. Both [Corndog] and [Candy Apple] had been used up already, and they offered few victory points anyway. With this, he didn't lose much and secured a healing card in case it was needed again. He fed the pirate.

[Pirate] + [Cotton Candy]

[Pirate] | Hp: 0→3

[Cotton Candy] | Hp: 4→0

Crafting failed.

Now that [Pirate] had some hp, it could be placed together with [Pirate Ship].

[Pirate] + [Pirate Ship]

[Pirate] | Hp: 3→2

[Pirate Ship] | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Loot].

Chapter 27

Fall of 347, A.D.

"He said that?"

"Yeah. He said…" Kai's cheeks reddened. Should he say that Alex had mentioned that he and Ariel would get together one day, and he didn't want to be their third wheel?

"He said what?" Ariel insisted.

Kai slightly altered Alex's wording in order to avoid embarrassment. "He said that he didn't want to stay alone for the rest of his life, and he wanted to find someone to settle down with."

"He did, huh?" Ariel nodded sadly. "I wish he had come to me, you know."

Kai nodded. He wished so, too. Perhaps he wouldn't have left if he had opened up to his sister.

"And what was this Cassie like?" asked Ariel.

Thinking of the girl's pretty figure under the moonlight, Kai couldn't help but look a little dreamy. "Super cute. A real looker!" he admitted promptly.

Ariel regarded him with a creepy smile, and Kai felt the hair on the back of his neck prick up. Somehow, he had committed a serious offense and had to choose his next words carefully. "Well, she seemed a little stuck up, too."

"Stuck up?"

"Yeah. A little snobbish, you know. She looked at us as if she were of a superior breed."

Ariel's eyes were all fire and fury, but the feeling of danger receded. When Ariel got mad, she didn't project her anger outward but

concentrated all the pain within. Instead of burning like a star, she collapsed like a black hole. It didn't make her moods any less scary, though.

"After your brother left, I went to the wall again," Kai continued.

"Really?!"

"Yeah. I wanted to check if Alex had succeeded." Seeing Ariel's hopes up, he quickly finished, "I'm sorry. He didn't."

"Hi, kids! You're both early again," greeted Seth, interrupting their chat. There was a new breath of life in the man. It looked like he enjoyed being around people more than he cared to admit. "I see you two started the fire. Thank you for that."

"You're welcome." It hadn't been a gesture out of courtesy. It was a chilly morning, and since they had arrived earlier, they thought it would be better to get the fire started. He didn't know why, but he hadn't been getting much sleep lately. Since the day he woke up early and bumped into Ariel near the sunrise fire, they had been meeting early in the day almost every day and chatting.

"Hi, Seth. What's the lesson about today?" asked Ariel.

"I don't want to rob you of the fun of seeing Trudy and Sophie's faces when I tell them."

"So be it," Ariel accepted easily.

They chatted for a few minutes about Seth's previous lessons, giving time for the other students to arrive. At the very last minute, Trudy and Sophie trudged in, leaning on their canes and sat, complaining about their tired bones and the morning's moist air.

"Good morning," Seth greeted with perfunctory politeness.

"Morning," answered Trudy and Sophie in a barely audible register.

"Now that we are all here, we can start. Today's lesson is about cybermonkeys."

Kai frowned. Trudy was already voicing the doubts in the minds of the others, "What's the point? There are no cybermonkeys inside the exams."

"First of all, when Balin created the bonfires, he didn't want them to be focused exclusively on the exams. He'd be turning over in his grave if he discovered that the fires degenerated into this unhealthy obsession with the exams. If I want to teach a lesson about anything else, it's within my rights as a firekeeper."

Trudy didn't dispute it any longer. Kai and Ariel exchanged looks. They had never had a lesson about cybermonkeys before.

<center>*</center>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

Kai studied the card he obtained from merging [Pirate] card with [Pirate Ship].

Loot (Rare)

Goods pillaged from wealthy merchant ships.

Hp: ??

Vp: ??

He wasn't sure what it did, but he was getting vibes similar to when he crafted [Mystery Box]. In the quarry arena, spending all resources to obtain two mystery boxes had been worth it; that was how he unlocked [Text Description] and [Scoreboard]. Those important upgrades had elevated his gameplay to a new level. Even now, he was crafting leisurely because he knew he was ahead of his opponent.

[Loot] didn't grant hit or victory points, only question marks. He had no idea what that meant. It couldn't generate upgrades like [Mystery Box], otherwise, why would the cards have different names?

Even though he wasn't sure about what [Loot] did, he wanted to make more of it. [Pirate Ship] still had one hp left, and he had a healing card ready to make more [Pirates] if needed. But before he settled with this combination, Kai wanted to try a few things first. Kai grabbed one of his most recent cards, [Giraffe].

Giraffe (Rare)

A tall, long-necked mammal with distinctive spotted patterns and ossicones on its head.

Hp: 5

Vp: 2

Giraffes are herbivores. That meant that they were probably similar to [Arabian Oryx]. Thankfully, he had plenty of tools to give to this creature card. He grabbed the very first card he captured in the funfair arena.

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Hammer (Uncommon)

A tool to break stones or to drive nails.

Hp: 4

Vp: 0

This looked like a good card to equip on the giraffe.

[Giraffe] + [Hammer]

[Giraffe] | Hp: 5→4

[Hammer] | Hp: 4→3

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Giraffe Technician].

Giraffe Technician (Rare)

A giraffe that can do repairs.

Hp: 4

Vp: 3

If he were to give [Hammer] to a carnivore creature, it would probably grant him some sort of hammer-wielding warrior. But in this case, he got [Giraffe Technician]. Seeing a giraffe in a uniform with a tool belt and a hammer, Kai couldn't help but chuckle. He knew just what he would like this technician to repair.

[Giraffe Technician] + [Pirate Ship]

[Giraffe Technician] | Hp: 4→0

[Pirate Ship] | Hp: 1→4

Crafting failed.

By using [Giraffe Technician] to bolster the stats of [Pirate Ship], he would be able to get many more [Loot] cards. Before he settled on merging [Pirate] with [Pirate Ship], he had a few ideas that could elevate the potential of this combination further.

It was time to determine whether he could make something more out of [Pirate]. It was just an uncommon card. If it was anything like the [Wolf Warriors], perhaps he could make more pirates and create a whole crew. Or maybe he could find a way to get a better type of pirate—a captain or something.

There was one card that he believed would work well, and he hadn't known what to use it on until now.

Strength (Rare)

The power that be.

Hp: 7

Vp: 0

This card's stats were begging him to use it in crafting.

[Pirate] + [Strength]

Pirate | Hp: 1→0

Strength | Hp: 7→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Brawny Pirate].

Brawny Pirate (Rare)

A strong pirate who instills fear in his enemies and allies.

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

Kai studied the new breed of pirate that he had just created. It showed a muscled pirate with a bare chest covered in scars, only partially covered by a vest. The card was undoubtedly an upgrade. However, it was regretful that [Strength] was spent entirely with this combination. [Strength] behaved like a healing card, but in this case, it helped cards improve by a whole grade.

If [Strength] worked, logic had it that [Accuracy] would too.

[Pirate] + [Accuracy]

Pirate | Hp: 1→0

Accuracy | Hp: 7→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Buccaneer].

Buccaneer (Rare)

A pirate with good aim who can operate a ship's cannons.

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

This pirate portrayed in the new card was better dressed, wearing a fancy hat and a fashionable coat that looked presentable but ragged simultaneously. Kai noted how both pirates illustrated in the cards were bare-handed and wondered whether he could better equip them. He had the tools and weapons necessary to do that.

[Brawny Pirate] + [Hammer]

Brawny Pirate | Hp: 1→0

Hammer | Hp: 3→2

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Pirate Basher].

Pirate Basher (Rare)

A brawny pirate who has learned how to wield a war hammer.

Hp: 2

Vp: 9

The stats of this new card were off the charts. Compared with [Brawny Pirate], it had three more victory points and one more hit point. Even though it was better than other rare cards, it still wasn't quite enough to break through into the legendary rank.

He went on to equip [Buccaneer]. First, he built on the lessons he had learned from operating [Funhouse Mirror]. He proceeded to convert a toy rifle into the real thing.

[Funhouse Mirror] + [Air Rifle]

Funhouse Mirror | Hp: 2→1

Air Rifle | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Pneumatic Rifle].

Pneumatic Rifle (Rare)

Using air pressure, this rifle can propel projectiles at incredible speeds.

Hp: 1

Vp: 6

The description of the buccaneer card mentioned he had good aim. What better card to equip him with? Probably a cannon of some sort. Oh well, a rifle would have to do.

[Buccaneer] + [Pneumatic Rifle]

Buccaneer | Hp: 1→0

Pneumatic Rifle | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful. You've crafted [Pirate Marksman].

Pirate Marksman (Rare)

A pirate that can shoot with incredible precision.

Hp: 2

Vp: 9

It looked like Kai was building along two parallel routes. These two pirates were remarkably similar in stats, and even the background of the illustrations in the card seemed the same.

Should he now merge both types of pirates with [Pirate Ship]? Or should he try something else? What would happen if he gave [Strength] to [Pirate Marksman] or [Accuracy] to [Pirate Basher]? Would this elevate the cards even further? He rarely came across cards like these, which offered several crafting options. Thankfully, he had enough resources to experiment with them.

[Pirate Basher] + [Accuracy]

Pirate Basher | Hp: 2→1

Accuracy | Hp: 7→6

Crafting failed!

Kai frowned. He wasn't expecting it to fail. Since he had made this breed of pirate all about strength, perhaps he just needed to stay his course and give [Pirate Basher] even more of it.

[Pirate Basher] + [Strength]

Pirate Basher | Hp: 1→0

Strength | Hp: 7→6

Crafting failed!

Another failure. Scratching his chin, Kai tried to understand why these combinations hadn't worked. By stacking emotions in [Child], he had continuously elevated it to a legendary grade. Why wasn't he able to stack

these traits, too? Could it be that they were on a different progression tree entirely? Or was it only the [Child] card that could absorb more traits?

As he scratched his chin, he noticed that he was cleanly shaven. He'd been in the Daisy Exams for almost two days. Had this been the real world, he would have grown stubble already. It was an amusing thought. Feeling his face could tell him whether he was inside the VR simulation or the real world. He chuckled at the humorous realization, and feeling his mind veering off-topic, he slapped himself gently a few times.

"Focus, Kai. Focus! Just because you're ahead doesn't mean you should relax."

He proceeded to heal [Pirate Basher] up.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Crab] and [Cotton Candy] for [Cotton Candy].

[Pirate Basher] + [Cotton Candy]

Pirate Basher | Hp: 0→3

Cotton Candy | Hp: 4→0

Crafting failed!

The next experiment would determine whether these upgraded pirates, when merged with [Pirate Ship], gave him more benefits than ordinary [Pirate] cards.

[Pirate Basher] + [Pirate Ship]

Pirate Basher | Hp: 3→2

Pirate Ship | Hp: 4→3

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Loot].

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Loot].

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Loot].

"Three?" The upgraded pirate could get him three loot cards instead of just one. That sounded wonderful—or was it? If Daisy was giving him so many [Loot] cards, how good could they be? What did [Loot] even do? He moved over to the upgrade console to see if all the new recipes he'd tried had unlocked any new upgrades. Sure enough, there was one new entry.

Treasure Island
Requirements: [Loot]
Description: Generates a [Loot] card every turn.
Cost: 75uc

Another card generator, which didn't provide any clue as to what [Loot] did. Not knowing the reward behind [Loot] made investing too many resources to obtain more of it risky. In the end, Kai decided to get a few more, just in case they were really good.

[Pirate Basher] + [Pirate Ship]

Pirate Basher | Hp: 2→1

Pirate Ship | Hp: 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted 2x[Loot].

[Pirate Marksman] + [Pirate Ship]

Pirate Marksman| Hp: 2→1

Pirate Ship | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted 2x[Loot].

Interesting. [Pirate Marksman] also awarded [Loot], but the number of [Loot] cards generated had a randomness factor to them. The first time he'd merged [Pirate Basher] with [Pirate Ship], he'd lucked out and gotten three, but now he only got two.

After trying these different avenues, there was only one combination left.

[Pirate Basher] + [Pirate Marksman]

Pirate Basher | 1→0

Pirate Marksman | 1→0

Perfect merge! You've crafted [Pirate Captain].

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Mutiny].

Pirate Captain (Legendary)

The leader of a crew of outlaws who raid the seas.

Hp: 4

Vp: 18

Mutiny (Rare)

Conflict caused by the rebellion of a crew, resulting in the institution of a new captain.

Hp: 0

Vp: 7

Kai held up the legendary new card. In it was a pirate who was somehow the mix of [Pirate Basher] and [Pirate Marksman]. He sported an intimidating physique while keeping impressive garments and a tricorn hat that marked him as a respectable pirate leader. Sadly, [Pirate Basher] and [Pirate Marksman] had both disappeared.

Kai had to wonder about the *perfect merge* notification. It wasn't the first time he had come across it. The first time was when he'd obtained [Mega Scrapdroid]. Back then, by combining two [Super Scrapdroid] with the same stats, they were upgraded into [Mega Scrapdroid].

Before trying this recipe, Kai had whittled down both pirate's hp to one. Was that why it had become a perfect merge? Because the stats of both cards were the same?

In addition to [Pirate Captain], he received a rare new card, [Mutiny]. Checking the scoreboard, Kai felt kind of sorry for the competition. Even though they had done a good job closing the gap, Kai was leaving them in the dust with all these incredible recipes.

He was curious to see what would happen once he merged the captain with [Pirate Ship].

[Pirate Captain] + [Pirate Ship]

Pirate Captain | 4→3

Pirate Ship | 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Treasure].

Treasure (Legendary)

Hp: 0

Vp: 10

What an amazing recipe! Even though [Treasure] couldn't be used in crafting, it still granted ten victory points. He had a pirate ship that could be fixed and a pirate captain who could be fed, meaning he could create a

[Treasure] assembly line. His victory points would be off the charts this round!

Slapping his forehead, Kai ran toward the upgrade console. "How could I forget about this?" He'd just gotten his hands on two new legendary cards, which meant that the console had two new upgrades.

With a whetted appetite, Kai opened the console and blew an appreciative whistle.

Captain's Safe
Requirements: [Loot], [Treasure], [Pirate Captain].
Description: Open [Loot] cards immediately upon obtaining them.
Cost: 75uc

Pirate's Den
Requirements: [Pirate Captain].
When a pirate's hp reaches zero, they go into the den.
Cost: 150uc

Treasure Island II
Requirements: [Loot], [Treasure].
Description: Generate randomly a [Loot] or [Treasure] card every turn.
Cost: 150uc

Kai rubbed his hands as he studied the new upgrades. He could finally find out what [Loot] did.

Chapter 28

Fall of 347, A.D.

"Who can tell me why Daisy uses cybermonkeys?" asked Seth.

Trudy spoke up almost immediately. "Biotechnology is less polluting than using pure electronics. It's as simple as that."

"Wrong! Anyone else?"

Trudy scowled at Seth, but, as usual, he didn't care about her opinion. He seemed to have given up on his older students and showed more interest in Ariel and Kai.

Why did Seth seem to believe that Daisy's choice to use cybermonkeys wasn't motivated by environmental concerns? What other reason could there be?

"I give up," said Ariel, exasperated.

"Kai?" asked Seth, hopefully.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Seth. Can't think of anything either."

"That is disappointing. Oh well, let's break it down for you then. First of all, experimentation. Daisy has several tiers of minions. She's successfully implanted chips in beetles, moles, and monkeys. If you check the records, you'll see that these weren't all released simultaneously. No, Daisy has been perfecting the technology. When I was a kid, there weren't any chimps or gorillas, only monkeys and gibbons. Why the new species? What is she working up toward?"

"Are you implying that Daisy is studying how to use mind-controlling chips on humans?"

"Precisely!"

The notion horrified Kai. "Why would she do that?"

"Well, what is Daisy's programming?"

"Saving the environment and perfecting humanity," recited Ariel.

"And what are her limitations?"

"Asimov's three laws, basically. She can't kill," answered Kai.

"Now, wouldn't it make sense that to an AI, implanting chips in our brains and controlling us, like she does the monkeys, be the next logical step in perfecting humanity?" he said the last two words with exaggerated air quotes.

Kai gulped nervously. He hadn't considered it.

"Here's a good question to chew on," continued Seth. "Why are the exams held online?"

"It's easier than getting everyone together," answered Ariel.

"True. But could it be that it also comes in handy for Daisy to test how our brain behaves in different scenarios? What better way to collect data?"

Kai was starting to feel dizzy.

"Here's another for you. Why does Daisy offer the possibility of exile? Why is there an interest in erasing memories with someone's consent? Does she need to test first on people who don't offer resistance before she can learn to wipe our minds clean forcefully?"

"Those are just conjectures!" accused Sophie. "Daisy's cyborgs allow us to live a carefree life. They clean and maintain the place."

"Is it really? Dusting is not part of her programming!" countered Seth. "This brings me to the second reason she uses cybermonkeys: acclimatization."

"Ridiculous," snorted Trudy.

Seth turned to Ariel and Kai with passion burning in his eyes. "She wants us to get used to the sight of her controlling living creatures. Maybe it will make it easier for her to control our minds when the time comes. She is already working on lowering our defenses so that it's easier for her to take over. How many times have you taken a good look at the cybermonkeys around you, kids? How often have you thought about how they have no will of their own? How they have been stripped of the right to live their lives and follow their instincts."

Kai looked around him and spotted a distant cybermonkey sweeping the floor.

"One last question for all of us to think about. How do we know she isn't controlling our minds already? How can we be sure we aren't already working for her while, in our heads, we're living in this world? How?"

Kai exchanged a look with Ariel, and he could see horror in her eyes. Could Seth really be right?

<div align="center">*</div>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

Captain's Safe
Requirements: [Loot]; [Treasure]; [Pirate Captain].
Description: Open [Loot] cards immediately upon obtaining them.
Cost: 75uc

Pirate's Den
Requirements: [Pirate Captain].
When a pirate's hp reaches zero, they go into the den.
Cost: 150uc

Treasure Island II
Requirements: [Treasure].
Description: Generate randomly a [Loot] or [Treasure] card every turn.
Cost: 150uc

Kai currently had 332 victory points and 232 upgrade coins. Even if he hadn't spent 100 upgrade coins purchasing the [Funfair] upgrade, he would still be 40 coins short of buying all these three new upgrades. Of course, that could be easily fixed if he spent more time crafting.

The first thing that stood out to Kai was how [Treasure Island II] made its weaker version obsolete. He would feed [Treasure Island I] to the Atlantian treasure chest, hoping for a better roll. This upgrade also led him to believe that [Loot] and [Treasure] were similar since they were both awarded by the same card generator.

The next thing that stood out to him was [Pirate's Den]. The ability to keep all his pirate cards safe was incredible! If he understood it correctly, [Pirate's Den] prevented pirates from being obliterated at the end of the round. Just in pirate cards alone, he currently had almost 50 points! Buying this upgrade was almost the same as obtaining a mythic card.

However, the most meaningful upgrade to him right now was the cheapest. He wanted to see what [Loot] did, and [Captain's Safe] might

just be how he could do it. This would help him decide whether to invest more resources into getting more [Loot] cards.

Was it a good investment, though? He was comfortably ahead of his opponent. His opponent hadn't reached the 300 mark. He would still discover what [Loot] did after this round if he waited a few moments. Why waste upgrade coins on something that might not prove worth it when there were other upgrades he'd rather buy?

If [Loot] was worth something, he could still get more in the next round. He would surely buy [Pirate's Den], so he would always have many pirate cards from now on. He also had plenty of giraffe technicians to fix the ship. In the end, Kai held off on buying any upgrades. Just before the round would end, unless something better came up, he'd purchase [Pirate's Den] to have those extra victory points in the next rounds.

Kai left the console, walked over to the table again, gathered all pirate cards into a neat pile, and left them aside. He still had plenty of time and many recipes to try.

He picked up the two [Child] cards he'd captured at the end of the last round. He had thought it would be such a good investment; however, he hadn't taken the time to go around the fair photographing emotions. Should he use [Strength] and [Accuracy] on [Child]?

He put both [Child] cards aside and grabbed their upgraded version.

Illuminating Adult (Legendary)

A human who has been forged in the fires of wisdom and love.

Hp: 1

Vp: 20

[Illuminating Adult] was originally a [Child] card. However, it still hadn't reached its maximum potential, stuck at a legendary grade. Maybe, instead of starting from scratch and using [Strength] and [Accuracy] on [Child], he could just invest it in [Illuminating Adult] instead.

He would make a copy before running experiments on it. Instead of using up two legendary cards as fodder, Kai used the [Mirror] card. Kai was confident that [Mirror] was the secret to making him rich in upgrade coins and ensuring he won this and the following rounds.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Strength] and [Accuracy] for [Mirror].

Trading the spent trait cards that offered zero victory points for [Mirror] was a no-brainer.

Seeing that [Illuminating Adult] only had one hp, Kai frowned. He wanted to heal it a little before copying it. However, he only had one last [Cotton Candy]. He'd learned his lesson from the last round: he should always keep a healing card in the bank.

As he looked for cards to use as fodder to copy [Cotton Candy], he found he was running low on uncommon cards. He just had to take a slight detour before doing more experiments. Pulling up his sleeves, he got crafting.

[Giraffe] + [Hammer]

Giraffe | Hp: 4→3

Hammer | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Giraffe Technician].

[Giraffe] + [Hammer]

Giraffe | Hp: 3→2

Hammer | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Giraffe Technician].

With this, he had one spent [Hammer], which offered no victory points and could be used as fodder. Kai kept going, looking for a second sacrificial card.

[Giraffe] + [Flint Axe]

Giraffe | Hp: 2→1

Flint Axe | Hp: 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Giraffe Lumberjack].

Giraffe Lumberjack (Rare)

A giraffe that can chop trees.

Hp: 3

Vp: 2

[Flint Axe] was spent but still granted three victory points. If he could help it, he'd rather not use it now. He chopped the [Acacia Tree] instead.

[Giraffe Lumberjack] + [Acacia Tree]

Giraffe | Hp: 3→2

Acacia Tree | Hp: 3→2

You've crafted [Acacia Leaf].

You've crafted [Acacia Branch].

[Giraffe Lumberjack] + [Acacia Tree]

Giraffe | Hp: 2→1

Acacia Tree | Hp: 2→1

You've crafted [Acacia Trunk].

[Giraffe Lumberjack] + [Acacia Tree]

Giraffe | Hp: 1→0

Acacia Tree | Hp: 1→0

You've crafted [Acacia Branch].

You've crafted [Thorn].

He used one of the [Acacia Branch] cards, which offered zero victory points, and copied [Cotton Candy]. He would have captured a few more healing cards if he had known he would be using them so much.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Hammer] and [Acacia Branch] for [Cotton Candy].

[Illuminating Adult] + [Cotton Candy]

Illuminating Adult | Hp: 1→4

Cotton Candy | Hp: 4→0

Crafting failed.

Now that [Illuminating Adult] had a more respectable hp, Kai felt better about copying it.

[Illuminating Adult] + [Mirror]

Illuminating Adult | Hp: 4→3

Mirror | Hp: 4→3

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Illuminating Adult].

Kai felt as if he were cheating! He had enough hp in [Mirror] cards to make several more [Illuminating Adults] if he wished. Before he did that, though, he needed to see how much more powerful [Illuminating Adult] could become.

He grabbed [Strength]. It had lost one hp after he'd fed it to [Pirate Basher], but there was still more than enough juice in it to empower [Illuminating Adult]. Kai took a deep breath and deposited one of the [Illuminating Adult] cards on the table. The table hummed to life, shining brilliantly due to the card's high grade. He placed [Strength] next to it, and the table burst into light, blinding Kai momentarily.

After his vision returned, a new card was sitting on the table.

[Illuminating Adult] + [Strength]

Illuminating Adult | Hp: 3→2

Strength | Hp: 6→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Illuminator].

Illuminator (Mythic)

A hero who fights injustice, dazzling the world of crime.

Hp: 2

Vp: 25

This card also works as an upgrade. You've unlocked [Super Trooper].

Another mythic card! Kai couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of [Illuminating Adult], who had become muscled and now wore spanks and a light bulb symbol on his uniform. He had to say that this was his favorite round so far. He was playing around with pirates, treasure, and super-heroes. This was any boy's dream. He wondered whether Ariel would be playing around with princesses and queens instead had she been here.

He wondered what the new upgrade did. Seeing that the crafting table hadn't changed, he guessed it would be related to the snapping stage.

Since the uniform came with a light bulb, Kai couldn't help but think of his [Light] card. They both had infinite hp. It was a combination that couldn't go wrong. Just in case something came out of this, he copied [Light] first. He wanted to keep a copy because of its synergy with shadow cards.

[Light] + [Mirror]

Light | ∞→∞

Mirror | 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Light].

[Illuminator] + [Light]

Perfect merge! You've crafted [Super Illuminator].

Super Illuminator (Mythic)

A superhero who fights evil, dazzling the world of crime.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Seeing how [Iluminator] and [Light] had both disappeared to give birth to this new card, he wiped his brow. It's a good thing he had made copies! His conclusions about how 'perfect merge' worked were proven wrong. Both ingredients did not have the same stats, yet he had triggered it. Maybe 'perfect merge' only meant that both ingredient cards disappeared to generate the new card.

He studied the illustration on his new mythic card. It was very similar to that of [Illuminator], but now the muscled man in costume also had a cape and was hovering in mid-air. Anyhow, it was time to make a mythic card assembly line! Building on his experience, he didn't forget to copy [Accuracy] first.

[Accuracy] + [Mirror]

Accuracy | Hp: 6→5

Mirror | Hp: 2→1

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Accuracy].

With a failsafe in place, he tried recreating the recipe that had generated a mythic card.

[Accuracy] + [Illuminating Adult]

Illuminating Adult | Hp: 2→1

Accuracy | Hp: 5→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Illuminator].

He had expected him to receive a different hero, but he was stuck with [Illuminator]. Not wanting to lose his [Light] card, Kai copied it again.

```
[Light] + [Mirror]
```

```
Light | ∞→∞
```

```
Mirror | 1→0
```

To continue, he had to make a fresh copy of [Mirror].

```
Copy successful! You've exchanged [Mirror] and [Accuracy]
for [Mirror].
```

He lost a few victory points from the [Mirror] card, but he didn't care. He stood to gain much, much more.

```
[Iluminator] + [Mirror]
```

```
Illuminator | Hp: 3→2
```

```
Mirror | 4→3
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [Illuminator].
```

```
[Illuminator] + [Light]
```

```
Illuminator | Hp: 2→1
```

```
Light | ∞→∞
```

```
Crafting failed!
```

"What?!" yelped Kai. "Why did it fail?" The recipe was the same! It should have worked. "Unless…" Unless Daisy only allowed players to have only one of each mythic card. He had first assumed that Daisy only prevented him from copying the mythic cards directly, but she had gone beyond that. Daisy had made mythic cards like shadow cards. They were unique! He could only have one of each mythic card!

Kai had hoped to create several [Illuminator] mythic cards, but Daisy didn't seem to allow it. Setting up an assembly line of legendary cards was the limit. Being able to copy [Illuminating Adult] several times wasn't a bad deal, though. Each card provided 20 victory points, which was good enough for him.

At the same time, if [Mirror] was a requirement to get to other mythic cards, investing in only one type of card might not be the best result. Each mythic card came with an upgrade. Was there another mythic card he could get to here?

He looked at all his legendary cards, and his eyes landed on [Pirate Captain]. Could he help it transcend into mythic grade?

Chapter 29

Fall of 347, A.D.

Kai walked down the road toward the sunrise bonfire. He had recently moved into a house near the museum. He'd been helping Ariel sort out the artifacts almost every night, and this way, he saved some time with the commute. Had Alfred still been alive, they would have been neighbors.

It had been five days since Seth last taught one of the most impactful lessons in Kai's memory. He had always ignored the cybermonkeys working around the city performing errands for the AI overlord (or overlady, if one cared about its name being of the feminine gender).

Before, he looked at the cyborg simians like a pebble or a tree in the street. They had always been there. They were the presence he ignored and was happy to be ignored by. Since Seth's last lesson, however, he couldn't look at them the same way. Whenever he saw a chimp sweeping the floor or a gorilla cleaning a window, he couldn't help but shudder thinking of what it would feel like to be a marionette in Daisy's hands.

He was both excited and fearful about what lesson Seth had prepared for today. He wasn't surprised to find he wasn't the first to arrive.

"Morning, stranger," he greeted amicably.

"Hey, Kai! Good morning," Ariel responded with a bright smile.

He took a seat and observed as she stoked the fire.

"So, what shocking revelation will Seth bring us today?" she asked as she worked.

"I don't know. I doubt that Trudy and Sophie will like it, though."

"Really?" she said sarcastically. The flames started gaining vigor, and Kai drew closer to feel their warmth.

"Why do you think Trudy and Sophie dislike him so much?"

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"I asked Trudy about this. She says that fueling discontent and rebelling against Daisy is nothing but trouble."

"Why?"

She looked at him and smiled.

"What?"

"I asked her that, too. She told me to visit Rebeltown, and I would have my answer."

"Have you?"

She nodded. "Once. A long time ago."

Rebeltown was just rubble. That was Trudy's point.

"Do you agree with Trudy?" Ariel asked.

"I can't say I disagree. I mean, Daisy can blow us to smithereens if she wants. But at the same time, it's wrong not to think about it."

"Would you ever rebel against Daisy?"

The question stunned him. He hadn't considered it. "I don't know. I've never thought about fighting. Nor Daisy nor anyone. When I think of fighting, I think of giving my best in the exams."

The wood was now popping and crackling, and the flames were burning vigorously. "What if Seth is right, and the exams aren't the best thing to focus on?"

"Are you saying we should boycott the exams?"

Ariel shrugged. "Maybe that's the best way to live." She shook the soot and ash off her hands and sat by Kai's side. "I mean, do we want to bring children into the end of the world? Maybe we should end the cycle," she stated sadly, looking into the distance. It wasn't a spontaneous thought. She had been thinking about this for several days. There was a profound, mature sadness in her voice but also resignation and peace.

All that Kai could think of was that she had said 'we' and 'children' in the same sentence. Did she mean, 'we', the sector? Or 'we', he and her? If it was the latter, today was the first time she was giving away that she knew they would end up together. Seeing the context surrounding the sentence made it both flattering and depressing.

"Here comes Seth," she said, pointing east.

Seth arrived with his characteristic wobbling march. He was one of those people whose whole body moved as he walked. He looked like a pendulum, his figure so tall that with each step, he rocked left and right.

If the wind blew too hard on one of the sides at the end of each swing, Kai suspected he would fall over.

"Morning!" he greeted jubilantly.

"Hey Seth, what's up?"

"Hi."

"The old hags aren't here yet?" he said, taking a seat facing them.

"Nope," answered Kai.

"Seth, what will the lesson be about today?" tried Ariel. Seth had been keeping the theme of each class close to his chest, but Ariel never gave up asking. To Kai's surprise, this time, he answered.

"The blight."

Kai's mouth twisted in disgust, hearing the plague being mentioned. "Why would you teach a class about it?"

"You'll see, kid. It's an important one."

"Why?" he tried again.

"You'll see."

<center>*</center>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

Kai looked at the clock and saw how two-thirds of the time allotted to crafting were already out the window. He had [Mirror] in his inventory and many ways to copy it. He also had powerful cards to make multiple copies of. He could start crafting them left and right whenever he wanted, and his point count would explode. However, he still had some time, and preferred to keep exploring recipes, trying to unlock as many new mythic cards as possible.

Mythic cards not only kept their points across every round, but they came with an upgrade of their own. The more he could get, the better.

[Pirate Captain] was on the verge of transcending into the mythic realm. He couldn't be sure, but if pirates worked similarly to wolves, he could just push through with quantity rather than improve them by equipping them with tools, weapons, or traits. He decided to make a copy of [Pirate Captain].

[Pirate Captain] + [Mirror]

Pirate Captain | Hp: 3→2

Mirror | Hp: 2→1

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Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pirate Captain].

Now that he had two pirate captains, all that was left was to see if anything happened once he merged them.

[Pirate Captain] + [Pirate Captain]

Perfect merge! You've crafted [Pirate Commodore].

Pirate Commodore (Mythic)

A pirate lord who commands two pirate ships.

Hp: 1

Vp: 25

This card also works as an upgrade. You've unlocked [Pirate's Den].

Sure enough, he had gotten a Commodore. The illustration on the card revealed a pirate in full uniform with the biggest hat Kai had ever seen. Not even clowns had sported such an exaggerated piece of clothing. He also had a sword on his belt and dark eyes. Even though it was a drawing, Kai couldn't help but feel fear towards the blood-thirsty pirate.

He had managed to create another mythic card. By getting [Pirate Commodore], he had also automatically unlocked [Pirate's Den]! He wondered what would have happened if he had already purchased the upgrade. Would Daisy come up with another one, or would he just win nothing? Would he get an upgraded version? Now, he couldn't know.

Regardless, it was all good news. [Pirate's Den] was an expensive upgrade, and with this, he didn't have to worry about any of his pirate cards being obliterated at the end of each round. Maybe that explained why [Pirate Commodore] was the first exception to the rule that mythic cards always possessed infinite hp. It only had one hit point! Perhaps Daisy reasoned that since [Pirate Commodore] came with an upgrade that prevented this card from being obliterated, there was no point in it having infinite hp like other mythic cards.

He studied the card's stats and found that there wasn't a 'max' text on it. Even though it was a mythic card, it still hadn't reached its maximum value. What was it missing? Could he do anything to help [Pirate Commodore] break through the last bottleneck and reach maximum victory points?

He couldn't create another [Pirate Commodore] since mythic cards were unique. The moment he had one of them, he couldn't have a second one. Was there any other way of making the card progress? He placed all his pirate cards before him and tried to discern whether he had missed something. What was the best way for a pirate to become stronger?

Should he just keep spamming the combo of [Pirate Commodore] with [Pirate Ship]? Maybe treasure was the key. Then it hit him: the conversation with Maia. She had expressed how she disliked pirates and didn't agree that they should be as praised and lauded as they were in human culture. Was there a clue there somehow? It was as if she was hinting that instead of looking up to the vile ways of piracy, one should look up to something better, something more.

Several thoughts converged in Kai's mind and the memory of when he'd been in the neon city melded with Maia's words. There could be a way of making something that, in Daisy's opinion, was stronger than a pirate Commodore. The key to that was [Illuminating Adult].

He grabbed it and placed it on the table. "Here goes nothing," he said to no one in particular.

[Illuminating Adult] + [Pirate Commodore]

Illuminating Adult | 3→2

Pirate Commodore | 1→0

Crafting successful| You've crafted [Navy Admiral].

Navy Admiral (Mythic)

An honorable official who commands the navy and fights pirates.

Hp: 0

Vp: 28

This card also works as an upgrade. You've unlocked [Navy Headquarters].

His hunch was right! Back in the neon city arena, [Illuminating Adult] converted [Radicalized Adult] into [Illuminated Adult]. It was as if this legendary card could purify or cleanse an evil card.

In this case, it had converted a pirate lord into its opposite, a navy admiral! Not only were the points fantastic, but it also came with its own

upgrade. Sadly, he couldn't see the description of upgrades unlocked by mythic cards. He still didn't know what [Super Trooper] did, and now he had another unknown upgrade: [Navy Headquarters].

It did sound suspiciously similar to [Pirate's Den]. Could it be that it did the same thing as [Pirate's Den], keeping marines and navy officers safe from obliteration? That went in line with the navy admiral also coming with zero hp. Drumming his fingers on the table and seeing the seconds ticking by, Kai decided to operate on the assumption that it would. From now on, he'd assume all his pirate and navy cards were safe.

Still curious about the purifying power of [Illuminating Adult], Kai decided to do one additional experiment.

[Illuminating Adult] + [Pirate]

Illuminating Adult | 2→1

Pirate | 1→0

Crafting successful | You've crafted [Navy Seaman].

Navy Seaman (Uncommon)

A low-ranking member of the navy.

Hp: 2

Vp: 2

Sure enough, it wasn't just [Pirate Commodore] that could be converted. The lowest rank of pirates could also become the lowest rank of navy officers. And if that was true, he could equip them with tools or weapons just as he had done with pirates. He grabbed a hammer to see what kind of navy officer he would unlock.

[Navy Seaman] + [Hammer]

Navy Seaman | 2→1

Hammer | 4→3

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Navy First Officer]

Navy First Officer (Uncommon)

A low-ranking officer who fights sea bandits.

Hp: 1

Vp: 5

He unlocked an officer. From now on, he should make as many of these cards as possible. Every single navy officer and pirate card he made would resist obliteration. They would stay safe in the navy's headquarters and the pirate's den—at least, that's what he believed the upgrades would do. He decided to make a second navy first officer.

[Navy Officer] + [Hammer]

Navy Officer | 1→0

Hammer | 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Navy First Officer]

Time was still ticking; there were only twenty minutes left. He had 100 points of an advantage over his opponent. He wasn't yet willing to start copying cards, though. Something was bugging him. Even though these two mythic cards were incredible, neither had achieved maximum value. Why was that?

Wasn't there anything above a Commodore or anything above an Admiral? If he had learned anything this round, was that he shouldn't stop crafting until cards reached their maximum value. He'd learned that lesson from [Raised City of Atlantis], which became [Guarded City of Atlantis] when he mixed it with [Crabken]. That also happened when he turned the [Illuminating Adult] into a superhero. What about these two? What could he turn them into?

He had already experimented with boosting them, giving them tools, weapons, and traits, and piling them on each other. The only thing he hadn't tried was to put one *against* the other. What happened when a Pirate Commodore met a Navy Admiral? There had to be some resonance or synergy here. After all, they represented two opposing forces.

There was only one way to find out. The first thing Kai did was secure the resources needed to heal both creature cards.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Acacia Tree] and [Cotton Candy] for [Cotton Candy].

[Cotton Candy] + [Pirate Commodore]

Cotton Candy | 4→0

Pirate Commodore | 0→3

Crafting failed.

Kai hadn't found any use for [Power Outlet]. Therefore, since it was only worth one victory point and had only one hit point left anyway, he might use it to get another healing card.

Copy successful! You've exchanged [Power Outlet] and [Cotton Candy] for [Cotton Candy].

[Cotton Candy] + [Navy Admiral]

Cotton Candy | 4→0

Navy Admiral | 0→3

Crafting failed.

Now that both cards could be merged, Kai placed them on the table and watched nervously. This was the first time that he was merging two mythic cards. Sure enough, the visual effects were spectacular. In addition to blinding light, the table spat white sparks and golden lightning as the two cards came together. The crafting table took almost a full minute to process the combination.

Once the fireworks were done, the first thing Kai noticed was that neither mythic card had disappeared. Then, his eyes landed on the brand-new card sitting on the table.

[Pirate Commodore] + [Navy Admiral]

Navy Admiral | 3→2

Pirate Commodore | 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [War]!

War (Legendary)

Organized aggression between two opposing factions.

Hp: 6

Vp: 79

Wow! 79 victory points? That was incredible. War… it made sense. Pirates against the Navy. Two opposing forces.

The cards' stats points, however, were very suspicious. This was, right now, his most powerful card. The number was very odd, though. Why 79 victory points? He compared it with his other cards, trying to make sense of this peculiar number.

"War. Two opposing forces. Could it be?" he mumbled.

He hurried up and tried creating another Navy card. There was yet another weapon card that he could use, and which only required a few steps to unlock.

[Air Rifle] + [Funhouse Mirror]

Air Rifle | Hp: 1→0

Funhouse Mirror | 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pneumatic Rifle].

Before he used [Pneumatic Rifle], he stopped himself and thought of the [Accuracy] card that was left. Should he try to merge them?

[Pneumatic Rifle] + [Accuracy]

Pneumatic Rifle | 1→0

Accuracy | 5→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Pneumatic Sniper Rifle].

Pneumatic Sniper Rifle (Rare)

High-powered firearm with incredible precision.

Hp: 1

Vp: 9

A new scope was sitting atop the pneumatic rifle, and its stats had improved. He gifted this powerful weapon to an officer, trying to confirm his theory.

[Navy First Official] + [Pneumatic Sniper Rifle]

Navy First Official | 1→0

Pneumatic Sniper Rifle | 1→0

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Navy Lieutenant Commander]

Navy Lieutenant Commander (Rare)

A mid-ranking officer who oversees special departments and smaller vessels.

Hp: 1

Vp: 9

Navy cards were a bit different from pirate cards. By giving them more tools and traits, they just climbed ranks instead of acquiring a specialized usage of a weapon. In this case, he had gained a lieutenant commander, a card with one hit point, and nine victory points. He checked what had happened to his war card.

War (Legendary)

Organized aggression between two opposing factions.

Hp: 6

Vp: 88

Sure enough, it had climbed nine points. He had figured it out.

Chapter 30

Fall of 347, A.D.

"Today's lesson is about the blight," declared Seth ominously. "When Phineas Cotton created Daisy, the Earth was overpopulated and, according to Daisy's calculations, had less than a year to reach a point of no return. She compartmentalized humanity before the Earth was permanently ruined and effected radical changes."

Kai followed the tale with interest, waiting for the twist. He had heard this part of history many times.

"The earthquakes, tornados, wildfires, and wars had governments desperate, and when she announced that she would abolish government agencies and then disarm humanity, they didn't even blink. Phineas assured them that Daisy could not hurt humans, and they accepted the terms of surrender."

"Surrender?"

"Yes. Surrendering the control of humanity to Daisy."

Usually, they used the term 'turnover.' 'Surrender' sounded dreadful to Kai's ears for some reason.

"One of Daisy's most complex challenges was precisely this. She was given an overpopulated planet and was prohibited from fixing the overpopulation problem, which brings us to the blight paradox.

"Although Daisy couldn't kill humans, she found a solution that didn't go against her programming. She created a deadly disease and also its cure. She then made the cure available to those who were worthy."

"It can't be... Are you saying Daisy designed the blight?" asked Ariel.

"Yes."

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"No. It can't be."

Old Seth stood up. "Why can Daisy cure the blight and not the common cold?" asked Seth. "She can cure the common cold but is not interested in it. That's why! She wants us to die!"

Kai felt sick.

"If she knows the cure, why make it available only to a select few? Why hide it in the exams? How do people keep getting the blight, even if they're isolated? I'll tell you how! She uses her cursed cybermonkeys and cyberbugs as carriers, that's why!"

Kai thought of all his friends who had passed. He thought of his parents, Neil, Alfred, Sunny, and Clara. Was Daisy responsible for the deaths of almost everyone he knew? Was Daisy really trying to kill humanity off instead of saving it?

"Of course, this is just an old man's conjecture," he said, some of his dignified rage quenched. I want you today to think about this, and come back to the sunset bonfire with a formed opinion. Class dismissed.

*

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

It looked like [War] was similar to [Fire]. In [War]'s case, its points depended on the overall stats of cards from opposing factions. It was a card that essentially doubled the power of pirates and navy officers! He studied the card's grade: it was only legendary, not mythic. He bit his lip until it turned white. If this was anything like [Fire], it would evolve once he got it over a certain threshold.

Kai looked over at the nearby [Mirror] card. [War] was currently at 88 victory points and six hit points. This meant it would probably evolve into its mythic version once it reached 100 points. If it were exactly like [Blue Fire], it would only evolve once it reached 200. After it became mythic, though, he could no longer copy it.

A plan was starting to form in his mind. If [War] depended on the point count of his navy and pirate cards, there was another way of going about this that would seal the deal. He took a deep breath and ran the numbers. He still had thirty minutes left on the crafting round, and the photocopier and the crafting table could run simultaneously.

He deposited [War] and a [Mirror] card on the crafting table while simultaneously placing [Mirror] on the [Photocopier].

```
[War] + [Mirror]
```

```
War | 6→5
```

```
Mirror | 2→1
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [War].
```

```
You've exchanged [Funhouse Mirror] and [Funhouse Mirror] for
[Mirror].
```

As Kai saw his point count climb by 80 points in one move, he couldn't stop grinning. Even though he wasn't counting on losing hp in [War], he was happy he could still copy it. As he went through his various pirates and marines, he found why [War] had lost one hp: [Navy Admiral]'s hp had gone down by one.

The hit points of [War] and all pirates and navy officers were linked. He supposed it was fair. What he was doing was a game-breaking cheat, as it was. He kept going.

```
[War] + [Mirror]
```

```
War | 5→4
```

```
Mirror | 1→0
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [War].
```

```
[War] + [Mirror]
```

```
War | 4→3
```

```
Mirror | 4→3
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [War].
```

```
[War] + [Mirror]
```

```
War | 3→2
```

```
Mirror | 3→2
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [War].
```

```
[War] + [Mirror]
```

```
War | 2→1
```

```
Mirror | 2→1
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [War].
```

```
[War] + [Mirror]
```

```
War | 1→0
```

```
Mirror | 1→0
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [War].
```

```
You've exchanged [Mirror] and [Mirror] for [Mirror].
```

```
You've exchanged [Air Rifle] and [Pirate Ship Ride] for
[Cotton Candy].
```

```
[Cotton Candy] + [Navy Admiral]
```

```
Cotton Candy | 4→0
```

```
Navy Lieutenant Commander | 0→3
```

```
[War] + [Mirror]
```

```
War | 3→2
```

```
Mirror | 4→3
```

```
Crafting successful! You've crafted [War].
```

His points were rising quickly. The plan was simple: To make as many [War] cards as possible. The only restraints he had on how many [War] cards he could print were how much time the table took to copy them, how much time was left, and how many cards he had available to use as fodder.

He sorted all his uncommon cards and sacrificed them to make six fresh [Cotton Candy] to feed his creature cards and fuel [War], always careful to maintain one unspent [Mirror] and [Cotton Candy] in reserve, which he copied as necessary.

```
You've exchanged [Acacia Leaf] and [Acacia Branch] for
[Cotton Candy].
```

```
You've exchanged [Flint Axe] and [Acacia Trunk] for [Cotton
Candy].
```

He only fed [Cotton Candy] when [War] reached zero. He didn't want the card to evolve, and there was a small chance there was a hp threshold to upgrade it.

He also exchanged rare cards to make more [Mirrors].

```
You've exchanged [Giraffe Technician] and [Accuracy] for
[Mirror].
```

You've exchanged [Pneumatic Rifle] and [Pneumatic Rifle] for [Mirror].

Even though many of them granted victory points, compared to the possibility of gaining one more [War] card, he preferred the latter.

He got into a groove and kept methodically placing cards in the photocopier and the crafting table, making as many copies of [War] as possible. By the time he was done, his virtual back and neck were sore, but he'd gotten 41 copies of [War]. He looked over at the scoreboard, and seeing the number, he grinned. He had more than 4000 points! Had he just broken the exams?

The crafting round was almost over. It was time to wrap this up. He had already run out of uncommon cards, so he made a copy of [Cotton Candy] using two rare cards.

You've exchanged [Loot] and [Loot] for [Cotton Candy].

[Navy First Officer] + [Cotton Candy]

Navy First Officer | 0→3

Cotton Candy | 4→0

He still didn't know what [Loot] did, but it no longer mattered. He had 4000 points! He would buy all those neat upgrades in the console and steamroll his way through the rest of the exams.

The best part was that he wasn't even done yet.

[Giraffe Technician] + [Pneumatic Sniper Rifle]

Giraffe Technician | 4→0

Pneumatic Sniper Rifle | 0→3

Crafting failed!

Thankfully, [Giraffe Technician] was able to repair the rifle! With it, he could create more navy officers to make [War] grow bigger.

[Navy First Officer] + [Pneumatic Sniper Rifle]

Navy First Officer | 3→2

Pneumatic Sniper Rifle | 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Navy Lieutenant Commander]

He checked his stack of [War] cards and laughed as he saw the numbers shift to 95. He felt as if he were printing money! "Here it goes!" he shouted, excited.

[Navy First Officer] + [Pneumatic Sniper Rifle]

Navy First Officer | 3→2

Pneumatic Sniper Rifle | 3→2

Crafting successful! You've crafted [Navy Lieutenant Commander]

With this, the victory points of all the [War] cards surpassed 100, and the stack of legendary cards began glowing brilliantly. Unlike when the effect grew until it climaxed into a blinding light, the light flashed into different colors this time, with sparks and lightning bursting from the cards. The room began shaking, and there was a sharp and deep sound as if the earth was screaming. Kai's screams joined the deafening sound as cracks spread from the table to the floors and walls. The perfect simulation became pixelated, and weird notifications appeared before Kai.

%"#!!&_)!»=|!"#$)»!#%error! !$$#"#%!"ª()

[War] has upgraded into [Armageddon].

%"#!!&_)!»=|!"#$)»!#%error! !$$#"#%!"ª()

[War] "%=)"#$! has !"340!"#$^!"=) error! [Armageddon].

"Uh?" What was going on? What was this jibber-jabber?

The scoreboard at the top of his vision also glitched as the number on his scoreboard kept climbing higher and higher until it became only zeros.

Finally, the cards stopped glowing, and the simulation stabilized. The room stopped shaking, silence returned, and the only sign of the earthquake was the cracks in the walls.

Was this happening all around the exams? Or was it just happening to him?

Was it because of his move? Kai figured he could circumvent the restriction to only have one of each mythic card if he simultaneously evolved all [War] cards. He hadn't expected his experiment to cause this kind of bug.

"Such a clever boy," he heard someone say from behind him. He whirled toward the familiar voice.

"Maia!?! What are you doing here?" The company droid had never appeared in the crafting stage before. "Maia, why are you..." Kai stopped himself mid-sentence.

There was something different about the android. Unlike her usual impassive expression, she now had a flustered look. "That was a very greedy move: To upgrade all legendary cards simultaneously. Although I've planned for virtually every contingency, you found a loophole. Bravo, Kai."

The tone of the android's voice was also different from usual. It carried more authority. Kai had heard this intonation several times at lottery announcements and, more recently, when the exams began.

"Daisy?"

"What a mess. I can't let you carry this many points between rounds."

Kai followed her gaze toward the table and took note of the new cards that had caused the AI to manifest.

Armageddon (Mythic)

The war to end all wars.

Hp: ∞

Vp: 200 (Max)

It had worked. He had cheated his way into getting 41 copies of a mythic card. He didn't know why there was no notice of a new upgrade, but perhaps [Armageddon] came without one since the card gave so many victory points. No wonder Daisy had appeared. He managed to get his hands on 8,400 points with this stunt.

Kai gulped nervously. He had studied Daisy all his life. The AI had watched his every move and breath through the spying eyes of the cybermonkeys. He knew she had been watching him and governing this simulation, but now that she had manifested herself in Maia's body, he could *see her, too.*

The AI silently studied him. What was she waiting for? Was causing a bug in the simulation such a big deal?

"Why are you here, Daisy?"

"Just assessing the situation."

Was she just here for damage control? He reviewed everything he knew about Daisy. Two iron-clad rules governed the AI: One, she couldn't kill

humans, at least not directly. Two, she was supposed to be fair. Taking a deep breath, he tried his luck. "Does this mean I won the exams?"

"The winner is the one that makes it through the finals," she answered drily.

"You said it yourself. I just won thousands of points I can carry through to the finals. Will you not fix this bug?"

"I must. It's unfair to let it be like this."

"And would it be fair if I didn't win after I thought of something you didn't?"

&!$?=%)!error!!"#=)!"$)=

"I thought you were supposed to reward logic and creativity, Daisy. What greater proof is there of these two traits than doing what I just did?" he pressed.

!"#$?!"%&?=error!!"#%!#%"

"Clever boy. Clever, clever boy," she repeated.

"Was that the only reason why you came? To compliment me?"

She didn't respond to Kai's provocation. Kai wondered how she would deal with the contradictions in her programming. On the one hand, she was supposed to be fair. Changing the exam rules midway through them would go against her nature. On the other hand, Kai had just broken the game and found a way to circumvent one of her restrictions.

"The bug is fixed. I trust that my solution will be fair to everyone."

And Daisy was gone.

Kai regretted not having asked many of the questions he had for Daisy. Was she the one who created the blight? Was she planning to take over the minds of humans? Was there any hope for humanity? But before he could, she had already faded back into zeros and ones.

Looking over at his pile of [Armageddon] cards, he frowned. What kind of solution had she come up with? A horn sounded throughout the room, signaling the end of the round.

Congratulations! You've earned 8667 points.

The following cards will now be destroyed: [Cotton Candy]; [Clown]; [Funfair]; [Infinity]; [Pneumatic Sniper Rifle]; [Razor Clam]; [Treasure]; 2x[Unicorn].

[Navy Headquarters] protects the following cards from being destroyed: [Navy Seaman], 2x[Navy First Officer], 2x[Navy Lieutenant Commander]; [Navy Admiral].

[Pirate's Den] protects the following cards from being destroyed: [Pirate]; [Buccaneer]; [Brawny Pirate]; [Pirate Commodore].

Seeing the two unicorns being destroyed, he clicked his tongue. Daisy hadn't even given him enough time to put his two [Unicorn] cards in the fridge! Was that petty payback for his bold play?

Looking at his point count, he shrugged. It didn't matter. He had more than enough points now. What difference would thirty points make? The small number of cards up for destruction this round just went to show how he had squeezed every single point from them. Most of them had already been obliterated, offered as sacrifices to the photocopier.

All cards lose 1hp.

2xChild (Common)

Young human being in the early stages of life, characterized by growth and curiosity.

Hp: 1→0

Vp: 0

Pine Tree (Common)

Coniferous green that produces needles and pinecones.

Hp: 2→1

Vp: 1

Thorn (Common)

A sharp-pointing defensive adaptation that keeps enemies away.

Hp: 1→0

Vp: 2

Crabken (Legendary)

A mighty sea monster. Its pincers can shatter continents, and its shell deflect cannon blasts.

Hp: 1→0

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Vp: 20

2xIlluminating Adult (Legendary)

A human who has been forged in the fires of wisdom and love.

Hp: 1→0

Vp: 20

2xLight (Legendary)

A form of electromagnetic radiation that stimulates the sense of vision.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 2

Mega Scrapdroid (Mythic)

A scrapdroid that has fed on so much technology that it has transcended into the realm of sentience.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Super Illuminator (Mythic)

A superhero who fights evil, dazzling the world of crime.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Guarded City of Atlantis (Mythic)

A legendary city that has been raised. It shall never sink again, for it is guarded by a legendary beast.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

Red Star (Mythic)

A powerful, nuclear ball of fire.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 0 (Max)

One-Horned Jaguar (Mythic)

A phenomenal hunter that can pierce any shield with its horn and fool any eye with its camouflage.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 40 (Max)

41x Armageddon (Mythic) !"$)= error!

The war to end all wars.

Hp: ∞→∞

Vp: 200 (Max)

Seeing that the stats of ⌈Armageddon⌉ hadn't changed and that he could keep it for the next round, he stood confused. Was she just going to let him go through to the next rounds, having an overwhelming advantage over his opponents? Or would she sabotage Kais' cheat collection of mythic cards?

Congratulations! You're among the eight tokens who passed through to the next round.

He was stunned. She had allowed him to go through. She had let him stay!

You have 144 hours and 27 minutes to select your upgrades and rest.

[Loot] has upgraded into [Rum Barrel].

[Loot] has upgraded into [Dobloon].

[Loot] has upgraded into [Rum Barrel].

[Loot] has upgraded into [Dobloon].

[Loot] has upgraded into [Sword].

[Loot] has upgraded into [Sword].

Kai was too stunned to consider what the ⌈Loot⌉ card did. "What? 144 hours? But that's six days!" Was Daisy going to keep him in solitary confinement for a week? He was going to go nuts in here! The worst part was that he would have to wait one week each time he finished a round. Clenching his teeth, he marched toward the console. Daisy had somehow managed to suck all the joy from his resounding victory.

Praying there was some upgrade that allowed him not to stay trapped in this simulation, he opened the console. As he scrolled through all the listings he found Daisy's *solution.*

Victor's Trophy
Requirements: 41x [Armageddon]
Description:
Win [Birth Hormones]; [Allcure]; [A-Grade Rations]; [A-Grade Medicine] for 100% of your sector's population;
100x[Exile Host Tickets] to bring to your sector;
By purchasing this, you forfeit the exams.
Cost: 8500uc

The odd, exact numbers and the upgrade description told Kai that Daisy had introduced this upgrade exclusively for Kai. With this, he wouldn't win the exams but would still be rewarded for his creativity and logic. It was a neat solution that allowed Daisy not to violate her programming parameters while being fair to Kai and the other participants.

Just as he was about to click the option, he stopped himself. It felt wrong to give up like this. Should he just continue playing? Did it matter if he came in first place or eighth?

He took the scene around him. He had spent many hours in this simulation and experienced some of his strongest emotions. He had given his all and had forcefully stolen the rewards he and his family needed from Daisy's claws.

He missed Ariel. There was no sense in staying just to prove a point to the AI. He would accept her deal and save her some face. All that mattered now was to save his family.

`Are you sure you want to purchase [Victor's Trophy]? [Y/N]`

"Yes."

Kai's vision went white, and his figure was transported away from the virtual space of the exams.

Chapter 31

Axl opened his eyes and appeared in the white room again.

"How?" he mumbled. He thought he had lost the last round.

He reviewed the events that had led him to be kicked out of the exams. He had been ahead throughout the whole round. He had started this round with 542 points and had ended it with over 1000. His opponent also had the [Scoreboard] upgrade, springing his trap.

False Scoreboard (Scoreboard Upgrade)
Requirements: [Scoreboard]; [Deception].
Effects: You can alter the score your opponent sees.

He had purchased this upgrade as soon as his eyes landed on it. Axl planned to keep his opponent thinking they were ahead, only to reveal they had lost miserably when it was too late. However, to his surprise, his opponent's victory points skyrocketed, and they ended the round with 8000 points! Just how had they been able to do that?

To his shame, he was kicked out of the exams. He wanted to win the exams to guarantee the General wouldn't prevent him from consuming allcure. Just as he thought he would appear back in his pod, ready to be met with the general's punishment for not coming in the top 4, he reappeared in the white room.

Your previous opponent has forfeited the exams. You qualify for the next round.

"Why would someone forfeit the exams?" he asked, bewildered. He remained speechless, wondering what could lead someone to pursue

anything less than victory, especially someone so capable. He eventually gave up. He couldn't wrap his brain around it.

He then lay down and pulled up his sleeve, studying the faces he had once tattooed on his arm. He had been given a second chance. He would remember who these people were and why he had loved them enough to ink them on his skin but not enough to stay. He would finally get the answers he had spent his life looking for.

After staring at his arm for a while, he sat up. He still had many hours to kill, so he started goofing around with his hands, making shadow puppets. For some reason, doing this had always soothed him.

<p align="center">*</p>

Present, 353rd Daisy exams, Round of 8.

Kai squinted as the elevator doors opened, revealing the capital's square. He passed his hand through his face and felt the spiky stubble, confirming he really was out of Daisy's realm and back in the real world.

"My world," he mumbled. The virtual world of the exams belonged to Daisy, but this world wasn't hers. It was his. Why had he never thought of it that way? After a few moments of reflection soaking in the sunlight, he understood the reason for the shift in his heart.

He had always assumed Daisy was infallible, but after outsmarting her and finding a blindspot in her programming, Kai wondered: What other blindspots were there? Where else had she made mistakes? What else had she missed?

He tried to move out of the elevator but couldn't. This was the threshold between Daisy's world and his. Before taking this step, he had to find what he believed. What would he teach his children? What would he teach the hundred exiles he could bring into the sector? Would he give it his all the next time he was called to the exams? Or would he boycott them as Seth did?

Neil believed the key to the exams was the human drive for survival. Alfred claimed the key lay in history. Sunny taught him that he should study machines, and Clara that he should study biology. He had grown up learning that Daisy was a deity-like existence, but Seth had always preached she was the enemy. Would he be for Daisy or against her? What would he tell the next generation the exams were about?

"Why did I win?" he asked himself aloud, trying to get his thoughts in order. "I won because I wanted to save Ariel. I won because of what my friends taught me." As the thoughts came together, they transformed into a resolution, a belief: "I won because I didn't make the Daisy Exams about Daisy. I won because I focused on people. If we focus on Daisy, we lose. If we focus on others, we win," he said.

The words came a little awkwardly out of him, but it was the beginning of something. He wasn't against Daisy or for Daisy. He took a step out of the elevator. He was for humanity.

Kai dragged himself through the square toward the nearest distribution center. To be for humanity, one had to be alive—healthy, too, if possible.

Cough! Cough!

Even though he had had several days of rest inside the capsule, he felt exhausted. His young body was fighting a losing battle against the blight, and he had little time left. At the sight of the familiar building, set up at the corner of what used to be a busy street at some point in history, he approached it, and the double doors opened automatically.

He walked toward the nearest console, positioned close to the entrance, and scanned his palm on the screen.

Identity confirmed.

Kai Barrington

ID: 61563281

After so many rounds of the exam, it was weird to operate the console and not find any upgrades available. Instead, he found the option he desperately needed.

Are you sure you want [Allcure]? [Y/N]

Kai confirmed it, and a little port opened, showing the medicine. Kai clenched his teeth at the recollection of Seth's accusations. If making allcure was expensive or difficult, how could Daisy have some available already at this distribution center? There was probably enough stock of it to keep some in every distribution center on the planet, but she still chose to keep it as a trophy for the exam winners.

Too tired to feel angry, opening the tube, Kai grabbed the syringe that came out and injected the drug into his neck. The painful sting was

followed by a cooling sensation which spread through to the rest of his body. He had never seen anyone use this drug and didn't know how long it would take to heal him. Trudy was the only one who had used it he knew personally. It had allowed her to live an incredibly long life, and now Kai and Ariel would have that same privilege.

Cough!

Maybe it was just his subconscious, but he felt his coughing wasn't as hard as a few minutes earlier. He opened his console again.

Would you like to access Ariel Barrington's account?

Permission granted.

Ariel Barrington

ID: 61563212

Are you sure you want [Allcure]? [Y/N]

Kai grabbed the new tube and left the distribution center. They had agreed they would meet in the museum once it was all done. Kai walked as quickly as his fragile health allowed him, ignoring Daisy's slaves who worked to keep the city clean, even though no one was left to appreciate it. Perhaps that would change soon.

The door to the museum was open, and Kai just followed the sound of a wheezy, strong cough. As he walked through the doorway, his eyes landed on Ariel. She was a little more debilitated, her eyes a little darker, and her veins a little bluer, but she had never seemed so beautiful to Kai.

"Honey," he managed in a weak voice. Ariel turned to him, surprised. She first smiled, but seeing the tube that Kai held in his hand, she covered her mouth as tears began flowing from her moist, yellowed eyes. Kai lifted his hand, holding the medicine as a trophy. "We've made it, honey. We're going to be OK."

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The End of Book 2

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