

Tutorial 201

Chapter 201: It's too easy

It takes a few more hours for Elydor and Obelia to hash things out. It seems like Elydor used Obelia and her guild to get there, offering them support and promising her a percentage while withholding a lot of information from her, sharing them only now.

He most likely did this out of fear that the information would fall into the wrong ears.

So, Obelia and her guild examine the star-shaped mana stone under the watchful eye of a member from Serpent's Eye, and then they discuss.

While we wait, I continue to practice trying to etch coordinates into the mana stone. Sophie notices and joins me, sitting by my side and watching the process while giving her opinion on it.

There's also one woman, apparently named Eve, who keeps eyeing Tess with hateful eyes. When I ask Tess about them, she just tells me not to bother, so I do just that.

"Did you guys try selling mana stones to the system shop?" I ask when Sophie and I take a break.

"Almost as soon as we got some. You need to sell so many of them to barely get some shards that it's not even worth it," she examines the mana stone in her hands and hands it back to me after making some suggestions, "We also tried to go into high-end shops, touch expensive items, and try to sell them. It didn't work; the system didn't consider us as owners of the item to sell it."

"How about buying common and uncommon gear and selling it?" I ask.

If we become rich enough, we could buy plenty of them to get some easy shards.

"That did work a bit better. You can buy common gear from the shop for 20 shards, but buying a common sword here and trying to sell it to the system shop would usually get us only around one or two shards. If you buy an item from the system for 20 shards and sell it back, you get 10 shards." Sophie pauses and glances at a group of two big guilds talking.

She turns back to me, "We have a theory that it's either the system limiting our ability to exploit it this way, or there are requirements we don't know about, or the system simply considers us getting these items too easily, so that's why it's low."

"We should try creating our own items; they could be worth more than items already existing on the 4th floor," I say.

Sophie thinks about it for a moment, "I think you're right."

I hand her the mana stone and continue to think. It's a shame; it would be nice to get some easy shards, but obviously, the system will hold us back. Even the epic items I got from the 3rd floor are worth only 200 shards, while the system sells them for over 4 thousand. There's still so much to examine.

"Get ready, we will head out!" one of the men from Serpent's Eye shouts, and immediately the atmosphere changes. Everyone becomes a bit more tense and on guard.

We've known about Calamities only for a few days, so I wonder how it is for the natives of these floors who grew up hearing about them, about the people these calamities killed.

Yet, they are still here, a group of humans motivated by greed and willing to risk their lives. Some things don't change no matter where you are.

We move closer to the city while still keeping a long distance between us. Following a map left on the mana stone, Elydor leads us down the hill and then sideways towards one of the cliffs nearby. Near the bottom of the cliff, we stop.

Multiple members of both large guilds start scanning the area with their senses, and mana to try to detect something.

Out of curiosity, I use my [Perception], but not knowing what to look for makes it even more difficult. Yet, I continue to try and even consolidate my [Focus] to do so.

And then I feel it. A tiny, weak mana signature on the side of the cliff. The signature is extremely faint, but the mana I feel from it is so different from any mana I've felt until now, so I detect it.

I cancel my skills and then continue to recreate the signature in my head, examining it. I do so for a few more minutes, and that's also when a notable member of Serpent's Eye finds it. The man was the one who laughed the most when Elydor came to visit us so unexpectedly.

"Good job, Varrik," Elydor smiles proudly, seemingly poking fun at Obelia because his guild member found it first, whatever it is.

We then wait another hour while he approaches that tiny dot of mana signature and places the star-shaped mana stone on it. There seems to be a special method he needs to use, so that's what takes him a while. When he finally does, only a flash of mana is sent into the area and nothing else changes.

The man then puts his hand on the side of the cliff, and it burrows inside as if there's no wall at all; the hand just disappears into the stone.

"Okay, good, everyone get combat ready!" On his order, people shed some of their bulkier clothes and even take out their weapons.

Some start strengthening their bodies, others start charging their skills. There are a few with eyes that start shining or tattoos appearing on their skin, charged with mana.

And I don't know where to look; it's all too fascinating to observe.

"You, brat, go in first," Elydor says with a cruel smile, pointing at Min-Jae.

That gets some smirks from some of his men, and Varrik, the one who found the entrance, visibly smiles. Obelia and her guild remain silent. They don't seem to enjoy the spectacle as much as Serpent's Eye, yet they do nothing.

Min-Jae, on the other hand, starts to panic a bit and freezes on the spot, unable to respond.

“Are you deaf? Come here and...”

“I will go first,” I interrupt and step closer to the guild master of Serpent's Eye, the man named Elydor.

He looks surprised for a moment but then just nods, “You're the one who keeps controlling his mana, aren't you?” He stops in front of me and places his hand on my shoulder.

“Go on, get in,” he pats my shoulder a few times and then pushes me towards the entrance, “you have one minute to examine what's there and then get out.”

But I already ignore him and gather mana inside my body. I don't even glance at Min-Jae to see his expression. I'm sure it would be annoying.

Taking a step, I pass through the stone and immediately form a mana orb filled with thermal energy to illuminate the surrounding area engulfed in total darkness.

It's a tunnel.

Just a somewhat regular-looking tunnel with surprisingly smooth walls, floor, and ceiling, all made from the same material.

After releasing my mana into the area and receiving no feedback, I send my orb ahead. The tunnel continues for a surprisingly long time, moving straight ahead, and at the end, there's a twisted staircase leading downwards, also made of the same material as the rest of the tunnel.

I create a few mana projectiles and position them in front of me. I even activate [Mana Domain] and, as a final test, leave an anchor behind, taking a few steps to check for traps.

Finding nothing, I return to where I came from before the minute passes and step back outside.

“Oh, good job, maybe you can be our scout,” Elydor says with a smile, his eyes challenging me to react.

But I just nod, "I'll do it," I respond while sinking deeper into [Focus].

When all of us enter the tunnels, I don't summon my orbs. Instead, others light the area while I keep observing Elydor and his men.

Could I kill him? Most likely yes. His men and he at once? Also, probably yes, but it would be close. With Obelia and her guild, along with a few dozen more people, my chances are slim, not to mention the risk of them killing someone from group 4. So, if I'm not absolutely sure I can protect them or that we can confront them together without someone getting killed in the crossfire, it's better to keep myself calm. I can wait for better opportunity.

Ignoring the looks from Group 4 and making my decision, I start walking first. My mana is constantly cycling through my body, ready to explode at any moment, and my regulator is converting eighty percent of my mana regeneration into strengthening my body.

The expedition continues to walk through the tunnel, our steps echoing. After reaching the stairs, I begin descending, constantly sending my mana ahead.

My mind is sharp, and there's no hesitation in my steps. As always, during such situations, I'm weirdly calm.

We spend a few minutes on the stairs, and I constantly sense other people sending their senses ahead or all around. They too are checking for traps or anything suspicious.

Yet there's nothing. The stairs end, and the tunnel changes its direction, this time heading right towards the city and slightly slanted downwards. The material it's made of remains the same, but this time, the tunnel is a bit wider. It's tall enough even for a lynthari to walk without bending their head and wide enough for ten people to walk side by side.

The longer we're in the tunnel, the more I notice things.

[Perception - lvl 35 > Perception - lvl 36]

The walls aren't just simple stone; there are veins of a strange material embedded and running through them. Every time I try to examine them, I feel my skill being deflected, as if the material is being evasive.

Some sort of camouflage? To hide the tunnel leading under the city? I suspect that they are circuits that used to be filled with mana, creating some sort of effect, perhaps enhancing the tunnel's ability to conceal itself. But right now, they are nearly empty, with just weak wisps of mana flowing through them.

In almost absolute silence, we walk for several hours, with only the occasional conversation. Nerves are at their peak, and I can sense the way others use skills change over time — they become more careless or increasingly irritated, wasting mana.

Some even start to use their skills more frequently, more nervous than ever.

I, on the other hand, become calmer and calmer, and my steps quieter. The longer we walk, the more I rely on my skills to warn me in case something happens.

But there's nothing. It's easy, and when we reach the end of the tunnel, everyone hesitates, a shared sentiment evident on their faces.

It's too easy.

More mana flows from their bodies as we continue to climb another set of stairs. By the time we reach the door, it feels as though they're about to explode.

"What the fuck!" one of the men nearly screams, "how is it so..."

"Shut up," Elydor turns to him, and the man instantly quiets down. No one else dares to speak.

The guild master of Serpents Eye appears calmer than most of them. He walks past me, approaching a door that has a similar mana signature to the entrance on the side of the cliff.

"This will take a while," he says, moving past me to address his men.

Biscuit gets in his way, and a short blast of mana sends the corgi flying, even though he tries to defend himself with quickly created purple tentacles. The piece of dried deer meat that Biscuit was excitedly bringing to give me fall down and with a whimper, the small corgi lands on the ground.

“Get that fucking creature away from me,” Elydor simply says and turns to his men.

[Focus - lvl 36 > Focus - lvl 37]

Biscuit looks around, stress evident in his eyes, and then he moves toward me, slightly limping. He pushes his head against my leg, and I reach down to pet him.

“Just hold on a bit longer, okay? As I said before, don't attack them yet,” I whisper so only he can hear and continue to pet his head.

(Hurt.) sounds in my head while he limps a bit. Not knowing what to do, I just continue to pet his small head.

I look up and see Tess holding back Lily, and Hadwin doing the same for others. It seems most difficult for Sophie, who has to physically restrain Isabella from doing something stupid.

My eyes shift slightly towards Elydor, who is talking to Varrik, his strongest man, seemingly indifferent to what just happened.

One of his men makes a joke, and Elydor laughs briefly before shaking his head. He then returns to showing them the star-shaped mana stone and discussing how to unlock the door.

[Focus - lvl 37 > Focus - lvl 38]

Chapter 202: Underneath the Colossal Shadow

I take Biscuit to Lily, who carefully heals him with a glimmer of mana, so others won't notice it. The process takes much longer than it could but thankfully, the wound isn't that serious.

(Nat, how can you just let them do this? Let's just fight them! We can do it easily!) Min-Jae shouts through the twins' skill.

A few people from two big guilds notice the link in between us, but they don't seem to care enough to stop us.

(Kim, use your head, okay? There are fifty of them. Even if we could defeat them all, what do you think would happen if we start fighting here, in the tunnels? How many of you do you think would die?) Tess responds to him.

Min-Jae immediately quiets down, and words from the girl he has a crush on probably sting even more.

(Two guild masters over 200, five people over 170, and another twenty or so around 150. Most of us aren't even at 100. Stay low, and once the expedition is over, we'll get stronger and have our revenge.) Hadwin supports Tess and also addresses Min-Jae.

His words are logical. We are severely outmatched, and even though we're treated as fodder, he hopes we'll survive. Hadwin thinks we can't handle that many humans with such high levels.

He's mistaken.

The entire Serpent's Eye is already dead, and the Storm Brigade will join them if they make a move.

I'll make sure of it.

It takes a few more hours to open the door. They constantly examine the star-shaped mana stone and even draw some circuit-like symbols on the door with white paint that seems to conduct mana very well.

Elydor is the one who unlocks the door, his mana radiating from his body. He continues to feed it to the symbols, adjusting them constantly. His eyes focused, and he finally takes a step closer and places the mana stone against the door.

They shake slightly, and although nothing appears to change, I sense they're open, similar to the ones in the hill.

“What do you think, Obelia? Quite good, isn't it?” With a smile, he turns to the guild master of the Storm Brigade, but the woman doesn't even bother to reply.

Elydor's mana stops radiating, and even his residual mana in the air gets pulled back into his body. He turns around, searching. His eyes land on me, and I anticipate his next words, “Get your ass going and scout for us.”

“Sure,” I reply as I rise to my feet.

I cut off the twins' [Connection] when some of them start complaining uselessly.

It's hard to understand them properly. Sure, I know why they are angry. Who would be happy to be ordered around like that? To be sent to risk their lives while being looked down upon. Yes, it's hard to endure, and yes, some of them might feel like their pride is hurt.

But it's slightly different for me. Elydor is already dead, his men are already dead; I'm just deciding when I will let them know that. I will do it in a way that benefits me the most while being the safest for me and for this silly group 4.

Maybe I will try to pit them against the Calamity to see what it is capable of. Maybe I will let them collect the items we are after and then deal with them.

“You listen really well, don't you? Maybe I should keep you and help you control the immense mana you're hiding.” Elydor smirks and whispers as I pass by him. Yet, I ignore his words and pass through the door.

Immediately after entering, I scan the area around me and create a few orbs to light the room. Yet, as before, there's no danger. I don't feel any mana; there's no threat.

The room I'm in is a simple living room, and I've just passed through one of its walls. It's somewhat luxurious, but not excessively so. After all, layers of dust cover everything. In the corner, there's a broken window with the floor around it wet and rotting; some greenery even grows on it. The rest of the furniture is in a similar state, either dry and breaking or wet and rotting depending on its location in the room.

The wooden floor beneath my feet feels soft, and the walls are pale, having lost their once-vibrant colors.

I send a few strong pulses of mana through the house and only detect a few weak mana signatures. Nothing else. Even as my mana reaches beyond the house, I don't sense anything. There's no life; the entire area feels dead.

A minute passes, and I go back through the door into the tunnels where Elydor's second-in-command welcomes me with a smile.

The man, called Varrik, says, "Good job, newbie!" He taps my shoulder and then, along with a few others, passes through the door, quickly followed by more people.

"I don't like them," Izzy complains as she reaches my side, closely followed by Sophie, "They feel ugly." The little empath then connects to my feelings, and I let her. She stares at me for a while.

"You're so weird. Everyone else is scared or worried, so why aren't you?" Isabella whispers.

"You're not scared either," I reply.

"That's because of Sophie's skill," she says, and I notice Sophie twitch, a hint of guilt flashing across her face.

"I'm also using a skill. You should know that." I tell her.

"Yes, but..." she pauses, "it's not just the skill. You're just weird." Isabella shakes her head.

"Come on, move," one of the men from Serpent's Eye pushes us, and we also pass through the door, greeted by Obelia and a few of her guild members drawing some circles onto the walls with paint that conducts mana very well.

"I think we're in the right place. One of the smaller houses near the mansion, just as the plans said." Obelia says after looking around and sending mana into the area.

Everyone does something similar and tries to scout the area with their skills. Then, a few minutes later a woman moves closer to Obelia and hands her a few small mana stones, "We did a scan and inscribed a map of the area into the stone, guild master."

"Thanks, Jenna," Obelia says, then hands a few of the small stones to Elydor, "You can make more copies on your own."

The room can barely contain that many people and it's bustling. Mana continues to be sent into the surrounding area, and some men and women even release small animals they have a connection with to scout.

No one leaves the room yet, and a few members of each guild even create some temporary barriers around us.

They all seem efficient and professional. No unnecessary words are spoken, and everyone appears to do what they are accustomed to during such expeditions.

"Guild master," one of Elydor's men says, "we didn't detect any barriers, no traps, no signs of life. We also keep monitoring the Living Tree."

"Good," Elydor responds, then turns to the room, "So far, everything has been straightforward, but don't let your guard down. Remember where we are and act accordingly. We will follow the plan: get into the main house, take everything we can, and will split the loot after we get back to Virelia. We don't want to stay here too long and alert the Calamity to our presence, so be quick. Use mana only to scan the area as little as possible. Do not send your senses towards the tree. Do not move towards it. Do not even look at it." His last words seem to be mostly directed at two small guilds that are part of this expedition.

Following his order, his men reduce their mana output slightly, and even the Storm Brigade does so after Obelia instructs them.

This time I'm not sent to scout, and all of us in a big group leave the smaller house. Our steps are quick as we pass by an overgrown, old garden and multiple smaller houses. The atmosphere is tense, and the approaching darkness doesn't help. While there is still light, we move swiftly, no one wanting to be left alone or separated from the group.

The worst part is seeing the shadows of leafless branches that hang over the entire city. Every once in a while, they emit soft creaking noises as a strong wind blows through them high in the air. The Living Tree's trunk is still far away, but even from this distance, it's evident how enormous it is. It's so vast that it doesn't fit into my field of view, and I have to look around, yet I still can't take it all in.

It's gigantic.

When we enter the main house, there's a sigh of relief from everyone, but I become a bit nervous. I could have sworn I felt a pulse of mana around the edges of the city but I do not dare try to examine it.

Following the plans, which they likely had from the start, and using shaped mana stones, both big guilds move through the house, going from door to door, while we and Blackrock, another small guild, are left downstairs with a few people keeping watch.

Minutes pass, and occasionally, amidst the tense atmosphere, we can hear surprised shouts and excited talking.

The main house is in much better condition, with walls made from more durable stone and even glass. Mana circuits are everywhere, powering some peculiar effects, yet they've long been devoid of mana. Even the insides of the walls are full of them: the floors, the glass. And the more I examine, the more I am amazed by the amount of work and time it must have taken to create all this.

Maya turns to me, "Why did they even bring us here if we're only tagging along?"

Hadwin answers instead one me, "It's simple, we're fodder in case something happens. But so far, this is too easy, too easy. We should be ready for anything the moment we get out of the city." he pauses, "Or maybe we should run for it right now?"

"They locked the door, and Elydor has the key," I say, disappointing everyone.

No one wants to try anything, not while we're so close to a three-question-mark monster. Even the idea of dealing with 50 or so people seems like a much better option.

After what feels like ten more minutes, everyone returns to us. Some of the men and women are nearly laughing with big smiles on their faces. They are holding weapons, large mana stones, or full boxes. All items are meticulously packed, and at just a simple glance, it's clear that they're not commonly found.

Elydor even comes back with two of his men carrying a large chest that seems heavy, even for two high-level men. It seems to be made from weird black wood-like material and there are no locks on it.

Obelia and her guild also seem satisfied, and Obelia herself holds something with a shape reminiscent of a spear, just tightly wrapped in cloth.

It takes a few more minutes for everyone to return, each one laden with as many items as they could carry. The Champion's house, still brimming with artifacts, seems to lack any strong protection. After hundreds of years, the mana likely no longer powers the defenses or traps.

Our return journey is quick and easy. There are no enemies. There are no surprises. Everything goes smoothly, even as we pass through the hidden passage in the living room back into the tunnels.

When Elydor locks the passage behind us, a few members of the expedition start laughing out loud, congratulating themselves. The atmosphere remains tense, but it's noticeably more cheerful as we swiftly move through the tunnel beneath the city. Some of them are already planning to return to loot again.

I sense something ahead of us before anyone else does, but I keep it to myself.

We continue to walk for another minute, and then a few of the more perceptive ones catch on as well. The atmosphere shifts immediately. There's a flurry of harsh words exchanged, and they hasten their pace.

But it doesn't matter. We reach a part of the tunnel that must be just under the edge of the city, and there, in front of us, stands a barrier made of pale white mana blocking our way.

They don't want to believe it at first, so they keep sending their mana to examine it, but it's futile. Just like me, they realize a spherical barrier envelops the entire city. Something only one entity in the area could accomplish.

We've been trapped by one of the four Calamities: the Living Tree.

Just then, a new side quest pops up.

Side quest: Survive.

Chapter 203: Not yet

I check the side quest and its reward.

Side quest: Survive

Reward: 500 shards

Seeing how high the reward is, this is dangerous. Yet, it still feels low, aren't we against the Calamity?

"No, no, no, no," Elydor mumbles under his breath while he examines the barrier. With his class, Mana Harbinger, he probably already realized how strong the barrier is.

"Varrik, go and keep watch. Take Samuel and Otto," he quickly calms down and orders his men, "Evir and Zen, get your asses over here and take a look at this with me."

Everyone else is pushed away from the barrier, and in the darkness of the smooth-walled tunnel lit by a few skills, they start examining the barrier. At the same time, a few more people from Storm Brigade also disappear to where we came from, towards the passage to Champion's house, to keep watch.

There is a hint of panic on everyone's faces as they move around, trying to find a way to pass through the barrier.

(Try to stay calm and be ready for anything,) I say through the link the twins set up for us, and while looking around, I notice Obelia staring at me.

It's not the first time that has happened. Ever since she felt me examining the circle that teleported us here, she keeps glancing at me once in a while. Once, she even asked one of her guild members to examine me, and I felt a thin, almost impossible-to-notice thread of mana reaching me. After I noticed it and destroyed it, they didn't try again.

She reacts to me catching her gaze by nodding shortly, as if in some sort of greeting, and I return the gesture. Obelia then turns back to her guild. Her face is still calm, and her eyes covered in circuits continue to look at the pale white barrier created by the Living Tree.

"This doesn't seem that good," Tess whispers next to me, not using the twins' link probably because she doesn't want them to hear.

"After a few days, they will find out that they can't pass through the barrier, so they will most likely want to get back into the city and try to find a different way," I answer back in a whisper.

"But the tree already seems to know about us, so the ones that exit the tunnels would most likely end up dead. Even though I still don't know why the tree is not attacking us inside of the tunnels," she says back.

"Yes, they will send us out first, and Tess, we are not strong enough to face the tree. Not right now, not without more preparation," I tell her.

Tess just nods solemnly, "We will have to fight if they try to push us out." There is a determination on her face.

“Oh, and Tess,” I move closer and whisper even quieter, “We already are under the attack of the tree.”

Her eyes widen, and she leans her face closer to me. “Nat, what is happening?” There is urgency in her voice.

“The moment we reached the barrier, the tree started attacking us. It's some sort of hard-to-detect attack that uses really small amounts of mana. It's almost unnoticeable.” I tell her.

I feel in the air tiny particles of mana that try to reach our bodies, touch them, enter them, and then do something to them. I'm not at the point where I've found out what they do, but there's no way I would allow them to touch us.

“So Tess, I'm dealing with it and also protecting our group, but it's difficult. Tell others to group a bit more and move somewhere to the side, a bit further away from the barrier,” I say.

At that moment, my skills level up.

[Perception - lvl 36 > Perception - lvl 37]

[Mana Domain - lvl 2 > Mana Domain - lvl 3]

To defend against that attack, I'm using my domain to create a field around myself, and it expands enough to cover members of our group. Then, while using [Perception], I locate particles of mana and then destroy them with my own mana, which is easier to manipulate within [Mana Domain].

It's hard to do, so it takes quite a bit of my attention, and sometimes some particles slip by me, and I have to use [Resonance] to destroy them.

I tried just running a disruptive field, but it didn't work that well. It's almost as if the Tree's particles are hard to hit without locating them first. The attack of the Calamity is not that strong; it's just hardly noticeable, slow, and constant. To be honest, I'm not sure how long I can keep it up.

Because most of their attention is on the barrier, almost no one noticed it, well, except Obelia. The woman noticed my usage of my skills, and after talking with a few more of her guildmates, they also found out what was happening and then urgently started doing something similar I do.

They didn't bother telling Elydor, but they were a bit less careful than me, so Elydor noticed them using mana and then examined the air. A series of curses that escaped his mouth were quickly followed by him starting to radiate a lot of his mana that started to push all the particles away.

Where I tried to use as little mana as possible, he just uses constant pressure that creates a field in a larger area, and a few of his men do something similar.

Yet, some smaller particles continue to pass by. Something I did notice while trying to use [Resonance], but they did not.

(Aaron, connect me to Obelia,) I say through the link, and soon he does so.

The guild master of Storm Brigade accepts the link he creates, curiosity getting the better of her.

(Not enough,) I say through the link and then disconnect.

For the first time, a hint of surprise appears on her face, and hurriedly she starts examining the air around her guild members.

That much should be enough.

Half a day passes, and they are still at it. The symbols are continuously drawn around the barrier and filled with mana. Items are used, even some they just took from the Champion's manor.

They even attack the barrier with dozens of different attacks. Yet there is no change at all.

Min-Jae says that the tunnel is a few miles long, so there should be enough air for months for us. We also have plenty of food, so no one panics thus far, nor throws around ideas of leaving the tunnels.

The attack we are under is well known already, and they continue to have a few people to deal with it. At some point, Elydor created some item out of an expensive-looking mana stone, and it's enough for his men just to infuse it with mana, and it creates a field that pushes away the invisible mana particles of the Calamity.

They also noticed that just a simple push was not enough so there are a few more men and women from both of the big guilds who keep switching places and continue to push away the particles using a lot of mana. They do it successfully, but it takes a toll on them.

(Asshole?) Biscuit asks me in my head.

I reach out and pet him, (Not yet.)

Two more days pass. And for some, it's getting harder and harder. The ever-present silence and darkness of the tunnels, the constant attack from the Living Tree, and the barrier blocking us are enough to put most of the people on edge, and even some members of group 4 become a bit touchy.

The twins become quieter. Isabella starts spending more and more time near me, connecting to my emotions. She says that it's hard to handle feeling the constant nervousness of others, even though Sophie's skill blocks some of Isabella's fear.

She also says that I am weird as I continue to play with the mana stone in my hands while observing their attempts to break the barrier.

I gulp down the piece of dried meat and just shrug my shoulders.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 39 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 40]

[Mana Domain - lvl 3 > Mana Domain - lvl 4]

Three more days passed, and the first of my skills reached level forty. I made significant progress while trying to inscribe circuits into the mana stone.

Sophie, wanting to take her mind off what's happening, also starts helping me, especially now that Isabella almost constantly stays by my side.

Lily offered for me to try using her [Disintegration] on the barrier, but I just told her to wait. Even though her skill is terrifying I don't think she has enough mana to destroy it or create a passage. Not without sacrificing most of her body to do so.

Tess is trying hard to keep the group from becoming too... unbalanced, and it seems to be getting harder.

After one unsuccessful attempt to destroy the barrier, Elydor notices me sitting there, examining the mana stone. Angry and frustrated, he sends a pulse of mana at me, destroying the stone in my hands and throwing me against the wall.

I apologize and then watch as even Obelia tries to calm him down.

In the end, he lets me go, and I pull out another mana stone and continue what I was doing again. This time a bit more carefully and attempting to hide the stone.

Some members of group 4 give me worried glances that I didn't understand, especially now that I constantly keep [Focus] running and actively blocking certain emotions.

POV Sophie Martinez

He is becoming quieter and quieter. He wasn't that talkative before, but now he rarely says anything.

A week has already passed. A week in these terrible, always-dark tunnels, and everyone is growing tired from the constant worry and the ever-present darkness. Yet he continues to sit there, lit by a few orbs floating nearby, his eyes glowing as he continues to examine the barrier of the Living Tree, attempts to break it, and the mana stone that he has now hidden in the sleeve of his shirt.

It's amazing how much progress we made in the past few days, something that would surely have taken us much longer outside. The inscription he works on is way beyond me, but even that is enough to help me to improve my skills, just from observing.

But I worry. I worry for Isabella, who tries to act brave, but I feel she's trying to only focus on his feelings and not even touching mine. I can't imagine how terrible it must be for her, feeling the emotions of everyone. So she clings to him as if he is her raft in a stormy sea.

Nathaniel doesn't seem to mind it that much, and once again I'm amazed by the will he possesses, the determination he shows, and the sheer strength of his mind.

He is constantly maintaining a field around us, around the entire group 4, and unlike other members of the expedition, his field uses much less mana. It's more accurate, yet it must also take a much greater toll on him. Nathaniel keeps it up for days, and I don't remember if he has slept since this all began. He waits, and I don't know what for. And that's what scares me the most.

Something will happen, something terrible. He knows it, and he is expecting it.

When Tess asks him about it, he always tells her not to worry and not to distract him as he continues to keep his field running. I tried to help, but I wasn't able to do it for too long, a few minutes at most at a similar level to his. The particles are too hard to locate and too difficult to influence, even though my skill is able to do so. So I continue trying and improving.

Again and again. I push myself even further, seeing Isabella hugging Nathaniel with closed eyes.

I clench my teeth and try as hard as I can.

It takes a while, but the field I create allows me to see these particles as well and try to destroy them. Once again I realize how difficult it is. And he's working on inscribing mana stone while doing this?

A few more days pass and screams wake me up.

Quickly, while summoning my mana, I get to my feet and turn towards where the screams are coming from, after locating Izzy who still clings to Nathaniel. He also looks towards the source of the screams.

And there, on the ground, one of the members of Serpent's Eye continues to twitch, scream, and groan in pain, scratching his chest and body while tearing his clothes.

With horrified looks in their eyes, his guild members continue to watch, and it takes me a while to see what they have noticed.

There are things, small green things, all over the man's body.

It takes me a bit longer to realize that they are leaves. Green leaves a normal tree would have.

And right now, those leaves are growing from under the man's skin.

Chapter 204: Unforgiving rage

For a few minutes, I watch a man screaming and flailing on the ground. It's one of the men that came with Elydor to our house. A man with long black hair, pale skin, and an annoying laugh.

After a while, I get bored, and since they stopped trying to get through the barrier, I go back to working on inscribing the mana stone.

That's nearly all I've done in the past two weeks; I carefully observe them trying to get through the barrier, and I'm learning a lot. I'm not sure I would be able to get through it, not even with [Resonance], so watching them work while also examining it on my own helps a lot. Well, maybe I could get through, but only alone, having to leave others behind.

And I don't want that.

The inscription I work on is something that might help me create a passage in the barrier.

I sigh when the man starts screaming again and take a look towards where he is. Currently, branches are poking his skin, and on these branches, more leaves grow. Blood is everywhere; his bones are breaking, and his screams become hoarse.

His guild is trying everything they can, yet nothing helps. No matter how many leaves or branches they remove, new ones grow. They can't even stop it with their skills.

At some point, Elydor sends one man to Lily, and they grab her hand, pulling her towards the man and screaming something at her.

The petite black-haired girl glances at me a few times and then tries something as well, yet even her healing is not helping and only seems to prolong the man's suffering.

In the end, Elydor clenches his teeth and a sharp blast of mana blows off the man's head, the screams finally stopping.

As if not held back anymore, more and more branches poke through the dead man's body, covering nearly the entirety of it, and beautifully vibrant green leaves appear, most of them covered in blood.

Tess pushes everyone from group 4 away and comes closer to me alone. She squats in front of me, her eyes more serious than ever.

"Nathaniel," her tone is serious, "I need to know what's happening. I need to know what's wrong with you and how the hell you don't care at all when they pull Lily around like that. Or when they punched Hadwin or..." she shakes her head, "You haven't been acting like yourself."

"Tess, as I said, I'm busy," I continue to examine her face. Her words also made me feel a hint of curiosity. Am I really that different? "I have my [Focus] constantly blocking my emotions so I can keep up the domain, and you guys won't end up like him," I nod at the man, well, a bunch of flesh, bones, and skin intertwined with branches and leaves.

"Nat, we can fight, we will deal with them all, and then we can get out of here on our own," she leans closer and whispers.

It seems like two weeks down there have even affected Tess; her eyes are wild like an animal pushed into a corner and ready to bite.

I shake my head, "We won't be able to, Tess. The moment we leave the tunnels to go to the city, the Living Tree will destroy us; I'm sure of that. The tunnels seem to block its influence to some point. As for the barrier, I need to observe them a bit longer. Just a little bit longer, and I will be able to get us out."

When I open my mouth to continue, I feel blood on my lips, and when I reach out to wipe it, I realize that it's blood from my nose. It's not the first time this has happened, but I didn't want Tess to see it.

"Should I call Lily? They already know she's a healer so..." Tess offers.

"It's fine; there is no wound. It's just that there are more and more particles in the air, and it's getting more difficult," I say.

In response to that, Tess's face becomes even more worried.

Before she can say anything, I ask her, "Tess, do you trust me?"

Without any hesitation, she nods, and for a long moment, I just look at her. She's not lying. There's only full and honest trust shown in her expression.

I wonder how I earned that.

"Give this stone to Sophie; she can work on our project on her own if she gets bored. I think I won't be able to do it right now." I try to lower [Focus] to examine my feelings, but only deep, red-hot rage surfaces, so I slide back into the cold, calm embrace of the skill.

I check the latest notifications.

[Mana Domain - lvl 5 > Mana Domain - lvl 6]

[Perception - lvl 37 > Perception - lvl 38]

[Resonance - lvl 24 > Resonance - lvl 25]

Then I go back to observing the men and women trying to get through the barrier. I do it carefully, only perceiving mana. Once in a while, they notice some small mana observing them, but I quickly cancel the skill, and they, unwilling to get more distracted, continue.

I'm learning a lot from them, and I especially like the technique where they create mana circuits by drawing on the barrier with paint that conducts mana so well. Thanks to that, I keep getting better and better at inscribing patterns into my mana stones.

But to be honest, I'm quite disappointed. Even though the people working on the barrier are over level 170 and have much more experience than me barely half a year in the tutorial, they don't seem that good?

Or maybe they are. I don't know. They all feel soft, easily distracted, and prone to panic. They lack hunger and determination, and they rely too much on the skills themselves.

They're missing something that's hard for me to describe.

Now they're even drawing circuits on the ground to strengthen their repelling force of mana to fight against particles, and that's where I see them panic the most. The way they twitch every time something itches them or their clothes rub against their bodies. The fear with which they keep looking around and the amount of mana they spend to fight against the attack of the Living Tree.

It's almost funny.

One day passes, and we are already close to exhausting all the food and water we brought with us. Unfortunately, the man who died did have a skill that supplied us with water until now. I wonder if it's a coincidence.

Even though Group 4 is huddled around me to make me deal with as small a domain as possible, Lily comes to talk to me, not caring that others can hear. In her voice, I can hear how worried she is, and with my own eyes, I can see it in others. I have a suspicion that it might be something I wouldn't like that much usually, but I'm currently using [Focus] to block nearly all emotions.

It's a weird feeling; I'm surprisingly logical, but even then there's a hint of dislike bleeding through. It's something that Maya told me some time ago. It's as if the skill is changing my personality.

I don't mind it lowering some emotions like fear, anxiety, or anger a bit, but this might be too much. Well, it's not like I have much choice.

Lily continues to talk to me, she also touches me and sends her warm mana through my body in an attempt to heal, but there isn't much she can do with the strain I put on myself. Not at her current level.

I listen to her, I feed Biscuit some food from my portion, and again continue to work on my idea, inscribing a difficult set of circuits into the largest mana stone I have. I do it even though it makes it more difficult to stop the Living Tree's particles.

Another day passes and a woman dies in the same way the first man did. It starts with her arm and after they cut it off in an attempt to stop it, leaves start growing through the skin on her neck. Once again it's someone from Elydor's guild and while cursing, he kills her, this time earlier than the man before.

I notice that he starts to look toward where the door to the mansion in the city is. I know that his decision is close.

He notices me watching him and when our eyes meet, he is calm. Unlike before when he acted like a B-rate villain, he is now focused in the face of danger. It's not a skill, no, it's just the strength of his will. You don't become one of the most powerful men in a city like Virelia without being skilled.

Yet, he is still an asshole and soon his men come to our group, taking all the food and water away from us and pushing us further from the main group and into the darkness of the tunnel.

Elydor's eyes are suspicious as he watches us, most likely unsure why we didn't die in a similar way his guild members did.

Three more days pass and all at once, four men from the small guild Blackrock die in the same gruesome manner.

Elydor and his men conduct some experiments now that they are not from their guild. They cut off limbs, they burn leaves, they try to dissect them while they are alive and branches grow from them. They even draw some glowing symbols on them and test some items.

One of Elydor's men tries some shadow skill, and Elydor himself sends his mana into the body of one of the men to fight against the process, but that only accelerates it.

And then, when all the men are dead and he stares down at their bodies, it seems to be enough.

"We will try to get through the city," he says to the deafening silence that ensues.

His voice is sharp and his face is determined. Mana moves around his body domineeringly, and he now seems taller and stronger.

"Fodder will go first and buy us some time, and then we will run for it, everyone on their own. The ones that make it will meet outside the city," he says, ignoring the fact that the barrier is most likely around the entirety of the city.

He is desperate and wants to try it while he still has some strength left. The most surprising thing to me is that he doesn't even suggest attacking the Calamity, clearly showing how terrifying the tree monster is.

Well, the waiting is finally over.

After a long time, I stand up with a sigh of relief. I have learned all I could and I do not need them anymore.

I throw the mana stone I was working on at Sophie and she grabs it, giving me a short nod. She immediately sends her mana inside, keeping the field that protects us from the Living Tree stable over a considerable part of the tunnel.

That much is enough.

After close to 20 days, I reach out and start weakening the hold over my emotions that [Focus] has.

POV Maya Jones

Out of nowhere, the silence becomes even more deafening. It's so quiet I can swear I hear my blood moving through my veins. Then the air becomes colder and every movement I make is like I'm moving through molasses.

And only then, a loud thump sounds, followed by another. As if a heartbeat continues to echo in the tunnel.

Nathaniel stands up, his face pale, bags under his eyes, messy hair, and even a visible hint of some weight loss. But he doesn't move slowly, and I don't feel any weakness from him; he stands up confidently, each movement sharp and strong.

Then mana starts radiating from his body. It slowly ramps up as if it's a generator creating more and more of it, and it continues to flow into the tunnel, almost feeling like waves hitting and reflecting from it.

"Oh, so you did hide a little bit of mana," Elydor smiles, immediately noticing it, his tone almost as if delighted by the challenge.

But it doesn't stop there; even more and more mana continues to radiate from Nathaniel to the point where the smile slowly disappears from Elydor's face, replaced by sheer surprise and then a hint of fear.

"Get into formation 5, we are against an Amplificator. Estimated level a bit under 200," he hisses quickly at his men, his mana also activating.

On the other side, Nathaniel just lazily takes a step away from us and towards them, keeping Group 4 behind his back.

“You with them?” Nathaniel asks shortly towards the woman called Obelia, guild master of Storm Brigade.

To Elydor's cursing, Obelia shakes her head and only takes a step back, creating a barrier around her guild members that they continue to strengthen.

And then Nathaniel's expression changes. The distant face he had up until now disappears as he deactivates the skill both he and I share. For the first time since we ended up trapped in the tunnels, his eyes become different. They are not so uncaring and distant anymore.

Like a burning fire, hate appears in them. A terrible, unforgiving rage.

At the same moment, his mana changes, it stops freely flowing and freezes in the air, dominated by his will.

“Change of assessment, level over 200, at least a rare-grade Primary class,” Elydor shouts, and his mana rushes and clashes against Nathaniel's.

Chapter 205: Sheer force of Mana

POV Sophie Martinez

Immediately after Nathaniel begins releasing his mana, members of a small guild called Blackrock, along with a few individuals from Serpent's Eye who were nearby, attack us.

Tess runs in front of me and hits the man who is about to attack Hadwin from behind, while lightning crackles around her body, burning the attacking man. Her javelins spin around her, moving as if they have minds of their own, stabbing at anyone who attacks us.

Maya's armor darkens, and she is thrown back by an explosion nearby. She is bleeding and her eye seems hurt, but her armor darkens even more, and I can see the wound healing at a visible speed. Moving faster and with a calm look on her face, she attacks a woman who has flames around her body.

The twins move even faster than Maya, constantly attacking a single target while confusing him with illusions of other people. The illusions seem so realistic, it's hard to determine what's real and what's not.

Hadwin continues to take attacks from people, none of them able to pierce his skin or even draw blood. Hadwin is thrown back occasionally, but he always stands up quickly and slashes with a sword he got from Nathaniel, each attack breaking barriers and piercing armor.

Kim maneuvers dozens of orbs made from silver metal around him, and seizing the opportunity, he shoots them at people trying to kill us. The orbs are boosted to an insane degree, barely a blur, and they deform or pierce the armors of anyone he attacks. Often, he also targets an opponent or two, and when he does, their movement slows down.

One of Elydor's men performs something similar to teleportation and appears behind Lily, slicing into her neck and almost separating her head from her body. Just before we react, a few of Lily's fingers disappear and the wound heals nearly instantaneously. The man tries to vanish, but she's already holding his hand. Lily uses her terrifying skill, and with one pulse of grayish mana, the man disappears, gear and all.

My eyes meet Lily's. I shudder and avoid her gaze.

Someone shoots ice-like spikes at me, and I don't react as Izzy creates bright blue flames that swirl around us. They melt and burn everything in their path, while our group doesn't feel any heat. The man who attacked me gets surrounded by them, and his body burns and is set ablaze, even though he constantly tries to fight against them with his barriers made of ice.

I continue to maintain the barrier that blocks the particles of the Living Tree. Only when I notice one of the women creating a strong attack do I reach into her mind. At first, she reacts with extreme surprise, as like many, she's unaware of mind manipulation, but she quickly defends herself, pushing against me. I don't stop there though; I attack more aggressively and burrow deeper, destroying her mental defense and taking over her mind while the woman screams in pain.

Then I send a simple order.

The woman's expression changes and becomes calm, with only the fear in her eyes revealing her true feelings. The woman starts pumping all her mana into a single attack, ignoring the strain it places on her body and mind. She bleeds from her eyes, nose, and ears, but she disregards it all under my [Manipulation]. When she's done, she turns around and releases the attack against her guild, torn apart in the subsequent explosion.

Blood and flesh cover the walls of the tunnel.

Another man approaches, clad in armor similar to Maya's, and attacks Izzy, only to be grabbed by the ankle with purple mana arms. These aren't translucent as before; they're a solid, dark purple color and seem to be affecting the man's armor, dissipating, disrupting, or dissolving it. Dozen more arms appear from Biscuit's back and surround the man's body, angrily tearing off pieces of the armor and dissolving the rest. Then, as the man screams, the mana arms tear off his head.

Biscuit looks around, and I notice his eyes glowing a purple hue. He shouts something at another enemy, using his telepathy differently — this time as an attack. The man screams in pain, clutching his head.

And then I feel that mana.

It's as if a monster is waking up from deep slumber. The domineering mana fills the tunnels, and it continues to do so. An immense, insane amount of mana that makes it feel as if it's hard to breathe or move through.

Dealing with the last member of Blackrock, whom Tess kills with a burst of lightning, we all turn to the source of all of that.

It's him.

Nathaniel stands there in the center of all of that, releasing all this mana without any worry in the world and blocking ranged attacks that are thrown at him. His face has a bright smile on it, instead of the distant expression he's shown in the past week.

Others probably can't feel it, but I can with my [Manipulation]. The area around Nathaniel feels as if it's his, the area within which he moves all this mana. There's no efficiency, there's no delicate control, and he doesn't even use it to feed his skills.

It's just a sheer amount of raw mana that he controls and moves. The mana is so dense it's possible to see it without any skills.

My mana continues to move through my body, cycling in the way I want it to. [Focus] changes and this time it only helps me deal with my skills. My emotions come to the surface, filling me with anger I haven't felt in a long time.

Every expression, every movement, every word Elydor says fills me with disgust as his mana rushes towards me, threatening and raging. He moves it in sharp wisp-like constructs that continue to slash against the walls, yet not damaging them at all; the tunnel is incredibly durable.

[Mana Domain] encompasses the entire tunnel and not waiting for Elydor's attack to reach me, I take a step towards him. A disrupting wave is sent ahead, canceling his attack and a few attacks from his guild members.

At the same time, I hear Group 4 finishing their fight against the members of Blackrock who stayed near them and a few members of Serpent's Eye who joined the fight.

I feel movement in my shadow and a woman steps out of it, a short dagger glowing in red light, as she moves incredibly fast towards my neck. At the same moment, I feel pressure on me, some sort of gravity magic.

[Redistribution] slows the woman's attack to a crawl as I absorb the energy of her movement. She tries to escape into my shadow again, but I disrupt the activation of her skill.

They throw more attacks against me, yet I quickly create a barrier that is stronger than ever before. Even then, a few cracks start appearing on it as I turn towards the woman, now blocked from the view of the rest of her guild.

In front of her, I create an orb. Not caring about efficiency, I use [Mana Infusion] to fill it with mana, then push more with [Redistribution], the orb turning into a tricolored one: blue, light blue, and purple mana swirling inside it.

“I remember you. You're the one who laughed when he came to our house,” I say.

She doesn't answer.

Oh, obviously, she can't; I'm holding her movement with [Redistribution].

I laugh shortly, “Sorry, I didn't realize,” I apologize to her. Then, strengthening my body and holding the tricolored orb in my hand, I bury it into her chest, blood, and gore exploding on me. But I do not care and leave the orb that starts shining brightly in her chest.

Still unmoving, blood flows from her mouth and her eyes start losing light. I lean closer, “Why aren't you laughing now?” I ask.

She doesn't answer and dies, right after my barrier breaks under the attacks of her guild.

I grab and throw her body against her guild mates.

For a moment, they hesitate and do not attack or block. Only a bit later does Elydor realize what's happening, “Barrier!” he shouts, his mana rushing back to him, creating a sphere around his guild, and over it, multiple additional layers are formed

Before the orb inside the woman's body explodes, I send a few javelins, boosted and filled with kinetic energy, toward the barrier, destroying several layers of it. Then, I expand my domain to reach even behind them and start working on Anchor.

The orb explodes, tearing the woman's body apart and sending a shockwave through the tunnel.

I absorb all the heat around me into stored thermal energy. It puts pressure on me, but I force myself to do so. Surprisingly, they even weakened the explosion a bit, and when their barriers break down, no one is dead. There is not even an implosion.

Before they attack again, I activate the [Tether] I placed behind them through my Domain. I appear on their flank, and before they realize it, I grab a man by his neck. Immediately I recognize him as one of the men who laughed when Elydor kicked Biscuit.

I smile at his terrified expression and while disrupting his mana I squeeze and pull off a big chunk of his neck. His heart continues to pump the blood that spurts on me as I kick him towards his guild mates.

[You have defeated Flame Ascendant - lvl 162]

I sense something and strengthen my body, and the invisible slash that would have killed me only sends me against the wall. Before I hit it, I absorb my own movement and stop in place, dodging another attack and attack with vibrating kinetic energy while a high-frequency pitch rings in my ears. The man staggers backward with a big hole in his chest. I can even look through it before he falls to the ground.

Remembering him as one of the assholes I send another blast of kinetic energy at his corpse, exploding it in its entirety, covering the walls in blood and tiny pieces of what used to be the man.

[You have defeated Terra Guardian - lvl 171]

My javelin pierces through the chest of one of the men attacking me, expanding afterward, tearing his body into two pieces that fall down.

I burn his face with dark yellow flames until he stops screaming.

[You have defeated Shadow Weaver - lvl 159]

They launch more attacks at me. A weird smoke that burns my skin, and I cancel it with [Resonance]. Mana whips and projectiles that Elydor uses to attack while blocking my own with his quick and

powerful barrier. He holds the sword in his hand, the sword with a blade made out of translucent white crystal that is slowly changing its color to pale blue.

The entire time Elydor also pressures and fights against my [Mana Domain] and continues to destroy my anchors, not allowing me to use [Tether] again.

Two warriors charge at me; their movement is slowed by [Redistribution], yet not enough. Supporting them, a man keeps shooting arrows at me, each a deadly projectile glowing brightly.

But I do not hesitate and fires appear around me, slowly healing my body and preventing the warriors from moving much closer. I redirect the arrows with the barriers that I continuously create.

My heart continues to thump, and I release more and more mana into the area.

I disrupt the gravity skill trying to slow me down. A burst of kinetic energy throws one warrior away, and a laser-like flame is continuously fed by the thermal energy my heart generates blazes toward him. More and more, even when a barrier appears around him to protect the man. I disrupt them, and while screaming, the warrior is set ablaze.

Still able to fight he moves towards me while burning, an incredible amount of stats in physical attributes keep him alive.

I step towards him, creating a sword in my hand to kill him. Then I sense something through my [Perception]. A few more members of Serpent's Eye are moving towards my group.

My regulator changes its settings, and all my mana gets redistributed into physical stats.

With a swing of my fist, I hit the head of the burning man, exploding it like a watermelon and then I release all the kinetic energy I have to push myself towards where the men are going.

I disrupt the slowing gravity skill, hit a few mana wisps away with my bare hands, and kick a woman with a shield who steps in my way. One of Elydor's projectiles burrows into my side, destroying a few barriers I have created, but I ignore it.

Within a second, I reach the first group and extend my hand towards one of them.

Varrik was his name? Elydor's right hand.

I place my hand on his shoulder and then fight against an attack that tries to disrupt my mana, his skin covered in some barrier that tries to do so. A giggle escapes my mouth at his attempt and I squeeze harder, breaking his shoulder and making others in front of him turn around.

I disrupt his barrier with one short pulse of disrupting mana and then send a strong burst of kinetic energy through his body, and watch as it swells, expands, and explodes in a shower of flesh and blood that hits me and his friends.

[You have defeated Crimson Bloodtracker - lvl 172]

Attacks enter my domain, and I create barriers behind my back while boosting my body even further and moving ahead.

The man that charged at group 4 dodges my attack, and his fist hits my chest with force strong enough to explode my body if I hadn't strengthened it. Tattoos start glowing on his body, and his movement speeds up, with multiple more attacks landing while two more men get behind my back and the remaining woman sends a lightning attack at me.

Barriers behind me break, and this time Elydor stops hiding and charges as well, sending waves of mana towards me and creating pressure that makes it hard to move mana outside of my body. The sword in his hand glows brighter and Elydor moves much faster than before.

[Focus] allows me to see every detail, and mana glows beautifully in a black-and-white world.

This is too easy.

The world is as if slowed down, and I take a deep breath in and out. Then, fueled by the anger that still keeps burning inside of me, I reach towards my Mana Reservoir, which is three times the size of my entire mana, and use it for the first time.

A few mana arms form within my [Mana Domain] and grab the men and women closest to me. With just a simple thought I control my mana and the arms tear them apart. Limb by limb and I throw them at Elydor, amused by his expression.

Multiple attacks are shot at me, but barriers and shields form immediately out of my mana within the domain. The barriers break but are quickly replaced as I disregard mana expenditure.

Right now my mana feels truly bottomless.

Elydor creates orbs that explode, dissipating large amounts of that mana within my domain. A terrifying attack follows, piercing through multiple barriers and throwing me against the wall.

A man rushes at me, bright blue tattoos glowing on his body. It's almost cute.

Quickly I form ten javelins around me and throw them at the man. He dodges three of them, the fourth hits him and throws him to the side and somehow, he destroys rest of the javelins.

I form twenty more of them, each of them of a darker shade of blue than the ones before. By the twelfth one, the man gets pierced by it, the remaining javelins arriving and obliterating his body.

A short silence ensues and then a loud thump sounds.

Five members of Elydor's guild encircle me. Elydor as well and he holds a sword that has a beautiful blade seemingly made of transparent crystal. He does something, and all the mana around me gets pulled towards the blade, which starts turning blue to a darker shade of blue and emitting a pale blue light.

I block a few attacks and start actively sending mana toward Elydor and observing the sword in his hand. Such a nice weapon.

Two women attack me from behind, their bodies covered in some sort of armor made of mana. I just release more mana and form four bigger mana arms that grab them and pull until they are torn in half.

Again, I throw their bodies at Elydor.

He shouts something and I can see tears appearing in his eyes. Yet he still notices the tricolored orb inside one of the bodies and screams with rage, ordering a barrier to be created while moving at a speed that seems too high for someone with as many stats invested in mana.

An explosion follows, accompanied by heat, but there is no implosion, once again canceled by Elydor.

A few more of his guild members die in the attack, unable to defend against it on their own.

What a letdown.

Elydor starts pulling out and using multiple mana stones, an amulet, and some other equipment, but he doesn't feel threatening anymore. His attacks are strong, yet they feel desperate, and seeing fear in his face is satisfying, yet disappointing.

I expected more of them.

The following fight takes barely over a minute. I don't even have to carefully use my skills, I just radiate as much mana as I need and my attacks are simple enough to be called primitive. Just simple mana shaping. There is nothing they can do, unable to deal with my vast amount of mana. Their barriers are torn apart by massive mana arms. Attacks are blocked with barriers.

It's not pretty and it's not efficient. There is no fight of wits, no exchange of skills. It's just the sheer force of my mana.

In the end, four big mana arms appear, tearing away every limb of the Serpent's Eye guild master while I ignore his attempts to continue to dodge or defend himself. The man screams, twitches, and tries to

attack even in such a state, but to no avail. I let kinetic energy flow from my body and explode his limbs on the ground, reducing them to nothingness.

Then I throw Elydor towards Biscuit.

(Asshole!) a single word resounds, but this time it feels different than usual.

Purple mana tentacles appear around the corgi, dozens of them, and they grab the man, completely enveloping him. It takes a long time but at the end, the screaming stops and Elydor's mana signature disappears.

I feel mana from Obelia of her guild and with a push from my kinetic energy, I move in front of them. Stopping at the spot in front of their barrier by absorbing my inertia.

Obelia and her guild. The Storm Brigade didn't join the fight at all, yet now I feel them preparing their mana, ready for anything. It doesn't feel threatening; it's more like saying: if you attack, we will fight.

I don't like it.

While staring down at them I start releasing more of my mana, taking more from my Mana Reservoir and using it to pressure them. There's no hesitation in what I am doing, and I'm ready to fight them. To fight and win.

The pressure continues to increase on both sides, like two wild animals facing off and growling at each other.

Obelia says something, and reluctantly, slowly, her guild members, and then she herself, pull back their mana, deactivate their skills, and abandon their combat-ready stances.

Only then do I feel satisfied. I send one more strong pulse of mana through the tunnels and stop using my mana.

I pull all my mana back to my body, copying something I saw Elydor do and soon it all disappears as if it never existed.

A long sigh escapes my mouth, and I feel my face revert to its usual expression.

I turn back to group 4 and my domain reaches them again, once again countering the attack of the Living Tree.

Chapter 206: Out of the tunnels

Everyone from Group 4 seems to be fine; there are some wounds, but nothing terrible. Unsurprisingly, they were able to deal with a few enemies even though most of them were at higher levels than our group.

I would be surprised if it didn't end up the way it did. They totally decimated poor Blackrock and a few members of Serpent's Eye that were nearby.

"Lily, would you mind? I might need a bit of healing," I say, leaning against the wall and sliding to the ground.

Immediately, a petite black-haired girl stops healing Hadwin's hands and comes rushing to me.

Wow, Lily, that's harsh.

She sits down next to me and puts her hand on my shoulder, and soon I can feel her warm mana flowing inside my body. I'm also keeping plenty of thermal energy flowing through me to have my passive skill activated, and with Lily's healing, I'm quickly getting better.

While sitting there, I check on my Mana Reservoir, and there's still around thirty percent of its total size left. Not bad. I mean, I could use my mana more efficiently, but it was worth it.

I look up, just in time to see Biscuit throwing Elydor's body far away into the tunnel.

Such a good boy.

For a few minutes, no one says anything, just continuing to calm down and letting me rest a bit while I keep the Living Tree's particles from reaching us. I'm getting quite good at it, am I not?

My mood is also much better now, and even though some of the remaining people inside the tunnel seem to have grim faces, I'm not worried at all. Obviously, I already know what I will do. If I didn't, I would've endured the past few weeks for nothing and ended up disappointed in myself.

Tess and Haddy, being as reliable as they are, are already looting the corpses of Serpent's Eye. Some of the items survived the fight, some of them of really high rarity, and then there's also a chest and a few items they got from Champion's house.

I notice a few greedy glances from Storm Brigade, but no one does anything, so group 4 collects a pretty sizable pile of items, mana stones, and some other valuables. Temporarily, they take some items to use, and the rest they put on a pile closer to the barrier, packed and ready to be moved.

"I suppose you do have a plan?" Obelia moves closer, accompanied by one of her aides. Neither of them is using mana.

Seeing her act so respectfully feels weird, but not in a bad way. Obelia is smart, smarter than Elydor, and even though she didn't help, she didn't underestimate me. It makes me wonder what she would think knowing that my level is lower than even that of the aide next to her.

Actually, should I tell her? It would be fun to watch.

"Yes I have a plan, I will need the biggest mana stone you have for that," I say shamelessly even though there are plenty of mana stones we got from looting Serpent's Eye.

Obelia hands me two of them. The ones that are even worth more than the ones worth a few hundred thousand dollars.

"Two more, and that weird mana stone you guys got from the champion's house," I ask.

Even though her aide seems about to complain, Obelia just does so. She reaches into her inner pocket and gives me three mana stones, and even that nice, spheric mana stone I saw them get from the manor— an item densely covered in mana circuits that I identify as epic grade.

She doesn't even hesitate, and her eyes are calm and decisive as she does so. She is simply paying me to help get her out as well. I bet I could get even more if I asked, but I think it's better to create a good relationship with her.

I really like her decisiveness and her logical thinking.

“It will take a while, maybe an hour or two, and then we can go on,” I tell her.

With a nod, she goes back to her guild.

“Lily, go and heal poor Haddy. I need to focus now and work on something,” I tell her.

“Are you saying that I'm distracting to you?” she says with a small, cheeky smile. Like everyone else, she's a bit down, tired, and somewhat depressed after two weeks in dark tunnels, yet she tries to joke with me.

Before I can pinch her nose, she stands up and joins the rest of the group.

You have escaped this time, silly girl.

Finally, I put away the stones I got from Obelia and keep only one that I hold in my left hand, which is pale white up to my shoulder. The one that Lily restored on the second floor.

My mana enters the stone, and I consolidate my [Focus] and start working.

The process is similar to creating a construct inside my body, yet a bit easier, meaning that a mistake won't hurt me, and a big mistake won't kill me. At worst, it will destroy the stone.

Unsurprisingly, the stone Obelia gave me is better than even the ones from before, and I'm sure with my current experiences, I won't be able to use it to its fullest potential, so a lot of the stone will be wasted. But is that even a problem? It's just some money, and if using an expensive mana stone helps me improve my chance of success even a tiny bit, it's more than worth it.

The structure I'm creating inside it with [Mana Infusion] and [Resonance] is extremely delicate, and it mostly hovers inside, not etched yet, waiting to be finished before I permanently put it inside the stone.

[Mana Manipulation] also works, and then I get an idea and activate even [Mana Domain]. Not a big sphere-like field around me; I make it much smaller and just use it around the mana stone.

[Mana Domain - lvl 6 > Mana Domain - lvl 7]

A skill that leveled up during the fight levels up again as only [Focus] keeps me concentrated on the difficult task.

My skills work together in harmony, and my creation becomes more and more intricate and detailed, and it's getting harder to keep it from breaking apart.

The construct I'm creating right now is only for single use and is inspired by all the testing Elydor, Obelia, and everyone else did in attempt to break the barrier. The biggest part of it and inspiration is my skill, [Resonance].

I could try to use [Resonance] only, but just from watching others' attempts, I know how impossible something like that is. No matter how good the skill is, its level is not high enough to compete with the three-question mark monster's barrier. The amount of mana that flows through it, its density, and most likely levels of its skills are just that monstrous.

[Mana Infusion - lvl 29 > Mana Infusion - lvl 30]

As I finally decide to inscribe the construct inside the mana stone, my skill breaks through the bottleneck. At the same time, I quickly make a few changes, noticing the mistakes I didn't feel while preparing for inscribing.

When I'm finally done, I sigh with relief and release my skills, and some tension escapes my body.

Mana Pulse Stone (rare) - A single-use stone designed to channel a surge of mana to attempt to disrupt the Living Tree's barrier. Once activated, it crumbles to dust.

I expected it to be of higher rarity, but even this should be enough as it's just a single-use item that will help me channel my skill and mana.

After letting others know, I stand up and move towards the barrier. As before, it's amazingly strong, and just knowing that it covers an entire sizable city gives me goosebumps.

I also remember Hydra, a three-question mark monster Lissandra so easily tore apart on the second floor. Was it as strong as the Living Tree? Weaker? Maybe even stronger. How strong is an Absolute to be able to do something like that? As always, titles such as Champion and Absolute fill me with curiosity. But anyway, I will know when I get to that point.

With everyone around and prepared to run the moment I create a hole in the barrier, I hold the Mana Pulse Stone in my hand and push it against the barrier. Then, I charge as much of my mana as I can, and, activating [Resonance]

The only thing I do is [Focus] to create as strong a burst of mana as I can without having my body torn apart, relying on the Mana stone to do the hard work instead of my body enduring.

The stone crumbles and the barrier only wobbles slightly, an amazing result compared to two big guilds being unable to do even that over two weeks, yet the barrier is still here.

Well, this is awkward.

I reach out with an open palm towards Obelia. Without hesitating, she places another mana stone in the palm of my hand, and I get back to inscribing.

It takes a few more days and two more tries to finally succeed.

When the tear finally appears in the barrier, everyone rushes out, and then we continue to run without looking back.

We run until we get out of the tunnels through a hidden passageway.

Yet no one celebrates. As quickly as we can, we get to the array we used to arrive there, and Obelia and a few of her members start putting mana stones into the circle and operating it with their weird item.

The entire time, the remainder of us face the old capital, staring at the Living Tree. Even now, the city is entirely covered in a spherical barrier that seems to glow.

It takes a few more minutes, and the barrier starts to expand. Slowly, but surely, it grows bigger and bigger, covering more and more of the area around the city.

That prompts the members of Storm Brigade to move faster, their movements urgent and exchanging short shouts while Obelia, with a calm demeanor, leads them.

When the circle finally activates, the barrier isn't even that far off, and I welcome the feeling of falling as we get transferred away.

We don't find ourselves back on the circle near Virelia we used for transport; instead, it's a circle somewhere on the plains, and far in the distance, I can see mountains, anthills, the territory of good ol' bus-sized ants.

"We didn't have time to pick the exact location," Obelia says to us, "But we should be able to get to Virelia fairly soon, so I think that much is fine."

"Sounds good," I tell her, and finally, there is more relief that I feel.

Looking at the items Group 4 carries, I can't wait to examine them all.

"Weird, they never leave their territory," I hear someone say and feel goosebumps on my back.

Oh no.

Tess also looks towards where Obelia is looking and activates her [Farsight].

"They aren't that far away from the anthills," Tess says to Obelia.

The guild master of Storm Brigade looks at Tess and nods, "They are not. But even this is weird. I don't think I ever heard of any ant leaving their territory."

It's fine.

"Miss, I think we should leave and maybe inform other guilds. They will want to set up some watches to observe their movements. Just in case," the voice of Obelia's guild member is worried.

It's totally fine.

Chapter 207: Boop

Tess's gaze burns on the back of my head the entire time we are moving towards the city, and I don't know why she does that. I did nothing wrong.

Everyone would have done the same. Everyone SHOULD do the same and throw a few fire orbs into the tunnels.

As we enter the city, Obelia gives me a small mana stone that contains the address of her guild and different ways to contact her. It can also be given to the guards who should let her know that it's me looking for her in case it happens.

She also mentions that Elydor's death will create a lot of mess and looks at me as if expecting me to do something.

Knowing how much trouble it would be to get involved in this mess, I just wave my hand, not bothered by her look that tries to guilt-trip me into doing something.

"I will see you around and thanks," she says, and then leaves with her guild members.

Our guild does the same, and we quickly rush to our house. When we finally get there, everyone disappears to take long showers, leaving all the loot in the middle of the living room. Items most likely worth more than some people can imagine just sit there: on the carpet, against the wall, thrown on the table.

Without a care in the world.

It's somewhat amusing to see items that caused so many deaths and took so much time for Serpent's Eye to plan and acquire. We suffered over two weeks in a dark tunnel, constantly worried about getting killed, yet right now, they aren't even worth more than a shower.

I look at Biscuit, "What do you think?"

(Sustenance?) the small corgi asks.

"Yes, we will buy you a lot of food," I tell him.

He woofs, and it somehow sounds thankful.

Then, after checking that everyone is still away, I kneel down to get my face closer to him. For a moment, I just look at this cheeky, yet gentle doggo and remember how they treated him while I was deep in [Focus] and blocking my emotions to protect everyone.

"I'm sorry I let them do those things to you," I whisper carefully, still worried someone might hear it. Then I carefully touch and pet his head.

That makes Biscuit stop swinging his tail, and he looks directly into my eyes.

I continue to pet his head, once again feeling the rage for how he and others were treated. I know I did it to protect them, but it still feels wrong.

"I would never let them treat you like that, without really good reason." I continue to whisper, after once again checking that no one is around.

Telling anyone who could respond normally would feel way too weird and be too difficult for me. But with Biscuit, it's somewhat easy.

"So, thank you for enduring," I finish and boop his nose, but only once.

In response, Biscuit starts hovering and slowly floats higher until his eyes are at the same level as mine.

For a while, he just looks at me in that way, his eyes feeling much more intelligent than back then on the 1st floor.

Then he lifts up his right front paw and touches my nose with it, a movement similar to how I always boop his nose. He doesn't say anything, but his eyes seem gentler than ever.

I wait until everyone is back in the living room, and only then do I tell them to wait for me and not to touch any items until I'm back.

The boys seem to be extremely unhappy and excited to go through the items, but their slightly angry looks that follow me as I walk upstairs only make me more powerful.

I need to do something petty like that to feel manly once again.

Damn, who would have known that the best manipulator of group 4 isn't Sophie, Isabella, or Tess? Nope, as always our animal overlords beat us even in that. Biscuit is the most dangerous being here.

Should I just give up, lie down, and wait for the end? I bet if I did, Biscuit would clear this floor for me. Heck, he's probably even manipulating people in the Community who long since learned that he is actually a cute, burrito-shaped corgi.

Dangerous, everything here is dangerous.

Inside the shower, I turn up the heat and close my eyes, replaying the past two weeks. Going through everything that happened with my emotions not weakened is a weird experience and at times I almost get angry at myself, but in the end, I can't help but agree with everything I did.

Thanks to my decision, no one from our group died, we survived, everyone got 500 shards, we got plenty of items, and even got rid of a few pieces of human trash.

Others also did well, enduring all of that and fought well when it came to it, but even now I feel a weird confusion as to why they put so much trust in me. They went through with my plan, waiting and trusting. They endured the treatment Serpent's Eye members gave them and the darkness of the tunnels.

In some way, the trust they put in me feels heavy and, from a logical point of view, I can understand why they did so. I'm strong, I'm talented when it comes to mana, and I am willing to push myself. Plus, I did have a plan.

On the other hand, it's something I don't think I would be able to do. Just doing that would require a huge amount of trust and a willingness to give up control, and that's something I haven't liked to do ever since going through all the bullshit in my childhood.

Well, anyway, bygones be bygones.

I finish my shower and take a bit more time to find some super comfortable clothes from the many I still have in the locker, and only then do I walk downstairs. Refreshed and feeling much lighter.

Unsurprisingly, the Twins and Min-Jae are already going through the items, and the moment they see me, they point at Lily, "It was her idea."

Before they start bickering, I just look at the petite black-haired girl, "Well, Lily, I have to say I'm disappointed in you." I joke, and it earns me a few surprised looks when I plop onto the couch, next to Isabella and Sophie.

"Nathaniel Gwyn joking and not being petty. The world is coming to an end," Maya reacts dramatically out loud and throws a bag of snacks at me, which I grab and start eating quickly.

In a good mood, I decide to ignore the attack on my person and turn to the Twins, "Sword with a blade made of something like crystal." I tell them, and immediately I get the sword Elydor used.

Ethercrystal Shortsword (Epic):

Ohoo, so the effect is as I thought. Good, time to look into absorbing ambient mana.

"Mine," I say and put the sword next to me, "Next."

Lily giggles as I get another item. This time it's a cloak.

Veilshade Cloak (Epic): Tailored from the rare and elusive shadow silk, this cloak grants the wearer a veil of obscurity against magical detection. Its dark aura masks the user's magical signature, making it a prized possession for those seeking to move unnoticed through places guarded by magical enchantments.

Huh, not bad, but nothing amazing. The effect is probably really good, looking at the item's rarity, but not something I would like.

"Fight over it after we are done," I say and put it on the table, as generous as I am.

All the items should be mine, to be honest, so giving away something of such high rarity is quite nice of me, isn't it? Someone should praise me and bring me more snacks.

The next item is a weird cube made of metal with its surface covered in white etchings of mana circuits.

Abyssal Anchor (Epic): This gravity anchor is made from a heavy mythical metal. When activated, it creates a gravitational pull, dragging foes toward the item and locking them in place, leaving them vulnerable and restrained.

This one also seems to be really good. The gravitational pull must be strong for it to be an epic item.

I think about it a bit longer and then just put it on the table next to the cloak.

Unfortunately, I don't have much time to try to learn its effects, and gravity magic too. My current priorities are coordinates and hopefully buying another epic passive skill.

Epic items are something that can be taken away; a passive is something that I will keep, hopefully forever, and looking at them being twice as expensive as items of the same rarity, the system seems to agree with me.

Before I get another item, I pull out the spheric mana stone I got from Obelia and check it as well.

Mana Core Sphere (Epic): This enigmatic sphere contains a pulsing core that can be filled with mana, which then resonates with other magical energies nearby. When activated, it can disperse a wave of mana that temporarily silences the magical abilities of foes in the vicinity.

Did I back then feel that its effect is similar to [Resonance] and that's why I asked Obelia to give it to me? I will check it and its effect before deciding if I give up on it. The item seemingly can create lasting disruption so that's something worth examining.

I put it away and take the last epic item from Min-Jae.

Darkstride Ring (Epic): This ring is imbued with a dark enchantment that allows the wearer to step into the shadows and reappear a short distance away in a different shadow, effectively granting the ability to blink through shadows for a tactical advantage.

Curious, I put it on my finger and send mana inside the ring, then, following the feeling, I activate it and reach towards the closest shadow near me.

I feel as if my body elongates and turns into a blur, and I enter the shadow, and while inside it, I feel something like a sort of connection towards the shadows in the room. The more I send mana into it, the further shadows are connected to me. To test it, I exit the shadow and then enter it again to return to my original spot.

“Wow,” Izzy looks at me with big eyes and reaches to take the ring off my finger, to which I pull my hand away, much to her annoyance.

I like it but also have a feeling that if I take it, I will start relying on it instead of trying to improve my [Tether] and my anchors. It's also weirdly limiting in comparison to my skill.

In the end, I put it on the table, and Sophie immediately moves it further away from little Isabella, who tries to take it.

As for the rare grade items that we got, I don't even look at them. There are probably some I would still find useful or interesting, but in the end, their rarity will limit them strongly and would soon end up being useless to me.

Selling them to the system might be a good idea, but the system drastically reduces the prices of items, so we wouldn't get many shards. It probably is better to try to sell them through the auctions in Virelia and then attempt to buy even better items or just save money for something interesting.

“How about the chest?” I ask the twins, pointing to the chest near them. The one that two of Elydor's men had to carry, even with their strong bodies, and that made him so happy.

“We couldn't open it at all,” Dennis shakes his head.

“There is no lock, and even Sophie didn't sense any mana from it, nor could she do anything,” Aaron adds.

Oh, isn't that interesting?

I stand up and move towards the chest to observe it. It's made of a black wood-like material, yet it's heavy. Either the material is very dense, or the item inside is really heavy. It's not that big, but big enough for a short sword, dagger, a bunch of books, or a piece of armor. Anything could be in there.

Slowly, I go through most of my skills that might help me get inside, yet nothing works. Even kinetic and thermal energy doesn't make a difference, and something tells me that even if I go all out, it won't change.

“Lily?” I turn towards her with a question.

“I already tried. [Disintegration] didn't do anything,” she says.

This is what surprises me the most. Lily's skill is something that even made Lissandra hesitate. Yes, the cockroach-like absolute wasn't at her strongest, not even close to it, but even so, it shows how scary the potential of that skill is.

Looking at the chest, I feel my hopes rising. Knowing that we were going to the Manor of the Champion, I hoped for items with a higher rarity than epic, maybe even similar to Peacemaker or Sword of Aeons from the second floor, yet we only found epic items.

But looking at the chest, I feel my loot goblin side awakening.

I usually don't care much about items, but heck, even I'm attracted to shiny ones like the Valorplate that one of the Calamities wears, or maybe the one inside the chest.

No matter how many months or years it will take, I will find a way to get it out!

Chapter 208: Fallen guild

Two days have passed during which life has become quite peaceful. No one leaves for hunting, and they enter the city only in larger groups as we wait for the consequences of destroying the leadership of one of the 5 big guilds of Virelia.

Yup, Myrra did promise to deal with the consequences, but I'll believe that when I see it.

Meanwhile, I spend some time trying to get into the chest, yet unsuccessfully. I use the underground area that the house has, which is shielded. It's quite large and durable, so I even use some stronger attacks, yet the chest resists.

I don't sense anything from it; there's no keyhole, and it still looks like black wood. Even Lily, with her terrifying skill, is unable to do anything. She tries to boost it by using [Sacrifice], and her entire arm disappears while she reduces the area of the skill and makes it stronger at a smaller point.

She doesn't even blink as her arm is used to boost the skill and only says that it will grow back and that she was able to gain a level in the skill.

As I've said and as I will repeat until Biscuit takes over the earth as the first and strongest animal overlord: No one from Group 4 is normal. Not a single soul.

I, Nathaniel Gwyn, am the most normal here.

Another thing I do is work on coordinates with Sophie. Down in the tunnels under the old capital, I gained some experience and learned a thing or two, so there is progress. Sophie, bored because she can't hunt, also spends plenty of time working with me.

I can smell it; just a few weeks and I will be rich! A lot of shards rich.

During the past two days, I also tested the Mana Core Sphere, and I was right: it works like [Resonance] and it scales with how much mana I use to activate the item. When I use a lot of it, the effect becomes terrifying.

With my skill, I currently can't cover that large an area, and I can't activate it in one push that would cover a huge area. The item doesn't have such limitations; I can send a huge chunk of my mana into it and activate it.

Obviously, I didn't test it properly. I have a feeling that if I use enough mana, I should be able to cover the area of the entire city.

Damn, what is it, a mana variant of EMP?

To balance it out and not make the item too powerful, the effect is a bit weaker than my [Resonance] when it comes to single target raw power and using the same amount of mana. The efficiency isn't nearly as good.

Then there's the fact that it leaves a lingering disruptive effect on the target, and that's something that I really like and the main reason why I'm messing with the item. It's an effect I want to learn to duplicate.

I could probably get it from a skill upgrade, but [Resonance] is one of the skills that I want to master on my own, as I consider it one of my strongest ones.

So that's the Mana Core Sphere, and I also have the Ethercrystal saber. For someone else, it would be an amazing item, but I'm terrible when it comes to using weapons like swords or actually any other weapon. I never had the opportunity to learn, and I could see the difference in skill when I fought with someone at least a bit skilled. Where they used technique, I relied on my aggressive attacks and the power of my body strengthened with mana.

Now that I think about it, it might be possible to hire someone in Virelia to teach me at least the basics so I should do that.

I reach out and pull the sword out of its sheath, revealing a beautiful transparent white blade that seems to be made from crystal. It looks delicate, yet I tested it, and it's extremely durable.

The description says, Forged from the elusive Ethercrystal, this transparent blade can absorb ambient mana from its surroundings. The sword channels the absorbed mana to bolster the user's physical strength momentarily.

And it does just that. The blade absorbs ambient mana; it does so even now, but the effect is weak as there isn't much mana. However, during the fight under the old capital, I saw it absorb plenty of my mana, turning the blade into a blue crystal-like material and boosting the physical stats of its user.

And that is something I want. Ever since I saw Lissandra absorbing ambient mana and using it during the end of the second floor, I wanted to learn that, and the sword in my hands might give me some hints I need to do so.

Holding the sword in my hand, I wave it around, watching the light reflect on it. The sword doesn't look too overdecorated. It's pretty, yet deadly-looking. I quite like it.

From testing, I learned that it can absorb even the mana contained in things like Isabella's fire, and when hitting Maya's [Armament]

And I didn't even test it at its fullest power when there's plenty of mana around to absorb.

I stand up from my favorite spot, a huge armchair in my room that offers a nice view of the city behind the window. I put the Mana Core Sphere into one of my pockets, and grab the sword, which is now in its sheath.

With a sigh, I walk onto the balcony, and when I look down, there's Myrra, behind the wall of our garden, waving at me. As always, her bodyguard is with her, just hidden really well. Thankfully, he isn't using any invisibility skill but is hiding in the shadows or something.

Invisibility skills should be illegal and monsters using them should be all annihilated. Should be and will be. By me!

I poke at Sophie's web.

(What?) Sophie soon sounds in my head.

(I will be going out for a while, Myrra is here. You can tell the others. And no, I don't know when I will be back. Oh, and I left a new version of the coordinates on my table, so check them while I'm gone.) I tell her the moment she sets the links between us.

(Will do, good luck.) With her message, our communication ends.

I jump from the balcony and boost myself with kinetic energy, then absorb it as I land next to the tall, white-haired lynthari with a scar across her face.

“So elegant,” her smile shows her sharp canines, and her golden eyes seem to pause at the pocket where I put the Mana Core Sphere. She also examines the sword I hold in my left hand.

“It looks like the rewards were quite generous, feral one,” with that, she starts walking, and I join her, walking by her side while her bodyguard tracks us.

“I can't complain,” I shrug my shoulders.

In silence, we continue to walk for a while, and from the corner of my eyes, I observe Myrra. She doesn't seem to be in a bad mood or anything, and her tail moves in a way that also confirms that. Once in a while, her cat-like ears perk up when she hears something interesting, but the tail is something that fascinates me more. It's slightly fluffy but not overly so, and it seems to be well-taken care of—healthy-looking with a nice shine to it.

It's the same color as her ears, a nice shade of gray that makes a nice contrast with her hair. The tail sways from side to side in many different ways, showing her mood. Yet it's not too much, just like her personality; it's controlled and calm.

“Would you like to touch it?” Myrra asks, her golden eyes glowing with amusement as she catches me looking.

“Yes,” I say shamelessly.

I'm not even lying. The same way I'm booping Biscuit's nose, I want to touch her tail and even pull on it, just to annoy her.

My answer seems to surprise her greatly, probably expecting me to get all nervous and apologize. After freezing for a bit, her tail starts twitching from side to side, showing her amusement.

"This is why you are so fun, feral one," she leans a bit closer, her eyes looking dangerous for a moment. As always, she decides to ignore my name and just continues to call me "feral one."

Myrra then doesn't otherwise react to my answer to her offer, and we enter an estate with a big manor-like building at the end of a pathway that is on both sides surrounded by beautiful, well-taken-care-of trees.

Slowly, we walk through the pathway until we reach the manor-like building. The closer we get, the more details I notice.

Broken doors, shattered windows, cracked walls, deep gouges in the ground, destroyed trees. There's even an entire part of the house that's missing, looking as if there was an explosion.

We enter through the door, and there are corpses of men and women on the ground, blood everywhere. The inside of the manor is also destroyed, burned, and with small craters everywhere.

"This is the guild house of Serpent's Eye, feral one. Can you guess what happened?"

I don't even have to think for long. "Most likely their enemies took revenge after finding out the guild master or elites of the guild died," I answer her.

"Close, this happened as well, but do you know what's funny? The fights started the moment the guild learned about the death of Elydor. Guild members fought each other to get the treasures the guild master locked away. Killing people they knew for years, just for a few more mana stones or an item or two," Myrra still looks amused.

She pokes one of the broken chairs with her feet, "Only after they were done looting did the enemies come, and more fights started. There was this one human I really liked, arrogant, prideful, and with powerful skills. He was one of the first to start looting, and he killed the man he'd worked with for five years. There was no hesitation at all," her expression is difficult to read as she says, "He got all the best things, he fought bravely, but in the end, he lost. He begged, he cried, and he tried to negotiate. But nothing helped, and he died just like that."

The tall lynthari with white hair looks around as if searching for the right words, then just sighs, shaking her head.

She continues, "In the end, he was just a fake. Someone pretending to be something he's not. So tell me, feral one. Is your behavior just a mask you show, and when things become hard, will you cry and ask for mercy?"

"There's only one way to find out," I answer her.

Her eyes examine me for a bit longer, and she nods in the end. "Yes, there's only one way to find out," she agrees.

Then she decides to change the subject and drops a bomb on me, "But now to the reason we came here, allow me to officially congratulate Angry Kittens for becoming one of the 5 big guilds of Virelia and replacing Serpent's Eye in their place."

Huh. What?

Chapter 209: Poking a cat

For a moment, I try to determine if Myrra is joking, but it doesn't seem like it. Even her tail seems to confirm what she said. It's not moving nervously, just gently swaying from side to side, showing her interest.

Her fluffy tail wouldn't lie to me, right?

"That sounds unreasonable?" I say to her.

"I agree," she moves and sits on a chair nearby, ignoring the craters around, burned walls, and holes in the ceiling. Her ears perk up slightly, and the light that falls on her face makes the scar that goes horizontally through it more visible.

"The main requirement to be able to be called a big guild is to be strong enough or have a strong member that could rival the power of an entire guild. Surprisingly, the guild master of Storm Brigade

said that your guild shouldn't have a problem with that. So tell me, feral one, is it you who is strong enough that you made me sense fear even from proud Obelia?"

Her eyes glint as she stares at me, surrounded by all this destruction.

"We are not interested in becoming a big guild," I ignore her question and answer.

Unsurprisingly, being the weirdo that she is, it only seems to make her even more curious. In a similar way as I watch her, she also continues to observe me. Myrra watches every move I make, she stares at my eyes, and she keeps probing with her mana senses, trying to get a funny response from me.

Much like a human annoying a grumpy cat to get a reaction from it.

"Very few would refuse that offer. What's your reason?" she asks.

"It sounds annoying," I answer honestly, "We have no time to bother with politics and other guilds."

"What if I told you it would be more fun this way?" Myrra leans backward on the chair that is made for humans, not lynthari, and it seems it's about to break, "As a big guild, there are some rules others would need to follow to bother you. Rules set by lynthari. Small guilds don't enjoy such luxury."

Was this her plan all along?

"Why?" I ask.

"As I said, feral one, I want you to rise to the top, I want to see you shine brighter than anyone else. Through your own power, your will. And I really want to see if you will break or if you're the real deal." She stands up, and the chair behind her instantly turns to ashes as flames roar around her.

The flames are strong enough to start melting the stone under her feet and set ablaze all the furniture or cloth around us.

Not overly bothered, I just use [Redistribution] and absorb the heat that reaches me, which would have burned me terribly if I hadn't done anything about it.

Myrra takes another step closer to me, her flames stronger and the heat is directed at me, "I want you to show me what you're capable of," she hisses, showing a surprising amount of emotion, unexpected from someone hundreds of years old.

I don't like it.

A burst of kinetic energy explodes from me at the center. I make it more blunt than sharp, and Myrra is thrown away from me, crashing through the wall with a surprised squeak.

Immediately from my shadow, her bodyguard steps up, but I already know this skill. The moment he fully emerges, [Resonance] disrupts his attack, and with a kick, I send him flying out of the window of the manor.

I don't like how everyone here thinks they can mess with me.

I redirect more of my mana towards the kinetic mana heart and turn all generated energy from kinetic into thermal, continuing to compress it while walking slowly towards where I kicked Myrra.

Tall lynthari is already on her feet, unhurt, but blue flames blazing around her.

She is smiling.

I send disrupting mana into the room, not allowing her guard to use any shadows around, and then release all the heat I collected, pressing it all against Myrra. For a while, she fights against it, her own flames pushing against my own. The manor is melting around us, being set ablaze. The air dries, cracks appear in the walls, and furniture turns to dust.

Elydor, partially Obelia, Myrra, every single one of them wants me to move according to their will.

Just leave me alone.

My flames turn golden, devouring Myrra's flames and pushing her to her knees. The tall lynthari hisses and more of her mana is released, this time in the form of chill that fights against the flames, the temperature in the room turning ice cold.

As I sense her bodyguard dashing at me, I cancel my flames and replace them with a strong impulse of [Resonance] that I send into the room. The flames and cold disappear, the male lynthari slows down, my attack disrupting his physical boost.

Then I follow it with another strong pulse of kinetic energy that sends both of them crashing through the walls. This time I boost my body, and follow Myrra.

I reach her as she bends in the air, elegantly landing on her feet. Her eyes glow gold, and her tail twitches excitedly. She licks her lips, and more mana is released from her body, pale blue circuits appearing on her skin.

At the same time, I pull an epic-graded shortsword from the sheath, and immediately a transparent white crystal-like blade starts turning blue, absorbing the mana from the area and from the attacks.

Both Myrra and I charge at once, and with each passing second, I feel my body becoming stronger and faster, boosted by the sword in my hands that continues to absorb more mana, turning darker blue.

Myrra nimbly dodges my attacks and leaves a few scratches on my body. She is fast, barely a blur.

Her bodyguard appears as well, but just stands on the side, not wanting to ruin his master's fun.

I send another pulse of disrupting mana at her, but she seems to be expecting that and throws some weak mana attack in the way that gets canceled instead.

A mana projectile flies at me, so pale in color that I can barely see it. I only block it at the last moment to her amusement, and her tail flails. Her golden eyes follow each of my movements while her cat-like eyes glow.

Oh, so you want to play?

[Mana Domain] covers the area and I stop Mana Cycling, instead letting my mana start leaking from my body, filling the area, and getting under my control within my domain. Some of that mana even gets fed to the sword in my hand, strengthening my body even further, and I start manipulating the rest.

Mana arms start appearing from thin air, attempting to grab Myrra.

Barriers form in front of me, blocking her attacks.

Mana projectiles form behind her back that is still within my domain.

Bombarded from every side, Myrra totally lets loose and moves like a wild animal led by instincts, deflecting all the attacks, using skills to block them, and sending bursts of fire and ice toward me.

I let her play for a while as I lead her toward where I want to while reading her movements. When she shows a moment of hesitation, I boost my body even further, and move in front of her in one quick movement. My sword stabs deep into her thigh and the blade is surprisingly start absorbing mana at a much quicker rate directly from her body.

Then I cancel all of my skills and stare at her.

Her canines show in full beauty as she leans closer me, her mouth open wide as if she is about to bite me. Her face scrunched, demonic-like even.

And I just watch her and twist the sword in her wound.

She nearly hisses, her expression threatening, but after a short stalemate, she stops. Her mana calms down, and her face slowly returns to normal. Myrra takes a step back, the sword sliding from her thigh, and at a quick speed the wound on her starts healing as we look at each other.

It takes a minute for her to say, "I guess I should apologize, feral one." This time the word "feral" is different in the way she says it. It's as if she puts a different meaning on it, "I got a little bit too excited." she smiles.

It's not a truly apologizing smile and she doesn't seem to be in a bad mood or something. It's more as if she kept poking a cute cat and the cat got annoyed, scratching her.

Now that I think about it, I keep using this sort of comparison to understand her and they fit surprisingly well. But, Myrra has cat ears and a tail, so why is my role always so fitting to the cat?

I put the sword back in its sheath and then hold the sheath in my hand. When I check my mana, there's barely any dent in it, partially also thanks to the sword replenishing and strengthening my body.

"If you are sorry, block others from annoying us," I tell her.

"I can do it only partially, there will be people who will want to fight the one who defeated Elydor. The items you got are also a big attraction. So expect some challengers," she says.

As I leave, I can feel her gaze on my back, and passing by her bodyguard, he greets me with a short nod.

Out of the estate, I glance at the sword in my hand. The effect of its boosting is more efficient than I expected it to be, and the way it took mana from the air, as well as the way it took mana from Myrra's body, really fascinates me.

It probably wouldn't be that extremely difficult to do that; no, what is most difficult is the way it transforms foreign mana to be used by me, but here's where I have another idea. What if I try to use [Resonance] to change the absorbed mana and turn it into mine?

Maybe I should fight with lynthari more often. I'm getting quite good ideas while doing so.

Unfortunately, something tells me not all of them would react to it as Myrra did. She seems to be weird even for a lynthari. Well, at least I showed her that there are limits to how far she can push. But I also

dislike that she still held back, her bodyguard too. I almost got caught up in the fight and took the fight seriously.

What would I do without good ol' Mr. [Focus]?

Unlike on Earth where I had more reasons to stay calm and control myself, it's a bit harder to reason such behavior here. Sure, I could do so; I was always good at that even without the skill I can control my emotions pretty well. The problem might be that I often catch myself not wanting to do it.

Venting once in a while is a nice compromise, isn't it?

As I walk through the streets, I find myself not wanting to return so soon. Lately, I was constantly surrounded by people. Talking with them, training with them, helping them stay alive down in the tunnel.

Seeing so many people pass by, and hearing them talk and enjoy their day somewhat drains me even more than usual.

I still somewhat enjoy Group 4's company; it's just that I feel like taking a break. Not a long one, just a day or two.

So instead of going back, I change direction and walk towards one of the giant trees. I've been curious about them ever since I got here. Should I check them out?

I use [Focus] to filter out the sounds of people around me, and even their presence stops feeling so pressuring. The world loses some of its life but becomes a bit more comfortable to me.

Only in my own company, I continue walking down the street.

POV Isabella Martinez

"What do you mean that he probably won't be coming back so soon, Izzy?" Lily asks me.

She feels funny, all these emotions she tries to hide and show at the same time.

“Pff, you guys couldn't even see it! But he was slowly getting more and more annoyed!” I explain to them. Old people are dumb so I have to.

“Annoyed?” Lily asks again.

I ignore the not-as-old-as-others but still dumb Lily and look around for Biscuit. As he often does, he is sitting on the couch spot where Nathaniel likes to sit.

Annoying! Biscuit is only mine!

When I get to him, I use my skill to connect to him and he allows me to do so.

Biscuit feels safe. Safer than anyone else. Like there is no evil in him. He must have been an angel in his past life.

I hug him and he lets me.

“Izzy, what did you mean by 'annoyed'?” Soph asks.

“You guys talk too much, are around him too often, ask him too many questions,” I pet Biscuit while talking to them, “he likes to be alone sometimes.”

“We don't know how long Myrra will take him, but he won't be gone for too long. A few days at most, so there's no need to worry,” it's Tess who said that.

Tess is... weird. She's not as dumb as the others and sometimes she feels scary. But it's fine; Nathaniel also feels scary, yet never towards his friends. And I'm his friend too!

I think.

"Are we also friends, Biscuit?" I ask.

(Food?) he says and I read his intention.

"Yes, I will get you anything you want!"

(Asshole.) he says louder so everyone can hear and I can feel gentleness from him. He even creates a purple mana arm and pets my head!

"Soph! Did you hear? He called me his friend!"

Chapter 210: Young guildmaster of Veilwalkers

Only a few minutes pass since I left Myrra when I realize that something is not right. There's that weird feeling that keeps bothering me. Something has changed, and it takes me a few moments to realize what it is.

The sword I held in the sheath in my hand is gone.

Huh?

I open and close my hands, but it's really gone; my hand is empty. Did I get robbed?

Immediately, I send a strong pulse into my area, detecting all the signatures around me, looking for something suspicious, maybe a phantom deer or something. Or another corgi with amazing camouflage.

The sword still holds some mana that it absorbed from Myrra, so I locate it fairly quickly. Not caring about the reactions around me, I boost myself high into the air and land on the roof of a nearby house. From there, I run towards where the signature is.

What I find there is a man in a cloak with his face covered by a cape.

[Veilstriker - lvl ??]

Oh, so at least level 182 or higher.

“It's amazing how quickly you noticed, almost the moment I took it away from you,” his voice is soft as he waves my sword he holds in his hand at me, “You are the first one. Not even Obelia was able to.”

The man throws the sword at me, and I let it land on the roof in front of me. I send a short pulse of disrupting mana at it, destroying whatever mark he left on it.

Only then do I take it from the ground and dash at the man, boosting my body and even pushing myself with kinetic energy generated by my kinetic mana heart. As I reach him, I send a thin cone of kinetic energy at his head.

The man dodges; his cape turning into a weird blur. More than being made from cloth, it looks like it's made from pitch-black shadow or smoke.

I track him with [Perception] and [Redistribution] activates to full power, trying to absorb movement from the man and make him slow down.

Surprisingly, it doesn't work; it's like my skill is slipping on him, unable to grab him.

I release more mana into the area and continue to observe his skill while he is dodging cones of kinetic energy. When I have a grasp on his mana, I send a pulse of [Resonance] into the area, and finally, [Redistribution] takes a grip on him, slowing his body to a crawl; his strength isn't enough to fight against it.

I push myself closer and direct a strong kick at him while more shadow-like substance forms in his hand, and he stabs at me. I don't dodge and just create a shield-like barrier in front of the attack. It cracks after getting hit, but that's when my kick hits him and sends him crashing against the chimney nearby.

The man bounces off the chimney, leaving cracks in it, and a more shadow-like substance surrounds him, shaping into spikes that stab at me as I rush at him again.

Another pulse of [Resonance], modified especially against the man, dissolves the attack, and I kick him again, sending him rolling on the roof.

While doing so, I again have this weird feeling and grip the sword in my hand tighter, disrupting whatever he is trying to do.

“Nice one,” I can hear the smile in his voice as he stops rolling after my kick and stands up.

The shadow-like substance that separated from his body as I kicked him, now like smoke behind me, becomes dense again and another spike is created, stabbing at my head from behind.

Such a funny guy.

I pull the Ethercrystal Shortsword from the scabbard and slash against the attack, the white crystal blade turning black and absorbing the mana. At the same time, I change the setting on my Mana Regulator, and nearly all my mana is automatically used through the Reinforcement construct to strengthen my body.

I enter deep [Focus] to be able to handle my increased speed, and the world around me turns into a blur. I reach the man so quickly that he doesn't even have time to react as I grab his hand and absorb my own kinetic energy to stop the inertia of my movement.

The man shows amazing reflexes and activates multiple skills: shadow-like spikes, his body becomes stronger, and he tries to use something similar to when I'm using [Tether].

Shadow spikes reach my body, and I don't even dodge, watching them stop and only slightly poke my skin, unable to reach further into my body that is boosted by the entirety of my mana.

I disrupt his attempts to teleport and even send disrupting mana into his body, making him lose control over his skills.

In a last-ditch effort, he pulls out a dagger and tries to stab at me. This time I dodge, break his arm and take the fallen dagger from the ground.

"Give it back," he hisses. His voice different from before.

Oh, you're not so confident and funny anymore?

Holding his hand, I swing his body and smash it against the ground, still somewhat careful to not kill him.

A painful groan escapes his mouth from under the black cape over his head falls down, revealing ashen gray hair. Then one swift kick sends him crashing against the same chimney again.

Damn, that chimney is sure catching strays.

I look at the dagger in my hand:

Painweaver (Epic):

"Oh, that's kind of harsh of you, trying to stab me with it," I say to the groaning man on the ground while putting the dagger away after surrounding it with some mana.

Another epic item for my growing collection. Something tells me it shouldn't be so easy to get them.

The man in front of me is very skilled; I can imagine him causing crazy trouble to people with his teleport, stealth, epic-graded dagger. Especially that weird skill that allowed him to take the sword away from me. That one is really dangerous.

"Are you the guild master of one of the 5, erm, 4 big guilds?" I ask him.

While waiting for his answer, I think: what would have happened if he tried to kill me instead of stealing my sword? It's not a problem anymore, as I already know what to watch for, but back then it could have been dangerous. I believe I would have noticed it sooner if he had gone after my life instead of the sword, but still, that skill is quite something.

"Give me back my dagger," he hisses again as he stands up, his body swaying from side to side.

He sounds young, a bit older than me, but who knows how old he actually is; he could easily be a few hundred years old.

"Give it back, you bitch!" he shouts.

Well, maybe he really is young.

I watch as his body turns into a blur, with smoky shadow-like mana surrounding him again, and he moves quickly, almost like smoke.

My mana projectiles pass through his body, as do flames and the kinetic energy cone. Even my physical attack. The entire time, spike-like attacks and projectiles continue smash against my body. They are strong, quick, and deadly, drawing blood in places even with my body strengthened to a terrifying degree.

But that's all.

He tries to confuse me with his weird skill and I shrug it off.

He tries to surprise me by teleporting behind me and gets a swift kick to his chest instead of hitting me.

He compresses a lot of mana and shadows into a single attack that I cut through with my hand covered in resonating mana.

And even pulls out two more daggers that get covered in red mana. They seem to have an effect that tries to paralyze me, a weaker version of his epic weapon. Most likely rare weapons.

Having had enough, I send another pulse of disruptive mana at him and grab him by the neck. When I check, his hand is already healed, the one I broke. Skills? Tattoo? Item?

I throw him against the chimney once more, and the chimney finally cracks.

Good, I was getting weirded out by how durable it was.

My ability to disrupt mana really feels like cheating against some opponents. But it's fine; they can suffer the same way I did on the third floor against the duo of mana hunters.

"I think it would be annoying if I killed you," I squat in front of the man, "but I will be taking the dagger as payment for you trying to steal from me."

"Are you dumb? Do you even have any idea how much something like that is worth? There are just over ten epic items in the entire Virelia!" he shouts at me.

Huh, he is quite hotheaded for an assassin-like type, isn't he?

I take one of his rare daggers and break it just with the strength of my body boosted with my mana.

I do it because he annoyed me.

Afterwards I let him strengthen his body again as he tries to attack me one more time and kick, sending him flying against another chimney.

After that, I walk back to where I left Myrra.

"Feral one, are you actively trying to make things difficult for yourself?"

"Look, he asked for it, and how the hell is someone like that even a guild master?"

"Lorven, the guildmaster of Veilwalkers, is young, but extremely talented and with a powerful skill. There's even a rumor his guild has a few pieces of epic equipment."

Myrra pauses as I put the man's dagger on the table, and she inspects it, "It's his dagger, isn't it?" she asks.

"Yup."

"Are you going to return it?" she asks.

"Probably, for a price. Assholes like him would be too annoying to deal with if they went against my group. Can you handle it? Ask a lot of money from him to get it back, and you can keep 20 percent of it," I tell her.

"Fifty percent," Myrra says shamelessly and takes the dagger, "and I will get as much as possible."

Looking at her, she probably doesn't even need the money but does it just for the fun of it.

"Fine," I tell her.

Myrra continues to quietly think while observing the long sharp dagger in her hands; the blade's color slightly shifts from pitch black to light gray as the light falls on it.

"There are only very few epic items in the entire Virelia, around two-thirds owned by lynthari and one-third by humans. And now there are you and Obelia, who both brought back a few epic items each if I'm right in my calculations." Her golden eyes move from the dagger back to me, then to the sword I hold, and then to the mana stone that is in the inner pocket under my clothes.

"Things will become interesting," Myrra's tail swings again as she says so.

Annoying, I want to correct her, but I give up.

Well, it's time for me to bullshit my way through all of this. "Angry Kittens will become one of the big five," I tell Myrra.

Lorven is easy to deal with as my skills counter him, Obelia seems to overestimate my level because of the amount of mana I possess. With a bit of luck, the other two guild masters will be the same, and I will troll the entire Virelia into thinking I'm the biggest dog there before I become strong enough to deal with all of them at once.

I ignore Myrra's excited reaction and interrupt her, "So, I would like to meet with every guild master. Talk a bit, maybe make some deals."

Or maybe beat them up. Funnily enough, showing strength often works best in these situations. Just enough for them not to want to mess with me. They are all over 200, but I'm not that worried. I'm long since used to fighting opponents of a much higher level, and my skill set makes me really versatile. My constructs, kinetic and thermal energy, disrupting mana, boosting my body with a stupidly large amounts of mana, my high ability to detect stuff, and concentrate.

I don't have any glaring weaknesses, so I trust myself that I can do it.

But only that much wouldn't be enough. They could try to kill me secretly, join together to do so, or threaten me by hurting my group. So there's one more thing I can do.

"I have an offer for them," I say to Myrra.

They are human, and human needs are easy to read. I just need to dangle a shiny, nice thing in front of them. Something they won't be able to get without my full help. Something that will be much more valuable to them than just messing with me.

"Tell them I will kill the Living Tree." That simple sentence makes Myrra shut up entirely and stare at me with her mouth open, in the middle of the sentence, "And Myrra, please, explain to them what it

means.” They will move how I want, and I will milk this floor dry, “If the Calamity is dead, all the stuff in the entire old capital will be for us to take.”