

Tutorial 221

Chapter 221: Rich

"Little princess has been looking for you for weeks already, but so far, I was able to hide you from her. Also, feral one, why does she call you her underling?" Myrra asks.

"Stuff happened," I say simply and then watch Myrra's tail twitch in annoyance.

"Anyway, I finally secured the metals you were asking for and some mana stones. They will be delivered to your house tomorrow, nya."

"Took a while." I decide to ignore the last word of her sentence.

"Obviously. They were expensive. And when I say expensive, I mean expensive even for me."

"I'm rich, I can pay for them," I say.

Myrra smiles and then tells me how much they cost.

"I see, thank you for your patronage, Miss Myrra!" I say respectfully.

Maybe I'm not as rich as I thought. I should prepare some stuff to sell in the auction. My pride won't allow me to be some sort of gold digger sucking up to rich weirdo lynthari.

"The plan still applies?" Two lynthari bow to Myrra, but she ignores them.

"Yup," I answer while munching on a snack I bought from a merchant, "The auction is in around two weeks, and then around two weeks after that, we can go on and deal with the Living Tree."

Hopefully, the second trial of Beyond won't take longer than two weeks. I'm really excited for the auction. So far, I have no reason to think that it will take that long, but it's not like I have too much information to judge it from, so who knows? The system is an ass.

We exchange a few more sentences, set some plans, and Myrra leaves to go and talk with other guild masters as well. Lately, they have been really quiet and I bet it's also thanks to her.

The past few weeks were... easy, unfitting to the 4th floor, and something tells me it's as I thought and only the "final bosses" will be strong enough to turn it into Hell difficulty.

Damn, I bet easy-difficulty people might only have to kill one level 150 ant or something. I'll make sure to ask them during the tournament.

Before returning, I stop by the workshop of the enchanter whom I met one night and who so excitedly taught me about his craft. The older man is someone I have visited a few times already and even talked with him about my plan, obviously without much detail. He offered truly priceless advice and saved me quite some time and a lot of wasted materials.

"You again," he sighs as I enter his workshop, but I see that he seems in a better mood immediately.

I still don't know his name, nor does he know mine, and even though it should be easy to guess what I might plan to do, he doesn't ask and pretends not to know and just talks about his craft.

I put a mana stone on his table, "I think I almost got it," I say.

"Sure sure," he grumbles but immediately takes the stone, and with almost youthful curiosity, he starts going through my inscriptions.

"You twisted it in a really weird way here and here," he shows me the mana stone, pointing out the twist.

"Yes, I did, it has something to do with my skill," I tell him.

"What a weird skill you have," he says and then continues to inspect it.

It takes 10 minutes longer, but when he is done, he just looks at me. "I didn't ask you before, but who are you?" he says carefully, his voice solemn. "The things you are inscribing are terrifying, and the speed of your progress is even more so."

I stay quiet, but that doesn't stop him.

"I tried to hold my curiosity back, but this," he waves the mana stone in his hand, "this is way too much. You don't even realize what you just created."

"With your help," I tell him.

The old man laughs. "I'm not dumb, I know how small my help was." He sighs. "This stone, with its inscriptions, is probably worth more than some epic items to the right people. You don't realize it, but there is so much new stuff and theories that can come up from this."

Oh?

"People would pay good money for it?" I ask.

He laughs. "They would sell their firstborn son just to glance at it for a few minutes."

What weirdos. I spend just a few minutes playing with the stone and training for my plan of killing the Living Tree.

"Are these people rich?" I ask.

"Rich? Enchanters that would be interested are some of the richest people in the city."

Maybe I can become even richer.

After enchanting some smaller mana stones with simpler circuits that say nothing about my plan, I leave them to the old man and tell him to sell them. He will get 20% of the money.

Hearing that, he starts sweating as it seems like even 20% will be plenty.

Good!

When I enter my house once again, Min-Jae welcomes me with a big smile, the twins close behind him.

What did they do?

"Nat! We scammed lynthari!" the young Korean boy laughs happily.

This can't be good; it's enough when I'm screwing up the floor, I don't need three teenage boys to help.

"We sold them one of the epic items," Dennis joins in, excited to share.

"Not sold, you dumbass, we leveraged it!" Aaron corrects him, smug about his fancy new word.

"You're the dumbass, I just wanted to say that," Dennis shouts back and then they fight.

Min-Jae starts explaining, "We found a rich lynthari and showed him the shadow teleport ring thingy, I forgot its exact name. We asked Hadwin to borrow the ring to us. Then we asked for a loan from rich lynthari and said if we won't pay back, he can take the ring." He giggles.

I can see where this is going.

"We set a one-year time to pay the money back, but in that time, we will be long gone to the 5th floor," Dennis pushes Aaron's face away from him and happily joins.

"It's free money," Min-Jae is still smiling as he says so.

"Min-Jae," I start, and the smile disappears from his face, "you don't even realize the mistake you made?"

Twins shut up too, all boys thinking and worried expressions appearing on their faces.

So, I tell them, "We have more than one epic item we can leverage."

They become happy once again and start talking over each other.

Greedy little twerps, I love them.

We spend the rest of the day borrowing money with our epic items as collateral. The conditions are outright predatory, but why should we care? By the time the loans are due, we're gonna be long since gone.

Sophie and Isabella are brought together with us and forced to read emotions and mind blend a bit to get even "better" offers. The sisters are an extremely good duo. Isabella can read if the lynthari is willing to offer more and Sophie can... well, make them a bit more inclined to agree.

We use all the epic items we have. The ones from the 3rd floor, Elydor's sword, the items from the Champion's house.

The process is a bit more difficult as we have to let them examine the items and write it down properly, sign multiple papers, some even with our mana signatures, and always one high-ranking lynthari appears to watch over the deal.

Epic items are just that valuable. In the entire city, there are currently only around 20 of them, and since we are basically giving 5 normal ones and the 3 weaker ones from the 3rd floor away, the lynthari almost fight each other for the opportunity to fall for our scam.

While leveraging the 5th item, the lynthari that is called there to watch over the deal just unbelievably stares at us, unable to think what kind of dumbass would have so many items and would be as willing to get screwed over.

Surprisingly, they don't seem to be too untrustful. Who the hell would dare to scam the lynthari? That's just something one doesn't do and they even use some skill to mark the items. Some sort of tracker.

The sheer amount of mana stones is way too much, so we use their version of a bank to store them after selling the items to multiple lynthari. We pick the richest ones from the information we were able to collect and always just shamelessly walk to their houses and tell their servants what we want. It always leads to them quickly letting us in.

So, in the end, we get something like a card made from silver mana conductive metal and on that card, there is a number etched that apparently syncs with our bank account.

Weirdly, we can even use this card to pay at some places. Just like a credit card back on Earth.

On the card, there are so many zeros I don't even bother trying to read how rich I am and on our way back I am Group 4's sugardaddy, buying them anything they want.

Snacks for Biscuit? Sure, here I will pay instead of you, Isabella.

A few pieces of rare equipment? Not a problem, Dennis.

A metal that conducts mana and you want to use it as projectiles for your [Telekinesis]? I will pay, Min-Jae!

The amount on the card doesn't even change and it seems to be impossible to spend it all. But, there is a thought in my mind.

Should I maybe sell Biscuit this way and use him as collateral against loan? The best doggo of the 4th floor surely will be more valuable than some random epic item.

Then, to flex on Maya, I buy some extremely expensive snacks and a few mana battery stones she could use, as a thanks for showing me a new use for a skill both of us possess. For Tess, we order a few rare javelins, also made from endurium.

The boys keep telling me to buy a ring for Lily. So I just ask Izzy to read their emotions while I start asking them why they keep staring so much at Tess, Sophie, and Maya when they think the young women aren't looking.

The trio shuts up surprisingly quickly.

Only when we reach the house do I realize that we forgot Hadwin, but I shrug it off. He can buy whatever he wants a bit later.

I hand the silver card to Tess, "There will be an auction in a while so don't spend much."

Tess checks the number on the card multiple times and then shakes her head a bit. "Nat, do you even know how much it is?"

Huh? Not really? I didn't bother learning how their currency that are mana stones works here.

I wave my hand at Tess to gesture her to stop from explaining, "I leave it up to you."

Sure, money is nice, but how can it compare to personal power or even mana?

Yeah, I thought so.

Then I enter the living room that is already taken over by Isabella, who also returned with me and immediately rushed in. She continuously pokes the egg on the table, the one that Sophie spent 5 thousand shards to buy. An amount enough to buy an epic item.

Hopefully, it isn't consumable.

(Food?) Biscuit also asks. Indeed, brilliant minds think alike.

I ruffle his head a bit and we continue to look at the egg.

"It's not food!" Isabella shouts, sounding like an angry kitten.

"The system called it a beast egg and the description says that it's a beast with the bloodline of some ancient monster," Sophie says, and Isabella gives her a harsh look, yet her older sister continues, "We don't know what monster and it seems to be randomized? I picked it so I could have someone to defend me close range hopefully, and Isabella wanted to make Biscuit jealous."

"Ehm?" I get out of myself.

"Yes, I know," Sophie sighs, "Izzy saw something similar in a drama on TV before we got into the tutorial. Just with men and women instead of a monster."

Oh, that quite makes sense, doesn't it?

"You got it wrong, Soph. It's for your protection and for us to get a new friend!" Even while Izzy says it, I can feel her connecting to the egg and constantly trying to grasp any emotion from it.

The little girl also continuously uses her [Pyrokinesis] to keep an egg nice and warm. As I watch how she handles it, I see a clear mark of improvement. The way she handles her skill and mana is much better now, and the heat she produces is nice and warm, but not overly so, and evenly covers the surface of the egg.

"Just a few days and it should hatch!" Izzy says after a while as she turns to me with a big smile on her face, "Just wait! You will be so jealous."

Aren't you too cheeky right now?

I continue to let her read my emotions, so she immediately knows what I am doing.

"N-no..." Isabella whispers in a broken voice.

But I already pull out a piece of dried deer meat and offer it to Biscuit, who immediately follows me back to my room, leaving Isabella behind, only with her weirdo egg.

Back in my room, I jump into the armchair, and Biscuit jumps onto my lap, closing his eyes immediately while I check the timer.

Two days left until Beyond's second trial.

With closed eyes, I get back to training what Maya showed me a few days ago.

Chapter 222: Second trial

Two days later the time comes and I start getting ready for the second trial. The farewells are short. Everyone in group 4 already knows about Beyond, some a bit more, others less, so there is no need for an explanation.

Biscuit gives me a nice piece of glass that he still thinks is the same as the mana stones they use here as currency. He also gives me a few pieces of dried deer meat.

Isabella somehow isn't petty and just hugs me and wishes me luck.

The boys are the boys, so they just tell me to level up a lot.

Haddy just nods his head and tells me to be careful.

Tess smiles at me and says not to worry about them while I'm gone.

Lily uses the opportunity to hug me and only stops after I knock on the top of her head a few times. I even have to boost my body a bit so she lets me go. That reminds me that if I ever lose mana, I will be weak like a baby against most of the members of group 4, even with my stats from Active tempering.

Sophie waves her hand awkwardly, and Maya puts a small bag into my hand, full of some rations and other useful stuff.

By the time I separate from them, I feel tired already and quickly get to the basement of our house.

“Use Beyond entrance token,” I say, and after the portal appears in front of me, I step through.

Welcome to the Beyond's second trial!

After passing through all three trials, you will be able to enter the Beyond.

The place I'm in isn't the second floor, nor any of the floors I visited before. The sky is dark, lit by stars that shine brighter than they should.

I slide into [Focus] and the world loses even more of its colors, yet the lights become brighter, shining on the ground I am standing on. As far as I can see, I see deep craters and mountains spewing out fire and smoke.

It's hard to breathe, and the gravity that affects my body is much stronger than it should be, forcing me to use Mana Regulator to put more mana towards Reinforcement and strengthening my body.

The cold that threatens to freeze my body is terrible, the worst I've ever felt, and I reach in and start releasing some heat I stored in the thermal orb I started filling with thermal energy days before Beyond.

Releasing more of the heat, it flows through my body and pushes away that terrifying cold, that is not visible at all. There is no ice, no freeze.

A hole forms next to me, and from it, a fire spews out, melting the ground around, threatening to do the same to me, only to be absorbed and turned into heat, stopping me from freezing.

Sensing a stronger eruption coming, I boost my body and move high in the air, hovering at the place and watching as the hole expands and tons of melted material spew out, a heat so strong I have to move further to not overwhelm my skill.

At the same time, the gravity that pulls on me is much stronger, so it's difficult to even float and the amount of mana I spend is so high I decide to land.

I check the quest and reward.

Beyond's second trial quest:

Quest Rewards:

Active skill combination token (low-grade)

1000 shards

I take in the text in front of me and there's a single reward that I can't stop looking at. The active skill combination token. The token with the potential of being a really good reward.

After reducing the amount of thermal energy as much as I can, I move again, away from the place where I feel another crater forming. Then, after examining my body more, I realize that I'm not wrong and it's as I thought the moment I entered here. That weird feeling I immediately got and started examining my body, almost unable to believe it.

My heart is not beating and generating any mana, affected by something that I can't even detect right now.

I seem to be otherwise fine. The blood is still somehow flowing through my body and my current mana pool is filled and not leaking, it's just not getting replaced.

As I continue to walk, I lower my expenditure even lower and strengthen my body only a little bit, just enough to fight against gravity that is about to crush me.

It's uncomfortable, but I'm saving mana and I do the same with thermal energy and try to make it as efficient as possible.

Then I look around and after a while start walking towards the mountains in the distance.

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 198]

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 188]

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 173]

I kill three monsters and then jump away, only enough to dodge the monster that breaks the ground and tries to bite at my leg.

Mana Leeches are heavily armored, quick, and good at locating me. They attack from underground and try to pull me down.

At first, they used ranged attacks and tried to steal my mana, connecting to me with their skills and trying to suck on it. They failed terribly as the Mantle totally blocked their attempts. So they tried a more direct attack, relying on their heavy armor.

Ethercrystal shortsword, an epic weapon, in my hand, cuts through their bodies easily, even sucking on some of their mana, the blade glowing in a weak pale blue light as the monsters don't have that much of it. There also isn't any ambient mana to absorb.

I dodge again and then let one of the leeches reach me, at the last moment I shoot a blast of kinetic energy against it, slowing it enough so I can finish it with the sword.

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 170]

[Lvl 170 > Lvl 171]

Another one attacks from behind and, sending only a short pulse of mana through my body, I boost it and turn around at a speed that blurs the area around and cut another human-sized leech in half.

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 176]

Under the ground, I feel more of them trying to take my mana, but I merely ignore them, only strengthening the Mantle a bit more actively. Then I continue to walk towards the mountains as the monsters do not dare to get on the surface anymore.

From the information I was able to collect, it's confirmed that there are 3 trials that I need to pass through to be able to enter the real Beyond. Each trial seems to be tailored for each person. I had the suspicion on the first floor where most of the monsters thrown at me allowed me to improve my skills or die, and this one seems to be testing my weaknesses.

My weak physical stats by strong gravity that seem to be only getting stronger with each passing hour.

The terrifying cold seems to be testing my thermal energy as well as my endurance.

The explosions of fire test my [Perception] and the monsters that attacked me so far test my mana. They keep trying to take it away from me, it being only thing that keeps me alive. My mana allows me to strengthen my body and create heat to keep myself from freezing.

One week, that's how long I must last in here. Unable to regenerate my mana, only able to use what I currently hold, and forced to constantly spend it.

At this point, it's the test of what will last longer, me or the bullshit the system throws at me and I'm not worried.

My reservoir is filled to the brim, containing 3 times my mana. My mana pool is also nearly topped out. The thermal orb I created and filled before even starting the trial contains an immense amount of energy I can use as heat or turn into kinetic energy.

I also have multiple mana battery stones I filled with mana, inspired by what Maya did. They are terribly small amounts of mana in comparison to my pool or reservoir, but it's also something.

I'm as ready as I could be.

I boost myself high in the air and shoot down a small arrow-like projectile that pierces the monster's eye and, with a scream that reaches my body, it disappears back under the ground.

The shriek it used is a mental attack that threatens to disrupt my mana, but my body endures and I land back on the ground, transferring some thermal energy from the orb into kinetic and stomping, sending a blast of energy under my feet.

[You have defeated Crater Worm - lvl 189]

[Lvl 171 > Lvl 172]

The monsters continue to attack me, pressuring me, looking for a moment of carelessness.

Multiple hours have passed and the strain of gravity put on my body is getting stronger, the monsters are getting harder to detect, and my heart doesn't move at all.

But, that's it?

I send another blast of kinetic energy underground, reducing the surface of the attack and moving it as efficiently as I can.

[You have defeated Crater Worm - lvl 191]

Is this really a Beyond trial?

I dodge two leeches and this time I do not even use the sword, just create a thin thread of mana that I cover in [Resonance] and cut both monsters apart.

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 179]

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 183]

Before another worm has time to shriek, I send a small thermal orb at it, and it explodes inside the monster's weird mouth filled with dozens of sharp teeth. The monster screeches even louder while thrashing around and burning, unable to stop the flames even in this terrifying cold.

[You have defeated Crater Worm - lvl 168]

More thin threads of mana appear around me, each covered in widely resonating mana, and this time it's me who tracks the monsters and attacks.

One day has passed.

The gravity is strong, but it feels weirdly comfortable as it keeps pulling on my body. With the little amount of mana I'm using, every step hurts and every wrong move threatens to send me tumbling, but the efficiency continues to improve.

The air closer to the mountains is getting colder and I'm forced to use more thermal energy from the orb. I don't like it, but the extreme temperatures are hindering my ability to fight, so I do it.

As time passes, I come to like the planet I'm on.

Other than blasts of iron-melting fire from the ground and monster attacks once in a while, it's quiet, so almost scarily quiet. There is no day and night, and no sun comes to the sky. It's permanently dark, the planet lit by beautiful shining stars that are lighting the way through the extremely clear sky.

Even though I'm moving for a day already, the mountains are still far in the distance, clearly showing how giant they have to be to still be so far on the horizon.

Six days remain, and I know I won't be getting any sleep, having to constantly manage my mana, and thermal energy, and keep fighting the monsters that will jump at me the moment I show weakness.

And I am fine with that.

As always in these situations, my mind feels sharp. It all makes me feel more alive than ever. It forces me to stop thinking of useless stuff and focus on survival at the place where a single mistake could end me.

Yet, the more threatened I feel, the stronger the danger is, the more I realize how much I want to live. Amazed, I observe myself utilizing everything I have learned. My skills, my body, my mana, and my talents. All of them constantly used to keep me alive.

The second day comes, and the sky is still the same, and the mountains look as far as before. While fighting against cold and gravity, the monsters continue to attack me, but that much is fine. The problem is that just now I realize that there is something or someone messing with my perception of reality.

I used a decent chunk of my mana to check my mind and it doesn't seem to be affected, only my senses are being fed fake information.

My skills are unable to fight against it, it being too ever-present and shown by me being constantly fed the wrong positions of monsters and the world around me looking different than it is in reality.

The result of that is more wounds on my body, and I'm being forced to create armor to protect myself and feed my passive with thermal energy to heal the wounds.

Unable to rely on my eyes anymore, I close them, but the effect still lasts as if the effect is delivered to me even through closed eyelids. [Perception] is being fed the wrong visuals too.

So I reach inside my body and cut nerves leading to my eyeballs, blinding myself. Then I actively stop the passive from healing this small wound that will be easy to restore later.

My usage of [Perception] changes, and instead, I continue to feel waves of kinetic energy and heat from the monsters' bodies.

A day passes, and I start being fed wrong information even from kinetic and thermal energy.

Chapter 223: Day six

It's the start of day three and I'm using only my mana to observe my surroundings. The reach becomes much smaller and the cost of keeping it up is annoying, so I take some mana from the mana batteries I have on me, feeding it to the skill. Efficiency isn't as good as my own mana, but it helps me to keep my own reserves as high as possible.

I still haven't touched the Mana Reservoir, and the thermal orb I have prepared is half full.

That's when monsters able to hide their mana signature start appearing.

After the first one bites off a piece of my shoulder, I'm forced to change my strategy.

The monster that bit me I kill with a sharp blast of kinetic energy and can't even check what it was without my senses.

I release dozens of small mana particles into my surroundings and then use [Mana Domain] to observe them and keep them floating around me.

The notifications continue to ring in my ears as I continue to kill anything that moves the particles close to me.

At the end of day three, the monsters that appear start countering these particles as well by avoiding them, so I release even more of them, my non-regenerating mana getting to half and the thermal orb to twenty percent.

I'm once again forced to start using more heat to keep myself from freezing.

When I fall to the ground, under the strengthened gravity, I also boost my body a bit more, just enough to wobble back on my legs.

The mana batteries I took here with me are empty. The monsters slowly sucked the mana from them without me realizing it.

It's my mistake.

I boost empty mana batteries through the bodies of the monsters and notifications ring, announcing the kill.

Observing mana particles around me, I sense that they hesitate.

"Come on, you wanted them so much. So just take them," I say to the dead world.

Then I boost the last remaining mana battery, and another notification sounds.

As many times before, I try to use my epic item, the Ethercrystal shortsword, and when I cut the monster, it sucks in its mana, trying to strengthen me.

But, as many times before, something or someone fights against that. Some of the mana that is in the process of being sucked into the crystal blade starts to get pulled away from it, and fighting over that mana wastes more of it than I would be getting, so I stop. In the end, the sword absorbs only a small part of it.

That makes the sword close to being just a nice decoration, but I continue to use it when the monsters get closer to save some mana.

It's colder than ever before, and the heat I have to generate increases, but with it, my efficiency in the way I handle it. It's not even radiating away from my body and just reaches the skin to keep maximal

possible efficiency. I also reduce the amount I send towards my limbs as they are able to endure a bit more than my core.

I start day four with my mana at forty percent and the thermal orb at ten percent.

All the food and water I did bring with me froze over. The result of me reducing the area of effect of my “heating”. Such a mistake is almost funny and I untie and drop the bag on the ground.

I restore my sight multiple times, but I always see only for a second before I start getting fed the wrong information again, so I blind myself. But even that second is fine, and I find that I have reached the mountains.

They are tall to a terrifying degree, making me feel extremely small. I'm nothing but a speck of dust in comparison to how tall they are. It somehow terrifies me even in [Focus]

The entire ground shakes, and I feel aftershocks even down here; that's how strong it is. It's clear that the area in front of me is much more dangerous than what lies behind me.

My mana is getting lower with each passing second, the thermal orb is almost empty, and the gravity that threatens to crush my body is pulling on my muscles. The place I'm in will become more dangerous as time passes; I'm sure of it. Even if I stay on the plains with worms, leeches, and fire geysers. The difficulty will ramp up. Yet the mountains in front of me are much more dangerous even now.

So, I take a step towards them, leaving the plains behind me.

The entire time I continue to observe my Mana Heart and the weird aura that renders my senses close to useless.

The mountains tower by my sides as I walk through the valley. From the second I'm able to use my eyes, I find out that the valley is unnaturally straight and flat, and the mountains by its sides are set there in too unnatural a manner.

It feels just like a sidewalk surrounded by trees.

The wind slows down and the air becomes warmer, just in time to leave me with five percent of my thermal orb, but the gravity and pull on my mana increase, even now partially ignoring my Mantle.

No monster appears anymore.

It's quiet.

Day five starts quietly. The wind doesn't blow. There are no vibrations from the lightning. No signs of any monster but the gravity is stronger after every step I take.

In the one-second window I use my eyes, I notice the doorway far in the distance. It is carved into the highest mountain I have ever seen, the doors themselves so tall I can't see their top.

Mana in my body drops to twenty-five percent, constantly pulled from under my control. I'm unable to hold it.

The effect becomes stronger the closer to the door I get.

I was able to make my heart beat for a few moments. After days without moving, it feels almost weird having it thump and send mana through my body.

While not moving, I continue to [Focus] on keeping it beating for as long as possible, mana in my body filling up slowly once again, even though some of it is getting pulled away from me.

The next ten minutes I spend fighting against the pressure that tries to stop it from beating again and, in the end, I fail and my heart stops again. This time the effect that stops my heart is a bit different and I start examining it over again with the intention of making it beat once more. There isn't even a speck of doubt that I will be able to do so.

It's my body.

It's my heart.

It's my mana.

No one will take it away from me.

I stop some distance away from the giant doorway and sit down, unable to keep myself standing anymore. My mind examines my body, and I start working on the Mana Sovereignty Mantle construct.

From my time here, I have learned so much, and I start applying it all to myself while being extremely careful of my surroundings. There is an armor around my body that is slowly getting destroyed, and the mana gets pulled from it, but I do it in case something attacks me.

I notice that my mana is getting pulled towards the door, and when I go through my memories, I realize that it has been doing that ever since the start of this trial. All the mana is getting pulled to whatever is inside that mountain, behind the giant black door, densely covered in inscriptions.

The inscriptions feel as though they should have been here to stop that from happening. My limited knowledge tells me that they should shield whatever is inside and not allow it to affect anything outside of the door.

Yet they are not enough; even though they are extremely complex and terrifyingly strong, demonstrating a mastery beyond any human or being I can imagine, they are unable to stop what is inside.

Even through [Focus]

I have never ever felt so small in my life. I'm just a small speck surrounded by powers I do not understand. The system, the tutorial, Absolutes, a thing beyond this door. This planet.

Everything is way beyond me.

At the start of day six, I make my heart beat again, this time for longer, and my mana fills by a nice amount. At this point it's been long since I had to fight monsters, all of them terrified of the being behind the black door.

The silence in the valley between the enormous mountains is almost deafening, and the safety I feel right now feels so fake it would make me want to scream if I wasn't so deep in the [Focus].

[Focus - lvl 39 > Focus - lvl 40]

I once again move my mana, sending small pulses towards the door, only for them to be obliterated by the inscriptions on its surface, but I observe even that. I learn from defensive mechanisms and use them to constantly improve my Mantle.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Over and over again, I do so and make small changes after small changes, the pull on my mana becoming weaker and weaker, and the heart twitching and shivering inside my chest. I continue to patch and improve the defenses of my biggest weakness - the possibility of someone blocking, stealing, or not allowing me to use my mana.

A big risk I took on myself, fascinated by this power I got at the start of the tutorial.

Fascination that lasts even now.

At the end of the day, my heart starts beating again and the attempts to stop it from doing so are unsuccessful. I watch as mana in my body starts growing, and I turn some of it into kinetic energy that I transfer into thermal, once again filling the thermal orb floating near me.

I stand up and mana smoothly spreads through my body, strengthening it. Kinetic energy explodes under me, and I push myself high in the air, turning around and floating towards where I came from.

Still unable to trust my eyes, I send mana as far as I can and continue to watch it within [Mana Domain].

When I reach the plain, monsters that appear are stronger than the ones from before.

A sharp nail immediately pierces my belly. Teeth break my armor and burrow into my flesh. A strong hit breaks my ribs and throws me against the ground. And I continue to fight, releasing all the frustration I felt, unable to use my powers properly.

I boost mana projectiles with kinetic energy. I create tricolored orbs, and explosions and implosions scar the planet.

Burst after burst of brilliant golden flames melt the monsters, keeping me warm against the cold that surrounds me and heal my body through my passive.

And I continue to get hurt. The monsters are just that strong. A big chunk of my leg gets bitten off, unable to be fully restored with my passive. A big wound in my side, carved off by some extremely fast monster that passes by me.

I fight and fight. I get hurt and I kill.

Over and over again as my mana roars and hums, free at last.

That's when the biggest monster appears. As tall as a small apartment building, a few floors high. The monster is bipedal and with long front legs with mana circuits all over its forearms. The monster reminds me of a gorilla with an extremely muscular body and four eyes.

I restore my eyes for a second.

[Skystrider Beast - lvl ??]

Javelins filled with thermal energy crash against the monster, barely doing any damage. My flames burn its skin, being weakened the closer they get to it. Kinetic energy disperses on the beast's skin. Tricolored orbs burn the monster, even making it stagger a bit, but the implosion does nothing.

Spending more time forcing my mana through a javelin that is three times my length and filled to the brim with thermal energy, I boost it while my heart thumps loudly. The monster is hurt by that, golden flames burning its body, the smell of burned skin and hair filling the air.

Yet it's durable, extremely so. Much more durable than the undead deer from the third floor.

I move closer, then, pulling out the sword and covering the blade with resonating mana that I extend.

Just a small human jumping against the big monster while surrounded by pale blue armor and with a glowing sword in hand. Using everything in my arsenal, I continue to avoid deadly attacks while I feel disrupting properties from the glowing forearm of the monster.

All the damage I deal is barely a scratch, the monster is just that big and durable, and that's when the monster roars as I dash at its head, a shockwave throwing me on the ground where I hit it and continue to roll, pieces of my armor breaking together with my bones.

When I finally absorb the inertia of my crash, the monster stands in front of me, moved there with one big leap, and its fist heading down at me.

At the last moment, I release all the kinetic energy I collected, propelling myself to the side and then immediately again to avoid another shockwave.

The lightning starts cracking on the monster's pitch-black skin, and its red eyes seem to glow with malice. It roars again, this time redirecting the shockwave and boosting its body towards me in a similar way I used my kinetic energy.

Watching the monster move towards me, I slide into deeper [Focus] and the world feels as if it slowed down slightly.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

My mana radiates from my body, creating an armor around myself that becomes a darker and darker shade of blue. It becomes as big as the one Maya showed me, making me three heads taller than before, surrounded by my mana. But I do not stop there. I push more mana from my body and with a speed that would tear me apart without my newest epic passive.

The armor around my body grows more and more, lifting me in the air until I'm at the chest of the translucent blue armor, surrounded by all this mana.

[Armament - lvl 37 > Armament - lvl 38]

[Armament - lvl 38 > Armament - lvl 39]

My domain encompasses it all, allowing me to stop it from dissipating and increasing my control over it.

[Mana Domain - lvl 13 > Mana Domain - lvl 14]

[Mana Domain - lvl 14 > Mana Domain - lvl 15]

And I continue to infuse more mana into it.

[Mana Infusion - lvl 35 > Mana Infusion - lvl 36]

Mana radiates all around me, making me over twice as tall as my normal height.

The effect of the sub-class Pride doesn't allow my [Armament] to look shabby, so it gains some delicate ornaments, and the pieces of armor are functional and deadly, yet beautifully looking.

I reach out my own hand, and the giant one made of my mana mirrors the movement. With a strong push, more mana flows there, and a sword made of mana, much bigger than the original in my hand, is created. A blade of a darker shade of blue than the armor and with wisps of light blue mana flowing through it.

Then I grab the sword and, taking a stance, I face the monster.

Chapter 224: Beast

The Skystrider Beast uses a shockwave roar again, but this time I burrow the feet of the armor into the ground, and the attack mostly disperse on the mana surrounding me.

Like a strong wind, the shockwave tears off chunks of my mana, but I ignore it all. As I take a step toward the monster, I continue to radiate more of it, repairing the damage done.

The sword in my mana hands resonates and clashes against the monster's skin. Unlike the ranged attacks, the sword is surrounded with [Resonance], so it doesn't disperse, and I finally draw more blood, making the monster roar. A swing of its fists sends me flying, the armor crumpling. The Skystrider Beast is still three times as tall as me, vicious and quick, and while I'm restoring the damage, it uses a shockwave and pushes me even further.

And then another one.

One more after that.

Each attack is stronger than the previous, craters forming around me, pieces of stone as big as cars flying to the sides. The air itself vibrates and roars under the force of the monster's skill.

Bigger and bigger chunks of my armor get pulled away from me like a building getting torn apart by strong winds.

So, I reach into my reservoir, and within my domain, mana moves quickly, filling the gaps, the armor becoming denser, and the sword even longer.

I take another step and the ground under me cracks. The mana has weight to it, either by itself or because of the combination of my skills.

As I run towards the monster, each of my steps breaks the surface under my feet, and with each passing second of the fight, my control over the armor improves.

I dodge the shockwave. I duck under the swing of the monster's fist. While doing so, I lose balance and use my hand to push myself back up, taking a hit from another fist but swinging my sword and dealing more damage.

[Mana Domain] expands, and mana from the Reservoir flows into the air, filling it with a pale blue shimmer. In the air, I form projectiles that fly toward the beast's eyes, trying to blind it. A hand forms there as well, expanding and growing until it's as big as the monster's, but when it hits, it disperses, unable to endure the monster's disruptive field on its skin.

Unlike my armor around my body, my ranged attacks do not have [Resonance] fighting against its barrier.

I stop releasing mana and just focus it more on the armor. I use [Redistribution] and [Mana Infusion]

My movement is awkward, yet so much better than before. It's getting easier to keep balance, and I slash with the sword again, tearing the barrier on the monster's skin and burrowing the sword deep into its side.

The beast's fist hits the head of my armor, destroying it, but my body is lower, in the middle of the chest.

I duck under another swing and then again when the monster uses a shockwave to boost its body toward me.

A giant fist hits the ground, creating a crater, and it roars again. This time the shockwave hits me but slides on the armor that I move. The armor is more durable than before.

When the beast attacks again, I'm ready, already knowing what attack it will use.

I dodge to the side and swing the sword towards the fist, the blade humming audibly and for a moment shining brighter than before. It cuts through the monster's skin, flesh, and bone. Easily as if there is no resistance. The cut-off hand falls to the ground, it being as big as a car.

More mana radiates from me as I move again while the monster holds the stump.

Both the monster and I move quickly, but slower than I would be if I was smaller. The mass and weight of [Armament] not allowing me to move faster.

When I step close and am about to attack, the beast waves its hand at me. The moment blood makes contact with the mana surrounding me, it immediately disrupts it and consumes it like poison. It causes a burning sensation, and large sections of the armor begin to disappear. I disregard this, even as the blood reaches my real body.

Another swing destroys more of the armor, the disruptive circuits on the remaining beast's arm still working. The monster then holds me and roars up close, and I feel my ears pop, blood leaking from them. My body vibrates, about to break apart.

I let go of the sword, and it dissipates even before it falls to the ground, I grab and hold the monster while changing my hands a bit to have sharper fingers that I burrow into its skin.

The beast doesn't mind and lowers its taller body, a mouth full of teeth biting and tearing off more and more of the blue mana armor.

I use Mana Regulator, and most of my mana rushes into my kinetic mana heart, generating an immense amount of kinetic energy.

The armor around me becomes even thinner as the beast roars again, a shockwave hitting me even more, and I feel blood in my mouth.

But I wait and watch it all happen while mana from the reservoir flows into my body and threatens to tear it apart, even with my Arcane resilience active.

When the monster finally bites off a bigger chunk of the chest of the [Armament], I restore my eyes and look into its red eyes, and then switch kinetic energy to thermal that fills the remaining half of the armor with all that energy.

The Skystrider Beast roars as the pieces of my armor get filled with immense heat in the same way I fill my mana orbs with thermal energy. Golden flames burn the black skin of the monster, and I squeeze and hold it stronger, even moving myself closer while the beast tries to push me away.

I fuel the flames, my heart beating and every throb sending even more thermal energy into what remains of the armor while I cling to the monster, burning it alive.

The best roars, a shockwave hitting my golden flames, making it look as if a strong wind tries to blow them off, yet they endure. The beast tries to use its blood again, but it sizzles and burns, turning into smoke. It roars, it cries, hands that move and try to push me away, try to squeeze me, yet I hold on, my body wounded but healing under the influence of the flames that activate Pyrokinetic resurgence.

It takes a few minutes, but the monster's movements slow down, a bone showing through the burned flesh and the attempts to push me away weaker.

I strengthen my armor with more mana and push the hand that tries to grab me away. I climb higher onto its body, and then towards the head. The beast bites at me, and I let it, losing a left arm of the armor that burns inside the mouth of the beast.

After climbing higher, I swing the remaining arm and burrow it as deep into one of the monster's eyes as, and then hold it as the beast thrashes against the ground in its last attempts to get me off. It continues to try to pull me off, only causing me to burrow my mana arm deeper. In an attempt to get me off, it also scratches its head terribly, not feeling the wounds because of all this pain and its burning body.

When the attempts weaken again, I redirect all the thermal energy and send it toward the arm that I hold stabbed into its eye socket. The parts of the armor stop glowing as all of the flames rush toward the wound, and the monster twitches a few more times, its blood sizzling and evaporating.

A weak groan escapes its burned mouth, and after twisting its body the last time, it finally dies.

[You have defeated Skystriker Beast - lvl 248]

[Lvl 177 > Lvl 181]

[Armament - lvl 39 > Armament - lvl 40]

[Mana Infusion - lvl 36 > Mana Infusion - lvl 37]

The monster falls to the ground, and I fall on it. As I do so, the armor around me dissipates, and I roll off its corpse, unable to stop it from happening. The air escapes my chest as I hit the ground.

I groan with pain, feeling a terrifying cold hitting my body, threatening to freeze it, and only then do I realize that I stopped generating thermal energy. With extreme difficulty, I calm my mind, and even through my complaining body, I start moving my mana again, transferring it to my heart and generating some heat that also slowly heals me, showing a limitation of the rare graded skill.

My body is pummeled from the inside, burned by the monster's blood, and even by some of my flames that I was unable to control fully.

I pull out the Ethercrystal sword and stab it deep into the monster's dead body. The blade immediately starts sucking the remaining mana from it and strengthening me. With relief, I sigh and lean against the monster.

A few scary minutes pass like that. My consciousness is kept only thanks to strengthening through the sword and flames that feed my passive. I watch as my hand shakes, and observing my body, I find out that I nearly depleted my body's mana. The Mana Reservoir also took a bit hit, with less than a third of its capacity remaining.

But as always, good things do not last.

The monsters start moving towards me from all sides, not scared anymore by the Skystrider Beast. There are dozens of them.

With a sigh, I pull the sword from the corpse and dodge to the side as a leech breaks the ground. I send a sharp pulse of mana through my body, strengthening it shortly at the top of the sword, and slash.

[You have defeated Mana Leech - lvl 170]

I move away from the corpse and my body staggers a bit as I feel weak in the legs. That makes an attack hit me, and I absorb only a bit of kinetic energy before I'm sent rolling on the ground.

Sensing another mana signature underground, I use the collected kinetic energy and send my body to the side, rolling even further before I stop.

When I get on my feet, I can barely stand, my body shaking and screaming in pain, and each use of mana sends sharp pain through my head.

Dozens of monsters start hungrily eating the giant corpse, disgusting noises sounding as they tear the skin and flesh from the body. Their devouring movements twitch the body, making it seem as if it's moving.

For a moment, I feel a hint of a weird emotion.

What a scary opponent the beast was, how far it pushed me. Yet now its lifeless body lies here, devoured by monsters that wouldn't even dare to come close to it while it was alive. And now they eat it, not even giving it enough time to cool down.

I feel the strengthening I'm getting from the sword weaken as the mana it was able to absorb starts to deplete and looking around, I detect a few dozen monsters moving toward me from all sides.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

[Focus]

More.

[Focus]

MORE!

[Focus]

My body stops shaking, all the emotions gone other than one. Sheer arrogance I show against all the odds.

How dare they try to attack me like hyenas, thinking I'm easy prey.

The pain is still here but pushed to the back of my mind, and I squeeze the sword I'm holding. My mana starts filling my body once again, as always, giving me all these powers and skills I got so used to.

My heart beats, and this time it's I who attacks first.

Chapter 225: Door in the mountain

Even though I strengthen my body, it's still weak, so I dodge the first attack by letting myself fall, my knuckles scratching as I still hold the sword. The leech passes over my head and, without even turning around, I send a short pulse of thermal energy at it, hearing it screech in pain.

Another attack from the ground hits me, and this time I let it. I create armor only in front of my chest, absorbing some of the hits, strengthen my arm as much as I can and stab the monster. I continue to keeping up the armor on my chest and stabbing the monster. In the end, I also shoot a pulse of kinetic energy, finally killing it.

Both of us fall down, and I keep the sword stabbed inside the corpse to absorb as much mana as possible.

I pull the sword out and stagger backward, only to avoid a nearly invisible mana attack that the leeches like to use. Small part of it still hits me, making me spin. Falling down to my knees, I push with kinetic energy, sending myself rolling away and dodging another attack.

Another pulse sends me back to my feet, just in time to surround my arm with mana armor and stab the sword deep into the monster's mouth.

Sharp teeth bite on the armor, cracking it, even sucking on the mana and weakening it further.

Crumpled armor presses against my skin, even slightly cracking the bone, and I send thermal energy through. The armor lights up with yellow flames, and the leech, while screeching, lets go. I send a cone of kinetic energy against its head, killing it.

The fight continues for what feels like hours. I'm so terribly weak right now, and killing a few dozen monsters strains me as much as nothing lately.

I roll on the ground, I stumble, I dodge. I groan in pain. All while killing one monster after another, slowly and methodically, saving every point of mana and straining myself as little as possible.

At some point, everything stops existing, and there are two orders I follow. Keep thermal energy flowing through so you won't freeze. The second one is to kill anything that moves through the mana particles I use to track the monsters.

Even then, the time comes when the last notification sounds, and after sending my senses into the area, I feel no presence.

A surprise hits me, and with it, a hint of disappointment. I start coming back to my senses and to this dead, dark world with only stars lighting it. The second Beyond trial.

Once again, I stagger towards the closest corpse and stab the sword into it, the blade hungrily sucking on the mana and strengthening my body.

That's when I promise to myself that my next epic passive will be a healing one. Either a strengthened version of my current one or a better one. Actually, should I go and buy a rare passive now to heal me?

After restoring my eyes for a moment and checking the timer, a greedy part of me decides against it and that I would rather save for a stronger passive than buy a weak one. The fight is over anyway, and I'll soon have Lily to heal my dumb ass.

With ten minutes remaining until the end of the trial, I stand up and start moving back into the valley between the mountains.

Only five minutes remain when I stop in front of the door, my chest moving up and down heavily even after a small usage of mana to get here faster.

The next four minutes I spend staring at the inscriptions and remembering as many as I can, even etching simpler versions of them into a mana stone I have on me. They don't do anything, and it's more akin to drawing on paper, just that the mana stones are much more expensive, yet I do not hesitate and do it as much as I can.

One minute left.

The world starts feeling as if it freezes over. I hear no sound and nothing moves at all. In the deafening silence, even mana inside my body refuses to move, and so does my mana heart. Only by checking the timer do I confirm that time didn't freeze, as it continues to tick down.

Then a whisper sounds in my head, (So very curious. Haven't I met you during your first Trial?)

There isn't any connection that I could cut off, nor mana I could feel. The voice is just there, in my head. The inscriptions on the door start glowing even brighter, and the entire mountain feels as if it's shaking.

"Who are you?" I ask.

(Just an intent I left in the tutorial.) the voice says as if it explains everything, yet it only creates more questions for me.

"Why?"

(To mess with @*--?#!) it pauses, and I can nearly feel amusement from it. (So she censored even her name.) This time it laughs, the mountain shaking even more, and big pieces falling all around as it continues to crack.

The inscriptions glow in a painfully intense light, and I feel sick just from sensing the enormous amount of mana they contain and manipulate.

Five seconds remaining.

"Who is she?" I ask my last question.

(The Ruler of Greed, obviously.)

Then I get forced out.

No portal appears near me; it's just my body that is yanked backward, everything around me turning into a blur. When it all stops, I find myself in the underground area under the house.

I sense that I triggered some sort of trap, and when I send my senses into the area, I realize that it's only Sophie's vastly improved web that surrounds the house. The effect I triggered was something akin to detection or a doorbell.

(Welcome back,) I let Sophie connect to my mind through her web.

(Can you send Lily here?) I ask while sliding to the ground, my back against the wall.

Huh, there is still so much blood?

(I did it already. Are you...)

I do not hear the rest of the words, and finally, after a week, I let myself pass out. My last thought is that Lily will be pissed off.

When I get back to myself, I decide to keep my eyes closed and don't move at all, nor change the way I breathe. Instead, I only send my senses and detect three people in the room: Lily, Tess, and Hadwin.

"So, how is he?" Hadwin asks first.

At least a few hours must have passed already, so this more looks like he and Tess are checking on me while Lily heals me.

But there is one question. Does she need to touch me that much? I mean, it's probably so her powers can more easily enter my body and all, but it still feels a bit awkward having her hand move on my chest and around the wounds there.

"If I use [Sacrifice] I can heal him much faster, but I don't think it's needed. His passive did help a bit," from Lily's voice I hear contempt, as if she is looking down at my rare graded passive.

That's quite rude. Pyrokinetic Resurgence is trying its best.

"Well, you can tell him he almost died and you saved his life, Lily," Hadwin says it in a way a grandpa would talk to his favorite grandchild.

In answer, Lily giggles and jokingly says something back.

I didn't even notice they became so close. It feels a bit awkward finding it out. Sure, enough time passed to create friendships between people in the group, yet it still feels a bit weird.

"We will go, there is a quest to scout the territory around ants, apparently they are even closer now and if it continues this way they will get to the city in a month or two," Tess sighs.

Oh boy.

"Take care," Lily shouts as they leave and I hear the doors close.

For a while, Lily continues to send her mana into me and I observe it. I continue to compare it to her skill a few weeks ago and the difference is huge. Lily is slowly but surely becoming really good at it.

Out of nowhere, she pinches and twists the skin on my right collarbone, "I know you are awake."

Should I start fake snoring and pretend to sleep?

Lily pinches again and I finally open my eyes, "That's rude."

"It's rude to think I wouldn't notice my patient being awake," she snorts and lets go of me. "You should get rid of your passive skill. To be honest, it's pathetic how weak it is," Lily adds out of nowhere.

"It helped me a lot," I try to fight in the name of my innocent skill.

"I could heal better even on the second floor," the black-haired healer doesn't seem to be impressed.

Looking around, I realize that I'm on the bed in my room. Feeling the weight on my legs, I look down and there is a big burrito reminding me of a corgi sleeping on my legs.

"He stayed with you the entire time and refused to leave. Even when Izzy tried to lure him out with some food," Lily says.

"I see," I get out of myself, "How long?"

"Only a bit over a day."

Huh, that's not that bad. Slowly I'm improving. I should start working on my new construct to help me deal with these situations. First, I will need to get into healing a bit more. Traditional healing like Lily's isn't something I was able to get in, but healing through thermal energy with my passive seems like something that I could work with.

Before I realize it, Lily pinches my nose, "You are spacing out again. You always do that," she complains, "Your eyes start looking even more distant. So what are you thinking about?" she pauses, "Women?" her eyes are cheeky as she says so.

Little twerp, pipsqueak! How dare she use my nose-pinching maneuver against me!

"Yesh, I thoukht about phwoman," I say while she keeps my nose pinched.

Our eyes meet, she pinches even harder and twists a bit, but then slowly a smile crawls on her lips.

She starts laughing, and I can hear relief in her voice as her laugh sounds in the room, "I'm glad you are fine, Nathaniel," Lily's voice is soft as she says so.

When Lily leaves, I reach to boop Biscuit's nose to feel manlier, but then I see him sleeping peacefully and remember Lily saying that he stayed with me the entire time. With a sigh, I stop myself from doing so and lay back on the bed, careful not to wake him up.

So weak! I'm so weak! Damn, what would Victoria say if she saw me like that? Actually, I don't even have to think about it, I can imagine her words, "Just do whatever you want, Nat." That's just how she is.

“Status,” I whisper quietly to not wake up Biscuit.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty:Hell Floor: 4 - Waning Realm

Time left until forced return: 4y 125d 10h 2m 6s

Traits (1/3):Mana Circuit

Lvl 182

Strength: 85

Dexterity: 87

Constitution: 223

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 686 + 686

Primary Class: Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class:[Initiate of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus Consolidation) - Lvl 40

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 41

Perception - Lvl 39

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 38

Armament - Lvl 40

Mana Infusion - Lvl 37

Resonance - Lvl 31

Mana Domain - Lvl 15

Tether - Lvl 7

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Kinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Passive skills:

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Pyrokinetic Resurgence (rare)

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

Tokens:

Beyond Difficulty entrance token

Active skill combination token (low-grade)

Shards: 3032

Nice, the reward of 1000 shards is already here. I have gained 12 levels, three of them from that annoying beast. A few skills leveled up too and broke through a bottleneck, meaning that I need to get two more skills over 40 to get a skill upgrade token as a reward from a side quest. Well, maybe I will ignore this quest and just use the active skill combination token as it seems much more useful than the skill upgrade token. It could also take me a few weeks to break through the skill bottleneck to level forty.

But the biggest reward surely is the way I used [Armament]

With a few improvements, this could become terrifyingly strong, even though right now I should hesitate to use it. My proficiency is still terrible, so it used way too much mana and the process was so bad it put a useless strain on my body. A few weeks of experimenting with it should improve it further and add another weapon to my arsenal.

But now, the thing I want to check the most.

“Use active skill combination token.”

You have used an active skill combination token. Please pick two skills from the following ones you would like to combine.

Warning! Combining two skills will reduce the level of the acquired skill.

Warning! A combination of not-compatible skills can result in worse skills.

Warning! After combining the skills, it will become extremely difficult to acquire the skills used for combination.

List of available skills to combine:

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 41

Perception - Lvl 39

Mana Infusion - Lvl 37

Armament - Lvl 40

Tether - Lvl 7

Oh, so [Focus], [Redistribution], [Resonance], and [Mana Domain] are not available for combination. It can either mean that the skills are just too high tier to be used this way, or the skill combination token is too low tier, and I would need to acquire a stronger one to actually combine these skills.

Well, it doesn't matter; I wouldn't use it on either of those four skills. They are way too important to me to use them this way.

[Mana Manipulation] with [Perception]

[Mana Manipulation] with [Mana Infusion]

[Mana Manipulation] with [Tether]

[Mana Manipulation] with [Armament]

[Perception] with [Mana Infusion]

[Perception] with [Tether]

[Perception] with [Armament]

[Mana Infusion] with [Tether]

[Mana Infusion] with [Armament]

[Tether] with [Armament]

Now then, I have ten possible combinations. Let's get into theorizing.

Chapter 226: Hatched egg

First, I look at [Mana Manipulation]. It's probably the skill I use the most, and even though it's not as high-tiered as some others I have, I still hesitate. For someone like me, the skill is extremely important and I don't know what would happen if I got rid of it, so let's rather keep it.

That leaves me with 6 options.

[Perception] with [Mana Infusion] would probably vastly improve my detection of mana. Maybe even allow me to feel it better and, in the end, improve the way I use it.

[Perception] with [Tether] would most likely improve my placement of anchors. A new skill could straight up end up being some sort of teleport. That doesn't sound bad at all.

[Perception] with [Armament] would most likely end up being a skill that would make my mana creations “smarter”, and maybe even allow me to program some behavior? Or maybe not, it sounds weird.

Then there is [Mana Infusion] with [Tether]. So maybe something to create traps that I can infuse with more mana or some stronger ranged attack?

[Tether] with [Armament], I don't even know what to imagine. [Tether] is still a bit weird, so I have trouble with that.

And then, there is an option I like the most. Especially ever since I saw Maya using it and I used it on my own in the second Beyond trial.

[Mana Infusion] and [Armament]. I used both skills this way, to infuse mana into my armor, which made it much stronger. An improved version of that would make my mecha-like armor even stronger, projectiles as well.

To be honest, this might be the first time I could really use a lot of my mana. What I did before while fighting beast is extremely mana-hungry but also really strong, especially against opponents who can ignore my ranged attacks. Weirdly, even with all that mana, getting up close and personal is a great option.

And then there is also an idea I have had for some time that might allow me to circumvent the system a bit.

For one more time, I look at [Perception] with [Tether]

"I want to combine [Mana Infusion] and [Armament]," I say quietly, still careful not to wake up Biscuit.

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Mana Infusion] and [Armament]! A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Regalia].

[Regalia - lvl 0 > Regalia - lvl 6]

Damn, [Armament] was at 40 and [Mana Infusion] at 37, so this skill better be cool as heck. The name is a bit weird when comparing it to other skills, but not in a bad way.

I start creating a mana orb over the palm of my hand, and my mana moves there easily, the orb nearly instantly changing to dark blue with wisps of pale blue mana inside. Observing it tells me that I need to push just a little for it to turn into a tricolored orb. The speed is just that immense. The orb itself feels heavier than before and even denser. I would need to test it a bit more, but it feels much tougher while still listening to me as before and moving according to my will.

The best part of it is that the skill is at level 6 only, in comparison to [Armament] which used to be 40. I mean, I won't complain, but isn't this too much?

I reduce the density a bit, and the orb becomes a lighter, more transparent shade of light blue, but it moves much faster and changes shape however I want, expanding, shrinking, all according to my will.

Right now, I really want to pump more mana into it and try to create armor, but the cute corgi sleeping on my legs holds me back. I guess I will have to stay here for a while.

Now then, back to a little bit of scamming.

I expand the orb in my hand, turning it into a dagger, and then try to fill it with more mana. It obviously works, either using [Mana Manipulation] or [Regalia] to do so. But this is not what I want to do. I long

since learned to infuse my creations with thermal or kinetic energy, and ever since the third floor, I was attempting to infuse them with my skills.

Even back then, my goal was to turn [Mana Infusion] into [Infusion], and now with the skill out of the way, it seems as good a time to try. I already made a lot of attempts over the past few months, even before the end of the 3rd floor.

I close my eyes, let's try it.

(Food?)

Biscuit is lying on my chest, with his front legs on my collarbones. When I look at him, he tilts his head, a pink tongue sticking out slightly. His eyes are still not fully open and he seems to be sleepy, as if he just woke up.

"Everything is fine."

(Food food?)

"Yes, I swear, it's fine now," I reach out and after touching his tongue, I ruffle the top of his head.

(Food.)

"Yes, I know, the next time I will try not to be away for that long."

Only after I say that he woofs and puts his head on my chest. Then, while listening to my heartbeat, he yawns and closes his eyes again.

Such a good boy.

I check the status, and [Infusion] is already at level 13, and even [Regalia] leveled up once.

In the end, it was easier than I thought, and I got [Infusion] nearly immediately after I started my attempts to get it. That makes me wonder if [Mana Infusion] held me back from acquiring it or if there is something else at work. But that doesn't sound right as before I evolved my [Mana Perception] into [Perception]. It could also be caused by me going through the second Beyond trial and my experience with the door and improvement of Mantle.

Carefully, I sit up and then stand up, holding Biscuit in my arms. He continues to sleep, and I move carefully, even using [Redistribution] to absorb some shocks as I walk to not wake him up.

Thankfully, I'm already wearing clothes. Someone also washed me while changing them, and at this point, I'm too worried to ask who. Neither of the options seem good, so I'd rather ignore it.

Outside of my room, I send my sense through the house and detect the twins.

When I get to the kitchen, Aaron and Dennis are sitting on the couch, as always, both close to each other and drawing something on a bunch of papers in front of them, seemingly theorizing about the uses of their skills and weaknesses of the monsters they hunt.

As they see me, they wave and, noticing sleeping Biscuit, stay quiet. Both of them pretend to be normal, but I long since noticed that no matter how friendly they look or how much they joke or talk with me, there is still a hint of carefulness.

Unlike Min-Jae, they don't like me that much. It's most likely caused by the impression I gave them on the first floor, or they just don't have as trusting personality as Min-Jae. To be honest, I don't mind it. They have a reason why they act the way they do, and it's not something that bothers me too much. I don't need people to like me or anything.

I sit on the couch with Biscuit still in my arms and look at them.

"How was the second trial?" Dennis asks quietly, and I use [Resonance] to cut off the sound around Biscuit so we won't wake him up.

Then, I shortly and without too much description, tell them about the second trial. Like everyone in the group, they also already know about Beyond, yet showed not even a tiny bit of interest in going there. They are just curious, and as I talk, they listen carefully, asking once in a while. It all reminds me of someone watching an action movie; that's how it feels.

Aaron and Dennis are both really similar. By similar, I mean nearly the same. Their personality and behavior are nearly identical, a sentiment confirmed by both of them having exactly the same skills.

The only way I can tell them apart is by their mana, but here I also noticed that they are trying to work on that. They know I distinguish them by mana, so they work on a way to confuse me, trying to duplicate signatures.

I still don't know if they do it as training or just to troll me. With them, either of the options could be it.

"I heard ants were seen close to the city," I say at one point.

"Yup, lynthari didn't like it at all, and I didn't see them hissing and nya-ing so much ever since we came here. Ants didn't attack or anything, not yet, but apparently, in a few weeks, they should be here with their speed," Dennis says.

Aaron also joins in, "Obelia was also looking for you. Something about an expedition and auction. Myrra also came," he giggles, "Lily was so mad."

"What is this bitch doing here again. Nathaniel should clearly tell her he is not interested in old women," Dennis mimics Lily's voice, and that makes Aaron laugh even more, yet he does it quietly, still worried about not waking up the best doggo.

But damn, Lily sure has no chill. Obelia looks barely thirty.

"I must never become weaker than Lily," not surely knowing why I say it out loud instead of keeping it in my mind.

Even the twins seem surprised, but soon they smile.

"I never thought of that. I wonder what would happen to you if you were weaker." Dennis's quiet laugh sounds in the room.

"I'm more and more sure Lily is an Initiate of Lust," Aaron joins in without hesitation.

Then the twins continue to joke with me. It's barely noticeable, but their laugh seems a tiny bit more real than before.

Later that night, Sophie and Izzy return first, followed by Maya.

Maya greets me first and tells me about the spot where she hid good snacks, and then she disappears to take a shower.

I'm already impatient to show off my new skill to her, but this will wait.

Biscuit is awake and well, floating around and annoying people to get some food. As if offering a sacrifice to keep their souls, everyone gives him something and the corgi floats to another target. Who would want to mess with a divine beast with one of the rare Primordial energies? Me, for sure not.

I notice that Izzy is holding her arms behind her back as if hiding something, and when I try to probe with my mana, she shouts angrily, "No, don't look!" and stomps. That sends a weak pulse of mana from her that blocks my vision.

It only makes me more curious.

"The egg has hatched," Sophie tells me while putting away their gear.

My curiosity grows even bigger. What could be inside the egg that cost five thousand shards? An amount close to an epic passive.

"Izzy?" I say carefully, but she seems to be waiting for something. "Please?" I add.

She seems to hesitate but still shakes her head, "You will have to tell Biscuit to be more friendly with..." she pauses, "with mine and Sophie's pet!"

Just tell me the name already, you silly girl, "I will tell him that, I promise," I say, still curious about what kind of beast it is that Biscuit apparently doesn't like.

For Izzy, such a promise is enough, and she runs to me, taking her hand from behind her back and showing me an animal. It is a beautifully white snake with emerald green eyes that have a surprisingly intelligent look in them.

The snake looks towards me, sticks out its tongue, and I can feel it, tasting my mana? That's the best way I can describe it. Then the snake tries to move closer to me.

"Oh, he really likes you! He didn't do it with anyone else," Izzy says, surprised but also a bit annoyed.

The snake seems to like my mana, not me, you silly girl, I want to say. There is no text over its head, and the creature still feels somewhat weak.

"Izzy, I have a few ideas for a name," I can't help myself. The snake looks cool, even though it's still small and wrapped around Isabella's arm. "Maybe something like Hissarion, Whitey, Emeraldie, Snek, Jörmungandr."

"Oh, you don't have to. We already have a name!" Izzy stops me.

"Izzy picked it," Sophie joins in the conversation.

I already know where this is going.

"We call him Noodle!" the little girl says proudly.

Noodle looks first at her and then at me. It might be only me, but his eyes seem tired.

Chapter 227: New group member

I continue to look at Noodle, and he looks at me; soon, we both come to an understanding.

We are the same.

Noodle here is introverted as well, suffering under the hand of his energetic, extroverted child owner.

"Hang in there, buddy," I say. As I do, he sticks out his tongue and swivels it towards me, once again tasting my mana.

For a moment, it also looks like he is trying to reach me, but Isabella quickly hides him, and I can see a hint of jealousy on her face, "Noodle is mine!" she fights back.

Meanwhile, Sophie shakes her head while looking at me, "I've noticed it a few times, but animals really like you. Biscuit, some from the city, now even Noodle, what are you? A Disney princess?"

Too proud to answer, I just ignore her and pass by Izzy. While doing so, I send a bit of my mana toward the white snake, and I notice him opening his mouth a bit and swallowing it. The cute little snake seems to enjoy it.

We introverts have to stick together.

"I will go to the city for a bit," I tell Sophie before leaving, and she nods in acknowledgment.

When outside, I boost my body and lift up into the air, flying over the houses and towards Obelia's guilds.

The Guild House of Storm Brigade is one of the highest towers in the city. It's really wide, allowing nearly anything they need to fit in. A place to sleep, training areas, learning areas, and labs. Just all in one. The walls of the tower are interwoven with circuits that have mana flow through them. The circuits strengthen it and have detection in them. I also long since noticed some nasty traps hidden there, ready to activate.

I land just outside the garden that surrounds the tower from all sides and then walk towards it. The air here is also filled with multiple effects that make flying much more difficult.

At the door, I meet two guards who greet me, used to my visits from before. Yet they still reach their hand towards me, and I send a bit of my mana at them.

Using an item, they collect it and find it in their database, only then allowing me in after greeting me. Apparently, I have one of the highest possible clearances. Either thanks to Tess, who is Obelia's third disciple, or thanks to me being the guild master of Angry Kittens.

After getting inside, I get going and fly through the tunnel made for people with this ability and get to the highest floor. There, I stop in front of the door to Obelia's quarters. As a guild master, she takes up the entire floor, the inscriptions in the wall denser, and the floor has an office, shielded labs, a strengthened training area, and a vault. Anything she would need.

It doesn't take long, and Obelia herself comes to greet me. Knowing it's me, she doesn't even wear the uniform Storm Brigade uses, just some comfortable-looking homely clothes. When dealing with me or Tess, she just does that. Otherwise, she is uptight and nearly always formal with her guild.

"What can I thank for your visit?" she says, dropping formalities.

She then leads me towards the outer wall and then onto a balcony that oversees the city. Here both of us sit, and for a moment I take in the view. No matter how many times I get there, I still continue to enjoy it.

"I just wanted to ask you for a few more pieces of ethercrystal and selenium," I ask.

From my testing, I found that these two materials are nice to work with, and both are good at holding or leading mana. Sure, there are some that are even better, it's just that they are too expensive for how little I would be able to get.

"I will have them delivered to your house tomorrow morning," Obelia says without much hesitation, and I just nod.

After a while, I ask, "How is Tess doing?"

That makes her look at me, her silver eyes calm, yet I see them changing a bit. Obelia seems to be proud and maybe a bit jealous of Tess, her disciple for a few months already.

"Tess is amazing, she already dealt with my second disciple, and the first one is avoiding her at all costs," she smiles just a little bit, "Tess is fierce, and when they started trying to control her, worried for their spot as 1st and 2nd disciples, she just beat them up."

Obelia then lifts up her hand and red lightning starts cracking on her palm; it's similar to Tess's, but not too much. Tess has white and red lightning that feels purer, and more dangerous than what Obelia is doing.

And the guild master of the Storm Brigade seems to know it as well, "There was progress. Just a little bit, but even that is more than I was able to do in the past 10 years." The lightning disappears.

She continues, "Sometimes I wonder where you two came from. Also, some of your guild members. Your skills are... something else," Obelia says, but the tone of her voice makes it clear that she doesn't expect an answer.

"What's with the ants?" I ask instead, to change the subject.

"Three or four weeks at most and they will get too close to the city, so we will push back against them. The lynthari have a territory they won't let them enter, so if that happens, there will be war," her eyes become distant, "we would attack much sooner, but there aren't that many of them, and they don't even build tunnels. It's all too weird, to be honest, so even the lynthari don't know how to react."

"I see, it's really a mystery," I say and quickly change the subject, "Some time ago you did talk about an expedition and auction. Do you still count me in?"

"That's something I wanted to talk with you about. The expedition can start in three days if you are willing to join. If everything goes according to plan it will take two days, if something screws up, it will take three to five."

“So five days for the expedition.”

Obelia nods, “As for the auction, it's set to start a few days after we finish the expedition, so that is also fine. I have a spot for you and two more people saved.”

“Sounds good. Then a few days after the auction, we can start with the Living Tree. I will be ready by then.” I stand up, “Will you let Myrra know and send someone with more information on the expedition and auction?”

Obelia just nods and I step towards the balcony. [Resonance] activates, and I jump from it, the skill allowing me to ignore my anti-fly safeguards.

Hopefully, there will be some strong monsters on the expedition. The ones around or a bit further away from the city are way too weak for me currently. But something tells me I will have my fun soon, the Living Tree, then the Colony, and after both are dealt with, the Fallen Hero. I totally won't deal with one Calamity only, I will get rid of these three and then find the fourth one.

When I land, I start walking again, this time towards a huge training area somewhere near the middle of the city. The entire area is built on weird gray polished stone, remains from times long past.

The gray stone that covers the area is indestructible. Literally. I have tried everything and was unable to even scratch it. No one knows what kind of stone it is, or what purpose it is for, so they just decided to turn it into an area where people fight without constantly creating craters.

I think I would like whoever decided to do that.

Unsurprisingly, I find there Isola, a short, pale, black-haired woman. The guild master of the Obsidian Circle.

As she often does, she duels and trains there, wearing a tee that shows her pale, yet muscular body and a big piece of her slim belly with a hint of abs.

Isola likes to fight, no, she loves to fight and lately, she has become my go-to punching ba... training partner when I want to test something. She doesn't seem to mind and, scarily, I noticed her getting better and better at countering my skills. We haven't gone full out yet, but it's clear that she has an immense talent for battle as well as a strong competitive spirit.

She is easygoing, always bored, and looking for fun things to do. She is also a total musclehead, yet weirdly smart when it comes to fighting.

"Feral angry kitten, welcome!" she immediately ditches her sparring partner and comes rushing to me, a big smile on her face.

Unlike Elydor, she says our guild name without ill intention or contempt, so I don't mind it that much.

Isola is already preparing to fight and I can see her mana starting to activate, strengthening her stupidly strong body even more.

I give her a short greeting and then [Regalia] activates as I use it to surround myself with armor. Unlike the old one, this one is even more dangerous looking. It's not as bulky, being nearly skin-tight, yet its design is improved by the skill itself and then even more by my Pride sub-class. Simple, but beautiful and somewhat regal feeling.

"Oh, this is a new one!" Isola says excitedly, her skin-tight barrier already surrounding her body and she adds to it even more as a reaction to my improved skill.

She attacks first and I stand there, watching as her fist is about to hit me. Before it does, I decide to use kinetic energy and send it through the armor with the help of [Infusion].

Her fist hits the middle of my chest and that's all. On the blue armor, a ripple appears, sent through its entirety. Like a stone thrown into a calm lake.

At the same time, I feel the effect of [Infusion] that combined with [Regalia]. My mana rushes into the armor at the point of hit, strengthening it and then using infused kinetic energy to absorb the energy of Isola's attack.

I feel nothing, my body doesn't move at all. The armor absorbs it all and kinetic energy flows through it, instead of being sent inside my body.

"Interesting!" without hesitation, she switches stance, mana appearing from intricate tattoos on her forearms and she hits me with an attack, switching to attacks that use mana.

Again and again, she hits me, yet the result is similar. The kinetic energy of her attacks gets absorbed and mana attacks just crash against the armor. At places where they damage it, more mana rushes there, filling the cracks and repairing the armor.

The drain on my mana is noticeable even with the amount of mana I possess. I start moving as well and using the kinetic energy I've collected, I punch at Isola. She dodges it, and we continue to exchange punches and kicks, moving all over the area.

The more we fight, the more I realize how amazing the skill is, especially in combination with [Infusion] that adds properties to it.

Closer to the end of the fight, I disable the armor and start creating projectiles using [Regalia]. Even they are much stronger and unlike those from our spars before, Isola isn't able to disrupt or destroy them. The decision I made seems to be really good so far.

When I return to the house, I find that everyone is back inside.

Ignoring the front door, I carefully pass through Sophie's web, able to do so without triggering traps or alarms, thanks to my extensive help in creating it.

After jumping onto my balcony, I look at Tess, who is standing there. She is resting against the railing and looking down at the city that is already filled with colorful lights as the night came. Tess seems to be thinking, so I just join her in silence.

The wind continues to blow, and unlike most of the time, her hair isn't tied into a ponytail and just waves in the wind, even at night showing its pretty blonde color.

When she turns to me, her steel-gray eyes are serious, and I see a hint of excitement and worry in them, "I was able to combine two of my skills," she says simply, "[Lightning Armor] and [Lightning Manipulation]," she names her old skill and the skill she was able to get around two weeks ago.

Tess uses her mana to feed her new skill, and the moment it activates, I realize how powerful it is, not dissimilar to my [Regalia].

Slowly, red and white lightning moves and collects over her head, at first creating a halo that hovers there, then the halo changes its shape a bit, turning into a crown made from red and white lightning. The tips of that crown turn slightly yellow as if heated metal. The power of her new lightning is extremely pure.

"It's called [Stormcrown]," Tess says, red and white lightning lighting her blonde hair and face. Even before she continues, I know what it means, "Nat, I can now enter Beyond 1st trial."

Chapter 228: The second strongest member of Group 4

I spend the rest of the day and a big part of another helping Tess to get used to her skill.

[Stormcrown], while activated, improves her control over lightning by a lot. It also allows her to let lightning flow through her body and create something like [Lightning Armor] from before. In some ways, it's a bit similar to my [Regalia].

While watching Tess use it and feeling the force behind her attacks, I can't help but feel admiration for her. She is extremely hardworking, in both dealing with people from our group, all the planning, and even with her training.

I don't think I ever saw her skip a day of training and similarly to Izzy, she also always walks around the house, having some of her skills activated. All of that transformed into her being the second person from our group about to enter Beyond. Other than her, only Lily and Min-Jae show interest in it.

Lily should be fine with her skills and after gaining some levels, but Min-Jae... it's something to deal with. He is strong and has improved a lot, he also works hard, yet he is missing something that is hard to describe.

“It’s easier than I thought, the new skill feels like a combination of my old ones, keeping them intact, but adding to them while strengthening them as well,” Tess says.

She then gestures with her hand, a dozen lightning arrows shooting at me, only to be met by a shield made of [Regalia]. I didn’t infuse it with any other skills, but it’s vastly stronger than before.

“My sub-class also seems to be working nicely with it.” As she says so, [Stormcrown] activates again and the crown that floats over her head shines brighter, and white and red lightning create it.

Tess, without any gesture, moves her dozen javelins towards her, each of them rare graded and made of endurium. Lightning cracks around her body, filling the weapons with it and all at once fly at me.

This time the shield I make is much thicker and I infuse it with [Resonance].

The javelins stab into it, but the moment they do so, I feel a pull on my mana and my skill disrupts the lightning.

Tess uses her skill and the javelins that she declared to be hers fly back and float behind her back.

The look in her eyes changes and she opens her mouth, “I declare this to be my domain,” the tone of her voice is different as if she is forcing the world to listen to her will.

That’s her [Declaration]

It takes a toll on her and I can feel the amount of mana it uses, even making her [Stormcrown] flicker. Yet it works and her mana fills a spherical area around her in a similar way my [Mana Domain] does. Within that domain, lightning continues to flicker in the air, ready to bend to her will, and the stones on the ground start to float upwards.

Tess pushes more and the crown over her hair shines brighter, and her blonde hair floats, lightning passing through them.

Following the blast of lightning comes out of nowhere, without giving me a chance to feel it, and crashes against my body I strengthened. Pushed by it, I absorb my inertia and [Resonance] activates, weakening her domain and pushing against her.

Each of Tess's skills activates faster within her declared domain, and the javelins that fly at me move as if they have their own mind, each with a different speed and trajectory, but all of them are trailed by lightning.

Sliding into [Focus], I calmly observe them and, strengthening my body, I deflect all of them.

The lightning that fails to damage me floats in the air and gets pulled to Tess, spinning around her body. The moment the ground explodes under her, she shoots at me a sharp blast of concentrated Primordial energy. It's fast, very fast, and it pierces the barrier I create and fails to push further, crashing against a glove made of [Regalia] that I infused with [Resonance].

My [Mana Domain] activates as well and starts clashing against Tess's. I feed it more mana until I win over her skill and cancel it.

I create an anchor behind Tess's back and send kinetic energy to it. I do it much faster than before and Tess barely reacts by creating a lightning armor around her before my attack throws her to the side.

Then she is nearly out of mana and I stop my attacks. The time we spent testing and her [Declaration] spent the last big remaining chunks of her mana.

"I liked your last attack," I say as I grab a bottle from a bench nearby and throw it to her, "With a bit of practice, it could become really deadly."

Tess grabs the bottle and takes a sip while moving a strand of hair off her forehead. She also seems to be thinking and replaying our fight, "I prefer quicker and weaker attacks. This one uses too much mana and takes a bit longer than I would like to use."

"There is a simple solution to that."

“More mana?”

“More mana,” I confirm to her amusement.

“Looking at my skill, I guess I will have to,” she sits down while letting out a loud sigh. “I will also go for Potency and upgrade my mana attribute. I think it combines the best with my skills and sub-class.”

“Come on, don’t be shy, just say out loud that your sub-class is Chastity,” I plop next to her.

My teasing gets me a poke with her finger into my ribs and a small smile, “Any other advice for Beyond?”

“Just don’t die.”

“Obviously, that's a priority.”

“No, Tess, I really mean it.” I say.

Something in my voice makes her expression change, and the look she gives me is hard to describe.

I continue, “You keep spewing all this bullshit about camaraderie and about you taking care of everything.” I lower the effect of [Focus] which most of the time weakens my anxiety, fear, and other useless emotions.

As I do so, I can feel something that I can describe only as worry, “Do not dare to die,” I repeat.

Early the next day, Lily, Tess, and I sit down in the basement. Tess is in top condition, wearing armor that used to be Edwal's and that was changed to fit her. She has multiple mana batteries with her, and a dozen endurium rare javelins float behind her back.

The Beyond's first trial will take one hour, so she takes no food, and in case something changes, she can use the system shop to buy some.

Her mana is filled to the brim and [Stormcrown] is already activated, collecting and storing lightning energy in a similar way I do with my orbs. It's already been plenty of hours since she started with it and at this point, the amount of lightning energy it holds is quite scary.

I would like her to collect more, no matter how much she complains about not wanting to blow off half of the street. Unfortunately, Tess currently can't contain and hold more.

She also refuses to wait longer, saying that she needs to experience the danger of Beyond and can't just get there when getting much stronger. That's something that is easier to understand.

I watch as she stretches, fixes her armor, and then takes in a deep breath.

The entrance to the first trial appears in front of her, and she looks at us, "See you in one hour," she says and takes a step without hesitation, and the entrance disappears behind her.

Ten minutes pass in silence when Lily asks me, "Are you worried about her?"

I give it a bit of thought and then nod, seeing no reason to lie. It's silly, I know, Tess is scary strong, and stubborn. She will be fine. Yet, like a normal human, I got used to people around me, to my schedule, to seeing them around. Right now, taking some of it away from me would annoy me.

"Would you be worried about me as well? When I also go there?" Lily asks, her voice quiet.

At first, I just want to pinch her nose or ignore it the way I always do, but when I look at her, I can see how serious she is. This is not just some sort of jealousy she sometimes shows. No, what I can see is some deep trauma that she seems to have and tries to hide.

It also makes me realize that I know almost nothing about her, other than things I have learned in the tutorial.

"I would," I tell her. I won't know for sure until it happens, but I can say with almost certainty that I would.

Unlike her usual self, I see relief on her face. As if she was really worried that I would say no. In the same way as most of us here, Lily also didn't have a nice life.

In the silence that ensues, we continue to wait.

Forty minutes remaining.

Thirty.

Five minutes.

A minute.

Ten seconds.

A portal appears, and Tess steps through it, immediately falling to her knees. The lightning wildly cracks around her body, her eyes wild and unfocused. She falls to the ground, a big chunk of her leg missing, and a hole in her side, the wound burned and closed by her lightning.

Then her eyes meet mine, and they clear for a moment. She looks proud and slowly closes her eyes to let herself doze off. The moment she does so, I feel her heartbeat slow down, and as I take a step towards her. White and red lightning that still remains around her body bursts against me, hurting me like a whip, burning wounds into my flesh. The same lightning hits her own heart and restarts it, making her regain a normal heartbeat.

Lily passes by me and her mana activates too. The lightning also shoots against her, but the black-haired healer annoyed, furrows her brow, and thin wisps of gray mana shoot from her, clashing against the lightning and disintegrating it.

For a moment, the two skills continue to clash, yet the gray smoke-like mana wins, getting rid of all the lightning.

Without any hesitation, Lily puts her hand on Tess and pushes her mana into the blonde woman's body. Lily doesn't use [Sacrifice], she just heals with her improved skill and with the entirety of her mana, and the wounds close, even new flesh creating at places where it is missing. She pushes until she is out of mana.

Tess's breathing calms down and her face looks peaceful, the pain disappearing from it.

That's when two of Lily's fingers disappear, and new skin creates over the wounds. Unlike the pale arm she made for me, this skin is the same tan as Tess's original skin. After observing the blonde a bit longer, another of Lily's fingers disappears and she heals something I think are internal wounds.

When she is done, Tess looks almost like new.

Once again, I'm reminded why on each floor there are organizations willing to kill to have capable healers in their ranks.

"She would have been fine without me, but now she doesn't need days to heal," Lily says while turning to me, seemingly not bothered at all by her missing fingers. "She did have a few smaller internal wounds, but I took care of it."

Lily then pretends to want to tie her hair into a ponytail but is unable to do so because of missing fingers, and the look she gives me is a bit cheeky, and I immediately know what she wants.

After I get behind her and start slowly tying her hair into a ponytail, "You did well," I tell her.

"I did, didn't I? Tess better be thankful," Lily smiles, tilting her head a bit, a big smile on her face. "Oh, and I got a few ideas of how I could combine [Rejuvenation] and [Reshaping], so soon I will go there too!"

“Yes, yes, just level up a bit more. The amount of mana you hold is pathetic, to be honest. You can't keep sacrificing your fingers because of it.”

“I won't be. Soon, I will learn how to [Sacrifice] items instead of them. And since we are rich, I will be able to get myself plenty of small, expensive items to do so.”

As Tess seems safe, I feel some tension leave my body and my mood improves as well. Obviously, I won't show it to this pesky black-haired healer of ours. Lately, she has been too shameless and I wonder, would having an annoying younger sibling be like this?

“I am rich. You are just a leech,” I tell her.

“I am, am I not?” she giggles a bit. “Then, are you technically my sugar da...”

Before she finishes, I tap the top of her head and poke her side. But that makes her only laugh more.

Chapter 229: Little Princess

When Tess wakes up, she is at first surprised by the people around her. Only slowly she realizes that she is in the living room instead of her room.

It was my idea. That's what she gets for making me worry.

Unsurprisingly, Tess deals with people who immediately ask her questions fairly quickly. A harsh look here, some lightning there. Yet, I notice that she is not that mad and realizes that they are just that worried. Even though she is trying to hide it, I can see her smiling a bit.

This is the kind of camaraderie she always hoped for. People going through the same terrible experience because of things out of their control and learning to help and worry about each other.

All the attention is on Tess and even Biscuit is there, and it takes a lot of time until she patiently answers their questions while they keep offering her food, snacks, and something to drink.

Tess's first Beyond trial was different from mine. The area was the same, but the monsters she had to deal with were different, with the end boss being a Giant Troll, a variant of troll with immense regeneration and huge stature that made it quite hard to kill.

A test seemingly to improve or check on her damage output, as Tess usually prefers more and weaker attacks.

Her skills improved and she leveled up, now being close to 150 and to getting her Primary class upgrade. I went to Beyond at around level 120, while Tess went a bit over 140. I can see that it still annoys her a bit as she is quite competitive.

When I check the Beyond community, I see the change.

Beyond 4/10

Unknown guy, Savant, me, Tess, that makes four of us here with probably Lily being the next one. Damn, group 4 is quite dominating this field, not like I will complain. More capable people mean more of me leeching off them.

The others become rowdy as well, and Dennis starts shouting something about them having to celebrate this, and I carefully disappear while masking my mana signature.

When outside, I take in the fresh air and boost myself, flying towards one spot in the city. I get greeted by a few guards Obelia left there when I asked her to. All three of them are over level 150, which makes it quite expensive.

After getting inside, I get welcomed by an older man with graying hair.

[Spellsmith - lvl 79]

“Such a shame, I thought you forgot about it and I will get to keep the items you left with me,” he jokes.

There in the middle of the table lies an Ethercrystal shortsword, an epic weapon that Elydor used to own. It's surrounded by multiple weird contraptions, a few mana stones, and even some metal rods with immensely delicate inscribing.

Parts of my plan to kill the Living Tree.

"Maybe I can beat one guy and get you a nice epic dagger if you want," I offer.

I'm sure Lorven will piss me off once or twice in the future, so I can take the dagger from him again.

"Yeah, no thanks. Just from your expression, I can tell I don't want to mess with it," he says immediately.

Some people are scarily good at reading my expression which rarely changes. Skill, experience? Smelling my mood? All sorts of annoying stuff exists.

"So, how's it going?" I ask.

The man has been helping me ever since the start, to my not-too-big surprise he is one of the best inscribers in the city and was even able to get help from a few others, men and women similar to him who are more excited to work on this project rather than by the amount of money they will get for helping.

The amount of theory crafting they did in the past months is immense.

"We are mostly ready, but the inscribing is something you will have to do. Not even combined do we have enough mana or levels in required skills to inscribe an epic-graded weapon," he sighs. "It would be amazing to work on it, but I can live with just observing it."

He points at a few mana stones on the table, "There are some improvements we came up with, so please check them out."

I nod and take the stones. Then I spend a few minutes examining what they have prepared for me. Some things are just straight-up efficiency improvements, while others are here like crutches to make inscribing easier, but I immediately scratch them up inside the stone. I won't be needing that with the amount of mana I possess and the force in the stones.

For a moment, I close my eyes and replay the frequency of the Living Tree's barrier, and make some changes.

Obviously, the tree might change it up, but I just set the base that I can quickly change when needed. In the end, I take a bigger mana stone and inscribe it all inside, the final version.

When I hand it to the older man, he just shakes his head, "It always terrifies me how quickly you can inscribe something onto a mana stone that is highly rated." He then spends some time examining it while I'm checking the materials.

Everything seems fine and ready to go. I will take the sword, we will go on an expedition with Obelia in a day or two. Then the auction and after that, I can finish my secret weapon.

Tree Obliterator 9000.

"By the way, the Craft Guild offered you to join again, this time they offer you the position of honorary vice guild master," he says, and I can see he is smiling.

"Again?" I sigh.

"Yes, they don't want to give up."

"One would say they have better things to do. Just tell them to practice."

"Well, it's your fault for getting out some of your inscriptions. Some of them are revolutionary to the point I think you do not realize."

Huh, I just did it for fun while working with the old man, "Ask money from them if they are so annoying they can at least pay."

"Yes, yes," he says almost absentmindedly and I see he is examining the mana stone I inscribed. His expression shows how happy he is, examining it, and I can almost hear all the new ideas swirling inside his head.

"Are you sure about this?" he steps closer.

As before, there is no hesitation, and I have a feeling that he wouldn't care even if I were a Champion or Absolute, that's how much he enjoys talking about his craft.

This silly old man also refused any form of payment, only asking for a chance to examine the stones and work with me and then, in the end, to watch the process of working on Tree Obliterator 9000.

Somehow, I can't bring myself to be annoyed, no matter how much he is asking or talking about inscribing. He just seems to love it in the same way I love working with mana and being such a person, he also wants other people to like what he does.

I'm about to return to our house when I notice two people in front of the gate. A lynthari woman with red hair and a tail like a fox and a child with the same color tails as her.

[Enthraller - lvl ??]

Immediately I know the adult lynthari is not good news.

The moment I look at her, she notices it and turns towards me. Right after, I feel her mana touch me, leaving a mark. After checking, I realize that it was made so she could track me.

She has impossibly blue eyes, that seem to pierce right through me, and she is easily the strongest person I met on the 4th floor.

Unlike other lynthari, she is shorter, only a bit taller than me. She looks to be a bit over thirty years old, but she also bears this almost ethereal beauty some older lynthari possess. The way she moves is fascinating and unnerving at the same time.

“Underling!” the little girl shouts and rushes towards me, followed by what I guess is her grandmother, the leader of lynthari. The Matriarch.

“It was really hard to find you, you know! But no worries, I was able to do it in the end, nya!”

I carefully watch them, but the matriarch doesn't seem to be angry. She is just standing there, lovingly smiling at the little girl. Towards me, she doesn't say anything, her silence making me even more nervous.

“Yeah, it's nice to see you,” I say carefully, still not sure how to treat her in front of this ancient lynthari.

“Boss! You have to call me boss!”

Oh boy, “I apologize, boss!” In the end, I just decide to go with the flow and at the same time, I remove the mark the matriarch left on me.

I rouse up my mana and meet her impossibly blue eyes. I don't push more and only use it to send the message that there is a line I do not want to cross.

In the same way as the lynthari, she doesn't seem to find my behavior annoying, just amusing, and for a short moment her canines show before they disappear as quickly.

Little Riftwalker, the matriarch's granddaughter, continues to talk about how much she likes the word I told her about.

“Some other lynthari also started to use it!” she complains, “But it's fine, nya!” Everyone knows that it came from me. Good job, as expected from my underling.” Even though she is 29, her mental age is even less than that of Izzy. Maybe closer to a 6-year-old?

She also talks a lot, as if getting out all the words she couldn't say to anyone, and then I start to realize how lonely this little girl must be. Being the granddaughter of the most powerful woman in the city and one of the very few lynthari children.

Just how happy she was when I decided to go with her play on boss and underling, how quickly she talks now as if trying to get out all the things before I disappear again. She is constantly checking if I'm still there with her.

She looks so lonely.

I sigh and lift her up, putting her to sit on my shoulders, her small hands holding my hair.

"W-what are you doing!" she complains, even though she doesn't seem to mind it that much.

"We can't have the boss walk around like some... underling," I add some feigned despise to the last word.

For a moment, I notice a surprised expression on the matriarch's face, but it quickly disappears, her eyes carefully observing me.

"That's true," the lynthari girl muses, "Ahead then, underling, I will tell you where to go!"

For the next few hours, I'm forced to walk around, getting surprised looks from a few humans and lynthari as well.

The entire time, I'm examining my own feelings and questioning myself why I'm doing something like this for someone I just met for the second time.

Is it an attempt to get on the matriarch's good side? Partially. But for a big part, it was just the look I saw on the little girl's face that made me do it. An expression similar to one my sister Victoria used to make when she was younger.

So we buy some food, I walk on tops of giant trees while she tells me what she has learned about them.

We break a few windows on the house of the Veilwalkers guild, the ones with Lorver as guild master. My idea, but I have decided to blame it on the little princess in case someone wonders.

I also decide against throwing a tricolored orb inside what I identify as Lorven's quarters.

For the whole time, I continue to listen to her excited blabber, and the matriarch quietly follows us. And when the night comes, the little girl becomes sadder, but she quickly hides it behind a smile.

"I will visit you soon!" she says before creating a rift and stepping through it, disappearing somewhere.

The entire time, the little girl didn't know about her grandmother being there with us. She thought there were just the two of us.

The matriarch keeps looking at the rift left by the girl, the structure of the skill still in the air. She reaches towards it, about to reactivate it and use it to transfer herself.

"For now I will ignore what you and Champion candidate Myrra are planning to do." That's the only thing she says for the entire day.

She then reactivates the skill and leaves me there alone.

Chapter 230: Expedition to ancient mine

So, Champion candidate Myrra. That explains a lot, as well as gives me new questions to wonder about. How do you become a Champion candidate? Matriarch is stronger than Myrra; is she also a Champion candidate?

I will have to ask Myrra when I meet her.

When I get back home, it's already night and most of the people seem to be sleeping, with the exception of Tess, who is sitting in the living room, looking much better now. The tall blonde is sipping on a drink with steam coming out of it and nibbling on some sweets.

"I miss the internet, hell, I would even be happy to watch some ads," she says, and I can hear that she is smiling.

"Given enough time, I believe we could create something like radio or TV here. Then we would show the natives the power of ads and become disgustingly rich," I joke while sitting next to her and stealing some cookies.

"That's beyond evil," she shakes her head.

In silence, we nom on the cookies, and she turns to me, some crumbs already on her shirt, "Nat, how do you feel about everyone on the 4th floor most likely disappearing after we leave it?" Tess asks.

"I try not to think about it."

"I see."

It's not something I could change even if I wanted to. No matter how real they look, everyone here is fake, and we have no idea what happened to the original.

Did their world die like the one on the second floor? Is the king and his warriors from the third floor still alive somewhere, defending the Saint that spreads Decay? Is Myrra still alive and already a Champion, or did her world fall to the Calamities?

"I don't like it," Tess says quietly.

I nod and then I stand up, "Good night," I say.

"Night, Nat."

Tess stays in the living room, looking at the wall and thinking.

When I wake up after two hours, I sense a presence behind the door. I quickly identify it and then, with a sigh, I create mana arms and open the door with them without getting out of bed.

The moment I do so, a small, white snake slithers inside, and I close the door. It's still dawn, and after checking, I find out that everyone is sleeping.

Noodle slithers onto the bed, the entire time sticking out his small tongue and tasting my mana.

So, I create a bit more, reduce the density, and send it to him. That seems to make him happy, and his movement speeds up, and his tongue flickers more.

The green-eyed snake seems... tired, beat up.

"Izzy won't leave you alone, right?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, but the pain in his eyes is evident.

"You poor creature." I lay back on the bed and create an orb over me that I continue to use to practice mana shaping. I also keep running Mana Cycling. At this point, it's almost constantly on, the entire time I'm up.

Seeing that I'm just relaxing there, Noodle moves closer. He does it carefully to not touch me, finds a cozy place next to me and lays there. I can sense him slowly absorbing my mana. It's either food, a delicacy, or something to make him stronger.

Well, the little creature is cute and he isn't annoying, so I just let him.

We spend a few hours like that when he starts moving again. He gets to the door and looks towards me.

Creating a mana arm, I open the door again, and for a moment, he just stares at it. Then he does something I can only identify as a long sigh and moves out of my room, much slower than before.

I close the door and with [Perception], I watch as he gets back inside Isabella's room.

After going through the information on the expedition Obelia offered us to join, Angry Kittens decided to accept, with all of us going.

Only now do I find out what the expedition is about, to Tess's surprise.

So what? I was busy.

The expedition is in the ancient mines not far off Virelia. They were closed hundreds of years ago after they got everything they could out of them, mainly iron-like endurium and small amounts of ethercrystal. Obelia then got to some ancient maps that hint that something else remains down there. The remains of a vault, a treasury of a forgotten Champion candidate who died long ago.

A person, capable enough to become a Champion candidate will surely have some nice stuff.

Tess and Haddy decided for us to go on the expedition. But this setup reminds me of something, and it smells like a lot of trouble.

I'm in.

The vault could contain some mined endurium and ethercrystal, as well as some personal belongings of the Champion candidate. What Obelia hopes for are old records of the world before the Calamity, old maps of teleporting arrays, and maybe an epic item or two.

She also seems to be hiding something, and Tess confirms it too. The guild master of the Storm Brigade knows more about the vault than she says, and that only makes me more curious.

What I hope for is to stretch my stiff body after all this experimenting I did and to test my new skills, [Regalia] and [Infusion], against something strong. A bit of fun before the auction and the hunt for the Living Tree. Knowing the system, the moment I kill the Tree, everything will go to shit, the Colony menacingly moving closer, confirming it.

“What do you think the Colony wants?”

“I have no idea, but I did talk with one lynthari who got to watch them, and he said it’s as if they are looking for something.”

I overhear the conversation between two members of Obelia's guild and promptly decide to ignore it. It’s not nice to listen in on other people's conversations.

Obelia reaches me, Jenna, her vice guild master by her side, both of them wearing similar attire, akin to a uniform.

“We are ready to go,” she says simply.

I glance behind me, looking at Angry Kittens, who are there as well, each one of them wearing high-quality items we bought lately for the money we got from “selling” all the epic items we have. Yet, there was nearly no dent in the amount of money we have.

“All ready,” Tess answers instead of me.

Then we leave the city, following closely behind Obelia and her guild.

Obelia even sends a few of her guild members to scout the area and constantly keeps checking on someone who might follow us. I also notice a few of her members doing something to hide our tracks.

It’s all well organized and I look at group 4. Unlike the Storm Brigade, they just walk around, members talking between each other, some of them even snacking and laughing out loud. In comparison to Obelia’s guild, we look like we are going on a picnic.

However, neither Obelia nor anyone from her guild seem to mind, and I notice a few of her members greeting or having short conversations with Tess, whom they recognize as the third disciple of their guild master.

Unlike everyone else, I just follow slightly behind, happy to be left alone. To not get bored, I continue to try to compress my mana with [Focus] like I did back at the end of the third floor.

I go at it extremely carefully, still remembering the toll it took on me. It doesn't matter that my Mana Cycling improved a lot or that I have an epic passive called Arcane Resilience; it's still dangerous. So, I just use tiny amounts of mana that I [Focus] into orbs as small as a grain of sand.

A tiny pitch-black grain of sand that, even though it is so small, feels extremely domineering, and it keeps trying to pull on my mana.

Unlike Lissandra's [Singularity], this thing seems to affect mana mostly. It's not like it has some physical pull. The feeling is more akin to domination as if the sheer quality of mana is so high it tries to take over any mana it comes into contact with.

The black mana still feels scary. Ever since the start, when I picked Amplification mana upgrade instead of Potency, I planned to improve the quality of my mana on my own, but this might take a while to get under my control.

Thankfully, the small orbs I create crumble on their own after a while, and I estimate I should soon be able to create one the size of my fingernail and be able to control it somewhat.

"You are scaring our scouts," Obelia slows down to walk by my side, her silver eyes staring at the speck of black mana over the palm of my hand, "They said they never felt such scary mana in their life."

I stop feeding it and it slowly dissipates, "Just a little bit of practicing," I say to Obelia.

She nods and rejoins her guild after one more curious look.

It takes a few hours, but we get to the mountain and walk around it to find the small entrance that is covered by greenery. When one of Obelia's guild members uses a skill to move that greenery away, I realize that it was made by them to hide the entrance.

“We already tried to go through there a few times, but as I said,” Obelia turns to me, “We need someone really good with inscriptions and barriers to open the door for us.”

I nod. I see an old cliché of digging too deep and our greed awakening some ancient evil.

Classic.

“Nat, if a Balrog pops out, you don’t have to try to stop him and fall into the hole with him. We will fight him together,” Min-Jae joins my side, as often, followed by twins.

“Why would I do that? I will throw you at him and run away,” I retort.

(Food?)

“No Biscuit, Balrogs aren’t food,” I answer and once again send some mana towards the white snake wrapped around Isabella's arm. Noodle gobbles it up.

Isabella's mana sensitivity isn't that good, so she doesn't notice it, but Sophie does. She is currently keeping up a web of mana over the entire expedition, even over the Storm Brigade. Some of the members know about it, but after checking on it, they don't seem to mind.

The web is used for detection, counterattack, and as defense as well, and it's so much better than it used to be. Improved by me and Sophie with a few pieces of advice from Obelia and even Myrra.

Slowly, we enter the mines, and I notice a few members of the group twitching and hesitating, unsurprisingly, even some members of the Storm Brigade do that. Memories of our time under the old capital surfacing.

The mood immediately changes, and the conversations stop. There is no joking, and everyone feels more tense. Like they are ready to jump and attack anything that moves. One after another, skills activate, multiple of them, lighting the tunnels we enter. They are surprisingly wide and tall, more like a cave than tunnels, the walls almost smooth, something people wouldn't spend time on back on Earth, but here with all the skills people possess, it's a question of a few hours.

Obelia touches one of the walls and sends her mana through it, lines appearing on them with her mana activating extremely simple inscriptions created by grounded mana stones turned into mana-conductive paint.

The stripes on the walls fill the tunnels with dim white light, and I reach the wall by my left and do the same, lighting the opposite side.

“The objective is simple. We get to the door. We will unlock it, get to the vault, and unlock it as well. Then we take everything we can before leaving,” Obelia looks around, giving a confident look to a few members who seem to be affected by the tunnels the most.

In the same confident tone, she continues, “We examined the area before. We left the markings on the walls, we have the maps, and we cleared the monsters.” Obelia taps on the ground with the beautiful spear she holds, an epic weapon she got from the Champions' manor and that she plans to sell at the auction, “But do not let your guard down and be ready for anything.”

She then turns around and takes a step towards the darkness of the tunnels, the darkness that is pierced only by the glowing lines on the sidewalls.

And slowly, we all follow her, the sound of our steps echoing inside the tunnels of the ancient mine.