

Tutorial 231

Chapter 231: Ancient mine

For a while, there is nothing, just darkness, damp air, and the sound of our breathing and steps as we continue to touch the walls once in a while to send mana through the lines that light them up. It's calmingly quiet, and there is something that I can't identify that improves my mood. Maybe it is the unknown in front of us, the mystery to be solved, the expectation of a strong enemy.

Or I'm just excited about this expedition that is something akin to a treasure hunt.

After a while, attacks start. Small, annoying monsters pass through the walls only to throw an attack at us and then disappear back into them without leaving anything behind, no mana or heat signature to follow.

Curiously, I observe other people dealing with them.

Maya, for example, calmly calculates the direction of an attack, dodges it, and shoots a mana projectile at the monster, often quick enough to kill it. Her projectiles are getting quite good, something I forced onto her, having a feeling that her ranged attacks are severely lacking.

Isabella does something similar, but instead of mana, her attacks are made of small blue flames that burn extremely hot, melting the monster and pieces of the wall, all observed by a white snake coiled around her arm.

Biscuit also once in a while uses a thin mana tentacle that catches a monster. The tentacles move extremely quickly and bend and twist in a way that clearly shows mastery over them. The best doggo of the fourth floor then expands the tentacle, crushing any monster dumb enough to attack our group.

The tunnels continue on and on; they are surprisingly vast and the ever-present darkness seems to disturb some people. The network has multiple ways we can use and twists, and as we walk deeper, I notice that Sophie is also leaving marks made of mana behind me, in a similar manner to me.

However, even after a few hours, there seems to be no end to them and slowly they become rougher, more ancient feeling, and the air becomes colder as well as more humid. Some parts of the walls are

crumbling and some mana lines start flickering and blinking, not working properly. All to the point where we start using our own skills and items to light the way.

The monsters also become stronger and more sneaky. Humanoid creatures without any eyes and with big mouths full of ragged teeth are now behind every corner, the echo of their screams filling the tunnels as they continue to attack.

At this point, I also start helping so group 4 can save their mana and not waste it on such mobs. Unlike them, I have much more of it, so it's not a problem.

[You have defeated Hollow Stalker - lvl 91]

[You have defeated Hollow Stalker - lvl 101]

[You have defeated Hollow Stalker - lvl 88]

Precisely aimed mana orbs made of [Regalia] continue to one-shot them, and I'm barely using mana, always only creating a small orb, that isn't even that dense, that I shoot at their heads.

Soon enough, I also learn to detect them with the help of my [Perception] and shoot them before they let out any sounds.

[You have defeated Hollow Stalker - lvl 102]

[You have defeated Hollow Stalker - lvl 82]

When we reach the first cave, the attacks nearly stop, either the monsters are avoiding us or just waiting for a better opportunity.

Filling the orb with thermal energy and changing it a bit to let out light rather than heat, I send it towards the ceiling, revealing the impressive size of the cave we are in, surely as tall as some higher building and multiple times wider.

That's also when we see them; monsters clinging to the ceiling. Most are humanoid and with unnaturally large heads. Their limbs are thin and reminiscent of spider legs rather than human ones. They immediately start hitting the ceiling they cling to, accurately dropping stalactites as big as cars on us.

Min-Jae and Tess, with the use of their respective skill, redirect some bigger stones while stopping the smaller ones and throwing them back at the monsters clinging to the ceiling.

Unsurprisingly, that makes even more stones start to fall down, but they just continue to grab them and throw them back at those weirdoes at the ceiling. It quickly gets out of hand, and dozens and dozens of pieces of stones as big as a fist or as big as a small motorcycle are annihilating the monsters.

Once in a while, I also redirect some or explode them with kinetic energy, but I don't do much more as Min-Jae is smiling for the first time since we entered the mines.

When we start moving again, there are no monsters around, and we enter another tunnel, this time even older looking, the ground covered in debris and dust.

Three of Obelia's people start monitoring the tunnels even more than before. They are sending their mana or using their skills towards the stone all around us, something done in worry of tunnels breaking and swallowing us all.

So far, it appears safe; they only use their skills occasionally to strengthen the tunnel while I observe them doing so.

I slow down a bit, until I walk by Tess's side, "So, what attribute did you upgrade? Mana and Potency?" I ask her.

From my point of view, Restoration and Potency would fit her nicely. Potency would be most likely nice to improve her Primordial lightning, while Restoration would work nicely with [Psychokinesis] and allow her to quickly regenerate her mana for longer fights.

"Potency, and I will start investing more stats into mana," Tess says after creating a barrier around us to make sure no one listens, "During the Beyond trial, I found out that my damage is lacking," she looks at me, "maybe you are not that wrong saying that the best defense is to quickly kill your enemy."

"Right? I always say that, but you guys don't listen," I shake my head, "Upgraded already?"

"Yes, before the expedition. The effect is more terrifying than I thought, even after listening to you about how significant attribute upgrade is."

"Doesn't that make it even better? If even you are scared of your own skill, imagine your enemy." As a reward for sharing my wisdom, I get an amused look.

"We are here," Obelia says simply, her voice strengthened by mana spreading to everyone.

Her eyes meet mine and I nod, moving closer after gesturing to Sophie to join. There I find a few of her guild members standing in front of a smooth stone wall covered in inscriptions and teeming with mana.

"A few years ago, we tried to dig a tunnel around the door, it took us months to dig just a short distance. Then the tunnel fell, and it took us a year to clear all the rubble while stopping it from falling further," Obelia says.

She continues to talk as I send my senses toward the door. "The only reasonable option seems to be going through the door, but none of my people were able to do it, and even a few people from the city were unable to do anything, and Elydor..."

"He was a big piece of shit," I say, sending even more mana at it, observing its movement and how it interacts with the mana of the door.

"Yes, a huge piece of... shit," Obelia confirms. "And you don't even know half of..."

While I send mana towards what feels like the center of the door, something clicks inside of it. Right after, an almost imperceptible pulse of mana is sent from the door.

Huh?

I wait a bit and nothing changes, so I examine the place where it came from and then, slowly, I realize what has happened.

My mana fires up at full power.

[Mana Domain] activates, bigger than ever before.

[Mana Domain - lvl 15 > Mana Domain - lvl 16]

[Regalia - lvl 7 > Regalia - lvl 8]

Within that domain, I turn and change all of the mana with the help of [Regalia], creating a spherical barrier all around us, big enough to cover both my and Obelia's group.

A few questions are thrown at me and surprised shouts fill the room while I create something like pillars within the barrier to strengthen it even more.

Then the others notice what's happening as well and dozens of skills activate at the same moment.

I infuse my barrier with kinetic energy and then watch as the entire tunnel, the cave around us, comes crashing down, tonnes of stones crumbling all around.

A minute that feels impossibly long passes, and finally, a silence ensues. The lights that flickered up until now stop shaking and light up the faces of the expedition members. Some of them terrified, others scared, all of them looking at the barrier around us, supported by something like pillars and preventing it from crashing down on us.

"I will solidify the rocks around us," one of Obelia's men shouts.

“Quickly, create a secondary barrier...”

“What was that? How did it happen!”

“More lights, we need more lights!”

Everyone becomes busy, movements urgent, and faces and bodies are covered in the dust from the crumbled stone. One after another, they start examining the situation we ended up in.

Meanwhile, I continue to stare at the door, probably our best option to get out of this situation, Obelia steps closer, and I can see her trying to catch my gaze. She is literally drilling holes into the side of my face.

“Anyway, my barrier should last for quite a while,” I tell her.

I didn’t even touch my Mana Reservoir yet, and Arcane Resilience made using this amount of mana so quickly a fairly painless process, so I’m not even hurt at all.

As I send more mana inside the door with extreme care, even more extreme care than before, I feel a movement at the edge of my [Perception].

Monsters are drilling through the tonnes of stone above us and heading towards the barrier. Without anyone stopping them, they reach it, and an attack starts, this one even more taxing to endure than the weight of the stones. Some monster with a somewhat disruptive skill?

I don’t even have to say anything as Sophie turns to me, connecting to my mind through her web, (I will carefully deal with them. Obelia and some others might sense my skill, but I will try to do it in a way they won’t have suspicion of mind manipulation.)

(I will open the door in the meantime,) I send back and return to the door.

The inscriptions here are extremely dense and beautiful. What feels like miles of circuits all over the door, creating pretty ornaments while staying functional. They are nothing in comparison to what I saw on the mountain-tall door during Beyond's second trial, but they are still nothing to scoff at.

Multiple circuits strengthen the door, more of them lock it, then there are some detections and a few more that I identify as very nicely hidden traps.

I mean, anyone could have missed them. The person who created these traps must have been extremely skilled. Most likely some sort of master.

As I said, such a trap is super easy to miss even by someone examining the door extremely carefully.

I myself know I would never be angry if someone tried to open them and triggered one of the traps.

Yup.

Could have happened to the best of us.

I touch the door and [Focus] on both the barrier and the locked door in front of me.

A few hours pass, and I have a feeling that I'm close to opening the door. I have already locked the "keyhole," and now I keep constantly using my mana to infuse the door, sending it through the same circuit as the defenses in attempts to learn them. I already have a few ideas on how to improve the door into my room, and soon they might really be able to endure Lily's [Disintegration].

At some point, I don't even perceive the people stuck there with me, and it all starts feeling like fun.

On purpose, I trigger a few more traps but cut off the signal they send as well as destroy the circuits they use. This reduces the amount of mana I have to decipher, as well as removes annoying obstacles. Obelia and Sophie have sensed that as they are also partially following what I'm doing, trying to be helpful.

When I destroyed the traps, they became a bit worried and started preparing for another attack. Then, when I told them there would be no attack and the traps I triggered were on purpose.

For some reason, that made them even more worried.

But slowly and surely, I get through all of this, and when I finally etch the circuits into one of the expensive mana stones I get from Obelia, I'm almost regretful. It was really fun.

"Ready?" I ask.

After checking, I hear confirmation from both Tess and Obelia, and I put the mana stone against the door and activate it. The door splits vertically, a red glowing crack appearing across their entire length while the circuits dim out. On their own, the doors slowly open inward, a terrible stench hitting us.

A dozen of my thermal orbs float inside, lighting up what seems like a room. The walls are expertly carved, and beautiful pillars support the enormous room. There, all around this room, corpses lie. Dozens, hundreds of humans and even some lynthari all across the ground, bodies terribly torn, limbs missing.

And all of the bodies look only a few days old.

Chapter 232: Want to know

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The moment the door closes behind us, I cancel my barrier. Even though there are most likely tonnes of rock and stone filling the place where my barrier used to be, we hear nothing.

Observing the door for a while, I see that the inscriptions are up and running once again, powered by an unknown source.

I wonder, should I use the anchors I left far behind in the tunnels to get us out? It wouldn't be that difficult, to be honest. I just need to activate the skill and get out. A few people might agree to become test subjects in desperation. To be honest, I'm not sure if I can take someone else with me, but probably yes?

In the worst case, we can do it slowly, destroying the rock and strengthening the newly created tunnel. That option would take much longer. Looking around at the expressions of people from the Storm Brigade, I guess that no one has some sort of group teleport skill.

“Biscuit, the corses are not food,” I say to the corgi next to me just in case, and he looks at me like I'm crazy.

I guess he has different tastes now, getting expensive food from Isabella all the time.

“Why the fucking tunnels again,” Maya stops by my side.

Soon, other members of the group join us as well, and no one particularly interested in moving inside the room.

“There are so many traps,” Sophie sighs.

Tess also nods, mana shining in her eyes, [Farsight] allowing her to see mana.

“Let's just take it easy for now,” says Hadwin, who doesn't seem to be that worried either. From what I noticed, with the exception of Tess and future animal Absolute, he seems to be the best at dealing with what happened when we spent twenty days in the tunnels, constantly threatened by the Living Tree.

“I'm a busy man, Haddy, and I really want to get to the auction in time. People kept teasing me with it for months,” I say and take a step ahead, pulling out my second epic item.

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

I feed it mana and then activate it. A pulse, stronger than I would be currently capable of bursts into the room and deactivates most of the traps in there, as well as disrupting the mana of some weaker members of the expedition.

I send more mana inside the stone and activate it again, this time sending an even stronger effect through the massive room we are in.

Then I do it again, the amount I use big enough to create a few tricolored orbs, yet my new Arcane resilience allows me to shrug it off easily.

Finally, the weird field inside the room breaks, and I put away the epic item. At the same time, the corpses on the ground start breaking apart, as if up until now they were unable to rot naturally.

It's fascinating and and disgusting to watch them crumble, flesh rot, hair fall off, eyeballs dissolve.

Soon enough, only bones are left on the ground, still easy to tell apart much taller lynthari from humans.

"Why don't we check what's left? Maybe there are some nice items? I will keep watch," I tell my group as well as to Obelias while I take the first step.

Some carefulness is fine, but too much of it is no good, to be honest. Making mistakes is fine too, but the important part is to not make the same mistake twice or be able to deal with it, isn't it? As for the door and trap that got us here, it's my fault; there is no going around it, I triggered it.

But it won't happen again, and I will handle whatever awaits us here.

It takes around ten minutes, but the room is checked over; there are no hidden rooms, no more items to take. The results are some rare items, a few empty mana stones, broken weapons, and that kind of stuff.

Apparently, each tier of items is separated into 3 tiers: Upper, mid, and lower tier.

For example, Ethercrystal shortsword, an epic sword I have is mid-tier or grade. Mana core I have probably as well. Epic crown and sword we got from the king and his warriors on the 3rd floor are low tiers. Valorplate of Fallen Hero, one of the Calamities, is most likely upper epic tier.

The difference between lower and mid isn't that high, but apparently, the jump from mid to upper tier is quite massive. Well, not as big as the jump in between grades, but big enough to be clearly noticeable. That's something I have learned as well, sometimes against my will, sometimes when I was bored.

The rare items we got from the bodies of lynthari are of upper rare tier, and then there are some mid-rare tier as well. Anything below that seems to have turned to dust when the weird field around the cave disappeared.

"How long do you think they were here?" Lily asks the question I also wonder about.

"Obelia said the mines are empty for three hundred years, so maybe that long?" Tess's voice sings next to me, answering Lily's question.

"Or even longer, and the miners found the door while mining stuff, buried it and continued to excavate stuff," hearing that, I turn to Dennis, who said it.

The young blonde boy with striking blue eyes, a carbon copy of his brother, shrugs his shoulders.

Huh, is he maybe a bit smart?

"I wonder what Obelia wants from here, she seems to know more than she told us," Lily's eyes aren't exactly friendly as she stares at the guild master of Storm Brigade.

"You know her the best, what do you think, Tess?" Hadwin asks.

For a moment, Tess ponders and then sighs, "Yeah, that would be just like her. I don't think it would be something that would put us into danger, more likely something she doesn't want us to know."

"We should ask her," Dennis shifts on his feet, a small smile on his face, "I'm sure she will..."

Oh, maybe he really is smart.

I collect a bit of mana and take a step out of the field Tess created to block the sounds. Taking a few steps, I stop in front of Obelia.

As I give her a second to react, I see understanding flicker in her eyes. For a moment, I see her thinking quickly as she realizes what I most likely want. Obelia is smart, a very smart and logical-thinking person. So, in the end, she comes to one conclusion and a long sigh escapes her mouth.

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“Do you trust your guild members?” she asks, glancing over my shoulder at the members of my group behind me.

Out of everything she could ask, this surprised me probably the most, and for a moment I give it serious thought. Do I?

I glance back at their faces, ones I got so used to seeing. Some of them close to a thing called a friend. A thing I tried to avoid so much. The reason is simple. If you don't trust anyone, you won't get betrayed. That's how it should work, and that's what I tried to do.

Yet, this bunch of twerps somehow got under my skin, and if I spend more time with them, I know they will get deeper, and it will be harder and harder to look at them the way I would like to.

Hell, it might be too late even now. It's annoying, but it's also something I decided to do after the start of the 4th floor. After I witnessed Lily sacrificing all of her limbs just to help us, after I heard Tess talking about camaraderie. Seeing Min-Jae looking at me with such admiring eyes and listening to every word I say to the point it felt heavy. And also after hearing Sophie nearly beg for a second chance. Not crying, but close to it, and only being able to say it out loud thanks to Izzy using her skills to help her.

All of this stuck with me, and I'm unable to just ignore it.

In the end, I push away the memories that flash in my mind and ignore the question. All annoying stuff is for future Nathaniel to deal with.

"Just say it," I tell Obelia.

She nods, "It's quite simple, really, and I won't bother you with too many details. The main thing is that there are people who believe that lynthari don't originate from this planet. We believe that on our planet only humans used to be and then, lynthari invaded it and tried to take over."

I see, looks like the mystery of the 4th Calamity is close to be solved.

"The Living Tree, The Colony are most likely the weapons, created during the war either by human or lynthari. The Fallen Hero is the last human Champion, killed by lynthari, and his body used as a power source by his Valorplate."

Everyone from her guild listens quietly and without much surprise. Something they all kept in extreme secrecy, yet all of them keeping the secret that could result in the destruction of their guild.

"And I believe we can find some answers here," she nods towards the second door that is on the opposite side of the room we are in.

"What is this place?" I ask her.

"I didn't lie before, I think it's a vault of a disciple of the Champion that is now the Calamity called the Fallen Hero. A vault with information left behind and hidden from lynthari."

"And what if you get it? What if it all is true and lynthari really came here hundreds years ago, fighting with your predecessors? What will you do?" I ask her.

Then I observe her expression. This is something that really makes me curious. How would she behave? Will she want to take revenge for people she never knew? Will she try to punish lynthari for sins most of them probably aren't even aware of as they didn't live back then?

The war, if there was one, most likely took a toll on both humans and lynthari, looking at the state of what is left afterward. Two races without their Champions and the world without the Absolute.

"I am not sure what I will do with this information, but it's something I want to confirm," the expression on her face changes, and for the first time since I met her, there is passion bordering on obsession in it.

Obelia sounds almost urgent as she continues, "I didn't know these long dead people. I don't know if even the lynthari know about what happened, but I still want to find out what happened, what this all means, and why it happened."

"What will you do after you find out?" I repeat my question.

To that, she just closes her mouth, Obelia herself unsure of what she will do. And partially, I can understand that, the need for knowledge she doesn't know what to do with. She just wants to know the truth and find out if she is being lied to.

Well, that much isn't a problem. If she doesn't betray me, I don't mind helping a little, "Let's find out then, shall we?"

I take the few remaining steps and put my hand on the door, sending my mana inside I immediately find the traps similar to before and quickly destroy them. There are even more of them and better hidden, yet I destroy them too. Making the same mistake twice isn't something I like to do.

Inscription after inscription gets examined by me, looked at, worked around. I find and destroy the trap, find the circuits that need to be used, create an image of the key in my head. I examine the mana and resonate with it.

When I inscribe the mana stone with the circuit, I don't even check and put the stone against the door, and the stone cracks right after.

With a loud crack, a vertical crack appears through the entire length of the door, mana leaking from the inside. I push and the door opens wide, the mana disappearing from them slowly and they start crumbling too, the stone they are made of pushed away with a blast of kinetic energy and then with one more to clear the way.

[Perception] shoots inside the room, taking in its size and looking for mana signatures. There is only one signature right in the middle of the circular room and nothing else.

There are no riches, no epic items, no monsters, and no traps.

In the middle of the room lies the corpse of a man in light armor. He is wearing a dark blue cape with dozens of holes in it and some of his limbs are missing chunks of muscles, showing the bone underneath.

From that corpse, a constant field is generated, and I have a hard time identifying what it is, but it apparently notices us and an extremely weak signature is sent to the beautiful mana stone that is imbued into the man's chest.

Even looking at it I'm amazed by it, the circuits that cover it are the most intricate I saw on the 4th floor.

Receiving some sort of the signal the corpse then starts moving. It grabs the bow from the ground, ignoring the fact there are no arrows and the pose it takes is confident and relaxed. Slowly, the eyes of the corpse open, revealing beautiful eyes made out of mana stones, also with delicate mana circuits in them.

The mana that then radiates from the mana stone imbued in the chest expands and fills the room with pressure that makes it feel as if I can touch it.

[Arcane Archer - lvl ??]

Chapter 233: What would you like to know?

“Level at least 220, ranged base class, get into formation 5, full power from the start!” Obelia shouts, lightning immediately cracking around her.

A few of her guild with heavy armor immediately get to the front, mana surrounding their armor or shields and further strengthened by the barrier of their teammate.

More members get further back, mana surrounding their weapons or fire floating around them. Two of her members put their hands on Obelia's shoulders and the amount of mana she releases intensifies.

(Why would we fight, dear child?) Without the arcane archer's mouth moving, the words sound in the room.

The voice is quiet, yet chilling, lacking emotions.

(I don't sense any invaders in between you, nor did I identify you as a traitor yet.)

The archer takes a step, reducing some of its mana signature, and to that, Obelia does nothing. She doesn't attack, but she also doesn't stop carefully observing the corpse in front of us.

I also take a step ahead, passing by Hadwin and Maya who moved to the front of our group the moment the corpse moved. Nice reflexes, something they built up while hunting with our group.

The archer looks at me for a moment, the eyes made of mana stones shining brightly, but then they move past me and he examines everyone in the room, all in a matter of a few seconds.

(Are you looking for death or knowledge?)

The voice that sounds a bit robotic continues to sound in the room and I slowly start realizing what the thing in front of us is. An imprint similar to what Lissandra did, an extremely delicate web of mana circuits able to store knowledge and personality.

Yet there is a huge difference. Where Lissandra created an imprint on my body with her Potent mana, the thing in front of me contains the imprint on one of the mana stones, either in the eyes or on the chest.

The imprint of the archer is much less intricate than Lissandra's.

"We didn't come to fight, we came looking for knowledge," Obelia says in her calm voice and I can't help but admire how quickly she got back to herself.

(Ask then, child of Nabulon.) the archer says, weirdly cooperative.

“You said child of Nabulon, what does it mean?” Obelia asks the first question.

(Nabulon is the name of the planet we are on.)

“Is Nabulon a planet where only humans live?”

(It used to be before the lynthari came.)

“How,” guild master of Storm Brigade shakes her head, “Tell me first who you are.”

(I’m a personality imprint of Champion Orven’s disciple, Reynar.)

I can hear a few people muttering, not because they recognize the name, they just seem amazed that something like this is possible. For them, titles like Champion, or Champion's disciple are something they only heard in legends.

“Are the real you and Champion Orven already dead?”

(With high probability. The imprint was created and imbued into this body before we collected the remaining force for the last try to fight the lynthari’s Absolute.)

“What happened then?”

(I do not possess the knowledge of that.)

The entire time they talk, I keep looking at the arcane archer, and dozens of questions swirl in my head, yet Obelia is asking the right ones so I just listen, collecting kinetic energy within me. My body with Arcane Resilience is capable of holding a terrifying amount of it.

“Who are the lynthari and why did they invade Nabulon?”

(They are natives of a planet that got Paired with Nabulon.)

“What is pairing?”

(I can't answer this question.)

This is when I join in, “Not even if I ask?”

For a moment the corpse just silences, the two eyes made of mana stones turning to me. Then, slowly its mouth turns into a smile that is too wide to be called friendly.

(This information is currently unavailable for tutorial attendees, yes.) It says.

Obelia shouts something about not hearing the words the corpse said, but the archer ignores her, the words it just said sounding less robotic than before.

(We've met, already twice before,) the voice that says that is the same voice that talked to me during both Beyond trials.

When I look around, Obelia and her guild are frozen still, not moving at all, nor blinking, only group 4 can.

“Should we fight it?” Tess asks, her [Stormcrown] already flickering over her head.

“I think it's fine,” I shake my head and turn to the being that took over the body of the Arcane Archer, “You are limited in what you can do, aren't you?”

(Yes, what you are talking to is only my intent that I was able to sneak into the tutorial's system. Usually, I wouldn't be able to interfere so much, but something weird is happening in your round of the tutorial,) the voice sounds almost amused, (So, what would you like to know?) it asks.

"I'm not curious about anything," I say.

"Nat?" Tess looks at me with shocked eyes.

Yet I do not change my mind. A creepy voice out of nowhere sharing some information with me and helping us? Yeah, sure, it's just another asshole trying to mess with us, manipulate us for more fun, feed us information it wants, and mess with her, the person responsible for the tutorial.

It is limited in what it can do within the tutorial, so there is no need to be polite and allow it to try to manipulate me. Even talking to it is risky, and it's something that should be done much later when I have gained more power or more information to build my own opinions without being subtly manipulated by it.

The laugh that sounds in the room is cold and amused at the same time and some members of the Storm Brigade, even unmoving, start bleeding from their ears and eyes.

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But it does not affect us and when it talks again I swear I can hear a hint of danger in it, (So very prideful,) the way it says pride makes it clear that it knows or guessed my subclass, (So will it be.)

The presence disappears and the Storm Brigade start moving again.

"What is Pairing?!" Obelia asks the same question again, all of them unable to remember what happened. Only then she notices her bleeding guild members, "Prepare for a fight," she says and with it, the conversation ends.

The same for the Arcane Archer who starts moving again. In its hand, an arrow appears, one made of mana, and the string of the bow starts glowing in the same blue color. The Arcane Archer draws the bow and aims at Obelia.

That's when I activate the anchor I created next to it while we were talking to the being from Beyond. [Tether] activates and through that connection, I send a blast of kinetic energy towards the anchor, making it explode on the other side, throwing the corpse to the side.

Just that moment is enough and dozens of attacks fly at it.

An orb made of blue fire from Izzy, a javelin filled with Primordial lightning from Tess, and a shower of small orbs made of mana-conductive metal from Kim. A red lightning from Obelia that sounds as if tearing the space as it passes by.

And much more, the corpse gets bombarded, but only until the arrow flies from where it lies, barely visible under the attacks.

The mana arrow digs through the barriers as if they are not there, and the legs of one of Obelia's guild members explode.

Immediately another one flies over, hitting Hadwin and throwing him to the side while he tries to shield Lily.

My [Mana Domain] encompasses the room and I radiate much more mana into it.

When an arrow flies at me, I create an anchor and teleport away, the arrow piercing through the wall.

Then I use [Infusion]

One after another, a dozen arrows get destroyed like that while attacks continue to shower on the corpse. When they stop for a moment, all the effects of them disappear and in a massive crater created by them, a movement appears while even the walls around it are cracked.

The body, the personality construct of the disciple of the Champion stands up slowly, entirely inside a spherical barrier made of pale blue mana. The surface of the barrier ripples like calm water when a stone is thrown into it.

That's when another attack flies at it, an arrow made of gray mana, and it hits the barrier. For a moment the corpse ignores it as the attack just crashes against it as if it's made of smoke, but then we can see big chunks of the barrier get dissolved, disintegrated without any resistance.

As if awaiting that, I feel a strong pulse of mana from Tess and the javelin that flies towards the archer is glowing in red and white lightning, the material of the spear barely visible through it.

When Tess's attack is just an arm's reach away from it, the archer turns and looks at Lily.

And then he disappears.

I activate the anchor I left next to group 4 and mana flows inside my body at the same moment he reappears behind Lily. Another arrow forms in his hand, but he moves it down and stabs Lily with that arrow, the pale blue projectile made of mana piercing her back.

The black-haired girl barely staggers under the force of the attack and a few of her fingers disappear, and for a split of a second she moves terrifyingly quickly, grabbing the hand of the archer. Gray mana envelops it and [Disintegration] eats into the hand that she is holding.

When I reach them, the archer disappears again, missing a hand Lily destroyed. Instead of that hand, a limb made of mana is created and he starts shooting again.

The arrow stabbed inside Lily's back glows brighter and brighter and I'm sure the following explosion will kill the girl if we don't do anything about it.

"Save your mana!" I shout at her, seeing she is about to use [Disintegration] on it and maybe [Sacrifice] a limb to do so.

Unable to destroy the arrow from the distance I reach out and touch it, finally breaking the resistance that blocked me from destroying it. [Resonance] tears it apart and Lily starts healing again.

I jump backward and the arrow meant for my head pierces the walls. In just that short moment, the archer killed two members of Obelia's guild and Maya is barely keeping her [Armament] active, with a few wounds on her body.

Sophie is using her [Manipulation] to change the direction of arrows and her mind blender thingy doesn't seem to work. Yet her redirecting the arrows seems to be the main reason why no one in group 4 is dead.

Her and Biscuit.

A dozen dark purple tentacles swirl around the corgi while he floats in the air, even his eyes glowing in a similar purple color.

Each arrow shot is met with some of the tentacles, no matter how fast is that arrow. Biscuit just continues to deflect the ones Sophie can't take care of while floating in front of Isabella. He even uses one to grab Hadwin and throw him towards Lily, only Hadwin's [Strenghtening] keeping him standing with a massive wound on his chest.

The arrows pierce almost through everything.

[Regalia] forms around my body and I force more mana into it, the armor turning dark blue. At the same moment Tess steps to my side, [Stormcrown] made of lightning floating over her head and her body surrounded by flashes of red and white lightning.

"Together?" she asks.

"Together," I answer as simply.

My domain expands and both of us rush at the corpse.

Chapter 234: 5th explorer

[Mana Domain] expands and I fill it with resonating mana again, canceling the arrows that the archer shoots at group 4.

Then his eyes made of mana stones glow and the stone lodged inside its chest radiates more mana. Its attacks become stronger and some of the arrows, even though weakened by my domain, clash against barriers I create.

That's when Tess reaches him, the mana exploding around her as she tears stones off the walls and the ground, making them spin around her before flinging them at the archer.

In between these attacks, a dozen of her rare endurium javelins continue to move as if they are alive. They change directions and let out a piercing noise as they pass through the air while leaving a trail of black and white lightning.

The archer disappears, appearing behind Tess, the arrow lodged in its bow and aimed at her. Within the domain, I quickly create an anchor and teleport behind him.

His barrier forms once again, but I resonate mana on my skin at the same frequency and my kick sends the archer flying, rolling on the ground.

Immediately Tess's attacks start hitting the monster, the lightning burning its body.

I use tether to appear close and flames that I infuse with [Resonance] blaze against the archer that once again creates a spherical barrier. The flames crash against it, the barrier enduring for a bit before getting disrupted by flames infused with resonating mana. As they start touching the archer, he teleports again, this time appearing behind group 4.

Before he does anything, a javelin comes flying and lodges itself deep into his body. The Arcane Archer staggers backward, lightning cracking around him.

Tess predicted this kind of attempt.

Before the archer moves again, Maya's spear made of mana stabs against the barrier he hastily creates and before Lily's [Disintegration] hits it, he teleports again.

This time I'm better at tracking his teleport and appear next to him soon after, my kick hitting the barrier and sending ripples through it. The corpse changed the barrier's frequency.

An attack explodes from it and the arrow that pierces everything it touches hits [Regalia] infused with kinetic energy.

I stagger backward, pushed by the force of the attack, and most of the energy gets absorbed by the armor. Then I infuse [Regalia] with [Resonance] and the arrow explodes, the attack mostly disrupted by my armor.

Two of Tess's javelins hit the archer's barrier, forcing him to move right to one of the multiple anchors I left all around the room.

I rely on Arcane Resilience and send as much mana as I can into the anchor, it quickly turning into a tricolored orb that starts glowing white. Tess moves behind me, lightning trailing her body and the archer tries to teleport, but he is unable to do so as I send a pulse of disrupting mana at him.

Instead, he strengthens his barrier and the exploding orb obliterates it, sending immense heat into the room and burning the archer.

I absorb any heat that reaches me before it can hit Storm Brigade or group 4.

The following implosion pulls the archer towards where the core of the orb was but he resists and more mana radiates from him, an immense amount that destroys all the anchors I left around and deals with the implosion.

When he turns his head to me, there is no hate in his lifeless eyes. He is just a personality construct, and an imperfect one.

Both of his eyes lose their light and the mana stone on the chest starts glowing brighter. The amount of mana he releases threatens mine, pushing it, trying to dominate it.

What a funny guy.

I reach into my Mana Reservoir and let the mana flow.

POV Obelia Jenth

The amount of mana that fills the room is almost sickening and all of it radiates from two figures in front of me. A terrifying young man and the corpse of the Champion's disciple.

There is no beauty in it, no delicacy. Just like wild animals growling towards each other, pressuring the other one with their mana.

Tess moves to my side and looks at me, "Let's not do anything. It's better to not interrupt him when he is like that," she says simply and even the crown disappears from over her head. The lightning crown I never saw anyone using before. And the woman I dared to call my disciple uses it with such ease, not realizing the power she possessed.

What a terrifying bunch of people she and her guild are. But most of all, their guild master.

The archer throws away the bow and a dozen of projectiles form around him, each of them as big as a thick spear and twice as long. He shoots them, at us, the shockwave following each one of them.

Yet, moving only a bit they stop once again. Unable to pierce the field around the terrifying young man. Even more mana radiates from him and it tears apart each and every projectile, then as if making fun of his opponent, he also creates projectiles, three of them, all dark blue with wisps of purple and light blue mana swirling inside.

"FUCK! Run!" multiple people from Angry Kittens scream right away.

Even before these words are finished they are all running out of the room.

With fascination, I watch as each of the projectiles starts turning bright white and is shot towards the archer.

“Barriers!” Tess shouts towards her guild and mine as well.

Hearing the tension in her voice, everyone who can creates a barrier.

A flash of bright white light blinds me for a moment as well as a blast of mana that washes over us. The explosion ensues and I can feel the heat on my skin, as well as feel the vibrations as pieces of stone fall from the ceiling together with dust.

I push it all away with my mana and then look towards the room where the young man and the corpse are fighting.

My view is blocked by a barrier that seems to cover the entirety of the entrance, the barrier made of dark blue, purple, and light blue mana. There are cracks all over it and I can see ripples spreading all over the surface as the barrier cracks, crumbling and revealing what's happening in the room.

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Nathaniel stands there in armor similar to the barrier that is now covered in cracks and golden flames blaze around him. Opposite of him, the archer stands, missing his left leg and arm, both replaced by prosthetics made of mana.

“Hey, get your asses over here, this guy is weak so you can finish him off, it’s nice to practice. Biscuit, you don’t have to,” he calls towards his guild.

Remembering the powerful attacks of the archer, I look towards them and most of them don’t even seem surprised, while some of them seem excited to fight.

I watch as they all move inside the room and start fighting while Nathaniel stands to the side. He constantly spreads his mana around and only helps when it looks like any of them will die.

His guild members get hurt. Bones are broken, deep wounds form, and they get thrown around. Yet, all of them fight.

A little girl fights with flames that devour everything, yet they don't burn anyone from her guild. They form orbs that she shoots at the archer, making him avoid explosions of blue flames.

A black-haired girl fights up close, taking wounds and restoring them immediately while not being affected by them at all. With gray mana that seems to terrify even the personality construct of a man long dead.

An older man is able to take on some weaker attacks of an enemy well over level 200. His body is handling it all, and his swordsmanship is somewhat lacking, but it shows his immense talent for positioning and his calm, calculating personality.

A black-haired woman with dark blue armor around her body that continuously creates and changes weapons made of mana and even uses some mana projectiles to shoot at the archer.

Twins that move faster than anyone else from the group, both impossibly synchronized and sometimes even switching places with each other while creating extremely realistic illusions.

A young boy who skillfully moves dozens of iron orbs that hit much stronger than they should and move at a speed that is hard for me to watch. He also does something that further slows down the movement of the monster.

And each single one of them has that weird look in their eyes. A look similar to their guild master.

What a scary bunch.

In the end, the arcane archer is a disappointment. Seeing his level, I hoped for more, but he is just an imperfect imprint with limited mana. A personality construct of someone much less skilled than Lissandra.

His mana reserves also weren't that big and he was capable of using only a few skills. Powerful skills, yet with limited use and it's not that smart, only reacting to outside stimuli. So, I just watch Angry Kittens fighting his further weakened version after fighting with me.

I notice that Obelia keeps staring at me, but I mostly ignore her and observe the fight in front of me.

Not even having to join that much, I let group 4 deals with an enemy that is close to 100 levels higher than them, and to be honest, the archer right now, after nearly depleting his mana, feels under level 200.

So yup, he is quite getting bullied, even though he lands a few nice hits.

In the end, it's Hadwin who deals the finishing blow, his epic sword cutting through the corpse that barely has any mana left inside its body.

[You have defeated Arcane Archer - lvl 228]

[Lvl 182 > Lvl 183]

I reach what remains of him and without hesitation pull out the mana stones from his eyes and chest. After sending my mana inside them, it's as I think, and there is a scarily delicate set of circuits that allowed storing the personality imprint as well as mana for who knows how many years.

All the stones are part mana battery, part personality construct, partially allowing the corpse to use skills or the mana, but there is something else too. A piece of information that is encrypted inside. A message left to humans, most likely talking about the invasion of lynthari, Pairing, maybe Calamities, or about the war. Or maybe it is a recipe for the best smoked deer meat. Who knows.

I also pick up the bow that didn't get destroyed during the fight, not even damaged by my tricolored javelins.

Windrider Composite Bow (epic): Engineered with high-tensile materials, this bow is designed to enhance and compress any mana or other projectile it fires. This results in a remarkable increase in both the distance the projectiles can travel and the force with which they strike.

Quite a shitty weapon to leave to someone for a fight in a small room underground. Somewhere outside with his teleport, the Arcane archer would be a much more terrifying enemy. Now what to do with the bow? It would be nice for Tess and would allow her to create projectiles out of lightning and shoot them much further. The same goes for Lily who might be able to shoot [Disintegration].

Or Izzy for some long-range fire attacks? Maybe even Min-Jae after getting him arrows made from mana conductive metal he likes to use and increase its weight with [Gravity Well]?

Hell, even Maya could create some mana projectiles, strengthen them with her [Boost], and have them even more compressed before shooting.

"Do you mind if I keep it?" I ask Obelia, who is looking at me and unsurprisingly she doesn't seem to mind that much.

I check one more time the mana stones in my hands and all of them look somewhat similar when it comes to encrypted and stored information. The size of that information seems the same in each stone so there shouldn't be a difference.

Then I hand her the mana stones that used to be the eyes of the Arcane Archer and look at her with a question in my eyes.

Obelia just takes them and nods.

Still, I feel a bit bad as an asshole from Beyond messed up with her collection of information so I will make sure to pay her back a bit in the future, even though she doesn't realize it's our fault.

I put away the big mana stone and hand the bow to Tess, "You can decide who to give it to."

The moment it gets out of my hand I feel relief as I get rid of the annoying decision. Tess and others can fight over it.

I know that Tess is using Abyssal Anchor (epic):

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

And the last epic item we got from the old capital and our friend Elydor went to Hadwin - Darkstride Ring (epic): This ring is imbued with a dark enchantment that allows the wearer to step into the shadows and reappear a short distance away in a different shadow, effectively granting the ability to blink through shadows for a tactical advantage on the battlefield.

Damn, I miss Elydor. I wish I could start the floor over again and meet him one more time.

"Check the Beyond community," Tess leans closer and whispers into my ear.

I do so right away.

Beyond 5/10

With Tess being the 4th it looks like someone else joined.

Gareth - How do I change my name here?

Sset - you can't

Gareth - Oh, hello, friend! That's unfortunate indeed.

Gareth -I wanted to leave the Community to Maximilian and Jakub, but they are unable to join this one.

Sset -who are Maximilian and Jakub?

Gareth - Sorry, my friend! They go by Brainiac and Lootenant in the community.

The newest Beyond explorer immediately starts doxxing his group members.

Gareth -My name is Gareth Vogel, leader of group number 1 we named WhiteWing. I'm 40 years old and from Germany. I just finished the 1st Beyond trial and hope we will get along.

Not only his group members, but he is doxxing himself too.

Chapter 235: Why are you here?

"Can you take care of this?" I ask Tess, and when she nods, I turn my attention back to the room.

First, I check on group 4. Hadwin's wounds, even the big ones, are already nearly healed thanks to his weaker healing skill and Lily. The petite black-haired girl is still missing some limbs and fingers, but she seems fine. [Sacrifice] is a scary skill and even scarier is how used to it she got.

I will have to sit down with her and force her to learn to sacrifice other things than her body parts. The skill also seems fairly good as for a short moment she was quick enough to rival the Arcane Archer. It was a really short moment and it did cost her, but the amount it boosted her speed is quite nice.

"Everyone is fine," Sophie says after stopping by my side, "Some wounds, but nothing too serious, and Lily will get her hands back."

"Sounds good. You couldn't do that much, right?"

She shakes her head, "The archer didn't have any mind I could manipulate. I will have to be more careful. I rely too much on mind manipulation."

I can't help but agree, but I don't think it will be that hard for her. [Manipulation] is a fairly versatile skill and she will find something even though mind manipulation is something she is best at.

(Food?)

I turn my attention to the best doggo of the 4th floor, no, the best doggo of the tutorial, "You did fucking amazing."

(Food!)

"Yes! You totally destroyed him, he couldn't do shit against you!"

(Food food!)

"Yes, you are the good boy!"

I keep petting the mighty young divine beast and the future Absolute of Earth. The Archmage Biscuit. May he remember me when he rises to his throne. To be honest, seeing him sometimes do things like he did during the fight against the archer makes me wonder how strong he actually is. I don't think I saw his full power yet.

Does he also have classes? Subclass? Is it a gluttony subclass if yes? What Primordial energy does he have? What is his level?

Well, it doesn't matter that much. He is cute so he can keep his secrets.

Walking towards Obelia, I notice one of Min-Jae's orbs on the ground and lift it. It's much heavier than it looks, surely as heavy as little Isabella. And he is moving dozens of them like it's nothing. Then I

remember that a long time ago I gave him practice where I told him to make the stone heavy with his [Gravity Well] and move it around with [Telekinesis] at the same time.

Oh boy. Did he continue to do that the entire time? Is this why he asked for mana conductive metal to make it better to accept his skills? The orbs are small, but with how durable they are, how heavy they are, and how quickly they move, they deal a lot of damage.

What a silly teenager.

Can group 4 people stop being scary for just a moment?

“Min-Jae, this thing is terrifying. Good job.” I hand him the orb and he gives me a big smile back.

The twins immediately make fun of him, but he only smiles brighter.

I reach Jenna, who is already examining the two mana stones I gave to Obelia, “Hey.”

She greets me with a nod and I look at her guild master, “How does it look?”

“Jenna is trying to decipher them. It will take a lot of time, but I don’t mind it that much. We already confirmed our suspicions so hopefully, the mana stones will contain more information.”

I nod. I also have one mana stone that I plan to examine and then use as a Mana battery.

I glance at it.

Whispering Echo Stone (epic):The Whispering Echo Stone is a rare, iridescent mana stone that serves as a powerful mana battery and harbors an imperfect personality imprint. There is something encrypted inside.

Yup, another epic item in my collection. Something tells me it shouldn't be that easy to get them even though this one isn't that useful. The part that would make it a bigger mana battery is ruined by inscriptions of the personality imprint and encrypted information. In the end, the amount of mana it can hold is really small, a few hundred stat points worth.

"Any luck with finding a way out?" I ask. I know there are already multiple of her guild members looking around the room in hopes of finding an array that would allow us to teleport outside.

"Nothing so far," she shakes her head.

Not too surprised, I head towards the door that has tonnes of stones on the opposite side and activate my [Mana Domain]. I take hold of the skill and change it so that instead of keeping a sphere-like domain around me, it extends more in one direction. Then I continue to make it thinner and thinner, just big enough to create an anchor.

[Mana Domain - lvl 16 > Mana Domain - lvl 17]

I also check it with my [Perception] and in the end, I have a feeling that I'm close to reaching unfallen parts of the tunnels.

That much should be enough for now, I have an option of moving people outside with the help of [Tether], or in the worst case, we can dig the tunnel. [Resonance] would be good for that while other people would strengthen the stone so it doesn't fall down.

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Or I can take the epic ring from Hadwin and find some shadow far away and get there after leaving an anchor where I am. Now that I think about it, it could be better. The ring has further reach the more mana you pump into it.

"It's nice to always see you so calm," Lily stops by my side, "You just look like you are thinking about what you will eat after we get out or how to make your skills more destructive."

“Quite rude to hear from someone with a Skill literally called [Disintegration].”

“I know, right? Are you scared of it?” she asks teasingly.

“A little bit,” I lie.

Actually, I'm scared of her skill by a lot. Scared and jealous. I mean, [Focus] and [Mana Manipulation], the Skills I started with are good and all, but!

“Yeah, me too sometimes,” she sighs. “Dennis said I should seal it in my left arm and put some bandages around it. Something about renaming it to Black Dragon and keeping it sealed.” Lily rolls her eyes.

“I think we found something,” Jenna interrupts us and we follow where she leads us.

There is a big iron circle on the ground, an array similar to the one Storm Brigade used to teleport us towards the old capital.

Jenna carefully moves more stone from it, “There are probably dozens of traps, so I think it will be better if you check it.” Her tone is somewhat casual, yet respectful.

I quickly get to it and put my hand on it, and it's as she said, there are dozens of traps and some of them even seem to be set to make teleportation go terribly wrong or make it explode the moment we feed it mana.

Jenna leaves and I continue to observe it while Lily sits nearby and slowly restores her limbs and fingers.

Slowly I get deep into it, and the trap even required me to focus on multiple things at once, and that is something I learned to do.

My [Focus] splits into multiple parts, something I did a long time ago with my first skill upgrade token, and then decided against it to not weaken my skill. Yet, while improving my abilities I have learned to do

it on my own. To split my skill into multiple parts, each weaker than the original, and [Focus] on multiple things at once. Doing it becomes somewhat easy in a similar way consolidation became.

The more I learn about the skills the more I reflect on my decision to improve my knowledge. And each new thing I learn makes me happy.

“You are quite charming when you focus on something,” Lily says out of nowhere.

That makes me look at her.

She giggles at my expression, “Even though your expression doesn’t change, I can tell that you are having fun and when you give something your full attention. It’s... charming,” she avoids using the word I know she wanted to use.

“Lily,” I say.

“Yes?”

“Remind me, how old are you?”

“Eighteen in a few weeks!” she answers, not understanding why I asked.

I can only sigh and filter out the voice of our childish healer and focus back on the array. The world becomes scarily quiet and loses its colors, and I activate my [Mana Domain] too and get to it. I examine all its twists, remove all the traps, and fix the circuits that were broken with time. I enjoy the entire process and even catch myself not caring about the time I spend doing it. It's fun.

In the end, I stop when the array feels like it's fixed and examine it one more time.

Seems good, this should do.

I look up and my eyes meet those of Jenna's, who also waits for me to finish my work.

"Can you tell where it's leading?" I ask her.

"Let me see," she passes by me and puts her hand on the array. The mana she sends in is a bit weird, and she even uses one of the items Obelia takes out when working on arrays.

Curious, I examine the process and try to remember as much as possible.

"Most of the arrays are multi-directional. For example, the one we used to get to the old capital leads to two more places. The one we used to get out of the old capital also leads to three places in total," her voice is quiet as her mana continuously flows inside.

In the end, she shakes her head, "This array leads only in one direction, and I can't tell right away, but I think the one it reaches also connects only to this one."

Jenna stands up and after excusing herself, she leaves to meet Obelia.

"Interesting, isn't it?" I hear the soft voice from behind me.

I don't even have to turn around to know who it is and decide to stay quiet.

"Nice reaction," the voice continues to speak softly.

At the same time, Lily also continues to talk to me, her expression clearly showing she doesn't hear the voice that talks to me.

"I will check something else, Lily. Can you check on Hadwin? Just in case?" My steps become heavier as I head away from the room, reaching the far corner of the big room we first entered.

After making sure I'm behind the pillar, I wait a bit and soon the lynthari woman, who is barely taller than me, passes by my side and stops in front of me, the Lynthari Matriarch. I wonder, why is the matriarch shorter than any other adult lynthari? Is there a reason for that?

Her piercingly blue eyes meet mine, and she moves a strand of her red hair from her shoulder.

My mana continuously flows through my body, strengthening it, defending my mind, and trying to perceive everything around me.

Out of nowhere, the Matriarch is here.

No, she was here the entire time; she entered the mines with us, and she walked by our side.

She observed the fight.

The entire time just an arm's reach away from us, yet no one could see her, no one could sense her.

"I can see why Myrra calls you the feral one," the matriarch, who looks barely thirty, just smiles. It's a somewhat friendly smile.

"Why are you here?" I manage to get out of myself.

For a moment, she muses over her next words and then she just says, "At first, I went here to kill everyone from Storm Brigade. Obelia long since started asking too... uncomfortable questions and her obsession isn't helping either." She turns around and looks towards one of the men from Obelia's guild.

He is walking towards where we are, but then, without me sensing anything, the man's expression changes and he stops, a surprised giggle escaping his mouth and he walks around where we are as if there is a wall in front of him.

“As for you and your guild, I planned to keep you alive. Mainly because you have a few guild members with interesting skills,” she thinks a bit longer, “Oh, and Eris seems to like you, calling you underling and such, so I would feel bad for killing you.”

Her voice is calm and confident, even as she talks about killing a few dozen people. A voice of someone confident in their decisions and power. A voice of someone who is used to ruling and making difficult decisions for a long time.

“But?” I ask.

“The array you just fixed, do you have any idea where it leads?” A few steps and she stops in front of me. I could reach her if I lifted my hand.

“Jenna said it's one-directional,” I answer as I still have no idea.

“Yes, it leads to the tunnels far away from here,” her canines show, “to the lab where the lynthari Champion created the self-sustained biological weapon called the Colony.”

Chapter 236: Back on the surface

It had long been suspected here in this world that the Colony and the Living Tree were weapons used in a war long ago. But learning in one day that the war was against invaders called lynthari and the Colony was something created to be used against humans would be quite earthshaking news for someone from this floor.

“So, you guys invaded this world during the Pairing, you fought humans, you created the Colony and the Living Tree and a few hundred years later you are at the point you are?”

“If you say it like that, it sounds quite rude,” her tail, which is much fluffier than other lynthari’s, moves, showing her amusement. “The Pairing is something that is forced onto us by)Oú +!ôú#*,” she continues to explain, but the system automatically censors everything else.

What a surprise.

“I see,” I nod and pretend to understand, “The Living Tree is also your job?” I ask.

The lynthari matriarch doesn't say anything else and a weird smile appears on her face and she nods, "It's been a long time since I talked with someone about it," she breathes in, "it's refreshing."

"So that means the other lynthari don't know?"

"They are too young, and I made sure to kill everyone who knew, leaving only kids behind."

I open my mouth to ask why, but I freeze at the start of the sentence. Her eyes clearly show that this is as much as she will say. Asking more than this would be dangerous.

"I see," I say in the end, and her tail moves a bit, showing an emotion that is hard to describe, seemingly both annoyed and amused at the same time.

Without explaining anything else, she turns around and walks into the wall, passing by it as if it's not there.

What level is she? Surely over 250 and her class is [Enthraller - lvl ??], showing only two question marks so she is still under level 300.

It's all really weird, she is a matriarch, probably the strongest living lynthari, yet she called Myrra Champion candidate. Does it mean that Myrra only possesses the potential to become Champion while the matriarch does not? Before this floor ends, I will have to ask her a few questions.

For a moment, I examine the wall she left through and there is no illusion or hidden entrance, it's just a normal wall, meaning she used some skill to pass through it. That's interesting, but there is something that annoyed me more than her ability to pass through materials. It's her skill that allows her to hide from other people. I guess that it is something similar to Lorven's skill or the twins' skill called [Sensory Deception].

Their skill doesn't affect the mind, just creates an illusion that the twins slowly learn to make more and more believable. Sometimes they even give them some fake mana signatures, and I could swear they somehow make them radiate heat.

The matriarch probably has a similar skill that allows her to hide from people or remove her “signature” from the world. I know that she is maybe even 100 levels higher than me, yet it still annoys me that she is capable of doing that. Especially while not being a Champion and not even a Champion candidate as far as I know.

While observing the wall to make sure, I even kick it a few times and obviously, that's when Tess appears.

“We are fighting walls now?” she asks.

“Only this one,” I sigh, “So how is our 5th Beyond explorer?”

“He is from the same group as Brainiac, Lootenant, and Mari, group WhiteWing, and apparently, he is their leader.”

“Also the strongest one out of group 1.”

“Yes, he is a bit... trusting and seems nice, but it's hard to say how much of it is an act. Right now, he seems like some paladin of justice, just from the way he speaks.”

I move away from the wall, “Someone in Beyond being nice? Tess, wanna bet? I think he is evil, maybe the worst guy from here, and is only acting all nice and just.”

“That's so like you,” she shakes her head, “Anyway, what do you think of the array?”

“That? It's a no-go for now, it leads to the Colony.”

I then tell her what I have learned from the matriarch and how close we most likely all were to death. What changed her mind is still a bit of a mystery.

“So she said she didn't want that information to leak out and she was willing to kill Obelia and probably all of us, but she changed her mind?” Tess asks and a dozen or so javelins that constantly hover behind her back move slightly to the side and follow her.

“My best guess is that she wants to attack the lab where the Colony was created and doesn't want to weaken Virelia's forces.” I tell her.

“I thought the same.” Tess looks around and also knocks on the wall of rock, “I hoped it would be a quick expedition with decent rewards, but once again we are deep underground, surrounded by rock and darkness.”

“Are you holding up fine?”

“For me it's not a problem, but some of the others are getting a bit nervous. It's not much, but enough to influence their behavior a bit if we stay here for much longer.”

“I see, can you tell Obelia what we learned about the array? Keep the matriarch's interference secret for now. I will meanwhile ask for the ring from Hadwin and try to check how far the closest tunnel is.”

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Tess just nods in confirmation and leaves while I reach Hadwin who is already fully healed.

The wound on his side is gone and he even put a new shirt on.

Seeing where I look, he shakes his head, “I thought I could take it on, but I was wrong.”

“Well, his attacks were quite strong.” I decide to be nice.

“Yes, but if he was real or fought better I would've been dead. But no worries, I will work on it.”

I nod. Seeing Haddy complain about not being able to tank the attack of someone with an epic weapon and a much higher level reminds me how weird most of us are.

How arrogant and far-reaching. We are just a bunch of newbies who only started learning how to use our skills and mana and we want to fight much stronger opponents. And not only fight, but to win, endure their attacks, crush them. Maybe you have to be a bit crazy to end up in Hell difficulty.

"I thought of it as well, but you will probably have more luck with your higher mana," he immediately knows what is on my mind, and after pulling it off his finger, he hands me the ring we got from the expedition to the old capital.

I examine it once more.

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

"You just have to hope there are some shadows in the tunnels. I'm not sure how well it works with pure darkness."

Huh, that's a good point. Is Hadwin maybe a bit smart? I didn't think of that, so maybe he is a genius?

"You are thinking something rude, aren't you?" he asks. He really is smart, "There might still be some mana in the lines on the tunnel walls so the shadows might be here, but you better hurry."

"No problem, thanks." I leave Hadwin and then use [Mana Domain] and stretch it in one direction again. Then, while using [Perception] in a similar way, I move around the rooms, close to the walls.

It takes a bit of time, but in the end, as suspected, I don't find any part of an unburrowed tunnel.

The ring says a short distance, but we confirmed before that the more mana you use, the longer that short distance is. So I do the same thing, just this time feed the epic ring with a lot of mana and search for shadows I could use.

In the end, I find only one, but it only feels weak, as it's about to disappear.

Quickly, I rush more mana through my body, and in the air in front of me, I create an anchor and feed it with enough mana to last a few minutes. Then, just in case, I create another one a bit further.

"Min-Jae, guard them for me," I tell the Korean boy who is closest to me, and he nods.

Then I use [Regalia] to create armor around my body and strengthen my body before using the ring.

The world around me changes, and I feel my body being pulled and moved towards the shadow I targeted. The skill of the ring ignores the stone and just moves me toward the shadow where I pop out.

As suspected, it's one of the tunnels we used, and further behind I sense one of the marks Sophie kept leaving behind.

Immediately, I leave an anchor in the air and this one I feed with even more mana than the ones before.

Examining it for a while, I send mana towards the wall, making the lines light up. Then, to be even more sure, I create one orb and fill it with thermal energy, making it create even more shadow and be able to last hours.

Giving my surroundings one more look, I then activate the anchor and teleport back through [Tether].

The skill is currently level 9, so testing if I can teleport with people will surely make it break the bottleneck, right? So who will be my test subject and find out with me if I can transport other people?

My eyes meet those of Hadwin's and he seems a bit nervous out of nowhere.

Who told you to be so durable and upgrade your constitution?

In the end, it worked. Hadwin went first, after using the entirety of his mana and [Strengthening] his body, even putting some heavy armor on. Such an amount of distrust almost hurts my sensitive soul, but I decide to forgive him.

While transferring him, I did it extremely carefully, even though I might have seemed unbothered. I spent a few minutes preparing and carefully calculating.

Surprisingly, it all went without a hitch, just the chunk of mana it took was much bigger than expected. It's hard to guess, but probably around 20 percent of my mana? Maybe even more. Enough for quite a strong tricolored or antomic bomb.

Still, having enough mana in the reservoir and my regeneration being somewhat decent because of the big mana pool, I spent plenty of time transporting everyone and waiting for my mana to replenish. It could go a bit faster if I took more from my Mana Reservoir, but I have decided to keep it at least mostly full.

"Damn, I missed the sun," Maya groans while she stretches. A sigh of relief is something I noticed.

"Next time we will take some people specialized in stone manipulation and tunneling. It would take them just a few hours to get us out," Obelia stops by our side.

Her saying that isn't surprising at all. Most of us are more inclined towards fighting rather than tunneling and stopping the tunnel from falling on our heads. Well, just a few hundred more levels and I will just destroy the mountain, not bothering with such things as tunnels.

"Judging by the time, the auction will start tonight. I will be taking Tess with me as my disciple and you will have a spot for two more people if you want to take them with you," Obelia says simply.

"Will do so. So we will meet there?" I look at her.

"Yes, I will be waiting for you," she then waves and leaves for her guild, all of them moving towards Virelia.

“How big is that auction, Nat?” Min-Jae asks while walking by my side. I also notice a few others listening.

“Myrra said the biggest one in a few dozen years, so probably quite good. Obelia will be also auctioning an epic spear,” I answer him.

But best of all, I will also be auctioning off some inscribed mana stones. With the help of the old man and just to get a bit more money from all the weirdos that drool over some new inscriptions.

I have to find a way to spend all that money. There will be some nice items in the auction, something said even by Myrra and Obelia, both extremely rich and one of them having multiple epic items while the other one surely has one as well.

“So, who will you be taking,” I don't even have to turn around to see the shine in Min-Jae's eyes.

Chapter 237: Dressed up

I check myself one more time in the mirror. I'm wearing simple gray suit-like clothes. They are tailor-made, and it took a few weeks to get a few sets. Something I, in the end, let happen even though I prefer my casual clothes.

The clothes are surprisingly comfortable, with gray pants, a similar color jacket, and under it, a black shirt with long sleeves and a vest-like thing that is also gray. In a few places, there is simple embroidery made with a golden-like color.

My hair is also put into a somewhat presentable state.

For a moment, I stare at my reflection, and the weirdo in the mirror stares back at me with his differently colored eyes. Well, I won't be getting any points for the expression my face almost constantly has, but at least I'm handsome, right? My mom said it once when I was nine years, six months, and ten days old, so it must be true.

Then I spend a few minutes thinking if I should create a thermal orb and store it inside my body, but decide against it. A few lynthari could sense it, and explaining it would be a bit... difficult.

“Asshole,” I say to the weirdo in the mirror, and the guy mouths the same words. The words Biscuit likes to use so often.

Finally, I exit my room and walk downstairs where most of group 4 are. Tess is the first I notice. A tall blonde wearing a simple white dress that somewhat looks comfortable and reveals a nice chunk of her shoulders and back.

Curiously, I locate Min-Jae and, as expected, he turns away his gaze from Tess the moment he sees me looking at him.

Oi, you will drool.

I shake my head and stop in front of Tess, “No high heels?”

“As if I would put on such uncomfortable things,” she also eyes me the way I did her, “See, you can be quite handsome if you try.”

“I don't have to be handsome, Biscuit likes me no matter how ugly I look,” I point out. “You look pretty.” I compliment her.

I can see that I made her a bit happy. Who wouldn't like compliments?

“And who is this handsome boy?” I squat down in front of the best doggo.

(Asshole!)

“Yes, yes you are!” I pick Biscuit up and examine the clothes he is wearing. Somewhat, they seem to be even more quality and expensive than the ones I have on myself.

Biscuit is wearing a dark blue jacket and vest, both reminding of a suit, and he also has something like a red tie. All of it fits well and is custom-made. The best thing the silly group 4, probably Isabella, spent money on.

Seeing how handsome he is, I think I would be willing to sell an epic item just to get a few more clothes like that for him. Well, my point of view might be skewed a bit when it comes to money, as epic items keep falling into my lap.

(Food,) Biscuit says after looking at me.

“Oh, really? Thank you, buddy! You too look very handsome.”

“It's so weird how those two communicate,” I can hear Maya somewhere in the background but ignore her.

We fancy-dressed people often have trouble being able to hear people like her, “Where are Sophie and Izzy?” I ask about the two people I decided to take with me.

Sophie to check the items with me and maybe make some people more... cooperative and Izzy to read other auctioneers and give us a nice advantage. I mean, some people didn't like it, but the decision is the most logical.

“Well, that changed a bit. Izzy got sick, and Sophie decided to stay with her,” Tess tells me.

“Oh... so who is coming?”

“Lily and Hadwin,” the blonde sighs. “Before you ask, Lily didn't do anything. I checked multiple times.”

If that doesn't suck.

The first one to climb downstairs is Hadwin, wearing a light blue suit in a style similar to mine. The older man has a short, well-kept beard and a nice haircut. The longer I look at him the more I wonder how much longer I can call him an older man. Hadwin now looks under 40, unlike his real age which is closer to 50. He is still well-built and only a bit shorter than me.

Unlike before when he was bulkier, he is a bit slimmer, yet the muscles are apparent even under clothes, not bulky, but flexible and tough, clearly showing how much he got into swordsmanship. I also check his face and I swear it looks younger than before.

Is it a result of a constitution upgrade or just the sheer power of stats? Or maybe he just enjoys this new “life” that much?

The same as me, he doesn't have any weapons on him.

“Tess, can you help Lily? She has some trouble with her clothes,” he asks.

“I will help too,” Maya says and together with Tess, they go upstairs.

“Nat, you have to buy me something nice, okay?” Min-Jae, still a bit disappointed, asks, “Some tougher or more conductive material for my projectiles would be nice.”

“Sure, I will buy everything useful,” I answer him.

I'm rich.

“Keep an eye on Isabella. If it seems to be getting more serious, come for us,” Hadwin tells him.

“Lily couldn't help?” I ask.

“That's the weird thing about it. Sophie didn't want Lily to interfere and asked us to trust her.” For a moment, a sharp expression flashes in his eyes, “Lately, Sophie has been acting suspicious so I sat down with her and asked her about it. She didn't tell me all, but I think she might have removed [Geas] from Isabella's mind.”

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Oh? That really surprised me. Sophie's [Geas]

"I think it's the right decision, but the effect of removing it must have been too much." Hadwin fixed his tie.

"She could have waited a few days," I tell him.

"Today is Isabella's 11th birthday," Hadwin says softly, to the surprise of everyone in the room.

"We didn't know that!" Dennis complains.

"Yeah, they never told us," Aaron continues, as always, the twins in perfect sync.

"They didn't want to spread it that much. So I think Sophie and Isabella wanted to do it on Isabella's birthday. Symbolic mostly," Hadwin's voice sounds almost gentle.

That's when Tess walks downstairs together with Lily, who follows shyly behind her. The black-haired girl is wearing a pale blue dress that is similar to Tess's, but less revealing, completely covering her back and showing only a bit of her shoulder and the entirety of her pale blue arm. Something she still refuses to fix for me and for her, both of us having an albino-like left arm.

It's not like I don't know the reason, and it's as Lily said once. She is scarily patient and stubborn.

"Say welcome to our Initiate of Lust," Dennis mutters, and Min-Jae giggles but quickly tries to hide it.

"How many times do I have to tell you I don't have a Lust subclass!" Lily shouts at one of the twins.

"According to Granny Liss, it's Radiant Lust, Lily! You should know that!" Aaron shakes his head.

Tess, patient as always, just waits for them to finish, “So, boys, keep an eye on Sophie and Izzy and if anything happens, look for us, you know where. Maya, I will be relying on you the most,” she turns to the other woman.

“Sure, buy me something nice, okay?” Maya smiles at her.

“Only the best stuff.”

“That's what I like to hear.”

Then we leave the house. Me, Tess, Hadwin, Lily, and Biscuit, of course. Tess will be with Obelia as her disciple, and I could take two people with me, but I need Biscuit too, obviously. They would not stop me from taking in my emotional support animal.

It's already getting darker and the streets are emptier than before, yet nicely lit. Having enough time, we walk towards the auction building. Even from afar, we can see dozens of people moving around. Talking to each other, building social circles, greeting old friends, and showing off expensive clothes and jewelry. Seeing all of it, Lily becomes starry-eyed, looking around with an expression that is so excited it makes me stop myself from making fun of her.

I also notice Hadwin looking at her, and the smile on his face seems almost fatherly as if it's his granddaughter having her first big party.

“Hadwin is nicer than you might think, Nat. He has been helping the kids a lot and they like him for it,” Tess slows down and whispers to me, “He just seems to have been lonely on earth. Did you know most of his family died not that long ago?”

Our steps sound on cobblestones, and in the distance, we can hear music playing as we are getting closer to the auction building.

Tess continues, “I think he enjoys having people rely on him and asking him for help.”

“And you are poking both Hadwin and the kids to make it happen,” I answer her back, also in a quiet voice.

“Maybe a little bit,” she flashes me a smile, “But is that so bad?”

“I guess it's not,” I answer to the best, after Biscuit, manipulator of group 4.

When I notice Obelia moving closer, I stop talking and warn others too.

The guild master of Storm Brigade reaches us soon, followed by her attendee Jenna. Both of them are wearing nice dresses that have their guild emblem embroidered into them. Both dresses are in pale blue color. “Excuse me, but I'm rather surprised how well you look in your clothes, Nathaniel,” Obelia says, with Jenna nodding in agreement.

I also notice Lily saying something under her breath that I'm sure is an insult to, according to her, the old woman Obelia.

Feeling my social batteries already going down, I just answer quickly, “Thank you, you and Jenna also look nice.”

One surprised lifted eyebrow from Obelia and a few sentences she exchanges with Tess, Hadwin, and Lily, and we finally follow her inside the auction house.

Just following close to her gives us a lot of attention from other people, and every time someone tries to reach out to sense our mana, I destroy the attempt in a way that should hurt at least a bit. Through the door framed with golden lights, we enter a giant hallway. The walls are full of beautiful paintings, the stone of the floor is smooth and shiny, and everywhere are dozens of powerful or rich people.

And in-between them, lynthari. A race of people-like beings that just have cat ears and tails, towering over everyone. All of them are young for lynthari, confirming that most of the old ones rarely mingle with humans.

“Oh, Obelia, it's nice to see you,” a woman lynthari joins in, her tail short and both it and her ears brown, similar in color to her hair, “I heard you are also auctioning some items, nya! I'm already excited to see it,” the lynthari chirps.

For some unknown reason, my body twitches.

“Thank you, Miss Lynthes, you are charming as always, and I hope you will have a lot of fun tonight,” Obelia answers in her calming tone.

“I will, nya! Who are your friends? I already know smart Jenna, but I didn't see the others.”

“Guild master of Angry Kittens, Nathaniel, his vice guild master Tess, and these are their other members, Hadwin and Lily,” Obelia introduces us shortly and without much grandeur, but it looks like something the lynthari would prefer.

“Ahh,” for a moment, my eyes meet those of the lynthari woman, and her tail twitches and her canines show, “You are Myrra’s...” her tone of voice sounds disappointed, “Shame,” she adds and licks her lips.

With a few more sentences, she leaves, and in my mind, I don't know if I should thank Myrra for scaring them off or be angry that she seems to be so possessive.

Walking around and grabbing some snacks here and there, I continue to follow our small group, and my mood only grows more and more sour, surrounded by all these talking people.

“Your expression is fun,” another lynthari who started talking to us smiles at me, somewhat shamelessly and not scared off by Myrra’s name.

Once again, I wonder why they won't annoy Tess, Lily, or Hadwin.

The lynthari sniffs, and for all I know, he can be trying to sniff my emotions or whatever they do.

(Asshole!) Biscuit shouts, making sure the lynthari hears it, and for a moment, the lynthari's expression becomes annoyed.

I noticed it long since, but the race of cat people don't seem to like Biscuit, to my surprise. I mean, how could you not? Just look at him, especially now when he is wearing a dark blue suit with a red tie.

"That creature, can you get it away, it disturbs me," the lynthari sighs in an annoyed voice and with slight disgust in it.

"Well, maybe you should just fuck off if you don't like it here," I get out of myself.

The expression of sheer surprise I get from the lynthari and people around me is almost funny. I did spend the last one hour and forty-two minutes dealing with their bullshit, surrounded by all this noise and people. And now they will trash-talk Biscuit?

"What? You didn't hear? I said you can fuck off if you don't like it."

The lynthari man then licks his lips, more amused than threatened, "I can see why Myrra likes you," he says before gracefully bowing and leaving.

As a reward for that, Biscuit thankfully bumps my leg with his head. Let's not let him know that I partially did it so Biscuit doesn't obliterate that weirdo.

I turn to the person who got us here, "So, Obelia, I'm bored, how about we go and see the items that will be auctioned off?"

Chapter 238: Start of the Auction

There are multiple rooms where the items are previewed, and there are already plenty of people in this rooms inspecting the items for one last time before the auction. A few guards are in each room, while the items are in glass boxes with circuits etched into them.

Armors, amulets, rings, some weird eggs, and bottles that are hundreds of years old. Some expensive meats that are also apparently hundreds of years old and perfectly stored. This meat can be smelt even through the glass and is from high-level monsters.

Mana stones with information stored on them and even plenty of items people don't know what they are for or that are straight up broken.

We pass through multiple rooms like that and even though some items are good, they don't catch my interest that much. Sure, I will buy anything that seems useful, yet they don't excite me, so we pass into a room with more and more valuable items.

Soon the rooms have much fewer people in them and there needs to be an invitation to even be able to enter them, something Obelia has so we can enter.

I notice a few rare armors of the upper tier, mana batteries that are hard to find anywhere else, and encrypted mana stones. Old manuals inscribed into mana stones containing information on classes.

Finally, this is getting better.

"This is the last room," Obelia says, and this time the confirming of her identity takes longer and when we enter, there are barely ten people inside and two lynthari guards.

There are only ten items in there and I recognize a few of them.

First, the epic spear Obelia got from the old capital and that has most people around it. The plan is to buy it for Tess so she can use it as a projectile. Might be overkill, but with the amount of money we got from scamm... from leveraging our epic items to the lynthari, we should be capable of buying this.

Plus, we got more money from Sophie and her... well, her ability to make people cooperative as well from me selling some inscribed mana stones.

We are not a scammers.

"Oh, feral angry kitten!" I hear the voice and can only sigh as Isola rushes towards us.

One of the strongest humans in the city has a smile on her face and is wearing a black dress that reveals a big chunk of her belly, "You are quite handsome if you dress up, but I still prefer you with some normal clothes," she complains and also greets other people.

"Is there anything you want to buy, Isola?" Obelia asks her.

Isola scratches her head, "Not really, just a few members of my guild want me to buy some mana stone," she gestures towards one of the glass boxes, "Apparently it has some amazing inscriptions on it made by some upcoming genius enchanter."

She then pauses for a moment, "Oh, and did you notice lynthari saying 'nya' after every other sentence? Lately, more and more of them do that, do you think they are trying to mess with us?"

"Oh? You noticed it too? Maybe it's some trend from their youngsters?" Obelia answers, and they get into a conversation and I use the opportunity to move around the room.

One after another, I check all the items and as expected, the mana stone Isola talked about is the one inscribed by me. As for why it's here among the most valuable items, I don't know. Well, it's probably the old man selling it here, but I don't know why it's considered so valuable to be next to an epic spear.

None of the items look more interesting than the heavy chest without any holes we got from the old capital.

Yes, even after all these months and dozens of attempts, we were unable to open it. Not me, not Lily, not even Biscuit after I told him there is the best food stored inside of it. At this point, I might give it to Min-Jae or Tess to use as a heavy projectile as they did during the first floor with heavy chunks of iron.

"Some items here are really nice, the best rare items I saw, and probably close to stepping into the epic grade," Hadwin joins my side and I notice that he is playing with the ring he has on his finger. The epic rarity one.

"We will buy most of them and you guys can take them," I shrug my shoulders.

“Nothing caught your eyes?”

“Nothing here, but in one of the first rooms, I noticed a few broken items and mana stones that I really want to get,” I answer him.

I'm not even lying. More than these highest rare-grade items and even more than the epic spear, I saw a mana stone that had such dense and weird inscriptions that they seemed like cracks and made the organizers put it into the trash items they want to get rid of.

There was also a bracelet that was twisted and broken, yet the metal it was made of was reacting extremely weirdly to my primordial energies. To be honest, it made me so curious I almost tried to steal it right there.

I spend the remaining time there talking with Hadwin and Lily, who sneaks closer to us while Tess deals with other people in the room.

All the guild masters are here, even Lorven, who looks at me so lovingly, and Thalen, the redheaded guild master of the Luminous Order. The healer tries to get into a talk with Lily, but she just straight up tells him that she is not interested, whatever she meant by it.

As for me, I still plan to make Lily a stronger healer than him so I can show off.

Now that we are here, I wonder if I should introduce Hadwin to Isola; both of them have a similar fighting style. I don't trust the woman, but Haddy could learn a thing or two from her.

Then I also get some food for Biscuit and hold him in my hands so he can also look at the items without having to hover. Every time he asks, I answer him that no, the item he is looking at is not food. He seems a bit disappointed, wondering why I show him items that are not a food.

As the auction starts coming closer, we head towards another room where all of us register and after infusing mana stone with our mana we receive another one with our signature, which we can use to bid on the items by sending a pulse of mana inside of it.

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Then everyone slowly gets to the biggest circular room. On one side of that room, there is a small podium where the items will be presented and the auctioneer will stand.

Down that podium are a lot of chairs where people will sit and then there are dozens of balconies all around the room. All of them are private and each is big enough for a few people only.

The room is beautifully lit by light that is sharp enough to light everything yet still soft to the eyes. Luxurious red drapes are everywhere, most of them even having embroidery with some material that glows slightly, fed by mana batteries nicely hidden from view.

I also notice a heating system built in the floor. Heating stones buried under and spreading heat through efficient mana circuits, yet in shapes that make them pretty to look at.

But the most eye-catching part of the room is the ceiling that curves a bit, creating a dome over the entire room, and then there is an effect created. The ceiling looks like a pitch-black dark sky full of stars that pulsate slowly and also light the room.

I poke Lily so she closes her wide-open mouth as she stares at it. Not like Angry Kittens have some name, but she will ruin what remains of it.

But yeah, when we get back to Earth, I will totally copy this thing and have it in my room. Obviously, I will make it even better. Maybe I can sneak inside the auction building a bit later and examine it. With the help of the epic cape we have, it should be doable.

“Welcome, welcome!” a tall man with long brown hair enters the podium, a big smile on his face showing his perfect teeth and clothes, “Thank you all for participating in the auction organized by White Stone Company and under the patronage of Ms. Lyriel!”

The man's voice, strengthened by some means, evenly spreads through the room and even reaches the balcony where Angry Kittens, Obelia, and Jenna sit.

“Lyriel?” I ask Obelia.

“Lynthari in charge of administration of the city.”

The auctioneer talks for a bit more, using flowery words to compliment people here or to point out how amazing the auction, White Stone Company, and Lyriel are. It all goes on for a few long minutes.

“Now then, why don't we get to why we all are here?” he finally gets to the point and the mood immediately changes.

People stop talking, they sit up straighter in their chairs, and all eyes turn towards the podium.

Seeing all of this, the man smiles and bows slightly as the drape on the side moves and the first item is brought onto a circular pedestal exactly in the middle of the podium.

“We will start with this item! It's a mana stone found in the ruins of a small village north of the city. Its age is estimated to be two hundred ninety years old. The stone contains information about the people living in that village and its administration. The starting price is two Mirage stones!”

The fight immediately starts, and I can feel multiple pulses of mana from people under us that the auctioneer receives and starts shouting out, the price quickly climbing to four Mirage stones and then changing to one Heart stone.

“So, Tess, how does the currency work?” I say after quickly resonating the air around us so Obelia doesn't hear.

The look that Tess gives me is halfway between amused and annoyed, “Nat, you've spent multiple months in this city, how the hell...”

I interrupt her, “I'm rich.”

She rolls her eyes, but I can see that she can't help herself and a small smile appears on her face.

Tess then explains and tells me how much each stone would be worth in comparison to dollars. Obviously, it's all estimations, but quite close if I know how diligent she can be.

There are 13 grades of mana stones, and obviously, the higher the grade, the more worth it is, and the rarer it is. Also, the higher the rarity, the harder they are to work on and to inscribe.

It all goes like this:

Pebble Stone: \$1

Dusk Stone: \$5

Spark Stone: \$10

Bloom Stone: \$50

Jewel Stone: \$100

Crest Stone: \$500

Mirage Stone: \$1,000

Heart Stone: \$5,000

Gem Stone: \$10,000

Moon Stone: \$50,000

Star Stone: \$100,000

Sun Stone: \$500,000

Eclipse Stone: \$1,000,000

There are probably some even more expensive ones, but that's not something you are usually able to see as a human.

I also quickly forget the names of cheaper mana stones and try to remember the names of the more expensive ones. I don't think I will need this information outside of this auction.

In the end, I also ask, "So, how rich am I?"

"I could tell you that we have a few Sun Stones in the bank and you would have to believe me," Tess teases.

"That's true. Tess, are you stealing my money and building yourself a villa near the sea?"

"Just one? With how much we have, I could build multiple of them and you wouldn't even notice," she snorts and smiles, glancing to the side at our healer, "But to quickly answer, before Lily gets even more jealous. In the bank, we have well over one hundred Eclipse Stones."

Huh, what?

"Come again?"

"Yes, Nat, you are rich, disgustingly rich," Tess shakes her head, "It could be double that, but the loans you got against epic items were extremely predatory and you guys could get much more. So next time, please take me as well."

“Tess, do we really have over a hundred million dollars' worth of mana stones?” I decide to ignore that it could be twice that.

“Yes. I'm still in a bit of shock that you didn't even realize it.”

For a moment, I think about it, and then my eyes move down and I look at the cute corgi that lies by my legs.

How much are you worth? Surely more than some useless epic item, right?

Biscuit senses my look and lifts his head, tilting it a bit, surprised I stare at him so intensely, (Food?) he asks.

No! I can't!

I quickly pet him and tell him that he is a good boy and cancel the isolation field around us, the voice of the auctioneer getting to our ears once more.

That's when I feel goosebumps on my skin, and looking around, I identify the source of it: a little lynthari girl staring at me from one of the balconies. She is there alone and when her eyes meet mine, a big smile appears on her face.

I just give up and prepare my [Perception], and as the rift appears next to me, I observe it, how it is created, how it interacts with space around it, and how mana moves inside of it.

“Underling!” the redheaded girl smiles, totally ignoring the other people in the room.

Obelia's eyes are so wide open that for a moment I think they might fall out, and Jenna seems like she is about to bow or kneel.

“It's good you are here, I was getting bored, nya!” she stops next to me, “Let's watch the auction together.”

Things have become more... interesting.

Chapter 239: Bidding

“What are you doing here... boss,” I say, ignoring the looks I get for that.

Meanwhile, the granddaughter of the lynthari matriarch sits on my lap. Shamelessly. The matriarch called her Eris before, so I guess I should call her that.

“Grandma said that I should go there and buy myself something nice if I want to. She even gave me her card,” Eris takes out a card made from transparent white crystal and with delicate blue circuits that create something like a panorama of the city.

Unlike my card, there is no number on it.

Don't tell me... is it unlimited? Looking at this silly lynthari girl, I get an idea. Should I use her to buy me everything?

But seeing her happy expression, I quickly change my mind. Even I'm not that evil.

“Underling, nya, I will buy you one thing you like, so pick anything, okay?” Eris says.

“Really? In that case, I also want to buy something for the boss, so pick something too,” I tell her almost automatically and shift a bit so she sits more comfortably.

No matter how much I think about it, I just can't force myself to treat her too harshly. I mean, I would be able to do it if my life was at risk or the life of someone from group 4, but in situations like this? There is no need for that.

Eris continues to chirp something, quickly telling me about her day while the auctioneer keeps showing item after item and selling them off. Then I wonder. What happened to the original Eris. Did her world get destroyed by Calamities? Did she grow old, get a family, and then die in bed surrounded by her grandchildren?

Seeing how Obelia acts now, did humans find out that lynthari are invaders and try to fight them and either got eliminated by the matriarch or were able to win?

And Myrra? She is a Champion candidate; was she able to reach that level or died before it? If she did, is she still alive? Did the system copy her world millions of years ago, and there is nothing left of it anymore, maybe even the planet was destroyed, and only shadows of all these dead people exist in the tutorial?

Their lives, struggles, hopes, and sadness used to make it feel more real for people who are taken in here.

The more I think, the less I like it. It's disgusting.

"Underling, you have a scary expression, does your tummy hurt?" the young lynthari asks, and there is even a hint of worry.

Great, now even I have little children to worry about myself.

"I'm fine, boss, but you were telling me about how you tricked one of your servants, so what did he do when he found out?"

"Yes! He was so surprised, nya..." Eris continues to tell me about it while I listen and also pay attention to the auctioneer and wait for the items I wanted. I think they should be numbers 113 and 189.

"Going once, going twice...the item was sold for five Heart Stones!" the auctioneer shouts.

One Heart Stone is worth around 5 thousand dollars, so the prices are slowly but surely going up, the items are also auctioned in order from cheapest to the most expensive.

"First underling!" Eris grabs my shoulders and shakes me slightly.

"Yes, boss?" I ask absentmindedly while watching some weird book being auctioned off.

"Who are the humans with you? Are they your underlings?"

Now that I think about it, I'm the guild master, am I not? So probably?

"I think so." I answer her.

"I see, that means they are my underlings too since I'm your boss!" she declares.

I mean, she is not wrong, and there is some logic in it, and I just nod, which makes her laugh happily, and she jumps from my legs to examine her newest targets. For the following few minutes, I observe as she bullies Tess, who just goes with it in a similar way I do, and then switches to Lily and Hadwin, who are less successful.

Before coming back, she plops on the ground and pets Biscuit, who patiently lets her.

Unlike other lynthari, she doesn't seem to dislike him. "Cute," she says.

At that moment, I start liking her a bit more. At least she is someone who can recognize the majesty of the divine beast that is Biscuit.

"I will buy him from you," she immediately says something that sours my mood.

"Biscuit is not for sale," I tell her without hesitation, and a surprised look appears on her face.

"One Eclipse Stone," she says.

Ha! Does she think Biscuit is worth...I quickly remember the worth of the mana stone...only worth one million dol...what?

She misunderstands my expression and quickly says again, "Ten Eclipse Stones!"

"Boss, I've never been so insulted in my life and neither has Biscuit," I say, curious how high I can get the price.

"Fifty Eclipse Stones!" she offers a price that is higher than two epic items.

Just how spoiled is she to be given so much by her granny?

But she confirmed to me that Biscuit is worth more than some random items, and now I can say "I told you so" to Tess who kept disagreeing with me when I joked with her about it.

"Sorry, boss, he is my friend and not for sale," I refuse the offer.

That seems to surprise the family member of the most powerful person in the city, but she doesn't push it and plops back on my legs. "I see!"

Her mood changes and also the tone of her voice is a bit off.

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So that's how it is.

I lean closer to her ear, "I also wouldn't sell the boss for any amount of mana stones," I tell her.

She doesn't say anything, but hearing what she wanted to hear, she starts swinging her legs and continues to watch the auction.

Ha! Kids are easy to deal with!

POV Aaron Dalton

I look at Kim and Maya and only then turn my card around.

“Oh, come on!” Maya groans and pulls more mana stones from her pouch, sliding them to me.

(Well, that was easy,) I receive from Dennis.

“Hey! No cheating!” Maya notices it somehow.

Damn, she couldn't sense our conversation before. Is Nathaniel teaching her more annoying stuff?

“It's something we got too used to, Maya,” Dennis defends us, “We did not cheat, I swear.”

“You better not,” she squints her eyes and then just leans back on the couch. “This was the last round for me.”

“Are you going to play that violin thing you bought?” Kim asks her the moment she does so.

At that, she smiles at him, and Kim even blushes a bit under her gaze, and she notices that, making her smile even more, “Come on, Kim, you can't blush so easily. You won't get Tess like that!” she pokes him jokingly.

“Isn't he already a lost cause?” Dennis asks her, “Tess seems to be going a different... way?”

“Oh? Do you think that? But that's not true. I don't think Tess cares if it's a woman or man.”

(Oh, that's spicy, isn't it?) I send to Dennis, and Maya notices that but doesn't do anything.

Meanwhile, Kim only innocently stares at her and slowly understands, blushing a bit more and his eyes big from surprise.

“Damn, it's almost cute how innocent you are sometimes, Kim,” Maya reaches and pinches his cheek while smiling at him.

After seeing that Kim doesn't say anything else, she just sighs, “Anyway, there's something else I wanted to ask you guys. But did you also realize how different Nathaniel is from the first floor?”

“You may have forgotten our holidays under the old capital,” I tell her, and through our link, I feel that even Dennis shudders.

“That's not what I'm talking about. I know Nathaniel is quite ruthless if someone steps over the line. What I meant is overall. He seems... less harsh overall.”

“It can be caused only by a woman,” I say.

“Do you think Lily finally got her fangs into him? She is an Initiate of Lust, so probably?” while taking a sip of his drink, Dennis smiles.

“You and your theory about her subclass; Nat sees Lily as nothing more than a kid. The way he treats her is similar to how he treats Izzy,” Maya sighs, “I mean, he is still scary when he wants to be, but it's harder and harder to call him an asshole,” while shaking her head, she reaches and steals some snack from the bowl in front of Kim.

“I think it's simple,” Kim says in a somewhat somber tone, “Nathaniel is someone that is nicer the stronger he is.” The way he says it is really confident.

(Should we make fun of him?)

(We can a bit later, let him cook.) I send back.

Seeing that we don't react, Kim continues, "Nathaniel acts harshly only in a few cases. If he feels threatened or if someone threatens someone he likes," he shrugs his shoulders, "During the 1st floor, it was really scary, and we didn't know what to expect, and there were monsters all around. Nat also wasn't that strong, so he was a bit cruel at times."

As always, there are a few orbs made of weird metal floating near him. Kim does this almost constantly and practices even as we play.

"But the stronger Nat became, the less of a threat we were to him, and the more confident he was with his powers, so he kind of calmed down."

(Oi, that somehow makes sense.)

(Shh, listen to him.)

"Right now, we are almost no threat to him, so he acts nicer. Of course, if we betray him, it will change." Kim shrugs, "I thought about it a lot, you know? I was really scared of Nathaniel for some time, but then I slowly realized how it works."

Kim smiles a bit and shakes his head while looking at his hands, "Nathaniel is someone who becomes nicer the stronger he is. Because that's when he thinks you can't hurt him."

I swear, when I become stronger, I will bully the entire lynthari population into oblivion. I will force them to use 'nya' at the end of every sentence, and skills that allow invisibility will not be tolerated, and their usage will be punished. While at it, I will order them to annihilate every single monster with such an ability.

Oh, and calling me "feral one" will not be allowed either.

The reason?

The goddamn bidding stone item in my hands. I tried to bid on one of the items, and not knowing how to use it properly, I bid one Eclipse Mana Stone. Yup. I bid one million dollars' worth on an item maybe worth fifty thousand.

"Calling once, calling twice..." the auctioneer quickly shouts, even his eyes showing his surprise.

What annoys me are the giggles of lynthari who even know who did the bid and stare towards our balcony, not even caring that I'm here with the granddaughter of their matriarch or that I'm something Champion candidate Myrra cares about.

No, they giggle, smile, cover their mouths, and their ears and tails move in an amused manner. Some even shout "Cute!" at my reaction to my blunder.

"Oh, you are quite rich, underling!" Eris is not helping this either, and what's left is to act like it's all according to plan.

"Yeah, I didn't want it to take that long," I say simply, trying to keep what is left of my dignity.

"Sold to the rich young man with black hair and unusual eyes!" the auctioneer shouts, even giving my description.

Okay, dude, you're the next.

"The next item is the rarest consumable on our list..." The man on the podium lets his voice sound into the room, the last words quieter than a whisper.

Once again, all of the attention turns to him.

"We would usually auction it later in between one of the last items, but why don't we spice things up?" he smiles and steps to the side, allowing a big glass box to be brought next to him.

Inside that box, a chunk of meat as big as the auctioneer lies. I could swear that even through the glass, I can smell the aroma of it.

“This, my dear guests, is the oldest piece of meat that we ever had a chance to auction off.”

A few people start to whisper with excitement.

I'm not that surprised; old meat is quite a delicacy here, the older, the better. Obviously, it's not every meat that is capable of keeping such worth. No, only the meat of high-leveled animals or monsters is either resistant enough because of a high constitution or high mana that remains in it.

Meat of such a monster can be hundreds of years old and if stored properly, it's safe to consume it. Not even mentioning its often delicate taste or rarity that makes the right people want to get it just to show off.

“An estimate is two hundred twenty-nine years old,” he says, pausing, knowing his audience, and as he predicted, people talk even more, “Estimation on the level of the animal is close to two hundred fifty!” the volume of his voice increases, “As for the animal it belonged to, it's believed to be the Archdeer that our Matriarch personally helped to slay!”

Chapter 240: Preparation to hunt the Calamity

Did he just say deer? Archdeer? Oh my, surely nothing wrong will happen if I buy it? I can't strengthen Bambi's curse, and I'm sure Biscuit would like that piece of meat a lot.

“We have the first offer, one Star Stone!” the auctioneer shouts. “Surely we won't end up at one only!”

One Star Stone is worth around 100 thousand dollars.

“Two Star Stones from an older gentleman in the audience!”

“Three Star Stones from a beautiful lady in a red dress on the balcony!”

The price quickly climbs higher and higher. “We have a Sun Stone from a young Lynthari gentleman!”

Half a mil, damn, they might be bigger foodies than Biscuit. But it doesn't matter; that piece of meat is mine. For a moment, I imagine Biscuit's thankful shouts and him impatiently tippy-tapping while waiting for the meat.

"What do you think, Biscuit?" I move Eris a bit to the side and look at the corgi nestling by my leg.

(Sustenance,) he says, and there is a hint of determination in his eyes.

If I don't buy this meat, he will go and get it himself.

(I require sustenance,) sounds in my head, but this time it's different. The voice is quieter, like a gentle whisper, and I feel goosebumps all over my skin.

When I look at Biscuit, I notice that his eyes are glowing slightly in a pale purple color.

"Leave it up to me!" I tell him quickly and send a signal through the bidding stone.

"Oh! We've got two Eclipse Stones from a young gentleman with pretty eyes!" the auctioneer calls attention to me, and I just nod.

Damn, how does this thing work? I wanted to bid only one Eclipse Stone.

After a few moments of silence, the auctioneer shouts, "Calling once, calling twice?"

The silence that fills the room makes a few more people look towards me, and they also notice Eris sitting on my lap. Her strikingly red hair and blue eyes.

Now that I think about it, rich or powerful people probably recognize her as the Matriarch's granddaughter. Does it mean it might make them scared to bid against someone who is in such a good relationship with her? Am I indirectly bullying them?

“Good job, boss!” I whisper to Eris.

The young Lynthari clearly doesn't know what she did, but she nods and smiles, lifting her nose a bit higher.

“Sold for two Eclipse Stones to the young man!” the auctioneer finally ends the bidding, and his eyes meet mine for a moment.

The auction afterward is quite boring.

Eris buys me some weird mana stone that she says has a similar color to her eyes, and in exchange, I buy her some ancient toy based on mana that helps to improve control.

Obelia bids a few times and buys some nice items for either herself or her guild.

Tess and Hadwin also point me to buy a few high-rare items that can be spread to our group members, some mana batteries, and other stuff.

Buying all of it barely makes a dent in the amount of money we hold, so I just keep buying and buying, as we end up with two dozen items. That brings some attention to us, but at this point, I'm not that worried. The only person that I found could threaten me is the Matriarch, and maybe a few more Lynthari. And Calamities, of course. Otherwise, there isn't much to threaten my life here on the 4th floor.

As the night progresses, Eris leaves to play with someone else, and I notice Tess joking with Obelia and Jenna, while Hadwin sometimes joins in.

I spend my time continuing Mana Cycling, which I do constantly, and observing people on balconies, with some showing interest in me. Mostly, it's simple to guess from their gaze what they want. Most of them just straight up want a good relationship with someone rich, others looking for a connection to Eris and the Matriarch, some recognizing me as the guild master of Angry Kittens, which is now one of the five big guilds thanks to its fighting power and not the size of the guild.

I just straight up ignore them, and when they reach out to me with their mana, I obliterate it, often doing so in a way that will sting them a bit.

“This crest is something we were unable to identify nor even scratch! It's made of a material that reminds of wood, but it's extremely heavy!” sounds from the podium.

That makes me curious again, and I look at the auctioneer, and the item inside the glass box reminds me of something. I didn't notice it while checking the other items sent to auction, so did they just add it, or did I miss it while trying to avoid people? The material seems to be the same as the extremely heavy chest we got from the Champion's house and were unable to open it, no matter what we tried.

The bids start at a Sun Stone, and I bid a few times until I win, ending up paying three Eclipse Stones and one Sun Stone.

“The next item is something extremely exciting; we are getting to the last ten items!”

The lighting changes, and the fake night sky on the ceiling as well, with stars disappearing and being replaced by soft, aurora-like blue lights that mix with white ones.

“Allow me to show you this extremely precious mana stone inscribed by the rising star of Virelia, someone said to be even more talented than Mister Elydor when it comes to inscribing!”

The stone they put out, I know very well; I inscribed it just a few days ago.

“The master inscriber's identity is a secret, but the skill is real, as confirmed by the Craft guild multiple times. I do not dare to be able to say what the stone contains, but our experts told me that they have never seen anything like it, and the Craft guild master confirmed it as well. Simply, the ones that know understand how valuable it is, and the rest of us can only look at it with amazement!” he opens up both of his arms and lights spark off under the glass box, allowing the stone inside to be seen better.

“The starting price is three Eclipse Stones!”

I watch as the price climbs higher and higher. There are even a few Lynthari bidding and plenty of older men similar to the inscriber that is helping me.

At some point, they get outbid by Lynthari, so they group together and probably join their money to continue bidding.

“...once, twice, sold for 7 Eclipse Stones, one Sun Stone, and three Star Stones!”

The final amount is \$7,800,000.

Easiest money of my life.

I bid on a few items from the top 10: a shield for Haddy, light armor for Maya, a lump of heavy and extremely conductive metal for Kim, a weird set of bracelets for the twins.

“Finally, the main course of tonight! A mid-epic item we have received from Storm Brigade, one of only 5 big guilds of Virelia!”

The tension can be felt in the air as they bring the weapon to the middle of the room, the glass box around it densely covered in inscriptions and housing a beautiful spear made from a single piece of metal-like material.

It's as long as the man auctioning it and gray of color, with a blade inscribed with pale blue symbols. The weapon is beautiful yet deadly, and that also makes me wonder, is the Ethercrystal shortsword also a mid-epic item, or is it of low rarity?

“Starting price is ten Eclipse Stones!” the moment the auctioneer shouts that, I can hear people sigh, and bids come flying.

“Eleven Eclipse Stones from the lady in a red dress, twelve from a young man in a pink suit!”

The bids keep flying.

"Fifteen from a young Lynthari master with a beautiful gray tail!"

And climbing.

"Twenty Eclipse Stones from a Lynthari lady with pretty orange eyes!"

"We should be able to buy it, right?" Tess moves closer to me.

She is not even trying to hide the hint of greed in her eyes.

"Did Obelia let you check the spear before she put it into the auction?" I ask.

Tess nods, "It's amazing, Nat. I want it."

"No problem," I tell her.

I'm rich.

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"Thirty Eclipse Stones from a young man with beautiful eyes," the auctioneer gets out of himself, and even the whispers stop, with dozens, hundreds of eyes turning to me.

"Thirty-one Eclipse Stones from a lynthari gentleman in a black suit!" he shouts again, getting another signal.

So I send one as well.

“Forty... FORTY Eclipse Stones from a crazy... from a handsome young man with pretty eyes!” he shouts.

I heard it, you asshole.

After that, there is nothing, just silence.

“Calling once, calling twice, calling thrice... sold to the rich young man!”

As if on cue, everyone starts talking, and I turn to Obelia, remembering that I bought it from her.

She is trying to hide it, but even I can see her surprised expression, and it's so funny that I remember it. I can laugh at it a bit later.

When I check the card, we still have close to 100 Eclipse Stones on it, even when I count the ones from the sale of my mana stone.

How do I even spend it all?

The way back home is refreshing. It's still dark outside, and I breathe in the colder night air as we slowly walk there. Most of the things we were unable to carry were already sent to our house with plenty of guards, and Hadwin went with them.

Me, Tess, and Lily just slowly walk. Tess is happily holding her spear, and the smile can't disappear from her face.

Gravitas Javelin (epic): Crafted from a metal known for its ability to alter its mass, this spear can be as light as a feather or extremely heavy based on the wielder's intent. Its dark gray surface is unmarked by battle, always appearing as pristine as when first forged.

That reminds me that we still didn't decide what we will do with the epic bow we got from the Arcane Archer. Seeing how many epic items we have and remembering how some people from the community complain about how hard they are to get makes me feel cozy inside.

I wonder how difficult it is to get epic items on Hard difficulty and if it's even possible on Easy and Normal. I will have to ask during the tournament.

"So now the tree?" Lily joins me, leaving Tess slightly behind us.

I nod, "Yes, the tree. In a few days, and we will be ready."

"You still won't change your mind? I would be helpful."

"I told you before. We either kill it in one hit or bail; there will be no fighting, no healing," I resolutely tell her, and she probably sees it and doesn't try to change my mind.

The plan is simple, and only a few people will go. Me, Obelia to get us there, Myrra and her bodyguard, Hadwin, and a few of Obelia's members that are good at enchanting or disrupting mana.

A few days pass. We split the items, we eat a few pieces of Archdeer meat, and as expected, Biscuit is extremely thankful and keeps letting me boop his nose without doing anything to fight them.

He doesn't even shout 'Bitch' every time someone mentions Obelia, nor use his creepy mana arms.

We spend a few evenings eating pieces of Archdeer meat that Hadwin grills, cooks, or tries to smoke. Everyone seems to like it and they start liking it even more when they hear how much did it cost.

They enjoy the company of each other. Something very different from the 1st Floor.

Izzy seems a bit off, different from before, now without her sister's skill affecting her. She is a bit shy, but she didn't change. It's still the same Izzy we know, even though she's a bit less brave at times.

I think Sophie might have removed or weakened some of the memories that could traumatize the little girl, but I can't confirm it, nor do I want to stick my nose into this. It's something the sisters both agreed on and did together, so it's up to them.

At first, Sophie seemed worried that her sister might hate her, but the moment the little girl hugged her after a day of removing the [Geas], Sophie started smiling again and kept apologizing to her sister.

I also examined most of the items we got from the auction and stored most of them in the room under the house for further study in the future.

The chest didn't open even with a piece of weird heavy wood we got during the auction, but Min-Jae said he felt something with his skill, so I leave it up to him. I swear I will open this chest no matter what or destroy it in the process.

A bit later, in the room under our house, I finally decide to finish creating the Tree Obliterator 9000.

The man named Cael, an older enchanter whom I met one night and who helped me with inscriptions, is here with me. He is here just to observe the process as promised, something he judged to be well worth the help he gave me.

I clear my mind and look at the items in front of me, I've gone over it multiple times and know how it should go, so I do not hesitate and consolidate my [Focus].

First, I take the Ethercrystal Shortsword and put it into a densely inscribed, mana conductive holder. The thing reminds me of the shaft of a spear and it connects to the sword by holding its handle. It fits perfectly, and when I activate the inscriptions we made, it almost seems as if it connects with the sword, holding it strongly.

I activate set after set of inscriptions, all of them in preparation for the next step and to work together with the epic weapon.

It takes hours and a lot of mana, but soon I'm ready and into the slot that we prepared, I put the Mana Core Sphere, my other epic item that can disrupt mana and leave a lasting disruptive attack.

The core perfectly fits in, and another set of inscriptions secures it inside.

So there it lies, a long shaft made of silver metal with its entire surface covered in inscriptions, and the epic sword as its blade. Near where the handle of the sword is imbued, there is also the Mana Core Sphere.

"Now, onto the hardest step," Cael smiles, his eyes shining as he observes the process, careful not to interrupt me.

Huh, I almost forgot he was here.

I shake my head and after a few deep breaths, I close my eyes, and [Infusion], [Redistribution], and [Mana Manipulation] all activate and I get to it.

It's time to connect them and change the inscriptions on the epic items ever so slightly. For that, a lot of mana is required, so I force my skills into overdrive.

[Redistribution - lvl 38 > Redistribution - lvl 39]

[Infusion - lvl 13 > Infusion - lvl 14]

[Infusion - lvl 14 > Infusion - lvl 15]

When this step is done, I use [Resonance] to inscribe circuits into the handle of the sword, connecting all three parts in front of me together with a web of circuits.

The weapon, handle, and sphere, are all interwoven together, the shaft connecting two epic items and forcing them to work together.

[Resonance - lvl 31 > Resonance - lvl 32]

[Resonance - lvl 32 > Resonance - lvl 33]

I take a step back and give myself a moment to calm down and to get back to the real world. My mana has taken a noticeable bite into it, and I even used some from the reservoir, actually, quite a lot of it.

It means we will have to wait a few days longer before hunting the tree, just so it can be restored, and so I can create a few orbs, just in case. And fill batteries... yeah, I need to let Obelia and Myrra know.

Finally, I take a look at my creation.

Ethercore Javelin (epic): Javelin that combines the Ethercrystal Shortsword and Mana Core Sphere, connected by an Arcanadium shaft intricately modified for enhanced mana flux. The Ethercrystal blade rapidly absorbs mana, funneling it into the Mana Core Sphere, which has been altered to continuously change the frequency of its emitted disruptive field, affecting a single target. These constant frequency shifts make the field unpredictable and highly effective against a wide range of magical defenses.

The weapon in front of me is the strongest epic item I've seen, surely upper epic without a speck of doubt.

I step back and let Cael examine the item. He looks just like a kid getting a new toy and doesn't ask anything. Instead, being the craftsman he is, he wants first to examine it all by himself without asking questions.

Now then, I wonder how big the disruptive field will be with all the mana the tree possesses.

And I wonder what will happen when the weapon disrupts its mana flow and how much it will destabilize the integrity of the tree that surely uses some mana just to stop itself from crumbling due to its sheer size.

It takes a few days longer, but we are ready and standing in front of the array.

"So, for the last time," I turn to the group in front of me, "We get there and everyone will use their disruptive skills to block our presence and other fields as well."

That's why I'm taking Hadwin with me.

“After that, we will get a bit further and set the circle where I can collect my mana and prepare the attack, all while you block it all so the tree can't sense us. Meanwhile, Obelia and a few of her members will keep the array running so we can use it in case anything suspicious happens.”

Myrra is also quiet, but she and her bodyguard are both fully prepared. They have plenty of powerful items, and I have a suspicion that one or two might be epic. She will go there mostly as an observer, and the amount of trust she puts in my plan is almost scary.

She truly is a weirdo.

Well, the one facing the most danger will be me; if the tree senses me preparing my attack, it might defend itself or attack me as well while others use the array. That would be unfortunate.

“All ready,” Obelia says, and I nod.

We went over the plan over and over again and even practiced the formations so there is no need to hesitate anymore.

It will work.

After one more check, all of us step in. The air feels heavy, as well as my body. My heart is beating wildly, and I can hear the breathing of some members of this expedition. Shaking hands, nervous glances, squeezing hems of their cloaks, last checks, and attempts at carefully controlling their mana.

We are going against the Calamity, a being that years ago wiped out the old capital on its own before it got weakened.

The light flashes, and the feeling of falling hits me but quickly disappears as we get transported through the array.

Immediately Obelia gives orders, “Quick, the fields.” She is whispering, even when she doesn't have a reason to do so.

I notice that her voice is shaking.

Multiple fields pop up around us, and I join in as we step outside. I carefully move my mana as we layer disruptive fields around us to avoid detection. We even avoid looking at the Tree as it could detect that.

It takes a few seconds and everything goes smoothly, just as we practiced, and I feel my confidence growing.

Then it all comes crashing down when I hear Myrra, “Oh no,” she says, and her tail is frozen, not moving at all.

I break the rule we set and follow her gaze towards the old capital, and then I understand the tone of her voice.

Gradually, more of us notice, and eventually, everyone is staring towards the direction of the old capital.

The Calamity called the Living Tree is gone.

Its colossal shadow doesn't tower over the city anymore.