

Tutorial 241

Chapter 241: We were wrong

“We are leaving, right now!” For the first time, I hear extreme urgency in Myrra's voice, and she even grabs the item from Obelia's hand, and uses it to charge and activate the array after throwing a few mana stones on the ground.

While they are preparing to leave, I send a pulse of [Perception] towards the city in a thin cone instead of a field that surrounds me.

I detect a few items all over the city, but the tree is gone. I can't see as well as Tess, but there is a crater in its place, and the buildings around it are not destroyed. It seems like the tree flew or teleported?

My eyes immediately turn to the sky, and a few more members of the expedition look at it as well, coming to the same conclusion. Skill after skill activates, trying to detect the tree, and Myrra even uses her mana to activate the array faster.

“Ready!” Myrra shouts, and all of us step back into the circle.

Looking at the capital one last time, we teleport and reappear back in the array near Virelia.

“Obelia, feral one, you are coming with me. We need to see the Matriarch, right now,” Myrra orders, and this time she doesn't joke nor ask.

But this time I'm not even angry and am inclined to do as she says.

Unfortunately, there is something that doesn't allow me to do that. Hundreds, thousands of signatures of monsters are all around Virelia, some of them even inside the city.

Ant signatures.

“How... HOW! They were weeks away!” one of Obelia's guild members shouts.

“With me, we go to the Matriarch,” Myrra orders again, and when I do not move, she looks at me, “Feral one?”

“I will check on my group first,” I tell her simply, my mana slowly radiating from my body, and kinetic energy collecting inside me.

Myrra hisses in annoyance and rushes towards the city without saying anything else, closely followed by Obelia.

“Be careful on your way back,” I tell Hadwin, and he nods in agreement.

Then, I use the kinetic energy I collected in an orb to push myself ahead with speed much faster than ever before. The nature around me turns into a blur, and the city becomes bigger and bigger, and I even pass by Myrra and Obelia. Yet I use more and more, a bad feeling I'm having not wanting to leave me, and when I notice especially a lot of ants on the hill.

On the street where our house is.

[Focus]

When I get close, I find the house nearly destroyed, and members of our group are fighting ants that are much smaller than before. Barely as big as a horse, yet they are much faster, and the barrier that resonates on their skin seems to disrupt mana attacks.

I land in the middle of what used to be our house and absorb the inertia of my fall, not even cracking the ground under my feet.

The first ant rushes me, and kinetic energy changes its frequency, turning into a high pitch, and the ant's head explodes.

[You have defeated Weaver Ant - lvl 189]

The moment I do it, some link creates between all the remaining ants, and when I use kinetic energy on another, the ant endures. All hundred or so remaining ants somehow shared the damage I did to one of them, distributing it among all of them.

Instead of attacking again, I let [Regalia] form all around my body to absorb its attacks. Then, I scan the area again, confirming what I noticed the moment I arrived.

Sophie, Dennis, and Aaron are not here. I can't feel their presences no matter how far I reach. That can mean only two things. They are either dead or they are beyond my detection range.

The ant bites at me again, and I clench my teeth; [Redistribution] slows it to a crawl, not allowing it to move. Then, I reach for one of the orbs I prepared for the Living Tree and send kinetic energy towards the monster. It's shared, so there is no damage, but I push more and more. The stronger and stronger attack and the high-pitched noise become more audible.

The air seems to wave and twist, and a crack appears on the ant's carapace.

One more push, and all hundred or so ants explode into pieces.

[You have defeated Weaver Ant - lvl 173]

[You have defeated Weaver Ant - lvl 179]

[You have defeated Weaver Ant - lvl 199]

[Lvl 183 > Lvl 184]

[You have defeated Weaver Ant - lvl 161]

Ignoring the rest of the notifications, I check on Maya. She is fine, fighting two gravity ants, surrounded by her [Armament] and not seeming to have trouble with them.

Min-Jae fights too, his telekinesis moving around the chest we got from the Champion's house and using its immense weight to smash the monsters, even increasing its weight with his [Gravity Well]. Biscuit is next to him, using his Tentacles to stop any ant that gets close.

On the other side, Lily shoots arrows made of [Disintegration], using the epic bow we got, and each attack obliterates the monster, no matter its level.

I boost myself and reach Tess and Isabella, who are fighting further away, surrounded by a dozen ants.

Isabella's fire doesn't seem to work on them, and I can feel that she is losing control over it, frustrated by it, and especially by something else. Tears are in her eyes and she seems scared, worried.

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There is a [Stormcrown] over Tess's head, and each of her attacks does terrifying damage to the monsters, and her epic spear keeps hitting more of them, always in perfect timing to help everyone.

The city is burning, and I can hear screams from everywhere, but it's weird too. There are too few ants; there should be tens, hundreds of thousands of them.

I quickly help Tess deal with the ants and glance at Izzy, who stops moving, and even more tears appear in her eyes.

Tess stops in front of me, "We were wrong, Nat, the ants never were after you or Virelia. They were after Sophie and the twins," she explains quickly, "They attacked the moment you guys went to the Living Tree, just a few minutes ago."

After dealing with their monsters, others join us too.

"Where did they take them?" I ask Tess.

"They used something like an array, I'm not sure..."

The same as me, she must know that they probably took them back to the colony and whatever they plan to do is not nice.

I turn to Izzy to say something but then hesitate. What can I even tell her? Saving them seems impossible. We could be throwing our lives away if we went there.

“Nat, I want to save them,” Tess says simply from behind me. She doesn't hesitate. Her eyes are clear when I turn to her. She knows going into the middle of the Colony could mean death, yet she is willing to do so.

How? Why? She barely knows them. Not even a year. Isn't her life more important?

Her voice becomes softer, “I'd rather do this than constantly regret not even trying to help them for the rest of my life.” The lightning stops flickering around her, and she takes a step closer. “I was always serious about all of us becoming friends and not even once did I lie. This is the decision I made.” She says, [Declaration] activating for a moment, making everyone feel her will.

I barely know them, Sophie did hurt me before, and the twins still dislike me, so why do I also want to help them? That's so dumb.

With a sigh, I take a step towards Izzy, who is already sobbing, “Sophie used her skill on me, forced me to run away,” the little girl cries. “They wanted to take me too. I could feel it. They want us, people with skills like ours,” the air around her gradually heating up, and everyone else takes a step back, unable to endure the heat.

I start absorbing it and take another step towards her.

“She promised never to use her skill on me, yet she did. She said to find you and stay safe near you,” Isabella looks at me with cheeks wet from tears that immediately evaporate as she releases more heat.

“We will save them for sure,” I tell her.

"You're lying. I can tell," the little kid shakes her head, "I can tell that you still don't like Sophie. You don't hate her anymore, but you don't like her because she did what she did."

"Yes, I can't help it," I admit.

Her flames start to melt the ground we stand on, pushing others back. Brilliant blue flames make iron glow bright and melt the stones.

"Don't come closer!" Isabella shouts, and her flames explode, pushing me back a bit before I absorb them and take another step toward her. Our eyes meet, "They want to do such terrible things to her, and I want to help, but I can't! Sophie's skill doesn't allow me to follow her!"

Isabella expends more and more of her mana, trying to force me away. She is crying but still using her [Empathy] on me. She is scared, and frustrated.

She is just a kid.

Before she hurts herself by using too much mana, I take the last step and kneel in front of her so our eyes meet. Then, I stop absorbing her flames and only strengthen my body a bit, circulating more heat inside to activate my passive healing.

Immediately, burns start appearing on my face and body.

Reading my feelings, she shouts shortly and her flames strengthen even more, burning my skin and revealing flesh underneath, "Don't..." she whispers.

Then, I disable my [Focus] and let her feel everything. All my fears, my anxiety, my past trauma, and all these feelings I like to push to the back of my mind, "I will help Sophie, Dennis, and Aaron. I myself don't know fully why and would be unable to express it. So just feel it yourself," I reach with my hand and touch her cheeks, still constantly burned by blue flames, "A simple answer would be that I consider you my friend, I think." The small smile that appears on my face just comes up on its own, and I don't even have to force it.

With a sob, all of her flames disappear, and she hugs me tightly, and I can feel her small body shake in my arms, "You won't take me with you to save her," Isabella sobs.

"No, I won't."

"You won't do it in case she will be..."

"Yes," I caress the back of her head, "But Izzy, check the Community, the number didn't decrease, meaning she, Aaron, and Dennis are alive."

I feel her body freeze, and the relief she must be feeling is clearly noticeable, "Do you promise you will save her?"

"I can't do that. I don't know what to expect, but Izzy, I will try. I will try really hard."

The last sob sounds from her. "That's enough."

Then I send a weak pulse of [Resonance] to her head, making her pass out.

When I stand up with her in my hands, I feel my body screaming to move, to run, but I can't. Even a small mistake I make could mean their death.

I pass by a few people and stop in front of Biscuit, who looks at me from the ground.

This time, I'm serious and don't use the tone I usually use with Biscuit. Right now, I talk to him in a way I would talk to anyone else from group 4, "Will you protect them while I'm gone?" Just a simple question.

Biscuit's tail doesn't swing at all, and the look in his eyes changes. The usual cheekiness is gone, and they are calm and firm. Instead of answering me, mana starts radiating from him. The one that feels extremely disturbing, and his eyes gain a soft purple glow. Even his shadow on the ground grows until it's dozens of times bigger. Biscuit is strong, stronger than he lets show, but even this is only a hint at his potential. The same as us, he also needs to grow.

(Friend?) he asks.

“Yes, I consider you a friend too,” I say to him.

(Friend,) he repeats and hovers into the air, his right front paw bumping my nose and I do the same.

With this, I turn around and put Izzy into Hadwin’s hands. The older man just arrived, and there is a surprised expression on his face, “They will explain everything to you,” I tell him, and then turn around, “Tess, Lily, will you join me?” I ask them to risk their life, to go into the heart of the enemy forces.

“I would go even without you,” Tess says.

“I will help,” Lily nods.

Neither of them hesitates.

“Biscuit, Hadwin, Min-Jae, Maya, please take care of Izzy.” I pause. “There might be a traitor, so be careful. The Living Tree is gone, it disappeared, so expect anything.”

I quickly explain the rest of it to them and then put Lily on my back, push us high in the air, and boost us towards the middle of the city. Tess similarly follows us, lightning trailing her body.

Chapter 242: Eris

We reach the area with flooring that is impossible to destroy, and most of the important people are already around there. There are even a dozen lynthari wearing the same black armor, each of them around level 200. Unlike most of the lynthari we met until now, they are calm and serious.

“How is it, Myrra?” I catch her to the side.

“Oh, this? This is nothing. Even if a hundred times more ants attacked, we would be fine, feral one, and soon all of them will be dealt with. We just don’t know what the intention was. Whatever it is, this

means war.” Myrra is also wearing beautiful armor that I immediately identify as epic equipment, most likely mid-grade.

It's multiple pieces of armor that seem to be tailored for her, and she must have been wearing it under her clothes even as we went against the Living Tree.

“And the tree?” I ask.

“Soon, we will send scouts there. They will use arrays all around the old capital and some that are even further, and try to find out where it is. Meanwhile, we did send more to all sides from Virelia, in case the calamity heads here.”

Her tail twitches, and even while talking to me, she listens to other people and lynthari talking a bit further from us, “I will be leading our enforcers,” she gestures at the group of twelve lynthari warriors, all in black armor, “Obelia, Isola will be coming too, and even other two of the five guilds will send some elites while we keep some powers here. You are coming too?”

“Yes, me, Tess, and Lily.”

“I see, it's good to have a healer with us. Thalen is too important, so he will stay in the city.”

“Nathaniel Gwyn, can I have a moment of your time?” I hear a soft voice next to me and when I look, the matriarch stands there.

No one else seems to be able to see her, no matter if lynthari or human.

Out of nowhere expression on Myrra's face changes and she leaves in the middle of the sentence to talk to other humans, the same other lynthari that unknowingly create a circle with me and the matriarch in the middle, yet no one seems to see us or realize it.

“You knew why the ants were coming to Virela,” I immediately throw at her.

There is no smile on her face, but her canines show, "Why do you think so?"

"You are manipulating people and lynthari in the city. You hid all mentions about the possibility of mind manipulation; that's why we didn't find anything about it," they are all suspicions I came to over weeks and months, "And that's why you kept watching us ever since we came. You and the ants both, for some reason, want people with abilities similar to yours."

"You really are fun," she smiles, and I don't even notice how but she stands in front of me, her nails against my neck, moving over it.

A smile climbs onto her face, "The Colony has [Hive Mind] while my skill is [Kin Control]," she tilts her head and creates another scratch on my neck, "They don't enter my territory, and I don't poke theirs. But you and your guild ruined it. That black-haired woman with green eyes seems to have a really irresistible skill. I wanted to slowly examine it, but I underestimated how much the Colony wants it."

I reach to grab her hand, but my hand passes through the air, and she stands a bit further away from me.

"You know, even though me and the Colony have such skills that give us immense powers, we live in constant worry that someone with a stronger one comes and takes over the network we've built and destroys everyone connected to it," she says.

The ants never were after me; they sensed the use of Sophie's [Manipulation], the Twins' [Connection], and Isabella's [Empathy], all of them mind skills and similar to theirs. They most likely went after Biscuit, and I still remember the huge number of ant corpses around him. Yet, he didn't seem to be their priority, and neither did Isabella.

Not killing them means that they want to use them somehow, probably to deal with the Matriarch or have an advantage over her or straight up evolve [Hive Mind] to take over. The Matriarch probably wanted to do the same; she just didn't expect the ants to get there so secretly without her noticing.

"You want to either kill or get back my group members," I say.

"Yes, leaving them with the Colony is too dangerous. But can you guess why don't mind telling you all of it?"

"You are Eris, aren't you?"

The matriarch's smile broadens, her sharp canines coming into view.

"As expected from my underling," Eris, a redheaded lynthari child, materializes from the rift. She waves and smiles at me and then takes a step towards the Matriarch.

When they touch, a wave of mana covers their bodies, and the figure of the Matriarch grows while Eris disappears, both replaced by a lynthari who isn't as short as the Matriarch but even a bit taller than Myrra. She has the same red hair as the Matriarch and Eris and, instead of one tail, there are two fox-like ones.

"You did it just for fun, didn't you?" I ask.

"Yes," the voice now is a bit different from either of them, a skill that allowed the Matriarch to split her body into two, "You might not believe it, but I really like humans. That's why I made all these rules and that's why other lynthari like to observe you as well, affected by my personality."

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She is now much stronger than before. Her mana is wild and dangerous, her body bears tremendous strength, and each of her movements feels like those of an apex predator.

"Underling," she says, a word sounding weird when said by her, "I kept this," she shows me a toy I bought for her at the auction. "You still somewhat irritate me, but you are fun and nice in a weird way; you remind me of someone. It's silly, I know, but I like you treating me like a kid; it made me remember times when I was young."

Her eyes cloud for a moment, a memory flashing behind, "The times when nothing mattered, and I could just explore the world, laugh, and have fun without any responsibilities. I miss that."

She touches my shoulder, "Go and save your friends, and by doing that stop the Colony from evolving." Taking two steps back she looks at me questioningly.

"For me to do that, you will need to cancel your weird field... boss," I tell her.

A look of shock is quickly replaced by a bright, joyful smile on her face, "Make me proud, my dear underling," the field that made others unaware of her crumbles, and she says one more word, unfitting her majestic appearance, "nya."

Obelia leads, closely followed by Isola and a few more elites from the big guilds. A bit further, Myrra runs with twelve enforcers, and behind them, our small group of three.

We are heading towards the old mines and the array that leads to the heart of the colony and the lab where the Calamity was created to serve as a bioweapon during the war.

This floor is called Waning Realm, meaning a realm that used to be powerful but now is just a shadow of its glorious self; a realm defeated by invaders of lynthari, and in the war, both sides suffered terrible losses. Dead Absolutes and Champions, destroyed cities. Terrible Calamities used for the war, now all weakened in this waning world.

No matter how we look at it, the lynthari are invaders here, yet can they even blame the current generation that has no idea about that, with only Eris, the Matriarch, knowing about it?

It's for other people to deal with. For me, it doesn't matter, and I'm not a person to decide. And to be honest, I don't care. Right now, I just want my group members back, to fulfill the promise I gave to Izzy.

It doesn't take much longer, and we reach the mines and, moving as quickly as possible, we reach the door and then the room with the array.

Obelia and a few of her guild members quickly get to activate it, and I observe our group. A hundred or so lynthari and people. One of the strongest from Virelia, and even the array has to be changed a bit to allow transporting us all, and that's what they are doing.

A few lynthari work with Obelia and are using some items that even Obelia looks at with surprise.

I watch them work and wonder if that will be enough. Even though this is probably what Eris wanted to do ever since we found the array and where it leads. A quick and deadly force of elites sent to deal with the core of the Colony. A queen, a strong ant that leads them all. Whatever it is.

There must be someone like Eris, an ant that similarly controls the Colony through [Hive Mind]. An ant that got terrified by Sophie's [Manipulation], and now wants to use it to strengthen itself.

I turn to Tess, "Try to calm down; your mana is seeping out."

The expression she has is proof of her worry, and impatience. I'm sure she is constantly checking the number of members of our group in the Community, hoping it doesn't go down.

Instead of answering me, she only nods and clenches her teeth, and I can see her mana slowly calming down.

So, I check the gear I have with me. My newest epic weapon, the Tree Obliterator 9000, may not be very useful there, since it's designed to be effective against a single, larger target, and will take some time to activate. I also have a few mana batteries, the one I got from the Arcane Archer included, and an upper-grade rare armor I got from the auction. An orb filled with thermal energy floats near me, and I continue to fill it with more. My mana is full; my reservoir is full.

Tess's [Stormcrown] is also floating over her head, and she keeps storing Primordial lightning inside it. She has two epic items on her, the Abyssal Anchor and the spear we just bought not long ago.

Lily also has an epic bow with her, the one we got from the Arcane Archer, and multiple pieces of mid or upper-grade rare equipment.

As I try to move Lily reaches me and puts her hand on mine, "Nathaniel," she says and she puts the crown into my hand. The one we got from the 3rd floor.

Crown of Eternal Vigilance (Epic): This finely crafted crown used to be seamlessly linked to the Saint, but now bears an imperfect connection to a novice healer, enabling the wearer to receive healing powers from them.

After examining it I look at her. "Just in case," she says, her eyes determined.

"Miss Myrra, we are ready," Obelia stands up from the array and, taking a few steps, she hands an item used to activate it to Myrra. "They might detect us the moment we pass through, so we should immediately shield ourselves so they can't do it too accurately."

"Obelia, do you know why we didn't deal with the Colony as of now?" Myrra asks instead, putting the item away and fixing her armor.

Twelve lynthari elites, the enforcers, surround her, doing the same, and dozens of skills activate, strengthening their bodies, making their mana flow.

Every one of them is much more dangerous than Elydor, either at or way over Isola's level of strength, not only in pure level, but just sheer amount of experience and control over their skills.

After Obelia shakes her head, Myrra continues, "The Colony and even their leader aren't that strong or high-leveled. Their advantage is the insane numbers and cooperation they have through [Hive Mind]. Not even once were we able to push deep into their territory to be able to deal with their leadership, but now? We will get to the heart of their territory, kill their leader while preventing them from evolving, and then we will use this," she shows us a small sphere of brilliant blue light.

She continues, "This is a return sphere made by the Matriarch herself. It's only one way and it will create a rift to allow us to the place where the sphere was created, to Virelia."

Myrra puts the sphere under her armor, "We have one hour before the sphere dissipates under the spatial defenses the Colony did set up, so keep that in mind."

Enforcers step into the circle that is now increased in size, all sorts of effects sizzling on their skin, tails moving calmly, and ears perked up. Tall with great equipment that is just a step away from epic, they look imposing.

“One hour should be enough to have some fun,” Isola also steps inside the circle, seemingly not imposed by the lynthari. On her skin, tattoo-like circuits appear and start shining.

“Let's not waste more time,” I also step in, closely followed by Tess and Lily.

Following suit, the rest of our group gets in, and Myrra's eyes meet mine.

Then the array activates, and with the feeling of falling, the scenery around us changes.

Chapter 243: Obstacles

Using [Perception] in the darkness that surrounds us, I find us inside a single half-sphere-like shaped room.

That's when a few of the enforcers join their skills together and create some sort of domain that doesn't allow me to perceive further nor any mana to pass inside.

Myrra also sends something towards the edge of the domain and continues to carefully examine something, “I feel no skill trying to pass through the silencing field, we should be fine for now.”

Multiple skills and items light up the area.

Everything inside the room is broken, with pillars made of crystal-like white stone, flooring made of polished white wood-like material, things that used to be tables and multiple pieces of furniture.

There isn't even a hint of mana inside the room, and most of all, it reminds me of some kind of research laboratory, even though it's all covered in dust, rotting, and unusable.

“Locate the source,” Myrra orders, and with a bow, two enforcers start scanning the room, “Take these stones; they will point you towards where I and the return sphere are. The less time you have, the weaker glow they will emit,” Myrra hands a small mana stone to everyone in the group.

Unlike what I'm used to, she is serious, and there is a hint of dignity to her.

I wonder what her being a Champion candidate means, how she compares to Eris, the Lynthari Matriarch?

“Myrra, the ants took away a few of my guild members. Getting them back is my priority,” after creating a field around us, I tell her.

Intrigue shines in her eyes, and she nods slowly, “I smell her on you. Did you talk with the old woman?”

“I guess you mean the Matriarch?”

“Obviously, feral one,”

I nod, “She knows about it.”

“Then it's fine,” Myrra leaves my field and joins the enforcers.

Now it's nearly confirmed that even she doesn't know about the Matriarch being two beings at the same time. Before she complained about the Matriarch's granddaughter. Or maybe she knows and pretends not to. Who knows.

With a soft hum, the white crystal pillars around the room start emitting a gentle light.

The ceiling also changes a bit, generating flickering light for a few seconds before it turns on. On the floor, mana circuits also appear, creating circles around some places that now contain only broken apparatuses.

One of the enforcers most likely located what Myrra called the source, and it seems to be a weird stone imbued in one of the pillars. He sends more mana inside and then does something that turns the walls of the entire room transparent, allowing us to see outside.

The web of tunnels big enough for three bus-sized ants to pass through are all around us, the walls covered in colorful mushroom-like stuff, some of them even glowing softly.

Then there are ants, crawling through the tunnels at dizzying speeds, often on the ceiling or on the walls.

There are many more variants than I ever met. Smaller ones with giant jaws. Bigger ones with shiny carapaces and thin legs, extremely quick and smaller ants. There are even much smaller ones that climb on the bodies of bigger ants and get carried around.

“Being covert doesn’t seem to be an option, seeing how many of them are here,” Obelia says.

“Doesn’t that make it better?” Isola giggles, “It’s been long since I fought them.”

“We should first locate the queen or whatever leads them,” I say and take a step towards a suspicious group of circuits on the floor.

I send my mana towards them, and nothing happens.

“Nice catch, feral one,” Myrra says as she passes by me. “But this is safeguarded, and only lynthari can use it,” she then sends her mana to it.

The ceiling starts flickering again, and thousands of dots appear on it, dots of three colors.

Red for ants.

Green for lynthari.

Blue for human.

There is a big group of blue dots, and then there is a smaller one. Three blue dots surrounded by hundreds of red dots, some of them even bigger than the ones before.

The map on the ceiling then changes, something akin to zooming out, revealing thousands more dots.

It zooms out again. Tens of thousands more dots.

Again. Hundreds of thousands more red dots.

At this point, no one is talking.

"Seems about right," Isola mumbles, "fuck."

"They detected us," Myrra says simply, and the map zooms in one more time.

Thousands of dots are already moving towards us.

"Feral one, you are on your own," Myrra turns to me. "I wish you luck."

"Thanks, take care of yourself too," I answer her.

There are two places of interest on the map. The one with a few big red dots and three blue dots where I plan to go. One more with the biggest red dot where Myrra plans to go. Both of the places are far away from each other.

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We watch as the ants surround the sphere-like room we are in. Hundreds, thousands of bus-sized or other ants climbing all across the wall, attacking, yet unable to get inside.

“The moment we exit, we will be unable to get back inside of the room,” Myrra says the last thing and activates some sort of array.

That makes the walls around us flicker, and she and her group pass through it as if it’s not there, even though the ants are unable to enter.

Me, Tess, and Lily do the same and immediately find ourselves surrounded by monsters.

“Save your mana for now,” I say simply, and flames burst in front of me, setting the mushrooms and ants ablaze.

[You have defeated Worker Ant - lvl 56]

[You have defeated Worker Ant - lvl 50]

[You have defeated Worker Ant - lvl 75]

[You have defeated Worker Ant - lvl 101]

The ants around us are weaker than the ones I fought before, the stronger variants not here yet.

As the mushrooms start catching ablaze with more of my help, some of the ants even start running away while we continue to run towards where we saw three blue dots.

The entire time, I’m absorbing the heat from the fire I set, so even Tess and Lily are fairly comfortable.

Crawling with surprising speed, a dozen ants move across the ceiling, jumping down at us only for me to absorb their kinetic energy, their falling speed visibly slowing.

Before they even reach us, I use that absorbed energy to pierce holes through the heads of half of them and create a few more javelins to kill the remaining ones.

I use only as much mana as I need to kill the ants, never more. I observe their strength and adapt the output accordingly.

A few minutes in, another type of ant appears, the one with a bigger head and mandibles that open 180 degrees wide.

The ant is only as tall as me, yet feels much more threatening than some much bigger ones.

[Trapjaw Ant - lvl 203]

"Be careful," I say, and that's when the ant disappears, cracked ground left behind him.

He moves with a speed I'm almost unable to track and stops in front of me, his jaws shutting down, the sound of them piercing the air audible.

I started pushing myself back with a blast of kinetic energy even before he reached me, and now I watch as his jaws snap shut with thundering noise, the air vibrating.

Then the ant disappears again, standing back at the place where he appeared. Slowly his mandibles open to 180 degrees again. There is no mana radiating from the ant other than from his mandibles. What he just showed was done only with the sheer strength and speed of its body.

Before he can dash again, I shoot a dozen mana orbs at him that he swiftly dodges, and only then the ground under his legs cracks and he disappears.

[Redistribution] activates at full power as this time he passes by me and goes after Tess.

His movements are too quick and the strength behind them too immense, so the skill slows him down only a little, but Tess already expects him, lightning crackling around her. She jumps up in the air as the trapjaw ant's mandibles shut with a scary noise and immediately stabs with a spear she holds in her hand.

The ant avoids it, moving back to the place where he started. There he stops and his mouth starts opening again, preparing for another dash. That's when I activate an anchor I left there, and through the [Tether] I send a strong blast of kinetic energy there that explodes near the middle of his body, cutting him in half.

Yet the ant doesn't hesitate and dashes again, just half of the body with head and jaw, dashing using three legs only.

He is much slower than before, and before he reaches me, a javelin pierces his head, killing him, and his body slides to my feet with all the inertia it possesses.

[You have defeated Trapjaw ant - lvl 203]

My domain activates and as we continue and meet other Trapjaw ants, I immediately place an anchor near them, the ants unable to perceive it. Before they even charge, I send an attack through it, most of the time killing them before they even charge us.

Slowly, more of them start appearing, some of them even a bit bigger than us.

Lily and Tess already fight on their own, Lily somewhat awkwardly using a bow and shooting gray arrows made of a tiny bit of her mana. The arrows are deadly, piercing through anything they hit, and Lily mostly aims at bigger ants I slow down with my skills.

Tess quickly moves around, defending Lily when needed and killing smaller and quicker ants with her javelins that constantly float around her.

The closer we get to where the map leads, the more ants appear and the stronger the variations, and I have to spend more mana to counter their attacks.

Gravity ants try to slow us down, Flame Legion ants start fighting against the fire I set up, Sentinel ants with glowing symbols on their carapaces fight always in pairs.

Yet it's not a problem for me. I saw most of these variations and since then my skills and stats have improved a lot. I have an evolved Primary class now, I have two epic passives, and I'm determined to fulfill my promise.

At some point, I let my heart beat loudly and my mana flow through my body.

The compressed thermal energy turns into golden flames that fill the tunnels and melt everything they come in contact with. The mushrooms, the Flame legion ants, all without exception, fueled by my mana.

Through the flames, we walk, not affected by them at all as I absorb all the heat and store it in the orbs that continue to float around me and follow us.

Getting closer to our destination, I absorb the heat and flames around me, which both almost instantly disappear. Instead, waves of kinetic energy fill the tunnel, throwing the ants against the walls, piercing their bodies, and exploding the ants in their entirety. Up until another rare variation appears.

His mana fills the tunnel and pushes against mine while I feel some weird web made of mana around him. His domain negates mine, and he destroys my anchors. The javelins I throw at him he disrupts and shoots a similar one at me immediately that I also disrupt.

I push more mana into my skills and more javelins fly at him, all of them on the brink of turning into white shining bombs. Yet he pushes out even more mana, tearing them apart into small motes.

The ant in front of us is small, barely reaching my waist. Its antennae are glowing in pale blue color and the entirety of its carapace is covered in circuits and inscriptions. His eyes are the same as those of the other ants, emotionless, black, and eerily alien-looking.

Then his smaller mandibles, which seem soft, open and close a few times. His legs burrow deep into the ground.

Right after, the mana that radiates from him feels impossibly strong, palpable in the air, and his body, unable to contain it all, starts breaking apart and immediately healing. Yet with every heal, a few symbols from his carapace disappear.

The ant is getting the mana from the other ants, hundreds or thousands of ants sending it towards this one that is unable to endure it all and will die the moment all healing inscriptions are used up.

But for these few moments, the ant in front of us is terrifyingly strong.

[Mana Channeler Ant - lvl ??]

Chapter 244: Crown

"We don't have time for this," Tess says, releasing a bit more lightning from her crown, and Lily uses more mana to create a gray arrow.

"This will be quick," I say. I've long since thought about how I would fight myself or deal with someone with mana similar to mine.

The javelin that I have created, boosted by kinetic energy, absorbs the mana trying to slow it down and lodges into the Mana Channeler ant after breaking the barrier he creates.

However, as expected, before the effect of the Sphere imbued in the weapon activates, the ant pushes it out of its body and quickly regains control over his mana, the weapon not affecting him fully. This weapon is made for a different kind of enemy.

[Regalia] forms around my body, and I infuse it with [Resonance], the armor turning transparent blue. Then I redirect most of my mana into the Reinforcement construct and dash at the ant.

He shoots dozens of mana javelins similar to mine at me, each of them as thick as my arm and twice as long as my height.

Yet the moment they touch the armor, they are disrupted, like snow melting before a red hot iron.

The ant creates something reminiscent of a chain that tries to coil around me and hold me in place, yet it too is disrupted, unable to take hold of me.

Next, he tries to disrupt the armor around my body. I wait until he is almost successful before changing frequency, so he has to start over. Whenever his attempts come close, I repeat it.

A barrier forms in front of me, filled with an immense amount of mana and dark blue to the point where I can't see through it.

[Perception] activates, and I detect its frequency, applying it to my armor and passing through as if it's not there.

An immense amount of my mana is being sucked up by [Regalia] and [Resonance], yet I continue using my skills to fight this ant as a huge number of other ants continue feeding him mana. I watch as his body crumbles under the pressure, constantly healed by healing inscriptions, only half of them remaining.

The ant doesn't seem to be capable of more than just channeling mana. This variant is either imperfect and incapable of using more skills or too young and inexperienced to fully utilize all that power.

An arrow passes by me, and I feel the hair on my body stand up as I get goosebumps.

The gray arrow made of [Disintegration] quickly reaches the ant, and the monster, recognizing the danger, dodges to the side, while in haste creating barriers in front of him.

Then, judging it insufficient, more barriers start forming, and a good dozen of them one after the other face the arrow as it starts breaking through them. Each barrier pierced has a slowly widening hole in it, slowly increasing in size, as it's eaten by the grayish mana.

I send a pulse of disruptive mana toward the barriers, weakening them further, and the gray arrow hits the wall, eating away at the wall and leaving uneven holes in it as the skill disintegrates everything it comes in contact with.

That's also when I reach the ant and it creates some sort of mana shockwave that cracks the wall and causes stones to fall from the ceiling, and totally obliterates any mushrooms on the wall.

But nothing happens to me, and I push through the javelin I've created absorbing the mana as the blade turns blue.

Then the amount of mana the ant is getting increases even further, most of his legs exploding and parts of his body crumbling, twisting. All the symbols on its carapace shine bright, and the next attack that hits me disrupts my armor, while the spear in my hand absorbs even more mana.

The Mana Channeler's body starts glowing bright white, the monster sacrificing itself to turn his body into a bomb, using all the mana that's ruined him.

For a short moment, I observe as his compressed mana fills each part of his remains.

Then I have a feeling that our eyes meet and behind his eyes I feel a different presence, The presence of someone much stronger.

The ant clacks its mandibles one last time before his head also crumples.

I redirect all of my mana towards Mantle and then activate [Tether], teleporting towards the anchor I left some distance away from Tess.

Then I divert a lot of my body's mana into the barriers I form in front of us, each of them shattering one after another, unable to resist the explosion of immense mana compressed in the tight space of the tunnels.

I slowly breathe out and form a mana orb over the palm of my hand.

[Focus].

The orb continues to shrink, to [Focus] to a smaller point until its color changes to pitch black with a few dots of light inside of it. The orb itself is as big as my pinkie fingernail, yet it immediately starts to dominate all the mana around it. Even that is enough to put immense strain on my body, even with my epic passive. No matter how good this epic passive is it can't compare to the instant regeneration of the Saint.

Not hesitating, I throw the orb in front of us and create a barrier behind it that I infuse with disrupting mana.

Then I watch as for the next few seconds the orb absorbs and compresses all the mana from the explosion that fills the tunnel. The size of the orb isn't changing, yet the thing starts feeling more and more dangerous.

My barrier barely takes any damage as the orb stops most of the suicidal attack and devours the mana, and when it's gone, it starts slowly trying to absorb mine.

It just floats in the air eerily at the place where I threw it, already out of my control, and when I send my mana toward it or create a domain around it, it doesn't react.

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"They are trying to slow us down, throwing one ant after another at us," Tess says, while her eyes stay glued on the black orb floating in the air in front of us.

"We are close, so let's push for a bit more," I start walking again, avoiding the orb that just floats there and tries to suck in my mana.

For a moment, I try to control it, but as before, it requires a huge amount of mana to use, and right now I'm not in a situation where I can risk a lot of my mana for untested weapons. So, I just leave it behind. It should crumble soon when there isn't enough mana around to sustain it, and just in case, I leave an anchor near it.

As we continue, I keep setting mushrooms ablaze, leaving burning tunnels in our wake that the ants have to deal with instead of focusing on us. Because of that, we constantly push to avoid the fire and smoke that are behind us.

At some point, Tess takes Lily onto her back, and we run faster, pushing away weaker ants while taking a bit longer to kill stronger ones. Once in a while, I check the stone Myrra left with me; the light is weaker than before, showing that our time is slowly running out and soon we won't be able to return.

I activate an anchor and teleport behind one of the ants, cutting deep into it with a resonating blade. Then I twist my body to avoid the compressed shockwave another ant sends at me, and a thermal orb explodes in their midst, only to be immediately absorbed.

More and more ants with anti-fire skills start appearing. Them and others that can disrupt mana or endure my blasts of kinetic energy.

No matter how many of them we kill, they keep coming, always quiet, communicating without sound, and they do not hesitate to put their lives down for the Colony just to slow us down a little or to learn more about our skills as they immediately attempt to counter them.

As always, the Colony is quick to come up with a tailored counter-offense, and some variants seem to have been created or worked on ever since the start of the 4th floor. The ants have amazing coordination, and down in the tunnels, they are more in sync, attacking us from all sides, some even passing through walls and trying to surprise us while some other variants try to mess with our senses.

They even try to counter Lily's [Disintegration] by creating a weird barrier that is made of a similar gray mana to our healer's, yet Lily tears through it as if it's nothing. No matter what barrier they create, no matter what variant they get, I just need to slow them down a bit, hold them in place, and Lily shoots them with arrows made of [Disintegration], further strengthened by the epic bow she holds.

Her accuracy is terrible, but she is not even using much mana, and bigger ants just die.

That makes the monsters focus on her more and more, but then they find Tess.

A lightning crown floats over her head like some sort of halo, her blonde hair seemingly glowing; she continues to fight, surrounded by lightning that seems alive, and a dozen javelins and an epic spear that attack and defend.

When she gets hurt, Lily just touches her slightly, sending a burst of healing into her that allows Tess to continue fighting.

The epic spear she uses can change its weight, and Tess doesn't hold it; she moves it like one of her javelins and increases its weight before shooting it, and the spear with incredible weight behind it continues to break barriers and pierce monsters.

Gradually, the tunnels change; there are fewer mushrooms on the walls, and they start becoming smoother to the point they feel more man-made, some of them even have perfectly square and flat walls.

The iron-like material they are made of seems to resist the heat, and even my golden flames are unable to melt it, and my attacks don't leave holes in it.

As if on cue, we slow our speed, and sending a scan in front of us, I detect the three mana signatures I know so well, surrounded by four monsters, each of them stronger than those we've met up until now. Signatures that shine brightly in comparison to the rest of the Colony.

During the last sprint, without being hindered, we enter the spherical room, like the one the array was in.

I ignore the details of the room and instead, my eyes find three members of group 4.

[Focus]

Each of them missing their legs.

[Focus]

Each of them unconscious, fleshy vines touching their bodies, some of them even burrowed inside their limbs.

[Focus]

Each of them is barely alive, hearts palpitating; their faces show signs of intense pain.

[Focus]

[Focus - lvl 40 > Focus - lvl 41]

I move my mana and stop Tess and Lily from jumping inside and ignore their screams and the tears in the eyes of our healer. Even Tess has an expression I had yet to see on her face.

Calmly, I examine the rest of the room, the monsters inside, exits, and the timer Myrra left us.

My mana crashes inside the room, and when the ants try to push against it, I reach inside the reservoir and mana batteries I have on me, obliterating their coordinated attempt to do so.

"Not one of you will leave this room alive," Tess Declares, her voice bearing a deep undertone of the skill she possesses.

There are only four ants, all the others left.

[Rift Shifter Ant - lvl ??]

[Inferno Brawler Ant - lvl ??]

[Arcane Juggernaut Ant - lvl ??]

[Ability Leech Ant - lvl ??]

Ability Leech Ant stays near our group members, barely bigger than Biscuit, and I can feel waves of mana from him, a skill similar to Sophies web.

Other ants jump down from the walls, and the first one to step in front of us is the Arcane Juggernaut, the biggest ant I've seen so far, most likely twice as tall as the other bus-sized ants and with a carapace heavily armored and surrounded by a body-tight barrier that is so similar to the beast from Beyond.

Before I even move, the thermal orb I was creating dwindles and disappears, while all the heat within the room disappears with it. The work of the Inferno Brawler that stole all the heat and made it its own, flames creating a circle that spins above him.

Sophie twitches and a painful groan escapes her mouth, one of her eyes opens, and the little veins all over it burst. She tries to use her mana, but one of the fleshy things twitches, and she screams in pain.

Nat, Lily calls up to me, and I follow her gaze.

She is looking at the crown tied to my belt. Her expression is the same one she had when she sacrificed all of her limbs to destroy the Saint.

I see. So it will be.

I take the crown and put it on my head. The crown is not perfect and doesn't seem to work immediately, but I know what to do.

[Resonance] activates, and I connect to the crown in a like Lissandra did to connect to the Saints healing aura and restore her body.

[Resonance - lvl 33 > Resonance - lvl 34]

And then gently, Lilys warm mana flows into me, a feeling akin to that of the Saint at the end of the third floor.

Fuck them up, the petite healer pushes through her clenched teeth.

I reach into my mana reservoir, and my [Mana Domain] encompasses the entire room, placing a dozen anchors all around.

Chapter 245: A promise made

POV Tess Hansen

Have I ever been this angry in my life? Have I ever hated another being this much? If Nathaniel hadn't stopped me, I would already be in the middle of the room, fighting those four ants and probably risking the lives of my three precious friends in the process. The lives of my comrades.

Can I trust you to save them? I want to ask, but our eyes meet for a second and I know I don't have to.

Right now, Nathaniel wears an expression I had yet to see on his otherwise emotionless face.

Fuck them up, Lily spits out, and his mana crashes in waves inside the room.

Nathaniel disappears, teleporting, and reappears on top of the biggest ant, the Arcane Juggernaut. Mana radiates from Nathaniel in a torrent that I'm sure would tear my body apart, and armor manifests around him, armor that continues growing until Nathaniel is three times taller and surrounded by all that mana condensed into the form of the armor.

A few fire-based attacks crash against it, followed by some invisible ones that leave deep gouges in the ground behind him. He just shrugs off any that land and stays on top of the comparatively slow ant, yet from the look, extremely durable.

Lily groans, falling to her knees, and a few of her fingers disappear as she continues to stare at the crown on top of his head.

Then more mana radiates from him, the armor turning dark blue and speeding up its movement. The hands of the armor become bigger, and he grabs the head of the ant he's mounted as it tries to shake him off.

With sheer shock, I watch as he tears the head off an ant, twice the size of a bus. The barriers around the ant just vanish the moment Nathaniel's armor touches them. The Juggernaut's body isn't able to endure, and the head just comes off.

Nat throws it at the Inferno ant who summons a wall of flame in response, turning the head to dust in the blink of an eye.

The massive body of the dead Juggernaut ant falls to the ground and I notice that Lily barely has any mana left as Nat continues to bleed from the wounds he's sustained all over his body.

Lily's left leg disappears and I feel movement behind us.

[Stormcrown] activates and my lightning surrounds us, clashing against a few attacks directed at us.

Then one of Nathaniel's anchors activates nearby and his disrupting mana hits the Rift Shifter ant before he can disappear.

Immediately I boost my javelins as much as possible and a few of them strike its body, sending lightning coursing through it.

The ant tries to create another rift, but another anchor near him explodes, Nathaniel's kinetic energy destroying a few of the ant's legs and that's when I increase the weight of my spear as much as possible until it gets hard to move.

The spear pierces the ant's carapace, the sheer momentum behind it allowing it to do so, but the ant disappears again, appearing near Lily.

Before he touches her, a few gray threads spin around her and pass through the ant's body while another of her legs disappears. For a moment the ant looks almost confused and then his body falls into two pieces that continue to move.

My javelins stab through him while I push against him with my [Psychokinesis] at full power.

He uses another rift-like attack that crashes against my lightning, forcing me to use more of my mana until they cancel out each other and my spear finishes him off.

When I look up, Nathaniel floats in the air, standing against two remaining ants. He has no wings and uses no mana, lightning, or anything. He just floats there and I can't feel anything. It's almost eerie.

A small ant jumps on the Inferno ant's back and golden flames burst forth from them at the same time as it feels like they are sucking the heat from the room.

Just an arm's reach in front of Nathaniel they stop, like there is some invisible barrier, and I hear a sound that reminds me of a heartbeat.

One heartbeat later I feel an immense amount of mana radiate from Nathaniel.

The second heartbeat and some of the flames move and swirl around Nathaniel as he takes them under his control.

Third heartbeat and Nathaniel's legs twist and break as if under immense pressure.

Fourth heartbeat and Lily's right hand disappears. I grab her and hold her against my chest.

Nathaniel's face is calm and I can see that he is careful to not allow any of this to touch our friends. Roaring like a terrifying animal, the flames around Nathaniel burst forth, extremely concentrated.

There is no heat filling the room, his thermal energy just becomes more concentrated, focused into a single beam as thin as my finger at speeds impossible to track. It strikes the Inferno Ant in the middle of its body and then moves diagonally, cutting him in half like some sort of laser.

The small Ability Leech Ant tries to run, but Nathaniel does something, and the ant freezes in the air, unable to move.

No don't kill him, someone says, and it takes me a few moments to realize it's Sophie.

I stop right before killing the small ant and turn to Sophie.

After I create several threads of dark blue mana to bind the ant, I place an anchor near it through which I constantly channel disrupting mana. Then, I float towards her.

Get me out, she hisses through clenched teeth, and I tear the things from her and the twins while creating mana arms to gently bring them down.

My body burns and hurts, and I'm barely able to keep myself from fainting, but I take off the crown to save Lily's mana.

They wanted to get my [Manipulation] and the twins' [Connection] to improve their [Hive Mind], she explains.

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Just rest for now, we will take care of the rest. Izzy and others are safe, I tell her before she asks.

For a moment, she closes her eyes, tears appearing and flowing down her cheeks, I'm so glad.

She opens them right after, You won't be able to escape, she says, the First One, the first ant the lynthari Champion created, knew that you would be coming and hes already trapped others. He and most of the colony are creating a barrier around us so that you can't return through the rift.

I watch as Lily sacrifices three of her fingers to slightly heal Sophie, Aaron, and Dennis, and I dont stop her. She is still unable to sacrifice items, unfortunately.

We will find a way out, I tell Sophie.

She shakes her head, They know about most of your skills, you won't be able to break the barrier, especially if the First One intervenes.

I don't like it; it's almost as if she underestimates me. Sure, my body hurts, my mana is low, and they know my skills, but that doesn't mean they can stop me.

I will help, so please, Nathaniel, take care of Izzy in case it goes to shit, a smile that appears on her face is sad.

Then, before I can do anything, her [Manipulation] activates, and she uses the twins' [Connection] to connect to the Ability Leech Ant and then to the entire colony.

The little ant starts flailing and twitching, and I stop Tess from killing it, You will hurt Sophie if you touch it, I warn her, decoding the web Sophie starts creating. I can't even disrupt it for fear of hurting her, nor can I observe it any closer.

Instead, I expand the range of my [Perception], and then for the first time, I see the sheer terror her [Manipulation] can cause, and understand why the Colony and the matriarch are so scared of her.

Sophie connects to and manipulates the ants [Hive Mind], and in the process, she takes over the ants in it, fighting the First One for control while its busy with Myrra and others.

Like a virus, her influence spreads, and the ants closest to us stop moving, and slowly, further ones too. Soon, I'm unable to feel how far it reaches because of my limited [Perception]. Her subclass greed must somehow help her because otherwise, I can't imagine how she can do it with as little mana as she has.

The ants start moving again, jumping against each other, mandibles clacking, and skills activating as the members of the colony fight each other in silence.

So fucking dumb, Lily groans, and the remainder of her fingers disappear, as well as a piece of her arm, and Sophie's face becomes a bit less pale.

We are leaving, I pick up Sophie and the twins and Sophie with my mana arms, and as the leader, Ignoring the way we came, I take a different path, reluctant to meet the black mana orb again. I move the little ant as well.

I continue to use [Perception] and track the mana stone Myrra left for me, and we pass through the tunnels. None of the ants notice us, all of them too busy murdering each other. Members of the Colony, whose immense power came from cooperation, are tearing each other's legs off and biting their heads.

All because of Sophie's skill.

Rushing through, we finally reach the tunnels near the room we started in, and there we find Myrra and the rest of the group. Some of them are missing, others are wounded, and no one looks untouched.

"We failed," Myrra hisses, "they waited for us." She pulls out a stone from the matriarch and a rift similar to Eris's appears in front of us, "Let's leave and"

That's when one of the humans moves and burrows his dagger covered in yellow mana into Myrra's chest, barely missing her heart as Myrra shifts her body.

One of the lynthari dashes, too quickly for me to follow, his body breaking in the process. He passes by me and when I turn around, I only see Sophie's severed head falling to the ground.

What?

Another human dashes at me, but before he even reaches me, an extremely concentrated burst of kinetic energy hits his head. At the same time, a few of the enforcers jump and literally tear apart the lynthari that attacked Myrra and the human that attacked Sophie.

Sophie's head rolls on the ground, her eyes open. Panic is about to take over me. A feeling of desperation. A broken promise given to a child.

[Focus]

Have I given up already? This much is fine. I can do it. Deep breath in. Breathe out.

Immediately I scan the rest of our group, but no one shares the mark in their brain the three who attacked us had.

Good.

"Through the rift," I say calmly and grab Sophie's head, ignoring Lily and Tess.

When I pass through it, I wait until everyone is here and watch as wounded Myrra closes it.

"I will be alright," Myrra says, blood on her lips.

I put the twins on the ground and then put Sophie's head next to her neck.

It's fine, we have a few minutes, We can heal it.

"Nathaniel, I don't have enough mana," Lily cries knowing what I'm thinking, "even if I sacrifice most of what I have left, I won't be able to heal it and restart her..." The petite brunette sobs.

"Items?"

"I don't know how! I tried, I tried so hard!"

"I see," I nod and look around.

There is no other healer.

For a few precious seconds, I stare at Sophie's body and then get on my knees and settle in front of Lily, "Sacrifice my body parts," I tell her.

"I won't be able to, it would be even harder than"

"I know," I tell her and then, creating a resonating mana along my hand. I cut off my entire left arm and burn the wound closed with thermal energy.

I put the arm in front of Lily, "This is the arm you restored for me. You sacrificed your arm to restore it. It's made by you and strengthened by me. You have a connection to it."

Slowly, her eyes open wider, and with shaking remains of her left arm, she touches it, "If I fail..."

"You wont," I say.

With her eyes wide open, she points what remains of her arm towards my severed limb. Her brow furrows and a few seconds pass, feeling impossibly long.

Then my arm disappears and the mana that flows through Lily is grander than ever before. The arm she sacrificed came from someone of a much higher level than her. With constructs etched into it, the arm is filled with mana and came from a body bearing two epic passives. It's a good arm.

Her healing skill activates, and I watch as the two pieces of Sophie's body connect.

It happened just a few seconds ago. The brain didn't have time to die. Lily can restart the body.

It will be fine.

Lily uses more mana, and it keeps flowing through Sophie, restoring her, circulating around her heart, and her brain.

Sophie isn't a normal human either; she has stats, levels, skills, and passives. Something like this should be possible even with a normal human, but Sophie is more akin to a superhuman like all of us.

It will be fine.

Sophie's heart starts beating a few times, and some color returns to her face. More warm mana radiates from Lily, and Sophie's chest starts moving.

I don't want to break a promise I made to a little kid. A promise I made to a friend.

Sophie breathes out and in, and her eyelids move a bit, and she opens her eyes, immediately closing them because of the light.

I look at Lily, Tess, Sophie, Aaron, and Dennis.

All of them are fine.

Chapter 246: The Message

Our trip back to Virelia is faster than before. I refrain from using mana as much as possible to restore it as I carry the battered members of Group 4 in arms of mana.

The three of them are all missing legs and are all currently unconscious, something Lily did with the rest of the mana she got from my arm. She also used what was there to restore her legs and now walks next to me. Missing her arms, but on her own two legs.

Tess is scouting ahead of us with Obelia, while Isola and the rest of the group, and Myrra, run beside us. We do not hurry, but we also do not move slowly, and I notice Lily constantly staring at me.

You were amazing, Lily, I really mean it. The young girl had to endure the strain of keeping me alive while I was dealing with the stronger ants, and constantly use sacrifice to save our group members.

For me, it's fine, but it's hard to imagine how stressful it must be to use all of your limbs powering your skill and then have to rely on someone else, unable to move, and barely able to do anything. Such weakness is something I never want to feel, yet Lily did it constantly, something that once again confirms how far from normal some members of Hell difficulty are.

I will do anything you want when things are a bit calmer, I return her gaze, All within reason, obviously.

I see, she smiles, but it's a tired smile. Can you please tell me again I did well? That it was worth all of this? the pain is still apparent in her eyes.

No matter how used she gets to it, or how much she pretends to be ok. Without a skill like my [Focus], it must be terrifying.

You did well, really well. I step closer to her and for a moment pull her armless body close. We saved them thanks to you."

She nods energetically, the tears flowing down her cheeks, and she doesn't say anything else.

A bit of time passes as we get closer to Virelia, until some of Obelias scouts and enforcers seem to panic and speed up, as we keep pace.

It doesn't take long, and I feel it as well. The presence of the Living Tree.

Then we see it as well, the colossal tree has fallen just outside Virelia. There is still some remaining mana, but the Calamity is dead, and there is not even a text over it.

Most of the walls around the city are gone as well, cracked and revealing the inscriptions etched inside them.

One of the enforcers starts crying, and more of them join in, with even Myrra lowering her ears and her tail just hanging down.

What happened, Myrra? I ask carefully.

The white-haired lynthari turns to me, tears in her eyes. The Matriarch is dead, feral one.

For a moment, I just stare at her and then toward the city and the tree.

Slowly, all of the lynthari with us turn towards Myrra all at once and lower their heads, getting down on one knee and facing her.

Myrra ignores their gazes and continues to look towards the city, tears rolling down her cheeks.

After we reach the city, we split up and quickly find the rest of group four, all of them fine, yet bearing signs of a big fight.

Isabella comes running and hugs the unconscious Sophie. For a few minutes, she refuses to leave her and continues to listen to her older sister's heartbeat and breathing.

Then she jumps in between me, Lily, and Tess, and thanks us, her small body hugging us with all the strength she can muster. The entire time, Noodle stays coiled around Isabella's arm and watches it all with weird interest.

(Safe.) Biscuit sends me.

Thank you, I tell him and caress his head. Im sure you did well.

The best doggo woofs and then wobbles on top of one of the walls of what's left of our house, and seems to keep watch.

Cute.

The Veilwalker guild master was one of the traitors, Hadwin and Maya sit next to Tess and me, while Min-Jae stays with the twins, a worried expression on the young boys face.

Maya continues, and I notice that she barely has any mana left and her gear is nearly destroyed, all upper-grade rare items. He was either controlled or worked with the Colony for some time. He attacked and injured the Matriarch while she fought the tree.

Hadwin sighs. The Matriarch fought it, using the trees in the city. Meanwhile, we had to work with a few lynthari to fight Lorven and his guild members."

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

How did the tree get there? Tess asks.

Maya meets her eyes. It flew. We could feel its mana from far away, it moved really quickly, and Tess, let me tell you, it was so eerie that it's hard to describe, she shakes her head. The Matriarch apparently activated inscriptions she had built all over the city over hundreds of years and fought against it. Some lynthari even shared their mana with her.

As I listen to her, the image of young Eris calling me underling is shown in my mind.

How did the Matriarch look? I ask, bearing a bit of hope.

She had two tails and was taller than any other lynthari, Hadwin crushes even the last of those hopes.

I see, I say while looking at my hands.

I can still feel the air shaking as they fought. The tree tried to use its weird mana particles, but the Matriarch stopped them by creating some kind of pressure and then fought against it by creating rifts and some kind of weird radiation while confusing the tree. She even used the leaves of the giant trees in the city, Maya shudders.

How did she even kill it? Tess looks between Maya and Hadwin.

Hadwin answers her, In the end, she activated some array, and that killed the tree. It made it dry out, and it just fell down, along with the Matriarch. The other lynthari took her then.

Nothing about the Floor quest? Tess asks.

Maya shakes her head. Nothing. I guess we didnt do enough for it to count as our work.

She then starts to ask Tess about what happened and wanting to catch a break, I stand up and walk towards our half-destroyed house. No one stops me, and I shift some of the debris and enter what remains of my room. The armchair I like to sit in is dusty and torn in places, but I plop into it and pull out the strange, blue mana stone from my pocket. The one Eris bought for me at the auction, it now radiates a bit of mana, and I dont even know when she inscribed it.

I set it on a piece of debris in front of me and send a bit of my mana through, which activates it.

An illusion of Eris forms around the stone and looks at me, I guess that's it, she smiles, hiding her hands behind her back. You listening to this must mean I was unable to deactivate it, and there can only be one reason for that, cant there?

The memory she left behind is even capable of reacting to its surroundings, and it jumps up to sit on the wall nearby, short legs hanging over and kicking the air.

I left messages like this for most of the people I cared about. Then, for a long time, I was wondering if I should leave one for you, the memory turns to me. You know, I hardly know you. In my long life, you are barely a memory.

I dont even answer; the memory wouldnt be able to process it or say anything other than what its been made for.

"Yet, something made me change my mind and I left a message for you., as Eris, the personality I created to mess with my lynthari and humans," she smiles diabolically, then sighs, "What was I even thinking at my old age, messing around like that," even then she giggles.

"But it was fun, you know. I don't even remember how long its been since someone put me on his shoulders and carried me around the city. How long has it been since I sat on someone's knees and stopped worrying about things and just acted like a kid for a few moments. How long has it been since someone wanted to bully and mess with me with such a cheeky look in his eyes."

The memory sighs, a smile not leaving its lips, "It was fun and I thank you for that," she turns to me and adds, "Underling," her tone is almost as if making fun of me.

"The Living Tree is on its way to the city. It's an out-of-control weapon I helped to create a long time ago. We sent it against the old capitals of humans, so I will be the one to deal with it. I will pay for the crimes against humanity I helped commit. I'm too old to avoid it and soon I will be too weak to deal with it and that would only leave the tree behind to threaten my city. My lynthari and my dear humans."

Eris jumps down from the wall and emanates a hint of mana detecting me and steps in front of me so the message can continue.

"I suspect it's all the work of the First One; he was always smart. The moment he sensed your friends' skills and detected them reaching Virelia, he probably increased his efforts to manipulate the Living Tree. He's been trying for years." Eris smiles, "What a creepy ant, right? He even kidnapped your friends the moment you left the city. For some reason, he is just as scared of you as he is of the Fallen Hero."

Eris sighs, "I got lazy, my skills dulled over the years of peace and stalemate, and now I will pay for it. As for you, underling, never let the First One get the opportunity to take your friends' skills. I would tell you to kill them if needed, but I suspect you would tell me to screw off, such is your Pride," she giggles. "But know this, the moment the First One evolves his [Hive Mind] will be the moment another being with the potential of reaching the rank of Champion is born."

Her eyes meet mine, "Myrra is childish at times, but she will be a good replacement for me, and in the future, she will grow much stronger than I ever was. But, underling, there is something I wanted to ask of you too. Please, don't hate the lynthari." Her hand reaches to me and passes through my cheek, "Every lynthari that remains is just a child, born after the war, none of them know about what happened before. So please, do not hate them, do not fight again, and try to live with them as I always wanted."

The memory starts becoming a bit more transparent and slowly disappearing, "Hating me and those lynthari who did fight in the war is fine, but the others are just kids, so please, get along."

She becomes even more transparent.

"Nya... I wonder what that word means," she giggles, her voice becoming weaker, "I hope you had as much fun messing with me as I did messing with you, my dear and last underling."

For a moment I feel as if our eyes meet.

"Farewell then, stay well... nya." She flashes me one last smile that stays on her face even as she grows and turns into the tall lynthari woman with two tails.

She then turns around and, after taking a step away, the memory disappears and all the mana from the blue stone is gone.

For a long moment, I stare at the blue mana stone in my hands and try to send my mana into it, to activate it again, but it doesn't work. The intricate inscriptions are gone.

That's when I hear a movement and Tess walks from behind the wall.

"Sorry, I heard most of it," she apologizes while sitting on the armrest of the armchair I sit on.

"It's fine," I reply.

"So that was the matriarch and the little girl we met during the auction."

"Yes," I nod, "we now know who was behind all this."

"Are you sad?" she asks.

"I barely knew her."

"You didn't answer my question, Nat."

"I only met her a few times and we mostly made fun of each other, and I didn't even know she was messing with me."

"So that's how it is?" she asks.

"Yes."

I'm about to use [Focus], then I hesitate and stare at the blue mana stone, but in the end, I decide against it, and stay like that a bit longer.

Chapter 247: Little Kitten

After a few hours of sleep, I wake up and stretch my body. Jumping from the bed, I take a few steps and enter the balcony, looking outside at the city. Virelia is unusually quiet, and the walls that used to surround it are gone, as well as dozens of buildings destroyed and a few towers have tilted or just straight up toppled.

Further in the distance, I can see the trunk of the Living Tree. Colossal, grayish bark, and branches without any leaves.

Defeated, destroyed, killed, just like that. All the preparations and planning gone and useless, the Calamity was defeated by Eris at the cost of her life.

I can't understand it fully; it's so dumb. So fucking dumb. She could have run away, she could have held it back and waited for me and others to join the fight. She could have just kept us in the city and not sent us after... but, that would mean sacrificing Sophie, Aaron, and Dennis, wouldn't it?

Looking down I clench and unclench my fist. If I were stronger, I would solve it all. I would be the one deciding the result, and no one would have to die. I wasn't strong enough, and it leaves a sour taste in my mouth, even though I know they are fake.

I wonder, could I have pushed myself more? Could I do it differently and focus more on leveling instead of improving my handling of my power? Could I have just left the tree alone and stopped the ants from kidnapping three members of our group and fought against the Calamity with Eris?

Taking a few steps, I jump back into the bed in the room Storm Brigade has lent me, Obelia has offered to board us until we can find another house.

Status, I say.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty:Hell

Floor:4 - Waning Realm

Time left until forced return: 4y 81d 13h 15m 7s

Traits (1/3):Mana Circuit

Lvl 189

Strength: 87

Dexterity: 89

Constitution: 224

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 707 + 707

Primary Class: Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class:[Initiate of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus Consolidation) - Lvl 41

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 41

Perception - Lvl 39

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 39

Resonance - Lvl 34

Mana Domain - Lvl 21

Tether - Lvl 11

Regalia - Lvl 10

Infusion - Lvl 16

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Kinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Passive skills:

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Pyrokinetic Resurgence (rare)

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

Tokens: Beyond Difficulty entrance token

Shards:3032

While examining my stats, I feel a touch and an attempt to connect to my mind.

I allow it to happen, and Sophie's voice sounds in my head. (Can we talk?)

(Yes, I will land on your balcony in a few minutes.)

(Thank you.)

I put on some clothes and look in the mirror nearby. The guy looking back at me seems the same on the surface , yet I know him well.

Asshole, I say, and his mouth mouths the same word.

Stepping onto the balcony, I locate Sophie and, generating just enough kinetic energy, fly higher and to the side, landing on the balcony not unlike my own.

Sophie is wearing simple clothes that are a bit too big for her, and the doors to the room are closed. Behind the glass, I see Isabella sleeping on the bed. Noodle on one side and Biscuit on the other.

Tracking my gaze, Sophie looks as well and smiles gently. She got surprised and scared by a small spider just a few days ago. I watched her scream and jump backward, hitting her head against the wall, she turns to me. I wouldn't have been able to see that without removing the [Geas] from her mind.

You messed with your own memories, I do not beat around the bush. Sophie is acting way too casual for what happened to her and the twins deep in the heart of the Colony.

You are quick to catch on, she sits in one of the chairs on the balcony while I lean against the railing.

After gathering her thoughts, she continues, I wanted to remove them, I really did, but something stopped me, she looks at her hands, Would I be the same person if I did that? And if I did that, would that make each new edit easier until I simply remove every unhappy memory I have?

Sophie looks at me, Nathaniel, maybe we humans aren't supposed to have this kind of power. Saving someone after their heads been cut off? She touches her neck where a thin, white scar stretches across its entire length, most likely something Lily left intentionally.

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

She continues to speak, Or manipulating people and removing their free will? her eyes are piercing as she looks into mine, Being strong enough to wipe a small city off the map just a few months after gaining these powers?

You can think about it as much as you want, but it doesn't change the fact that there are other people with these powers. People who won't care about that will complete the tutorial and return to Earth, I easily return her gaze, Unlike you, I don't mind it. I like my powers and the things they allow me to do. I reply.

She smiles and nods as if expecting this answer, then looks to the side, at the Living Tree outside the city, You know, I tried multiple things with my [Manipulation]. I tried to manipulate fire, manipulate mana, earth, and a few others, yet I always found myself progressing the most with controlling monsters or people.

Sophie breathes in and closes her eyes, I wanted to remove my memories, but decided against it. In the end, I did the same thing I did for the others after we escaped the tunnel under the old capital. I made those memories feel as if they happened years ago, leaving them a faint memory. She touches her neck, I can still feel the blade slicing through my neck, I remember the ants trying to steal my skill. Its all in here.

That much is reasonable, I tell her.

Do you really think so? I know that you have a skill that allows you to do something similar, she opens her eyes, her hand still on her neck, But I think we will pay for that in the future, Nat, both you and I for trying to cheat ourselves.

Probably, but that's for future Nathaniel to deal with, I pass by her and quietly open the door.

Noodle, now awoken, slithers outside, a bit bigger than before. His tongue flickers towards me as I radiate a bit of mana to feed him. When I reach out my hand to him, he hesitates for a moment, but then coils around it in the same way he does with Isabella.

Current me will do the best he can, I continue, and carefully touch Noodles head petting him gently.

The snake closes its eyes, and only his tongue continues to flicker. His body is somewhat cold to the touch, but it doesnt feel bad, and his scales have a nice texture to them.

I guess, consequences be damned, Sophie says while observing Noodle, Or maybe we are the dumb ones, and all these abilities are to help us deal with this all, something normal. It's just we still think like humans worrying about useless things.

I think about it for a while, It might be just as you said.

Isabellas soft cries sound from inside the room, she seems to be having a nightmare as she twitches on the bed.

Sophie stands up and opens the door. Lilly finished restoring her legs a few hours after sacrificing my arm.

When I hand her Noodle, she looks at me one more time, The matriarch is dead. You know what that means, right?

I nod, The Colony will be coming.

Yes. I tried to kill as many of them as possible, especially the ones capable of creating arrays, and I even left some traps in their links. But it wont slow them down for too long. A few days maybe.

Isabella twitches again, and Sophie just waves and closes the door, immediately lying on the bed and hugging her sleeping sister, who quickly calms down.

Not wanting to interrupt their moment, I jump from the balcony and glide back to my room. There, I open the balcony and pass through my room, opening the door outside.

The hallway is empty and simple, mostly made of stone and wood with a thick carpet on the polished floor. It has a nice cozy feeling to it. Taking a short walk, I reach the door to the room where Tess is staying with Lily, the two of them are together so she can help our silly healer. I knock and wait.

Tess opens a few seconds later, Come in, Nat. She just lets me enter immediately.

The moment I do so, Lily sees me too, and a big smile appears on her face. I notice that one of her arms is already nearly back. The left one that is once again pale, and I would bet if she restores my left arm too, it will be pale as well.

The speed with which she is regenerating her arms is much faster than before. Guess who can enter Beyond now? she asks me, her smile becoming even bigger.

I can hear Tess sigh next to me, and I sit on the edge of the bed next to Lily.

This is serious; I can see it in her eyes. The moment she heals, she will enter Beyond. As always, her reason is simple: to reach me. To become closer to me, to be strong like me. To become more useful to me. That's how she's thinking.

Ever since the floor started, I haven't heard her speak about her family, and Tess, who knew Lily just a little bit from school, told me that the black-haired girl was someone you might call a loner.

I wonder how her life was before for her to become so possessive of me, to cling to me and the others so much. To have such fear in her eyes that we will throw her away the moment we become much stronger or she becomes less useful. It doesn't matter how much Tess works on it, it doesn't matter that I tried to help too. Lily still lives in constant fear of being left behind.

Don't enter Beyond for now, I tell her.

She continues to smile for a moment, thinking that I'm joking, but I just look at her and slowly her expression changes from that of happiness to hurt and anger.

I move closer and put my hand on hers, I will train with you. I will help you prepare.

Lily might have the strongest damage skill out of all of us, and she is extremely hard to kill, but she is lacking when it comes to reading the flow of combat and over-relies on her damage and healing.

I squeeze her arm, I will make sure you become stronger.

The expression in her eyes changes a bit, hurt and sadness replaced by pleading and hope.

I want everyone to live, Lily, so we will prepare, okay?

Her eyes shake and she stares at me, taking in every detail of my face.

I continue, And when you are ready, you will crush the trial and join me and Tess.

Lily nods, Yes, yes. I will do it.

Flashback - Lily Chen - 8 years old

In a dark, small room, a little girl sits on a thin blanket. A little girl with black hair and bangs long enough to fall into her face.

"Are you angry, Grumpy?" the little girl asks, pulling the cat in her arms closer to her chest, "And don't meow, it makes you look even more like a grumpy," she says, smiling.

Meow. The little kitten tries to escape for a bit, but still being weak, is unable to do so and gives up.

That makes the little girl laugh for a bit longer as she snuggles the kitten with two differently colored eyes, yellow and blue, and with black fur.

Then silence fills the small room and the entire apartment.

It is around nine o'clock, and the girl is entirely alone, the floors cold, the power cut off, and tap water rarely flows. Something normal for the girl, too young to realize that it shouldn't be like that.

"We will be alone again tonight," she mumbles, holding the kitten tight.

Slowly she stands up from the floor, her feet are bare and her pajamas are old, dotted with holes. The little girl takes the thin blanket and moves away from the door where she has been waiting for someone to return, excited to talk about her day with the little kitten.

"Its fine, I have you, Grumpy," the little girl says, and after jumping on the bed, she wraps the blanket around them.

With a smile, she continues to watch as the kitten falls asleep. Then, even though there is no other blanket on her bed, she slips the blanket off of herself and wraps it all around Grumpy.

Feeling the cold, she continues to shake a bit, but the big smile doesn't leave her face as she continues to watch the little kitten sleep.

Chapter 248: This kind of person

Dealing with people is hard, isn't it? I could be on my own, not worried, not having to deal with them. It would be easier.

Sure, I like being alone and I really often need solitude to recharge my batteries, but being able to walk into the living room every once in a while and just listen to other members of Group 4, joke with them, tease them, that's also fun.

I wonder what my life in the tutorial would've looked like now if I had decided to remain on my own.

Noname - Savi, how is it going on your own?

Savant -Great, now even you are calling me Savi. I will only answer if you agree to answer my question afterward.

Noname -Deal.

Savant - I prefer being on my own. No one tries to stab me in the back. I don't have to deal with people screwing things up, and there's no need to babysit weaklings.

Noname -What happened to your group?

Savant -They got what they deserved... I've answered your question. We'll see who made the better decision during the tournament.

Noname -I think so too. You can ask your question.

Savant -I'll ask later.

Noname - Sure.

I close the Community, come to a door, knock carefully, and wait. The hallway is empty and quiet, the entire floor has been lent to us by Obelia.

The door opens slowly and Min-Jae pokes out and whispers, Dennis and Aaron are sleeping, he says after exiting the room and joining me in the hallway.

Min-Jae seems tired and worried about his friends, yet it's much better than when we brought the twins back, after losing their legs and nearly being tortured to death by ants.

Are they alright? I ask.

He shakes his head, They kept asking for Sophie and after she left they calmed down and went to sleep, his face takes on a sad smile.

The implications are clear, the twins most likely asked Sophie to do for them what she did for herself.

Is it a good decision to take such an easy way out? Should they get over it on their own and become stronger in the process? Is our logic flawed as Sophie suggested, should we just use our powers as we like? Is it pointless trying to apply regular human common sense here?

Is it a smart decision given that we are still in Hell difficulty and have no time for people dealing with trauma while the Colony threatens us?

Nat, I dont think they did a bad thing. I know you probably think that they will become weaker if they take the easy way out, Min-Jae looks into my eyes, but I dont think there is a need for them to be scarred because of this, or for them to wake up shaking and crying. Nat, they are just kids.

Looking at him, Min-Jae himself is only 15 years old and the twins are 17, yet here he is. A troubled young boy who kept copying me, looking up to me, defending his friends and opinions.

You are right, Min-Jae, I tell him.

Am I? he asks, a bit unsure.

Oh, was he faking it all?

When I look at him it doesn't look like it, he still thinks he's right but seems weirded out that I might agree with him.

Keep watch, okay? I will be nearby, I tell him.

He nods energetically and goes back into the room.

For a moment, I stare at the door after he closes it and try to read my feelings.

Back, down in the tunnels, I pushed my emotions to the back of my mind, I kept [Focus] running and tried to deal with the four ants that guarded them as quickly as possible at the cost of Lily healing me through the crown. But right now? I constantly feel the suppressed anger raging inside me.

They kidnapped them, they hurt them, they dared to touch Group 4. Because of that Sophie almost died, Dennis and Aaron suffered a torturous experience, and Lily had to push herself to the brink.

Oh, how angry I am. Those fuckers are going to pay. I will fucking blow their entire colony sky-high and turn their shitty tunnels into a burning hell.

Realizing that I've subconsciously started releasing my mana, I once again focus on Mana Cycling, bring it back under control, and touch Sophie's web.

She connects to me the moment she feels my probing, (Anything happen?)

(You still have 5 thousand shards from selling the coordinates, right?)

(Of course, they are yours according to our deal.)

(Good, I already know what you can buy for me.)

I find Obelia near her office with Jenna, whom she quickly sends away. Jenna greets me and closes the door, inscriptions within activating and running enchantments against spying and for defense.

Unable to help myself, I observe them for a while out of curiosity, and Obelia doesn't seem to mind as she sits in her chair patiently, going over some mana stones inscribed with messages.

So what happened down there? I ask when I'm done.

With a sigh, she shakes her head, It was a mess. They were constantly trying to slow us down, and half of us were constantly fighting against their attempts to deactivate our return rift stone. She puts away the item she's holding, giving me her full attention. The enforcers were just as terrifying as they were rumored to be, and dealt with anything that came at us.

Obelia looks at her hands and laughs a bit, I always thought I was one of the strongest in Virelia, even considering the lynthari, yet I could only watch and support them once in a while. That's how those twelve enforcers are.

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I think you could take one of them, I tell her. I felt their mana and saw them a bit in action, so I do believe that.

Probably? Their biggest advantage was their coordination. If twelve of them fought together, I don't think there would be anyone capable of fighting them.

So why did you guys fail?

The First One was terrifying, Nathaniel, Obelia's gaze grows serious. I still believe enforcers would be capable of destroying him if they fought, but they didn't have a chance. The other ants constantly fed the First One with vitality, stamina, and mana, through their connection. We damaged the First One, and another ant died instead of him. He used mana, and it instantly got replenished.

I move and sit on the chair opposite her and observe her expression.

Obelia continues, With the Colony nearby, the first one is impossible to defeat. He is the lynchpin that ties them all together and guards their [Hive Mind] against outside tampering. Plus he's smart and has immense control over the Colony.

I bet you also already found out what happened while we were gone, so can I ask you for a short summary? I ask instead. I will deal with the ants later.

In short? Do you remember the expedition we took to the old capital with Elydor when we met for the first time? It seems like the moment we escaped, the tree lifted off and started flying towards Virelia.

How does it even make sense for a giant tree to fly?

It took a month, but it reached the city while we were away. Apparently, the Matriarch knew about it even then and still sent us to fight the Colony, Obelia says.

I wonder if she truly sent us against the Colony because she didn't want the ants to evolve their [Hive Mind]. Was she even willing to put her life on the line to send such a big part of Virelia's strength against the ants?

The timing is suspicious, extremely so. There were traitors, people controlled by ants that attacked her the moment the Living Tree got close. Then there's the timing of the Tree launching an attack right after the ants. It's all too coordinated.

Is the First One, the leader of the Colony, behind it? Did it manipulate the tree and time its attack? Or did they work together?

Or is there someone or something else?

Miss Myrra will become lynthari Matriarch after the ceremony. The matriarch's granddaughter disappeared as well, I wanted to let you know in case you were wondering, she says.

I nod, I will visit Myrra.

Yes. But please be careful. No matter what lynthari do or say, they loved their matriarch. She was like a mother to all of them, and some knew her for tens, or hundreds of years.

I will take that into consideration, but what about you? You now know that the lynthari are invaders here. What will you do? I ask.

Obelia doesn't seem to be sure of that, but in the end, she shrugs her shoulders. Currently, I'm inclined to tell everyone.

That could lead to war.

She nods, Yes. Her expression says that she already considered it. Yet, I still think it's something other humans should know.

Even if plenty of them might die because of that? I ask.

It's not like I'm worried about people I don't know. I'm just that curious. Over time, I've built some respect towards this logically thinking woman in front of me. She is smart, talented, and good at reading people and, most of all, she knows when to take a step back.

The way you look at me reminds me of a lynthari, she says out of nowhere, a small smile on her face. You keep observing me like I'm some interesting animal. As if everything that just happened, all these threats, the Colony, the war with lynthari, the traitors do not affect you at all.

I guess she also learned to read me a bit after dealing with me all these months.

She continues, Don't get me wrong. I'm not insulted or angry. I know people like you, she smiles, her eyes as if she is remembering someone, People like you are a bit crazy and I guess they have to be able to reach that level and not even think of stopping.

Obelia stops remembering and looks at me, But be careful, that kind of person doesn't tend to die in bed surrounded by the people they love.

Before leaving for Myrras, I check the upper epic weapon I prepared to be used against the Living Tree.

I could try to dismantle it and recover the two items I had before, but maybe I can use it against the Colony. It's slow to activate because of my insufficient skill, but it should be useful there as well, for the same reasons I meant to use it against the Living Tree, I think.

It's annoying, to be honest. If I were to dismantle it now, I would have to undo the changes I've made to the items, and that would require some time otherwise I would risk ruining them.

Sighing, I move past it and look at the chest we got from the champion's house and the piece I bought at the auction.

Months have passed since we got it, and we are not even close to opening it. I swear, it would be funny if we learned that it wasn't a chest at all, just a piece of wood shaped like one. Shaped and weighted like one.

Sure, I would complain a lot and curse the system, this floor, and everything around me, but I would still consider it a bit funny.

Well, at least Min-Jae said he is feeling something from the chest and the small item, either thanks to [Gravity Well] or [Telekinesis]. Seeing how heavy the thing is, it might have something to do with gravity and the former of his skills.

Leaving Tess to take care of the items, I check my figure in the mirror. I'm still missing my left arm, but it's weirdly fine, and I just replaced it with a replica made of mana.

This one is much better and more nimble than before, nearly as mobile as my original arm. It will be fine, and when Lily takes care of her wounds and restores legs for the twins, she can take care of it.

After leaving behind an anchor that should last for hours, I jump from the balcony, disrupting the effect the anti-flight zone has on me. Boosting myself with kinetic energy, I fly to the place I know I'll find Myrra and, as I get closer, land on the ground, closing the remaining distance on foot.

The place I'm going is in the exact middle of the city. It is a beautiful spherical building that, at a glance, should fall under its own weight.

Yet, like the dueling area, it's made from the same indestructible stone, a remnant of the past.

As I approach the area, Myrra's bodyguard steps out of the shadows and nods in greeting.

I return the gesture, and without any words, I follow him.

It's my first time being here, so I take it all in, the pretty garden with colorful trees and walkways made of indestructible stone.

Entering the spherical building, I watch the lighting is similar to that of the auction house. The light seems dim and moves slowly as if reflecting the mood of every lynthari we meet on our way.

We reach some stairs which run the entire length of the building leading upstairs, where there seem to be multiple floors, hidden above the lights and illusions on the ceiling. Even then, we ignore the floors and just continue until we reach the top and pass by multiple lynthari guards, one of them was even one of the 12 enforcers we met prior.

Finally, the doors open, and I enter the room as Myrra's bodyguard closes them behind me.

The room is delicately beautiful, and massive circular windows offer a view from anywhere you stand in the room. Myrra stands in the middle of the room, wearing clothes unlike any I have seen her in before. They are less flashy and colorful than the ones she once wore. These are mostly made up of blacks and grays, simple, yet somehow beautiful, making her white hair and tail all the more striking.

The matriarch has led us ever since I was young. I have never known another leader in my entire life, and neither has any other lynthari, she starts, her voice is not as haughty or energetic as it was before, I mean, sure, I fought with her a lot, but what kid hasn't fought with their elders?

Myrra sighs, and I notice a bunch of mana stones on the table nearby, all bearing similar inscriptions, a memory from the matriarch.

She notices where I'm looking, Yes, she left a lot and some things I have learned Taking a few steps, she stops in front of me, She left it up to me to decide what to do with Obelia and the fact that she knows what I just learned. She left it up to me to deal with your group too, feral one.

Myrra reaches and fixes the sleeve of my missing left arm, replaced by one made of mana. I wonder what I should do with you all.

Wont it wait? my eyes meet hers, Right now we both have the same goal.

In the dim light of the room, her canines seem also shining. White and sharp, Yes, we have to deal with the fucking Colony first.

Chapter 249: Craft guild

"Your weapon should work against The First One as well if we're lucky. Most of the skills need at least a bit of mana for activation and upkeep, so disrupting the connection he has to other ants should stop him from receiving their mana, and vitality, or ordering them around," Myrra says.

"Only if we're able to keep him impaled on it. How big is The First One?" I ask.

"His head sits at about the same height as mine. His body is covered in pitch-black matte plating. Unlike other ants, he doesn't shine at all. We don't know what skills he has, but just the raw strength and vitality he received made it near impossible to deal with him."

"It's fine, I already have a plan," I tell her.

"You are quick, feral one. What is it?"

When I explain it to her, she starts talking about things like common sense, calling me an idiot, and the like. We repeat the conversation we had when I told her my plan to kill the Living Tree.

In the end, she sighs, "I'm not even surprised, and somehow this sounds a bit more reasonable than your plan for the Living Tree. For now, prepare for it, and I will set some as well. The matriarch left us some things that should help us hold the fort here in Virelia."

"What about [Kin Control]? Is it gone now that the matriarch has died?"

She seems surprised. "First, I learn the matriarch got her kicks by pretending to be her own granddaughter and teasing the lynthari, then I learn about [Kin Control], and now I find that you probably knew before I did. Tell me, feral one, did she like you so much because you so often feel like a lynthari in human skin? Is it because of your bearing? Are you also a Champion candidate?" Each word she says moves her closer to me.

"It's not my fault, Myrra, it's you guys that keep pestering and bullying me," I say in my defense.

"Sure," she sighs, takes a few steps back, and sits on the windowsill of one of the big circular windows. "[Kin Control] is gone, but I don't think she's even used it lately. She made sure the skill would lose its hold over us as soon as possible and so the ants wouldn't be able to take it over and control us. Now that the matriarch is dead, it should only take a few days."

"So from one point of view, the matriarch was the lynthari's weakness?"

"If you want to think about it that way, feral one, sure. But at the same time, she could do the same to the ants, especially from within the city, so they didn't dare to attack. That's where your friends stepped in."

She stops looking outside. "Before you came here, I spent a lot of time wondering if I should kill your friends, feral one. The last thing we want is for them to fall into the hands of the Colony again." Myrra giggles, her golden eyes shining, "Some lynthari even wanted me to lure you here and deal with your friends while you were busy."

"But?"

"But they don't know you, feral one." she continues, her eyes on me. "Ever since you entered the room, I've felt that thing you've been feeding with your power and that you plan to use against the Colony. I feel your connection with the tower, and I know you can return there quickly. And if we fail, you could end up being a bigger problem than the Calamity."

"A wise choice you told them to fuck off, right?"

She laughs again. "Yes, I did. But tell me and be honest. Would you kill me if I allowed it to happen and your friends died?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that absolute certainty of yours. It stings a bit that you said it without hesitation, but I like it. I like it a lot."

"I will be going then."

When I reach the door, she stops me. "Feral one, I did think about killing you and your friends. For causing her death, however indirectly. She sent us to stop the First One from taking their skills. Maybe she would be alive if the enforcers and I had stayed here."

"Maybe," I pause.

"Yes, maybe. I will see you later, then," she says.

I leave after that, and unsurprisingly, half of the enforcers, the strongest among the lynthari, stand there. Just in case, ready to rush in to protect their new matriarch.

They issue a short greeting as I pass by them, and Myrra's bodyguard leads me to the exit.

"Please be careful," he says before I leave him behind.

Once again, I use kinetic energy to push myself high into the air, and this time, I fly over to check in on the old enchanter, Cael.

The first thing Cael asks me is whether the weapon he and other enchanter's helped me with performed well. The second question is if I could help him get access to what remains of the Living Tree to examine it for materials. It's not until his third question that he asks about the attack on the city and the matriarch's death.

Are all craftspeople like that?

I answer his questions and spend the rest of the day discussing my plans. At some point, the two of us are not enough, and he leads me to the Craft Guild.

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The Craft Guild is one of the biggest buildings in the city and the most luxurious, clearly showing how important their work is. We enter without trouble, and I learn that Cael was once the vice guild master.

Of course.

"Young Sir, please! Look at this enchantment I created!"

"Mister, could you explain how this works for me?"

"It's him! The young man that inscribed that stone!"

"The guild master wanted him as vice guild master"

A bunch of men and women keep pestering us as we pass through the room, and I'm surprised how quickly the information regarding our presence spreads.

It's awkward, the way they keep looking at me like I just invented chocolate or something. As if I'm some kind of celebrity.

How would they look at me if I told them it's mostly my high-level skills, combined with massive quantities of mana, and money that allowed me to perform an amount of testing that would be impossible even for most mid-guilds? Especially when its all being wasted on a single person.

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

Instead, we eventually get rid of these people and reach the highest floor of the building where all the high-ranking enchanters reside, when they are here, and where the guild master is. Six men are already waiting impatiently within the circular room. Cael sent them a message before we arrived.

I stop in front of the door after feeling their presence with my skill.

For a moment, I examine the inscriptions all around me. On the door, in the walls, on the ceiling, inside small mana stones hidden within the floor and connected through web-like pathways. There is so much of it, and just examining them takes my mind off useless stuff.

"They might be getting impatient," Cael says carefully after a few minutes.

I sigh and gesture to an employee nearby, and he opens the door after bowing.

"Master Gwyn, it's such an honor to have you here!" immediately, one of the men attacks me.

"I'm a massive fan of the work youve done!" another one joins in a combined attack.

"Theo, Davi, please, leave it for later and do not pester him. You are old enough to have some self-control," Cael defends me.

"That's easy for you to say. You are keeping him for yourself! You should share..."

"Davi! That's rude to say in front of our guest! " Finally, the guild master of the Craft Guild reacts.

Hes even older than Cael and has long gray hair and an impressive beard. He is the perfect image of a wise old archmage you might see in children's stories. Even a cosplayer couldnt do a better job.

Allow me to welcome you, Mister Gwyn. Cael told me about the things youve been working on, and I was able to find some help. In a few minutes, a few more people will be arriving. They started immediately after they heard about it.

I can only stare at him. For some time, Ive been thinking about what I should do to pay them back for all the help they gave me while I was working on inscriptions to alter the functionality of my epic weapons and the arcanadium shaft that combined them.

But this?

Seeing their faces, hearing them gulp to keep from drooling every time I step closer to the empty mana stones on the table.

Paying them back? Hell no, it looks like I'm not using them enough, seeing their greedy eyes. It's at the point Im starting to have suspicions that I'm the one being taken advantage of.

The door opens and a few more men rush in, excitedly asking if we already started.

I'm too busy, so let's start. If someone else joins later, you can inform them, I take a few steps towards the table in the middle and pull out the epic mana stone Sophie bought for me for 5000 shards and put it on the table, of mid or upper epic grade.

It's as big as a baseball and other than being a storage unit for mana and other energies, it doesn't have any other effect. What makes it an epic item is the amount of energy it can contain. The mana stone already has a lot of thermal energy inside of it, yet I continue to store more, and the golden flames lazily swirl inside.

I look around the room, There are three goals I want to reach.

Their eyes flick between me and the stone.

First, store as much energy as I can inside this stone. Two parts thermal, one part kinetic, without hesitation, I tell them about the Primordial energies I have and ignore the looks of pure shock even Cael gives me.

I need help with this as even now I feel that soon I won't be able to store anymore. It's either the way I store it, the item's rarity, or theres something Im missing. Maybe it's just too much of it; I didn't hold back when I started filling it, unlike the time I created one to bomb the ants. But that doesn't seem to be it; the stone is an epic item, so it should easily handle something like that.

"Second, come up with a mechanism that will release all that energy at once when I want it to, as well as the energies of other filled mana stones near it."

Sure, I could start feeding it to the point where it can't hold anymore and is about to explode. However, unlike orbs made of mana, I don't have as strong a connection to it and it lacks that intuitive feeling. It would be unfortunate if the stone exploded somewhere in Obelia's tower and took a good chunk of the city with it.

Third, there is one of my skills I need to make sure it will work with As I continue to explain, they watch me, a childish curiosity replaced by an academic one, and I can see gears in their heads spinning already as they start coming up with solutions and ideas.

All of them quietly listen and let me talk, waiting for a pause to start talking about how they would go about it.

Yup, let's just fake it and pretend I know what I'm talking about because I need their help. Just one of my orbs is not enough. It would be powerful, yes, but not enough.

I will nuke these bitches into oblivion for touching what is mine.

I return to the tower late that night, more tired than I've been in a long time. Not physically but mentally.

Everyone else is already asleep, and I find the quiet of the tower really comfortable, more so for the fact that no one will try to speak to me this deep into the night.

I pull one of the armchairs out onto the balcony and plop down.

The city is dim and quiet, yet in the distance, I can see the lights all around the trunk of the Living Tree outside of the city. Lynthari guarding it.

Yawning, I stare out at it and think about how I feel about it dying without my contribution. I reflect on what happened and what I could change, but in the end, I stop thinking and just continue to enjoy the quiet.

As if in revenge against my busy day full of meetings, I do not go to sleep and enjoy the feeling of solitude.

Chapter 250: Surrounded

Two days pass, in the same fashion. I wake up, I train, I spend some time with others, I join Cael at the Craft Guild, I meet with Myrra, I rest on my own for a while and experiment with the items I got from the auction. A few weird mana stones with delicate inscriptions and a bracelet that reacted to my energies.

For the bracelet, I already found out that it's the metal that reacts so strangely well to them, and even after asking around, no one was able to identify it, and I got a few offers from curious blacksmiths.

So for now, I decide to keep it and continue examining it. The mana stones are more interesting. The inscriptions aren't anything super powerful; I just like how delicate and intricate they are and I already have plenty of ideas on how I might improve my inscriptions.

What's interesting is that if I'm right, the stones were made to be implanted under the skin of an animal and synchronized with the animal's pathways, all to some effect that I've found impossible to divine from the damaged inscriptions.

But I'm not even annoyed; the inscribed parts are enough to give me a few ideas for improvements to my constructs. Yup, I did not forget about them, and after getting my trait, I plan to go for a huge one and improve on my kinetic mana heart, probably the riskiest and the most powerful of my constructs.

As I said before and will continue to repeat, the second-floor Nathaniel was impressive as heck. Knowing what I know now, I would probably have noped out and never attempted to do something like that. Yet that cute little douche did, and succeeded, even though he almost died. Quite impressive.

So yup, I would like to get a few more levels and get my trait after level 200 from the quest, but in the past few days, I've barely left the tower and only ever for short periods as I maintained an anchor inside.

I also continue to send a trickle of mana toward the anchor I left near the black orb. I do this so the orb takes that mana instead of trying to mess with my anchor. As time passes, the pull on the mana I've been sending through the anchor weakens. This is either due to the black orb weakening and crumbling after days, or the ants dealing with it.

The Colony is confirmed to be sneaking around the city, and the only reason we don't attack is the protections that are especially set against them over long years by the matriarch. Eris had her lynthari and inscribers create massive circuits connected to dozens of power sources all over the city and then used her skill to make everyone forget.

After she died, Myrra and a few other lynthari learned about them from messages left by the matriarch and immediately reactivated them and checked to see if they were working properly.

In the end, it was judged that with how many there were and how many surprises the matriarch left, it would be best to just wait for the ants to attack and use it rather than go on a suicidal mission against the First One powered by the Colony.

From what we've learned, the weaker ants stayed in the Colony, and that number is a high percentage, but they're just doing nothing either.

Nope, the Colony created a set of relays from their territory all the way to the city. Each step of that relay is a big group of ants that receives vitality, mana, and strength from the weaker members staying in the Colony then sends it along, to Virelia through [Hive Mind], where their leader can use it when they decide to attack.

I'm sure there are massive losses, yet the sheer amount of energy they are sending makes up for it.

Of course, that doesn't mean there are no ants surrounding Virelia; nope, there are tens of thousands of them, each of them is one of the stronger variants, and they are still really far away so most people can't even use ranged attacks. Rarely do I see Tess, Min-Jae, Obelia, and other humans or lynthari trying to get in kills, but the ants are protected most of the time.

Surprisingly, Tess still gets some kills since she can see much further than anyone else, and her [Psychokinesis]

Not wanting to be left behind, I take some potshots as well, but I don't see as well as Tess and decide I'd rather use my mana to feed the bomb I'm preparing.

The ants also return fire to force defenders to spend mana on the barrier encompassing the city. This barrier is powered by the mana of their bodies and mana stored in batteries all around the city.

I'm quite fascinated by the way it's created in multiple segments and isn't always active. The barrier is split into hundreds of segments and makes use of something similar to Sophie's web, which reaches far beyond the city.

When the protections are activated, the detection web senses an attack aimed at the city, and through mana stones left behind by old humans and lynthari, it calculates the trajectory of the attack and then activates the required segment of the barrier.

It's much more difficult, and I'm not allowed to get close to the heart of it all, and no one else is. Hell, most of the lynthari and humans don't even know where it is, and there are dozens of fake stations all over the city.

Yet, no matter how good the protections are, most people are nervous and constantly shudder when a segment is activated and attacks crash against it. People scream and complain, and the mood between the lynthari and the humans becomes worse by the day, as rumors spread.

Running away is impossible as the Colony seems to be ever-present and surrounds the entire city, and even try to dig under it, where they find extremely strong layers of stone and traps left behind by the matriarch.

The Colony is highly capable, and its amazing cooperation is hard to imagine a single group being able to deal with, confirming my theory that there are always multiple ways to clear a floor.

Maybe you can face the Fallen Hero on your own as it's a single enemy. For the Colony, you can use Virelia, lynthari, and humans to deal with it. The tree is a single massive target, so maybe it can be dealt with from a distance, maybe it can be poisoned, or maybe you can even use another Calamity against it.

It's still difficult, but there are more options that seem to be testing different sets of skills and slowly introducing us to the worlds where the system exists, to Champion disciples, Champions, Absolutes, to the Pairing, and all that stuff.

It does what the name suggests, even though it is in quite a messed-up way, and that makes me wonder what world we will be introduced to after finishing the tutorial. There were plenty of warnings about what could happen to worlds with people with powers like ours, and it could happen to Earth too.

So, what level will we be when we get out? I already noticed my leveling slowing down for both my skills and level, and I'm not even level 200, with an estimation of a champion being close to or over 500. Maybe around that level for the ones capable of reaching it? Or more probably, Champion candidates,

maybe becoming a Champion will be something that happens outside of the tutorial. I could be wrong, but I don't think I am.

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So far, every floor we visited was rumored to have only a handful of Champions and a single Absolute, with the second floor being an exception, having two before Lissandra killed the second one and the Champions who tried to fight her too.

As for Earth, it could be the same: just a handful of Champions, each being someone from Hell difficulty, with those who got into Beyond being the most probable candidates.

Returning to reality, I first look at my newly restored left arm. It's as pale as before, the same pale shade as our silly healer's restored left arm.

Then I look up at Lily, who is currently sparring with Maya. Sparring and getting her ass kicked.

Once again, Lily falls on her bottom and sighs, "I want to use my skill."

"Nope, no disintegrating Maya," I say.

"Maybe she could try to use it a bit, Nat, I bet I could avoid it." The armor around Maya disappears, and she moves her hair from her sweaty forehead.

"We will get there, but first Lily needs to fight while saving mana and her body parts. She has a very bad habit of losing limbs."

"I know someone similar," I hear Lily mutter.

I decide to ignore it gracefully. "She can't yet sacrifice her items, she doesn't have that much mana, and both of her main skills are very mana-hungry. Do you disagree?"

Maya shrugs her shoulders, "I guess you are right. After sparring with her for a day or two, I can see that. Nothing personal, Lily, but I thought you would be stronger." She smiles and offers Lily her hand to stand up.

That's typical of Maya, always underestimating herself. Does she think I helped her improve [Focus] and [Armament] for nothing, plus her amazing [Boost]? Out of our group, Maya is one of the stronger members. Well, maybe not when it comes to skills and stats or mana. No, she is calm and calculating and has learned to blend her skills, and her fighting style is versatile.

"Lily, the 1st trial takes one hour, the second one takes 7 days, and both of them will be testing your weaknesses. You know what they are, right?"

Yes, I know. I mean, I won't complain about that, Nat, but wouldn't it be better if I could train [Disintegration] too?

Maya giggles a bit, understanding right away.

Lily seems confused, so I answer, See, and that's your problem. Until you are more efficient or capable of using it for longer, it should be your trump card. You created thin threads using it, so we will start with something like that instead of disintegrating an entire monster or wasting huge amounts of your mana on a ranged attack.

At least she is listening, seeing how her eyes are glued to me. We will also teach you to use smaller ranged attacks. Something like orbs instead of arrows. But Lily, that's for later.

I jump to my feet and stretch. We should test how much mana you receive from sacrificing your hair. We can start with a single hair and continue to add more until there is a noticeable effect. Then we will see if you can sacrifice your teeth instead of fingers. It's better to not be able to talk than lose a finger. For a stronger boost, you can sacrifice one kidney instead of an arm or leg.

Maya starts looking a bit uncomfortable and even mutters something, but Lily doesn't seem to mind.

I continue, We will try sacrificing things like your sense of smell, and taste. Maybe you can eat a lot of food and then sacrifice that. Maybe we can have you gain some weight and you could sacrifice your body fat.

My gears are spinning, and I could swear I'm smiling. There are so many options.

You can change your body, Lily. So why do you need items? You can maybe grow another finger for each hand. Maybe you can grow some small fake organs inside you and sacrifice those. You can use my left arm, as we've found out. So what if I cut it off, we store it, you restore my arm, I cut it off again and you leave for Beyond or another fight with multiple arms to use to power your skills."

Ew, Maya says.

Amazing, Lily's eyes are almost glowing.

So leave it up to me, we'll make a badass out of you yet.

Yes! Lily shouts.

A few days later we all stand around the chest from the Champions house.

Yes, the time has come. It took months of curiosity, impatience, and frustration. We had people try to open it, we used skills, we used items. I even risked it and created a tiny orb of black mana, yet nothing helped.

Not even Biscuit could open it after I told him there was better meat than the cut of Archdeer we bought at the auction.

I look around the room and catch the eyes of Izzy, who smiles at me brightly. Lately, I've become her second favorite human and the 4th favorite member of group 4 after Sophie, Noodle, and Biscuit. The ten, no, eleven-year-old girl hugs me every time she sees me and rarely leaves Sophie's side.

The twins are here as well, all four legs back and smiling. It's not the same smile they had before, but it's close. Thanks to Sophie, the memory has become more distant. Not quite gone, and the emotions are still there, but they use that as fuel, and over the past few days, I've seen them train extremely hard, even coming to Sophie and the others for advice.

Min-Jae continues to explain his process, and I listen to him with one ear while looking around the room. Everyone from group 4 is still here, safe and healthy. I can also say it's partially thanks to me, and it's getting harder and harder to lie to myself.

It's a weird feeling, as it's been years since I had someone I could even consider a friend or someone I kept seeing day after day and created a bond with. It's almost like camaraderie, like Tess talked about.

I look to the left and catch Tess's eyes, and her expression clearly shows that she has some idea of my thoughts. She smiles brightly, her steel gray eyes returning my gaze without wavering.

I have a few pieces of Archdeer jerky saved, call Tess an asshole, I lift Biscuit and whisper into his ear.

(Asshole!) he shouts before I even finish the sentence.

That only makes Tess smile even more.

So, as I said, I think this crest is something like a magnet activated by gravity-type skills, and I noticed pathways through the chest, so if I do this, Min-Jae, excitedly moves to the chest after using his skills to activate the crest.

Then he puts the crest on the chest, and even though none of us can feel anything, he moves it across the chest multiple times in specific patterns. Clicking noises sound out one after another, and finally, he lifts the crest, sending more mana through it and places it on one last point, before taking a step back.

Ready for anything, we step back, and I get ready to activate my skills.

I think it won't open on its own, I say and create mana arms that reach from me and try to open the chest.

Feeling how heavy the lid is, I create a few more and then slowly open it.

Curious, everyone takes a step closer and looks at the single item inside, a transparent glass tube filled with watery liquid. The tube is floating exactly in the middle of the chest, and inside that tube is a single thing.

A human eye with a yellowed iris.

There is no text from the system over it. No name, no rarity. This is not something that could be considered an item; it's just an eye.

The eye of someone who was extremely powerful, from what I can sense.