

Tutorial 251

Chapter 251: Eye

I keep looking at the tube and just wait for the word that will surely follow.

It's inevitable.

(Food?)

No, it's not food, I answer and only then scan the eye with my mana.

As I thought, the eye is different in a way that's difficult to properly detect. The pathways feel normal, and yet it's not a normal eye. Maybe the eye has been changed by a trait the original owner had. Maybe it's because it belonged to a high-level being.

I take the tube and look at it up close. I wonder, if we have the leisure of dealing with it right now, what with an attack from the Colony due anytime? Will it even be useful?

Nat, do you think you could gain a cool new power if you replaced your eye with this? Min-Jae steps closer, clearly excited by the idea.

I don't know, to be honest. Even if this eye contains some skill, trait, or whatever, could you gain it as well? How does the system work in such a case? I think about it.

These modifications aren't anything we've seen before.

What if you could just acquire a trait that modifies your eye, then transfer the trait by removing the eye, and implanting it in someone else, then have a healer restore your eye? Does it mean you could repeat it dozens, hundreds of times and give people the same trait you have? I ask.

Logically, probably, yes, Sophie joins in, But the eye you transfer could reject the host regardless of one's ability to use it or there could be other requirements for the trait to reactivate.

Would the system even allow that? Hadwin asks.

It could be a weaker version of the original, or it could be possible if the original owner was dead, and you had a host capable of using it! Min-Jae takes the tube from my hand and I let him.

Min-Jae continues to stare at it, Even now I feel a connection to my skill, Nat! At first, I thought it was [Gravity Well], but now it feels like a weird combination of [Gravity Well] and [Telekinesis]!

Tess takes the tube from him, It's not that simple, Kim. I know where youre going with this, but we know nothing about it. We don't know if it's possible, we don't know if Lily can transfer it, and we don't know if it will hurt you. She glances at the tube once more before putting it back into the chest.

Why would you store it if not for something like that? Min-Jae's eyes do not leave the tube.

I mean, there is some logic in it, and I grab it again, probing with my mana. There is no reaction at all, nor do I feel the connection Min-Jae mentioned, so I look at him. He isn't lying in hopes of getting the eye for himself, right?

I'm not lying, I really sense something! he complains immediately, as if he knows what I'm thinking.

Are you guys really thinking of pulling an eye out and replacing it with this thing we just found? I mean, what the fuck. Maya says like a normal person.

Maya, wanna bet it's a super super strong eye that could give you an amazing ability? Aaron pokes at her.

Maybe it will allow you to see into the future, Dennis nods.

Maya only shakes her head, Or it might give you some ancient infection even Lily won't be able to heal."

There is risk, of course, but it was hidden in a chest that we couldnt damage at all, that itself came from the Champions manor, so it has to be good for something, I say.

Is this some sort of hidden reward? An eye with some kind of ability? If so, is it for specific people? People like Min-Jae? He is the only one sensing anything from it.

I grab the tube. Everyone, try to probe it with a bit of your mana and see if you sense anything.

The tube slowly passes from person to person, and everyone just shakes their head. Izzy even quickly passes it while saying Ew. When the tube comes into Min-Jae's hands, he passes some mana through, and the eye noticeably reacts. The yellow iris glowing slightly.

Oh great, it was a flashlight in the end, Dennis giggles.

Min-Jae continues to channel more and more mana through it, but the eye just glows a bit, a hint of circuitry ever so slightly visible on the surface. The way the boy looks at me makes his intention clear.

Once again, I take the tube from him and examine it even more carefully, channeling different kinds of energy through it, I even try resonating my mana and changing the frequencies.

The eye doesn't react to me the way it does for Min-Jae.

After all these months and all this excitement, the goddamn thing I'd hoped would be equivalent to Peacemaker or the Sword of Aeons is a glorified flashlight. Should I still try to use it? Maybe I could slowly learn how to control and use whatever it contains.

My eyes meet those of Min-Jae, and he seems to know what I'm thinking. Yet he still smiles, You did most of the work, and it's probably safest for you to use it, Nat. Sorry, I didn't want to make it sound like I'm too shameless he sighs.

Feeling someone's gaze on me, I look up and meet Tess's eyes. The tall blonde asshole of a manipulator is smiling, she clearly knows what's going through my head. Even Izzy tries to connect to my feelings, but I don't allow her to.

Damn it. Damn it!

Once again, I try to channel my mana through the eye, and it doesn't react at all.

Whatever, I didn't want it anyway.

I throw the tube at Kim. I have that black mana thingy that I'm slowly getting the hang of; I don't need the creepy eye of some long-dead asshole.

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Nat I Min-Jae starts.

Shut up, you twerp, I interrupt as I locate Lily and gesture for her to come closer, Well do it right away since we don't know when the Colony will attack.

Lily and I sit on the floor, as Kim lies down next to us, his head between us. He's surprised at how quickly things proceed, and hes shaking already.

Heh, you didn't expect this to happen so quickly, right, you greedy little jerk?

Replacing his eye should be easy with the new skill Lily received when she combined [Rejuvenation] and [Reshaping]

The plan is simple. Lily will use [Disintegration] to painlessly destroy your eye. I will channel my mana through you, Min-Jae, and you will let me; it might hurt a bit because I will need to use a lot of it. That mana will be there just in case the new eye pulls some kind of bullshit.

I have plenty of experience with [Infusion] now, so this should be simple if he allows it, which he is capable of.

I will also surround the eye with my mana, so I can disrupt it if it tries anything. Lily will also have [Disintegration] prepared. In the worst case, we will destroy it and Lily will reconstruct your eye, I say.

It's a simple plan, but things like that tend to work the best.

I also prepare more scenarios in my head. I can use [Tether] to place an anchor on the eye and try to teleport it away. I can create a barrier around Min-Jae's brain and blow off his face, which would be quite a bad experience, but its workable if something does happen.

Now, before we start, I will examine it once more, I say as I open the tube, which is surprisingly easy. I put my finger into the thing and touch the eye directly, focusing the full power of my [Perception] on it.

There is no sense in asking anyone else in the city for help. After all the weeks Ive spent here, Ive come to realize that the amount of mana I have and my skill combinations make me one of the best in Virelia when it comes to this, probably the best now that good ol' Elydor is dead. May we meet again one day.

Examining the eye, I find more pathways I can easily identify as channels for mana to activate the eye and its powers, whatever they are. I examine it extremely carefully over and over again, looking for memory constructs, traps, some creepy virus, memories, anything really.

And then again.

And again.

Multiple hours pass like that, and Lily pokes me multiple times while Min-Jae continues to shift nervously. In the back of my mind, I hear some of them talking, bored.

I consolidate my [Focus], activate [Mana Domain] around the eye, and constantly use [Resonance] to disrupt any mana that could be left.

[Perception - lvl 39 > Perception - lvl 40]

And I find nothing. After probably hundreds of years, nothing remains inside the eye.

Pass some of your mana through, I say to Min-Jae, and he quickly nods, touching it, and doing as I say.

Then I start examining it again. There is some effect the eye is trying to produce, but it doesn't seem to be transmitting that effect through the optical nerve hanging from it. It's more like it projects in front of it and shares information through the nerve.

Well, let's do it.

Ready? I ask Lily.

She quickly nods and listens as I explain the steps to her one after another while Min-Jae nervously stares up.

I will try not to make it hurt, she tells him and puts her finger on his right eye.

Left one! he shouts quickly, and with a sigh, Lily does it.

I activate [Redistribution] and restrain his movement while infusing him with my mana as he lowers his defenses. It's a lot of mana, and he shudders in pain, as much as he can under the effect of my skill, and I gesture to Lily.

With a short blast of gray mana, his eye disappears, and immediately her mana rushes in, staunching the bleeding and healing it. Noting a lack of space, she uses [Disintegration] again, and more of his flesh disappears.

The entire time I'm carefully observing and moving my mana through his head, ready to shield his brain.

Lily quickly ignores the terrified expression in his remaining eye and the pain he must be feeling then pulls the yellow eye from the tube. After inserting it into the socket, she maneuvers it slightly, and I help by creating a thin thread of mana and moving the optical nerve into place.

She uses more of her mana, and the wound quickly heals, regrowing skin, part of an eyebrow, and his eyelid. It immediately covers up the wound, and then she focuses on the inside, letting her skill and experience lead her. She works on the connections very carefully, connecting all the nerves and muscles, giving herself enough time to do it properly.

Meanwhile, I continue observing the entire process and have my mana ready to activate the countermeasures.

Soon its done, and I release Min-Jae from my hold.

His eyelid moves, and he blinks a few times, both of his eyes moving as he looks around. the light brown original and the new yellow one. They both look the same and move the same, the only difference is the yellow color.

I observe as his mana slowly moves and gradually starts circulating through the new eye the same way it does with the original. Lily also is ready, her fingers close as the mana slowly reactivates it.

Then Min-Jae actively cycles his mana through the eye, just a little bit, a whiff, and the circular circuits on the iris glow slightly.

I feel fine, he says and cycles more mana through it, the circuits activating more fully.

The eye produces an effect that I identify as something like a combination of Tesss [Farsight] and my [Perception].

It's really weird, I see these waves everywhere, and theres this creepy sensation to it, Min-Jae reaches out with his hand as if he is touching something invisible.

Then he channels some of his mana into the air, activating his skill. His eye activates a bit more, and he closes his hand into a fist.

At that moment, something in the room changes that is hard to identify, and a big chunk of the wall gets torn off and compressed into a small point, reducing all that stone into a smooth ball barely bigger than a golf ball.

It takes a huge chunk of Min-Jae's mana to create that effect, about half of it.

Huh? he mutters and does it again.

Another big chunk of the wall gets torn off and with immense gravitational force pulled towards the center where it's then squeezed, and compressed.

The rest of his mana disappears, and Min-Jae wobbles, on the brink of passing out from the strain of using too much mana too quickly, yet he smiles, and both of his eyes shine with excitement.

Like me, he knows this is only the start of what the eye will allow him to do and my suspicion is as good as confirmed. The eye must have belonged to someone very powerful to allow him to use his skills this way, even with his relatively low level. Maybe a Champion or at least a high-level Champion candidate.

Chapter 252: Obsession

After Min-Jae restores some of his mana, we do a few more tests, and I conclude that the eye is not giving him a new ability. It seems to allow him to utilize his skills more effectively or combine them?

It's hard to say what exactly it does, and he says his connection to his skills improved, whatever that means, and that he can see waves that he suspects are gravitational, again, whatever that means.

So, what he did was channel his skill through that wave with a bit of mana and caused a spark, as he calls it, that in turn created a small orb of extreme gravity.

It takes a lot of mana, but it's something I think he should be capable of doing on his own in the future. So that's it? Is the eye that weak, or does he just need some time to utilize it fully? Well, he seems happy and becomes even happier when he tries his [Telekinesis] and learns that he can use these waves to move heavier projectiles as well, so he goes to practice just that.

I think it's a good thing, he was starting to lag behind a bit and lately has been in a bad mood, Tess says the moment Min-Jae leaves with the twins and Lily to test it more.

Kim focuses too much on comparing himself to other people and puts heavy expectations on himself, Hadwin shakes his head, He compares himself to you especially often, he says looking at me.

That's dumb; he shouldn't do that, I respond.

But he does. Even his subclass, envy, confirms it. He looks up to you, and he wants to be like you. One day it could kill him, Hadwin stands up, looking at me.

Min-Jae is his own person, Haddy. If this is the way he wants to live, he can. If he thinks it's worth risking his life to reach that, he can do it as well, I return his gaze.

Kim is just a kid, he is young and dumb, Hadwin's voice becomes a bit louder. I've tried to speak with him multiple times, but he only listens to you. You should talk to him.

The room becomes quiet, and everyone looks at Hadwin and me as I continue, Then, let me ask you, what will happen if I do speak with him? I can even beat him up a bit if you want me to, I can force him to take it easier. It wouldn't be difficult, and I know the words.

Tess pokes me slightly, but I ignore her and continue, What will happen if we leave the 4th floor and get split again? What if we end up on a floor where everyone's on their own? Do you think every floor will be like this one? Giving us time to prepare in comfort? Things will inevitably go to shit sooner or later.

We can stay here longer, we can train until we're ready, and move on then, Hadwin sighs. I know where you are going with this, and I partially agree with you, but there has to be a middle ground, his voice sounds a bit weaker.

Probably, but look at it this way. Currently, he has multiple stronger people around, and then we have our own pocket healer. When other than now will he get a better opportunity to push himself?

Fuck, I hate how much sense it makes, Hadwin shakes his head.

Tess also joins in, You also forgot one thing, Hadwin. Kim might be young, but he is not a kid. Sure, he is a bit more impulsive than someone older, but he can make his own decisions. her voice becomes softer. You know about his family situation back on earth and how much he hated his life there where they controlled him entirely. I think hes much happier now, however weird that is.

Haddy is just worried! Isabella interjects, clearly annoyed, You all talk so much, just look! She exclaims before activating her skill.

I let it connect to me, and I sense it's connection to everyone else in the room, as a feeling of anxiety flows into me. It's a pure and nice feeling, like a parent worried about their child.

Then I realize that Isabella is sharing Hadwin's feelings with us and cut the connection.

Sophie realizes it as well and hits the back of her sister's head, Izzy! You can't do it without asking! she shouts at her.

Meanwhile, I look at Hadwin and notice that the older man with his elegant haircut and well-kept beard seems to be the most embarrassed here.

At the same time, Tess giggles next to me. Not maliciously, as if she were making fun of someone. She just seems to be amused.

Leaving another session with Cael and the craft guild and with another set of inscriptions engraved onto the epic mana stone, I reach the branch of one of the highest trees and for a moment sit there, observing the sections of the barrier activating.

The attacks from the ants are more frequent now and getting stronger. They come from all sides, Virelia being totally surrounded.

Some ants must have detected me because multiple times in a row the segment far across from me activates, blocking the attacks aimed at me.

Cheeky fuckers.

Once again, I feel the need to move, to attack them, to jump into their lines, but stop myself from doing so. It might be just what they want. The important thing right now is to not allow them to get Sophie and the twins, and to not allow the First One to evolve his skill.

While knowing that, I stand up, and [Regalia] activates, and I start creating a javelin that increases in size and grows until it's three times as long as me and as thick as my arm. I push more mana into it, the javelin turning dark blue with streaks of light blue.

Now then, what should I infuse it with?

I pick [Resonance] and infuse the weapon with its effect. Then, while being careful, I spend a few more minutes and try to create temporary inscriptions on my mana weapon. It's difficult, and they constantly keep tearing apart, so I simplify them by stabilizing the javelin.

Gradually, I push more mana into the tip of the weapon and [Focus] it to a much smaller point, making the tip turn black and start to suck on my mana. Quickly, I make a few more changes, hoping that the black tip will dominate the mana it comes into contact with and transfer a small amount of it into the [Resonance] infused javelin.

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I let my heart beat a few times, creating just enough kinetic energy, and then use it all to push the javelin.

It pierces through the air like a flash and passes through the one-directional barriers surrounding Virelia.

When it reaches the ants' defenses far away, it resonates and passes through them as if they are non-existent, and hits the ground near a bigger group of the ants as they quickly surround it. The ants do what I thought they would; they start channeling more mana towards it, trying to tear it apart.

It's too far for me to sense, but the javelin dominates more of their mana, and for a short while, it uses that to strengthen the [Resonance] enchantment I've set to have the effect of my old skill, [Oscillation].

The javelin untangles into long threads of mana, coated in an oscillating effect, and cutting through most of the ants.

[You have defeated Barrier ant - lvl 166]

[You have defeated Flame Legion ant - lvl 169]

[You have defeated Gravity ant - lvl 151]

[You have defeated Gravity ant - lvl 199]

[You have defeated Ant warrior - lvl 180]

[Lvl 189 > Lvl 190]

I create another javelin, and this time I do something different. [Tether] activates, and I create an anchor on the blade and then another one near where I am standing.

The javelin receives the last infusion of disrupting mana, and I shoot it at the ants, this time toward a different spot. It pierces through the barrier again, and I activate the anchor, appearing in front of the ants.

Immediately, I feel the effect of dozens of skills trying to affect me as my Mantle fights against them with the aid of the [Resonance] barrier I've created.

The kinetic energy converts into thermal, and I compress it as much as I can like I did back in the Colony.

I project a golden beam in front of me as thin as my finger, and reminiscent of a laser, cutting dozens of ants apart as I fuel it with more and more energy from my wildly beating heart. I pour all my frustration into it, compressing the beam even further and redirecting it constantly as they continue to create barriers to block it and strengthen them.

The skills trying to affect me weaken, and some melee range ants dash at me only to be cut in half. The notifications about kills ring somewhere in the background while I do it as efficiently as possible, monitoring the area around me.

Then I feel a terrifying pressure reaching towards me and immediately activate the anchor I created.

The pressure tries to disrupt the activation of my skills, but I fight against it with [Resonance] and disappear from the spot, reappearing back on the branch of the tree.

I skip notifications about kills and look at the skills.

[Resonance - lvl 34 > Resonance - lvl 35]

[Tether - lvl 14 > Tether - lvl 15]

Well, that last bit was a bit dangerous. Was it the First One, or just some highly coordinated attack? I would love to jump in multiple times, but a suspicion tells me that the quickly improving and evolving Colony would be able to analyze my anchors and [Tether]. After a few tries, they could stop me from using them, and that would become dangerous.

A few more notifications ring, and curious where they are coming from, I look towards the place I shot the first javelin tipped with black mana, and that area seems to have become hell for the ants.

Dozens of threads of mana as thin as my pinkie swirl around from the remains of what used to be the javelin, and the threads with oscillation coating cut through the ants even now, to my surprise.

The ants made a huge mistake and used a mana-hungry skill to stop it, only to find a nasty surprise in the black mana thing, whatever it is. That little black tip of highly focused mana constantly takes most of

the mana the ants throw at it and uses a small part of it to fuel the remainder of the javelin and threads of mana while corroding the temporary inscriptions I left on it.

But good things do not last, and soon the inscriptions crumble, and that small black part dominates the javelin, absorbing the mana to fuel itself.

The ants finally identify the effect and, to my surprise, instead of trying to destroy it, they just create a field around it that seems to block all surrounding mana from getting to it and leave it as is.

Just for the fun of it, I create another javelin, turning the tip of it into black mana, and this time fill it with thermal energy and connect it to the black mana like I did before, with inscriptions.

The javelin once again passes through the barrier, but the moment it reaches behind it, the black part immediately devours the rest of the javelin, either because my balance is too off or I messed up with the inscriptions.

The ants once again surround it with some field and leave it there.

Well, enough playing; let's visit Obelia, as I promised Tess.

When we reach her office, we get in without incident and are left alone with the Storm Brigade guild master.

You seem serious, Tess. Did something happen?

Tess nods. I want to ask you to please stop spreading the rumor of the lynthari invasion of this planet, she says directly, without beating around the bush.

I have to remind you that this planet is called Nebulon, and the lynthari ARE the invaders here, Tess, Obelia says directly, her eyes flicking to me for a moment.

Then Obelia grows cautious. Her body straightens up, and I see her subtly warming her muscles and letting more mana flow into her body. She is getting ready for a fight.

Tess notices it as well but ignores it. I agree, but I don't think this is the right time.

I disagree, Obelia stands up. No one from the human guilds is dumb enough to fight lynthari now, and we will all cooperate, she walks around her table and stands in front of us. What will happen after the Colony is dealt with will be up to them.

You are worried that Myrra will try to kill you after the war before you can spread the information. So you want humans to know in the event that the lynthari are weakened and they decide to fight, Tess realizes it the same moment I do.

Obelia doesn't answer, but she doesn't have to even confirm it; she takes the tiniest step toward the door, and an item in her pocket activates.

Don't, I warn her, and our eyes meet.

For a moment, she returns my gaze, her eyes wild and threatening, Would you really do that? she asks, her mana not stopping and filling her body even more.

Yes, I answer with absolute certainty.

"Before things get out of control, why don't we do it like this," Tess interrupts us quickly, "Be more careful spreading it, spend much more effort on making sure there isn't any trouble during the war with the Colony. After we deal with the Colony, humans can decide what to do. Nat and I don't care about what happens afterward."

Tess starts sounding more threatening, "If you decide, you can murder each other, Obelia. Fight against lynthari, burn the city to the ground, you are free to do whatever you want when this fight is over. But I won't allow you to risk the lives of my companions over your obsession."

Obelia looks between me and Tess and nods, "Deal."

The entire time, I observe her curiously.

It's fascinating how much a logically thinking person can change their behavior when it comes to the things that matter to them.

Chapter 253: Against the Colony

After getting back, I train on my own until my head starts to hurt. I keep trying to improve efficiency and create tiny black mana orbs that crumble on their own after a while. They take quite a large amount of mana for their size, and I have to reduce the amount I channel into the mana stone I'm charging, but I think it's worth it.

The last king seemed to recognize the black mana, and he was close with the Absolute of their planet, so it surely is something good or scary. Or even better, both. Even I myself am not sure what it is.

I suspect that it's just something similar to the second stage of Mana upgrade Potency, the Dynamic mana. Or it could be something similar to Lissandra's [Singularity], with its effects limited to mana while requiring huge amounts of mana to use.

Back then, when I created a black dagger from it, I was able to cut the connection between the king's crown and the Saint's healing powers. A connection that I could barely sense and couldn't affect with any of my skills, a connection that had been weakened, though, it was made by an Absolute.

The other thing it did was ignore the king's absorption ability, the sheer density of mana having been enough to avoid the skill.

Then there was the case in the Colony territory where a smaller black orb absorbed an amount of mana that was enough to turn a Mana Channeler ant into a massive bomb, powered by hundreds and thousands of other ants.

And the last case where I was able to create a tiny black mana thing that, through inscriptions for a few seconds, continued to power my skill by dominating the mana of the enemy.

That last part gave me a few ideas on how to finally utilize it and do something I've wanted to do ever since I saw Lissandra doing it, the reason I spent months examining the epic Ethercrystal shortsword.

Maybe I can finally absorb mana. Not ambient mana like Lissandra did, that much is still impossible, no, maybe I can absorb the mana of attacks made against me.

I will use [Focus], [Redistribution], and [Mana Domain] to that end, and damn, will I need a lot of healing to test it properly and to get a feel for it.

Once again, I will have to rely on Lily and her crown, but it's fine; our silly healer improved a lot in the past few days. She just needed some instruction, and when she got it, the speed of her improvement became staggering, like with Maya, after I gave her my advice or even Kim a long time before.

Most of the time, I thought it was better to leave them on their own to come up with their own ideas, and they did, they really did, but now that I think about it, maybe I shouldn't just end things at that. I myself learned a lot of my skills by observing others. [Disruption] from Hadwin, and [Armament] from Maya, for example, even my [Regalia] came to me from Maya's ideas. Let's just hope they don't get lazy and rely on me too much.

So, should I take this responsibility and try to be a bigger influence on their growth and give them some pointers? I could make them much stronger short term, but it could make them overly reliant. Or would it just be a slight push to further their improvement?

With a sigh, I hold my right arm in front of me and continue drawing inscriptions on it with mana-conductive paint. The paint is extremely expensive and made of dust from pulverized mana stones, iron particles, and other components that are kept secret. The paint needs to be used quickly, and when you channel mana through it, it becomes extremely durable and hard to remove from skin.

It's my first time using it, but I do not hesitate as I draw a mix of circuits and inscriptions on my arms, inspired by my experiments with the black-tipped mana javelin.

Yes, the plan is simple. I will create a black orb that will absorb mana and attacks, and my arm will transfer that mana to me, then I will use [Resonance] to change its frequency in combination with [Redistribution] to make it my own.

As Dennis would say, this is an extremely ghetto way to do it.

Exactly how I like it.

Of course, my arm might explode if I do a poor job while creating the black mana and use too much or too little, but it's something for emergencies. I don't have to use it, but it's better to be prepared.

It could also be useless, as the orb takes a lot of mana to create, so if I can't absorb more than I used to create it, I will end up with a net loss.

Well, whatever.

I finish the last inscription and send my mana through it, and the lines glow for a moment. I do it again, and this time I use [Resonance] to cut into my skin just under the lines and infuse them with more mana, strengthening the effect.

If I had more time, I would rather prepare a construct, but this is the most I can do at the moment.

I look up at the constant shower of attacks that currently light up the night sky. They are timed to constantly activate a few segments of the barrier, and at this point, they feel more like a psychological attack. The First One is here, and the citizens of the city shudder under the siege. No one seems to be able to sleep, and a lot of people are out on the streets or hiding in bunker-like facilities. It's nearly impossible to find anyone without some amount of armor or a weapon.

I jump from my balcony and land in one of the sitting rooms, and even before I enter, I hear slow, soft music reminding me of tones I used to hear on Earth, unlike any music I've heard here.

For a moment, I listen, and a weird feeling of familiarity and coziness washes over me, and then I enter the room.

Maya is sitting on the couch, holding a violin-like instrument she plays on. She makes mistakes and misses notes, but the music she plays makes me want to ignore those small imperfections.

Tess is there as well, with her eyes closed and a distant smile on her lips. She is sitting near Maya, leaning against her, and even humming along to Maya's playing.

I catch Isabella's eyes, and she brings a finger to her lips and taps the seat next to her. I oblige and sit down, which causes Noodle to slither from the little girl's arms and climb onto me. Used to it already, I send bits of my mana towards him. The white snake is heavier than before and a bit bigger, yet he is still young and really weak. He might have the blood of some ancient beast but he hasn't shown any powers as of yet.

Out of nowhere, he straightens up and quickly leaves my lap, climbing back onto Izzy.

That's when Biscuit appears and floats up onto my lap. I hear him growl quietly, and the white snake seems like he's bowing his head, and only then does Biscuit calm down and woofs at me.

Obedying his order, I pet him.

The sounds of attacks crashing against the barrier mix with Maya's music as our entire group sits there and quietly listens.

Soon the attacks become more frequent and impactful, and the vibrations can be felt. Some people even scream in alarm, and constant waves of mana wash over the city, strengthening the segments of the barriers and activating secondary defenses.

And Maya plays, slowly, gently. Her fingers move more nimbly, and the expression on her face is distant, and she smiles sadly.

I look to the twins, as they lean against each other, exchanging constant messages through their skill. Even now, they don't seem to be back to their normal selves, and out of all of us, seem to be the most worried about what's to come.

Min-Jae, beside them, his eyes on Maya. His original brown and the new yellow eye. The atmosphere around him is different now. He seems more confident, but not in a bad way. Unlike before, when confidence felt forced and fake like a threatened animal raising its hackles to appear bigger. He is calmer now as if the power he just acquired gave him the hope he needed.

Sophie, next to Izzy, is working on multiple mana stones and etching similar inscriptions into each of them. Just from observing them a bit, I know that the stones are meant to work together, probably strengthening the web she constantly layers around herself in preparation for the clash of her [Manipulation] against the First One's [Hive Mind].

Hadwin, sitting near the doors, seems protective, by the way he's looking around. He is in full armor as he has been these past few days, and I can feel him constantly using his [Strengthening] to make it more durable.

Then there is Tess, her eyes closed as she leans against Maya. Over her head, a [Stormcrown] hovers, creating shadows and crackling quietly as she continues to fill it with a terrifying degree of Primordial lightning.

And Lily, a petite black-haired girl holding a crown in her hands and playing with it, making a few last changes to it and her body. Her hair is longer than before, and there are more changes inside her as well, as per my suggestions. An epic bow is to her left.

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For a moment, I just sit there as well, enjoying the mood of the room and the people surrounding me.

The word (Friends,) sounds in my head, and I look down at Biscuit, who returns my gaze.

I guess, I whisper to him.

(Friends,) he repeats.

I

(Friends.) He puts more weight on this word.

Maybe, I finally agree with him.

That's when the strongest explosion so far sounds throughout the entire city, and even the tower we are in shakes.

An alarm follows immediately, and Maya stops playing. That's it, I guess, she says.

That's it, Tess stands up, and her eyes meet the gaze of each of us. Stay safe, everyone.

A few more words and awkward hugs are exchanged.

I will continue as planned then, I say and activate my skill.

Nat Tess starts, but I do not let her finish. After Lily hands me a crown I immediately put it on my head and activate [Tether].

I appear in front of Myrra, who is surrounded by twelve enforcers. I reach the table and ignore Myrras words. There are multiple mana stones filled with mana, fire, poison-like feeling stuff, and other things. Theyre all like my mana stone filled with thermal and kinetic energy.

Examining them for a moment, I take my mana stone out as well as a plate made from highly conductive metal.

I place my mana stone in the middle, and around that, I set other mana stones filled by lynthari and humans. The stones Ive added to mine are as filled as mine or more, and they start to hum quietly, all of that energy in one place is terrifying.

My hand hovers over it and I breathe out, and in. I make last-minute changes to a few lines and activate the thing. The skill, Ive constantly fed with a trickle of mana to prevent it from disappearing, also activates.

[Tether - lvl 15 > Tether - lvl 16]

[Tether - lvl 16 > Tether - lvl 17]

[Tether - lvl 17 > Tether - lvl 18]

[Tether - lvl 18 > Tether - lvl 19]

Then I feel resistance, a barrier the ants must have set up around the anchor I left behind with the black orb down in the tunnels. [Resonance]

[Resonance - lvl 35 > Resonance - lvl 36]

Someone actively fights against me, feeling the danger and the amount of mana I'm trying to transfer.

I consolidate my [Focus] and continue to change frequencies, only to be stopped by them being changed again. The game continues for a while, and I totally shut out Myrra in the background. The world becomes black and white, with mana stones in front of me shining with a brilliant light that hurts my eyes. I feel my head start to hurt, but I push more, and the crown activates, filling me with warm mana.

[Resonance - lvl 36 > Resonance - lvl 37]

The presence is pushing against me, fighting, trying to stop me, and I realize that it's the First One.

A wave of rage washes over me, but I push it to the back of my mind and continue the effort, further activating the crown and healing me.

[Resonance - lvl 37 > Resonance - lvl 38]

Finally, I get a step ahead, and before the frequency changes can stop me, I activate my skill once again.

[Tether - lvl 19 > Tether - lvl 20]

The plate with the stones disappears, and a moment later, I feel an attempt to exploit the lingering connection and send the stones back, but it's something I've already anticipated.

Somewhere on the other side, the set of inscriptions I prepared for this case activates and disrupts the efforts, and another wave destroys the connection.

Then there is quiet, a terrifying quiet.

I return to the room, and a short blast of kinetic energy destroys the window, and I leave and get on top of the building.

The amount of mana that I feel from behind the barrier almost makes me vomit. It's the First One, absorbing as much mana as he can through the relay that leads here the entire way from the Colony territory. He is doing it to get as much as he can before the connection cuts off.

I look towards where the territory is.

[You have defeated Worker ant - lvl 71]

[You have defeated Flame Legion ant - lvl 119]

[You have defeated Gravity ant - lvl 101]

[You have defeated Gravity ant - lvl 79]

[You have defeated Gravity ant - lvl 93]

[You have defeated Ant warrior - lvl 60]

[You have defeated Worker ant - lvl 81]

[You have defeated Worker ant - lvl 68]

...

The notifications continue to ring constantly, line of text after line of text, nearly all of the ants at 100 or lower, the weaker ants left behind in the safety of the Colony to fuel their attack effort through a set of relays.

[Lvl 190 > Lvl 191]

[Lvl 191 > Lvl 192]

[Lvl 192 > Lvl 193]

[Lvl 193 > Lvl 194]

My lynthari, human joint attack continues to give me and everyone else involved, including the few members of group 4 who were able to fill weaker mana stones.

The lights appear far away on the horizon against the shadow of the giant anthills, and even the clouds in the sky are bathed from below in multi-hued light. Orange mixed with blue, yellow, gold, and green.

Before the set of relays feeding the First One with mana from the Colony cuts off, he harnesses all he can connect to. Simultaneously, he throws it against the city barriers, causing them to immediately crash and crumble under the force. A green attack crashes against the city like a wave, destroying buildings and killing thousands of people in the area.

The barrier tries to reactivate again, but the wave locates its sources and obliterates them, and then slowly particles of mana from what used to be the barrier start falling from the sky.

And the notifications continue.

[Lvl 198 > Lvl 199]

[Lvl 199 > Lvl 200]

[Lvl 200 > Lvl 201]

[Lvl 201 > Lvl 202]

Congratulations, you have completed a side quest. You can now pick your second trait. Please remember that humans are limited to three traits in total. Choose carefully.

Your traits are based on your performance up until now within the tutorial.

Mana-Responsive Musculature

Enhances the user's muscular strength in direct correlation with their mana levels. The greater the mana, the more pronounced the physical strength, enabling the user to perform impressive physical feats that go beyond ordinary capabilities. This enhancement adapts to the user's mana levels, making it highly effective in various scenarios that demand physical prowess, from combat to challenging physical tasks.

Mana-Dependent Regeneration

This trait enables the user's body to utilize their personal mana reserves to accelerate the natural healing process. Unlike standard healing, which is typically constant, this regeneration rate dynamically scales with the user's available mana. When the user's mana levels are high, the healing is significantly faster, but it slows as mana diminishes.

Arcane Skeletal Framework

Alters the user's skeletal structure to efficiently conduct and store various forms of energy, including mana. This not only strengthens the bones, making them more durable and resistant to damage but also creates an internal energy reservoir. This reservoir provides a steady supply of energy, augmenting their magical capabilities.

Compact Mana Heart

Transforms the user's heart into an organ capable of sustaining and compressing mana. This modification enhances the effectiveness of all mana-based abilities and reduces the physical and magical exhaustion typically associated with high-level spellcasting. The heart's ability to compress mana allows for more efficient and potent use of magical powers.

Mana Wavelength Iris

This trait endows the user with the ability to perceive a vast spectrum of mana wavelengths, far beyond normal capabilities. It sharpens the user's ability to detect even the most nuanced mana fluctuations, providing an unparalleled awareness of magical currents and energies. This leads to refined insight into the flow of mana.

Energetic Dispersion Dermis

The user's skin gains the ability to diffuse a wide range of incoming energies, including kinetic, thermal, and magical attacks. It acts as a protective barrier, effectively spreading the impact of these energies across its surface to significantly minimize damage. This trait is especially effective against concentrated mana attacks, providing a passive defense mechanism that can be crucial in magical combat.

Mana Echo Chamber

Converts the user's chest cavity into a chamber that resonates with ambient mana, storing it until the user chooses to release it. This stored mana can be unleashed in powerful bursts, useful for amplifying the impact of spells, creating sudden protective shields, or as a burst of energy in critical situations. The Mana Echo Chamber is particularly valuable for spellcasters who need an extra reserve of energy during intense magical confrontations.

Chapter 254: The First One

Quickly, I read all the descriptions and without hesitation, I pick Mana Wavelength Iris. Immediately, I feel the trait making changes to my eyes, and I squint a bit from the pain as they gradually change.

A terrifying pressure weighs on the city, and from under me, I feel Myrra activating something the Matriarch left behind.

The three giant trees inside of Virelia start moving, branches cracking and leaves glowing. Those trees start releasing leaves that float around the city and frequently interrupt the incoming attacks.

Of course, the trees aren't normal, the Matriarch said she helped create the Living Tree, didn't she?

Myrra joins me on top of the building, fully armored and her face serious, followed by her bodyguard and 12 enforcers clad in black armor.

That seemed to work better than expected, she says.

I nod as I observe the improved level over her head as well as the higher levels of lynthari with her.

The pressure of all that immense mana from the First One doesn't let up. He still has a lot of the ants he brought with him to attack the city, ants that may be lower in number than the ones left behind but are higher leveled. And currently, the First One is using all of that shared mana and vitality.

Everyone in the city hears the loud crack, and the crashed trunk of The Living Tree starts moving, floating into the air.

[Reanimated Sunseeker Tree - lvl ??]

A text appears over it as the tree floats higher, a gray trunk with branches without any leaves on them. The tree floats high in the air, a sight feeling much more terrifying knowing how much weight is moved like that.

So these fuckers really were behind the Tree attacking us, Myrra hisses through her teeth.

I can only nod as I observe the tree create a barrier around itself and even from as far as it is, I can see it releasing particles that are carried toward the city, crashing against the swirling leaves of the three giant trees.

The Sunseeker Tree, The Living Tree used to be a Calamity at the level of a Champion. It was severely weakened after destroying the Old Capital to the point of getting to three question marks. And now its reanimated remains are weakened even further to the point of two question marks. Yet it's still much stronger than the defensive trees left behind by the matriarch.

Feral one, your weapon? Myrra asks.

I show her my empty hands and continue to wait.

A gray arrow pierces through the air, and everyone with some sense can feel the disturbing mana it contains. That arrow splashes against the barrier of the Reanimated Living Tree, eating a big hole into it without any problem.

Then, like a falling star, a long javelin pierces through the air. The javelin flies even faster than the gray arrow, white and red lightning trailing it. The blade of the javelin, made of an Ethercrystal shortsword, burrows deep into the trunk of the Living Tree with a thump that I can hear even here in the city.

It only takes a few seconds for the blade to fill with mana from the Tree, and pass that mana through the arcanadium shaft into the Mana sphere core which creates an ever-changing disruptive field.

For a few moments, the tree floats there and fights against the effect, yet soon enough it starts falling down. To get confirmation, I shoot a mana projectile through the hole in the barrier and hit the tree with a weak attack.

The capsized Reanimated Living Tree stays on the ground, its barrier disappearing first, and soon its particles follow.

Its trunk starts to crack, some of the branches even break, and thousands of giant green leaves from the city attack it as well, covering and corroding it. A few minutes later, finally, the notification sounds.

[You have defeated Reanimated Sunseeker Tree - lvl 283]

[Lvl 202 > Lvl 203]

Even though I didn't do much, I leveled up, either because my creation of the javelin was considered an assist, or I was just so close to 203 that even a little bit of experience was enough. Well, I hope Tess and Lily got quite a few levels from it.

I turn to Myrra, "Did you think I wouldn't expect those assholes to try to pull something like this?"

Interrupting my speech, silence fills the city, as if someone absorbed all the sound. It's deafening and ever-present. All the fires burning, the sound of battle, the sound of the wind, all the voices. Everything is gone.

An absolute quiet ensures.

Then a single sound permeates all.

Clack.

As if someone is tearing apart the space itself, a terrifying force washes over the city.

For a long moment, nothing changes, and then everything over a certain height starts falling, smoothly cut. The three giant trees, most of the tall towers, the barriers, all of it cut smoothly and crashing down towards the city on the people and lynthari.

Sound once again fills the city; after deafening silence, they sound much louder.

Then I realize that the attack didn't contain mana, none at all.

I look towards its origin, and a single ant floats in the air. The ant isn't even that big. A black matte carapace that seems to absorb all light. Huge mandibles, now closed after generating the attack. Wings made of mana keep the ant afloat.

Even without focusing too much, I can feel the connection the ant has to all the ants inside and outside of the city. Thousands, tens of thousands of threads leading back to him, like a bonfire surrounded by specks of light trying to compete against it.

The First One.

For a moment, I feel as if our eyes meet and the ant disappears, the bombardment of the city continues, more dangerous now that we lack the protection of the trees and barriers generated by the towers.

(Javelin,) I say through the [Connection] the twins created.

I watch as the javelin Tess used to attack the tree pulls itself free and flies back to where I think Tess is. Then I let the twins get my location and, piercing through the buildings in its way, the javelin flies towards me, and I grab it after absorbing its kinetic energy. I inspect it for a moment, it still seems to be fine, and the inscriptions are working as well.

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(We already got one ant alive, the next time the First One attacks, we will help Sophie mess with his [Hive Mind], as planned,) Dennis transmits.

(He will expect that,) I remind them.

(Of course, he will,) this time it's Sophie talking, (But it doesn't matter, I'm ready for it. That piece of shit will pay, I will make sure of it.)

(Fuck Sophie, you are so cool right now, I might fall for you,) Aaron interjects.

(Don't, just help me,) she sends.

(Of course, as planned. We also owe him big time,) Aaron continues.

(Yes, we owe him a lot,) Dennis adds, and his voice sounds more serious than usual.

(Nat, I still haven't used your severed arms, so my next attack will be even stronger!) Lily also joins the conversation.

(Save some for healing, I plan to go all out for a while,) I remind her.

We are ready, I say to the lynthari surrounding me.

With a nod as acknowledgment, they start preparing as well, skills circulating in and out of their bodies, armors, energies, and some connection they have among themselves. Tails erect in a threatening display, pupils glowing, eyes wide open, hands squeezing weapons.

And I wait for my trait to finish altering my eyes.

The next attack is a golden flame, much bigger than I'm capable of creating. Funneled by the First One, powered by thousands of ants. The leader of the Colony is attacking from far behind the walls of the city, out of range of Sophie and the twins.

It's not a problem for him. The flames sweep into the city like a wave, momentarily crashing against the walls and barriers that the Lynthari and humans have erected.

Myrra and the enforcers wait with me, even now holding back and relying on the other warriors within the city to activate barriers and inscriptions fed by thousands of mana stones, gradually becoming more and more depleted.

He doesn't seem to want to enter the city, Myrra says through her teeth, her posture more threatening than I've ever seen.

(I can mess with [Hive Mind] to try to get him into the city,) Sophie sends.

(Don't,) I warn her, (Stay hidden, the moment you do something he will send all the ants against you,) I look around the city which already seems to be 20% destroyed, it hasn't even been that long since we started.

While talking, I continue examining my new trait. Unlike the Mana Circuits I got before, this one seems closer to being active than passive. I've already gotten a grasp of how to activate it, and I even think I can keep it active near indefinitely, if not at my level.

If there were trait rarities, I'm sure this one would rate quite high, just from observing the changes it makes to my eyes.

(Here he goes!) Tess shouts through the connection.

He appears again, just like before, all sound vanishing from the city and then a single snap resounds, the attack destroys dozens of buildings and barriers, cutting in a straight line.

This time the First One doesn't disappear. Even before Sophie uses her [Manipulation], I feel a gaze on me, and this time I'm sure I meet the compound eyes of the Colony's leader. A clear challenge.

[Hive Confluence Sentinel - lvl ??]

Then a disgustingly huge amount of blue mana starts radiating from the ant. Every time I think it's enough, more and more of it flows from him, feeling never-ending.

(I can't do anything! There is too much mana!) I hear through the connection.

All of that mana surrounds the ant floating in the air, moving, changing, shaping, and forming something like my [Regalia]. The mana takes the shape of a giant ant with the First One burrowed somewhere in the middle.

This doesn't feel like the most efficient attack possible, no, this feels more like a message. A show of power, as the ant surely knows what I used down in the tunnels. This is a challenge. Loud and clear.

The giant ant made of mana takes a step, its leg destroying a massive building that it dwarfs easily. The attacks crashing against the ant amount to nothing at all, not even sending a ripple through the mana construct continuing to move towards me, like an unstoppable force.

Heh, a giggle slips from my lips.

Myrra shouts something, and I nod, without listening, and she and her enforcers all disappear to attack the First One.

I feel a smile crawl onto my lips as the giant thing continues moving towards me, and even launches dozens of projectiles. The projectiles javelins made of blue mana crash against the building I'm standing on, even though they are unable to damage the gray stone.

I disrupt the javelins that hit my body and continue to watch.

Heat starts collecting at the center of the giant mana ant, and from the mouth of the First One, a golden flame roars at me, a flame as thick as my arm with the appearance of a laser.

The flame splits apart as it reaches me as I just manipulate the heat that reaches me and redirect it instead of wasting mana to control it.

Then the First One tries to compress mana like I do with my [Focus]. A ball of mana floats in front of the ant, an orb as tall as me, immediately compressing and turning blue, purple, and light blue. The First One tries to compress it even more, he tries to focus it into a smaller point.

And he fails.

Unable to replicate what I do he gives up and instead of the orb turning black, it starts glowing white, preparing to explode.

The enforcers and Myrra start attacking the giant figure and tear the attack apart, causing it to explode and finally deal some damage to the ant.

And the entire time, I just watch. With a big smile on my lips.

You little shit, I say out loud.

I raise the javelin in my hand high into the air, blade pointing towards the sky. Over the tip of the blade, a small orb of mana materializes, barely the size of a golf ball. Mana flows from me into that ball, filling it, turning it blue with streaks of purple and light blue until the orb starts shining white and is about to explode. Then, I push further and use my [Focus].

I do something the monster in front of me wasn't capable of doing.

Warm healing mana flows from the crown on my head into me, supporting me and fighting against the strain as I compress all that mana. The orb turns pitch black with tiny dots shining inside of it like stars in the sky.

Then, I poke the orb with the tip of my javelin, and it starts absorbing the black mana. The blade of the Ethercrystal Shortsword starts cracking. Even the upper epic weapon is unable to handle it.

I fight against the pull on my mana, and my heart beats three times, powered by the entirety of my mana, generating a huge amount of kinetic energy.

I change the setting and use all of my mana to strengthen my body, grab the javelin, and my right leg slides backward as I get into the stance. While my muscles scream, I throw the javelin and the moment it leaves my hand, I boost it with the kinetic energy I collected and leave an anchor on the handle.

Before I can even blink, the javelin reaches the ant and stabs the huge mana construct. The massive amount of mana surrounding the ant, a result of thousands of colony members powering it, vanishes in an instant the moment the black blade of the javelin touches it. The blade of the javelin cracking even further.

I activate the anchor and reappear next to the javelin, which I grab and float in the air, facing the matte black ant in front of me.

Chapter 255: One less

Myrra and the enforcers surround the First One the moment the mana disappears. Dozens of attacks crash against the carapace, damaging it, destroying limbs, and wounding the ant, as it constantly regenerates.

(Attacking!) Sophie sends, and I can feel her skills and the web she was preparing reaching towards the ant.

The moment she does so, I realize that this is what the First One was waiting for. He doesn't even turn his body or anything, but I know he immediately detects where Sophie and the others are. A shockwave explodes near him, pushing himself toward where the others are and avoiding the attacks I throw at him.

(He is after you!) I quickly send.

I use the anchor I left near them to teleport, but my skill is interrupted by a strong pulse of mana from the First One.

Fuck.

I boost my body, rushing after him, the javelin in my hand constantly fights against me, as the black mana inside the blade threatens to break loose.

When I reach them, they already stand against the ant, thin threads of gray mana flickering around them, Maya, Hadwin, and Biscuit in front facing him.

Min-Jae is shooting huge chunks of buildings at the ant, his new eye glowing, but he seems to be unable to use his new attack against the ant. Tess is constantly moving her javelin to attack and defend.

I dash from behind the First One, armor surrounding my body and [Redistribution] activating and trying to slow him. However, the skill slips off of the ant, unable to grasp him at all. [Resonance] doesn't damage him, and the massive amount of mana he is drawing is impossible to disrupt.

Taking a risk, I activate my trait for the first time, an intense pain immediately engulfing my head and eyes, and the overload of information threatening my sanity. An amount of information that seems to be impossible for a human to accept.

A beautiful and impossible number of waves constantly floating around and permeating everything. Small particles fill the atmosphere and every living being. Hearts pumping the mana that flows through our bodies. Connections based on mana. And something more.

I watch as the mana around the First One moves in sharp patterns while the ant seems like a giant bonfire and everyone else is barely a spark.

Sensing it, he turns to me, and that mana coils like a snake and surges against me.

Groaning in pain, I deactivate my trait, unable to handle it any longer. I hold the javelin in front of me. The weapon absorbs mana for a moment, until the blade cracks. Suddenly, the mana explodes into the surroundings, just for an instant. Then, it converges into a single spot, forming a floating pitch-black orb that begins to absorb all the mana close to it.

This forces me to push my body upwards and fly over it to rejoin the fight.

Meanwhile, The First One dashes against the group. He endures a gray arrow several times stronger than the one that hit the Reanimated trees barrier. Dashing through it, he redirects small bits of it, forming mana projectiles that take the attacks in his stead. Meanwhile, he regenerates his body as it takes damage.

A shockwave destroys Min-Jae's projectiles and multiple buildings as well. Maya gets thrown away, her body broken and mangled.

Tess's Primordial lightning pierces his body, but the ant regenerates. Tess uses an abyssal anchor which only pulls him for a moment before the ant destroys the epic item with a snap of his mandibles.

A blast of kinetic energy depletes all the energy I was storing and erupts, destroying a few buildings and throwing him to the side. His armor absorbs most of it, and the destroyed parts regenerate. He rushes again, right towards Sophie, who has her hands on the shoulders of the twins.

For a moment, the First One, and all the ants in the city with him stop. Some of them even start attacking each other, and Sophie starts tearing the threads that connect the First One to the rest of the Colony, taking over the network he created.

Another gray arrow splashes against the black ant, and he regenerates, slower this time, still using mana to absorb most of the attack.

Myrra and the lynthari arrive as well, surrounding him with a constant barrage that crashes against his durable body. A strong gravity field pins him to the ground, while flames burn him and ice surrounds his carapace. Myrra launches an attack using projectiles made of a multicolored, glass-like material. Meanwhile, the enforcers begin creating a barrier around the ant, covered in inscriptions, all twelve of them working in unison.

Even through all this, the First One starts moving again, slow step after step on constantly regenerated legs. His mana gradually increases and he pushes against Sophie's [Manipulation].

Two enforcers fall dead, mana projectiles they were unable to stop penetrating their heads.

Biscuit gets thrown away with a shockwave while protecting Isabella.

The ant redirects another gray arrow, his body regenerating faster now, even as Isabella and I maintain a combined assault. The constant blaze of our gold and azure flames melting the buildings around him.

A tricolored orb I shot at him gets absorbed and he shoots it back at us, forcing us to defend against it. I constantly need to redirect the First Ones attacks while keeping up the damage and attempting to cut off the connections.

Eventually, Sophie's skill weakens, and even the twins tumble down.

Our preparations finally complete, my eyes meet Lily's. I move back and reach towards the black orb. Mana starts radiating from my body, and I [Focus], forcing the orb under my will and changing its shape. I feel blood in my mouth and warm mana flowing into me through the crown. I activate the circuits etched into my arm and reach out to grab the black dagger I've created from the orb.

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All sounds disappear from the area, and I watch my severed right-hand fall as if in slow motion. Immediately, I move behind the floating dagger and watch as it absorbs a surge of golden flames directed at me.

Another snap sounds and Hadwin's body is cut at the waist, falling to the ground in two pieces after he shields Sophie and the twins. The ants' attack pierces through Hadwin's shield and sword, then cuts through his armor, yet despite its strength, it is unable to reach the people Hadwin is protecting.

Lily begins to move towards Hadwin, but another snap echoes and she stumbles, with both of her feet severed and Hadwin's head split in half.

I fail to stop these attacks.

Immense mana radiates once again, this time emanating from all the ants surrounding us. It creates a field that makes movement and even breathing nearly impossible, forming an area that encompasses the First One and our group.

The black ant turns and looks towards me and launches another attack that gets absorbed by the black mana dagger between me and the ant. It's not even a serious attack.

The First One snaps again, and multiple enforcers die while trying to protect Myrra.

Still in shock, I stand there, my eyes on Hadwin's body, until the First One tracks where I am looking and a concentrated shockwave erupts from the ant.

Feeling as if my body is about to break, I reach through the domain and stack a number of infused barriers in front of Hadwin. But the ant shatters each and every one of them while still looking at me, and breaking the last one the attack tears Hadwins body apart.

A memory of his feelings flashes through my mind from the time Isabella made us feel them. His gentle affection for the kids, the hint of sadness behind it all. A man striving to start a new life and bury old memories, slowly beginning to care for kids who bring him immense joy as he watches them enjoy life.

A memory of the two of us fighting, over and over again. Him trying to kill me. Him apologizing. The first floor, the second, even the third. His expression when he got the rare shield he was so happy about.

The world feels as if it slowed down, and I deactivate the hold [Focus] has on me and just use it to manage my skills. I take the crown from my head and throw it to the ground, the sound of it deafening in the silence. That makes the First One tilt his head. Our eyes meet, and I create a hand from mana and touch the black dagger floating in front of me, the inscriptions on my skin activating.

And then I start walking, each step unhurried. My eyes keep staring at the First One while my trait activates once more, a myriad of information and a whole new world opening to me, threatening to overload my brain.

I glance at the black dagger, and the entirety of my mana moves, the dagger dissolving, the blue mana of my conjured hand turning black, and bits of that mana even flowing into my body and through my circuits.

The First One also takes a few steps. Watching him with my trait, the mana around him burning bright like a bonfire.

As we head towards each other, he starts to hesitate, each step becoming slower and more careful.

At some point, he stops, and skills activate around him.

Watching all of it with my new eyes, I cut his skill apart. I disrupt his attempt at teleportation, I destroy the buildup for his shockwave, and a single barrier I create blocks his snapping attack, cracking afterward.

[Redistribution] powered by black mana activates, and the First One freezes on the spot. I reach out to him and lay my hand on his body. I begin to absorb the entirety of the heat he's generated while my kinetic energy crashes against him, attempting to tear his body apart.

Focusing solely on defense, he continues absorbing vitality from the Colony, and even my attacks are unable to damage him. Feeling the pain scorch my body, I reach out and cut off all of the connections, leaving him isolated.

For the first time in his entire life, the ant loses the connection he bears to the other ants, yet he still faces me proudly, his eyes staring into mine while his body freezes all over and pieces of him explode.

Then I stagger, my trait deactivates, and all the information disappears. The black mana inside of my body immediately threatens to kill me. Quickly I force it into a black orb outside of my body, ready to use it on the ant.

The First One starts thawing, and the connections quickly reappear, like a phoenix rising. The ant is restoring all his wounds, and all that strength starts running through his body again.

Then, he attempts to flee, dragging his damaged body away from the black orb.

My eyes activate again for a split second, and turning the orb into a dagger, I stab the black mana into the First One, targeting the place he was protecting the most during the fight. With a [Tether], I connect the black dagger to his body, and when the First One disappears, it teleports with him.

Strength leaves my body, and my eyes deactivate again. For the first time since the start of the floor, there isn't even a drop of mana left in my body, nor in the reservoir. The strengthening is gone, making my body extremely weak in comparison to everyone around me, yet I still push myself back on my legs and walk towards the others.

Sophie has an unbelieving look in her eyes as she holds Izzy against her chest and stares down at what remains of Hadwin.

Tess is trying to pull away Lily, who constantly keeps trying to reconnect the pieces.

Min-Jae starts crying while standing near the twins, who are both unconscious.

Looking to the side, I see a wounded Biscuit coming closer. There are multiple big wounds on his body, and one of his legs seems to be broken, yet he still is pulling Maya behind him as gently as he can. The woman seems to be on the brink of death, her chest caved in, bloody foam around her mouth.

Lily, I say, almost scared of my own voice. It's calm, and quiet, yet audible, even through all of the fire and screams around us.

Lily looks up at me from the ground, her eyes full of tears and blood on her. Pieces of her missing, used for [Sacrifice].

Heal Maya, I tell her.

For the first time, I can see anger in her eyes directed towards me. How can you she shouts, close to screaming.

Maya will die, I interrupt her and return her gaze.

The words stick in her mouth, and her eyes shake while she looks at Maya. Tess whispers something in her ear and hugs her. Sobbing Lily finally moves and starts healing Maya. She closes Mayas wounds, causing her breathing to return to normal and even Mayas face starts looking better.

Only then does Lily stand up, moving towards me, putting her hand on my shoulder. How can you be like this! she sounds at me. Hadwin Hadwin is!

My shoulder breaks and my body is easily moved by her. There is barely any mana in me and everything I have immediately gets turned into thermal energy to support my healing. Lily notices and immediately lets go of me, her face scared, and her expression changes as she looks at me.

She touches me again, this time extremely carefully, and sends her mana through my body, examining it. Her expression grows terrified, and I return her gaze as she starts healing me.

No one else says anything and the only sound to be heard is little Isabella sobbing, surrounded by all the destruction.

Checking the Community the number of people in Hell difficulty is one less.

Chapter 256: No goodbyes?

I leave the people from group four to deal with the aftermath and head to the area under Storm Brigade's tower.

My body hurts terribly, but after getting healed, I feel better, and my mana keeps regenerating as I feed my passive with thermal energy. Even that little bit is helping and slowly the rest will heal. Until then I better not sleep and keep my body strengthened and infused with mana.

It is worse for my head and especially my eyes. Despite all the healing I received, my vision is still blurry. My new trait seems to be even more demanding than I thought. Just the sheer amount of information I received caused me to end up like this. But just for those few short moments, I saw an entirely new world open up to me, and I wonder. Is that how Lissandra saw things? Is this a step towards where she stood?

Well, I will get there, and for that, I need to become stronger, much stronger as today's fight showed.

Much, much stronger.

I climb into the fallen tower, the strengthened walls still supporting its shape, and I find my room that is now on its side in the severed top of the tower.

The bed is broken, the furniture has been thrown around, and broken pieces of the wall have destroyed a lot of things, but I find some clothes, a few bags that I fill with some water, food, dozens of higher-grade mana stones, my experiments, the weird bracelet I won from the auction, and some other stuff.

I look around one more time and, without knowing why, pass through a hole in the wall into Hadwin's room.

The room is simple, and there are barely any decorations as the older man wasn't one to collect such things. On the ground, I notice several pieces of clothing, some gels he used for his beard and hair, and some snacks that Hadwin had liked and left here to eat later.

There lies a box made of delicately decorated wood and on top of it, sets a paper with a few words in English: Happy birthday, Lily!

She said she would be 18 soon, didn't she?

I clean the debris from the table and then I set the box on top, so I can fix it up a bit. After that, I flip the bed onto its feet, make up the covers, and move the broken furniture into the corner.

Slowly I pick up Hadwin's things and put them on the nearby table and the bed. The oil he used to care for his sword and armor, notes for swordsmanship, and handwritten theories on his skills. As I move the notes, a small piece of paper falls from them, and when I pick it up, I freeze.

After months in the tutorial, I see a glimpse of our world. A photograph of Hadwin, a woman hugging him, and a young man bearing a resemblance to the man. The photo is in a terrible state, going through four floors after all these months. Yet it's still there, in a state that allows me to see its content, clearly showing how much it meant to him.

That's his wife Olivia and his son Jonathan, both of them died just a few weeks before he got into the tutorial, Tess enters the room, her steps slow and careful as she ducks to step through the hole in the wall. They were both murdered by a young man. Hadwin said that for the first few floors, you felt like that man to him, and that's why he.

I see, I take a few steps towards her and put the photo into her hands.

I will put it next to his body when we bury him. He would like that, she whispers.

Before I leave the room, her words catch me, Will you stay for his burial, Nat?

There is no need to.

I see, I will see you later then. Take care.

Yes.

I intentionally use Mana Cycling to the highest effect to keep my mana from leaking and people from detecting me and cutting off the twins' [Connection].

There is no need to stay for the burial, he is dead, and he won't even know. It won't help him, it won't help me.

As I walk through the streets, it's as I thought, all the ants are gone. They ran away with their leader who should be terribly hurt and having to deal with the black mana that I tethered to him. I continue to send my mana to the tether I left on him to keep it from disappearing and to keep the black dagger connected to him. As before [Tether] is reacting weirdly to black mana and can partially ignore it.

The streets are broken, buildings have fallen, and corpses are everywhere. Some other streets are nearly fine, a weird contrast to the destroyed ones. Civilian casualties seem to be low as most of the dead ones have some weapons or armor on them, and in the end, it's 20-30% of Virelia that got so damaged, with the rest being nearly fine.

I also notice humans giving ugly looks to lynthari, a rumor about the lynthari invasion most likely spreading, but that's not something I care about. Unlike those of us from group 4, these people will be gone when the floor ends.

My mana continuously restores itself, and I gaze at my new arm Lily restored. It still appears blurry due to my hurting eyes, making me feel lightheaded.

Passing through the street, I steal some food from a store, some items in the next one, and another bag where I put more useful things.

I exit Virelia and enter the green fields, walking on a pathway. I do not even look back at the city and climb up to hills for a bit longer, where, at the top of the highest one I meet Myrra. She is sitting there, staring in the direction of Virelia. Myrra is wearing her armor and has supplies with her.

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

You know, feral one, you might not think it, but Ive gotten to know you well, really really well as Ive been observing you.

I wont stop you then, I continue to walk.

She jumps to her feet and follows by my side, So, how do you feel?

To be honest? Disappointed, I answer. Something inside me wants to talk.

In yourself? Myrra asks, slowing her steps to match mine.

Partially, yes, I answer.

Do you think being with your friends made you weaker? she asks.

"Yes, I think so. I enjoyed it at the time, and I believe I improved in a way I wouldnt have been able to on my own. But there is always this question: if I were on my own and forced to constantly fight for my life, would I have grown stronger?"

Then there is also that other thing, right, feral one?

Yes. If I was alone and they were on their own, would they be able to improve more and become stronger without me being there?

"Some of them could be dead without you," she says, and as she speaks, I hear no pity in her voice. She matches my tone, trying to understand me and engage in a conversation.

Thats also true, I agree.

Yet you are still leaving them, Myrra says, and we enter the forest, and continue walking under the trees that bend and creak in the wind.

"This is what I'm thinking: If I stay with them, I can help, sure, and more of them would survive. But then there would come a day when they would be on their own and probably die because I kept them safe, and they unconsciously relied on me."

Thats true, but there is more to it.

"Yes," I pause briefly. "Perhaps it's better if they die now while trying to grow stronger on their own. That way, it's less heartbreaking than staying with them, growing close to them, forming friendships, and then suffering through their deaths because they were too weak."

Thats so cruel, feral one, so very cruel to say, Myrra is smiling, our conversation taking her mind off things she doesnt want to think about. "But even I know that you are lying."

Maybe? I will have to find out and for that, I will need some time on my own.

You got scared, didnt you? You never wanted to get attached, and when that man died, it was a shock for you, her eyes almost seem to glow as she looks down at me.

I agree, it was a shock to see him like that, I nod.

So you are running away?

The same as you, Myrra.

She laughs, canines showing for a moment but she doesn't deny it, So what will they do without you?

Knowing Tess, they will train for a while and then go to hunt the Fallen Hero, I shrug my shoulders, Tess is smart, so she surely realized how lacking they were.

No goodbyes?

No goodbyes.

Coward.

A bit, I agree.

All this talking makes me feel a bit better, and telling this to Myrra, who will be gone with the 4th floor, is somewhat easy.

Are you sad, Myrra? I ask her.

She laughs, Such a question, feral one. I have watched my friends I knew for tens, and hundreds of years die. A woman I looked up to my entire life ever since I was a child got her head bitten off, and I saw her mangled corpse, she continues to smile.

We exit the forest and continue to climb into the mountain. This is the first time in my life I saw so many lynthari die. For the first time, I fought with my life on the line like this. I was terrified.

Step after step, I force my body to walk until I can't anymore and sit down. Even this bit of walking makes my breathing rough, and sweat runs down my body. I feel like throwing up, and my hands shake until I close them into fists.

Myrra joins me, and we look towards Virelia, still some smoke above the city. Even from this distance, we can see the remains of the Living Tree and broken towers and the trees in the city.

Myrra, how do you become a Champion candidate? I ask.

Not turning to me, she answers, The title was given to me by the matriarch, as she was the only one from the lynthari that ever saw Champions and could tell if someone was capable of reaching that. But it's unofficial. To become a true Champion candidate, you need a Champion to acknowledge you and for the system to accept it.

She turns to me, You could call me a fake Champion candidate, feral one, and you wouldn't be lying.

"I see," I nod and get to my feet, stumbling after I take the first step. I force some strength into my legs, and Myrra follows me.

We continue to walk slowly, having conversations, and in that short time, I learn more about her than I've been able to in the past few months. Her fears, her hopes. A lot about lynthari and fake Champion candidate Myrra. I also share a lot. Talking feels good right now, especially knowing she won't tell anyone, and slowly I realize that, as she says, Myrra knows me really well.

She's continued to observe me ever since we met for the first time, my manners, my movements. She can tell my feelings even through my flat face and can read my mood. Like a cat, she observed me from a distance, nearly unnoticed, and, according to her, fascinated by the things I have done.

We reach the side of a certain mountain after a long walk, and now even my reservoir is slowly replenishing as we delve into the tunnels after touching the walls and activating inscriptions in them, making them light the tunnels.

Our steps sound especially loud down there, and soon we reach the door that I open and then another and enter a big room with an array in the middle.

For the next day, we relax, we heal, and we prepare.

Here, down in the dark tunnels without anyone around, Myrra cries for the first time. She cries for all the lynthari and humans that die. Finally out of sight of everyone, breaking her majestic facade and cracking the mask. It takes only a few minutes, and after that, we don't talk about it and I do not mention it.

When we are ready, I pull out a few mana stones, put them into the array, and let Myrra activate it. The one-directional array right into the heart of the Colony.

Before stepping into it, I create an orb from tricolored mana and push it to the point it starts glowing bright white and leave it on the ground near the array.

I guess with this the array will be gone as well as our way out, Myrra says while looking at the orb.

Did you change your mind? I ask.

Such a dumb question, she says, and activates the array, transporting us to the heart of the Colony.

Chapter 257: Just two losers

POV Tess Hansen

A day has passed since the attack of the Colony and the city is still a mess. Lynthari are left without their new matriarch, Myrra. The humans are looking for someone to blame, and rumors about lynthari being invaders are spreading.

Lorven being a traitor, Isola is terribly hurt, and Obelia is reorganizing her guild and moving it to a different building.

Hundreds of dead fill the streets, many of which are destroyed, and a lot of houses are unusable.

It's not a nice look. But it's hard to care for all of that while looking at the situation in our group. Hadwin is dead, Nathaniel is gone, Lily is moving like a soulless husk while mumbling that even Nathaniel left her. The twins are blaming Sophie for not doing well enough even after they let her use their skill, and Kim is awkwardly trying to get everyone to get along.

And I as well, am feeling my uselessness during all of that. I know that the enemy we faced wasn't weak, yet I still feel that I could and should have done more.

I sigh and look at Maya sitting next to me, in the garden of one of the smaller houses that Obelia got for us.

You are sighing way too much, Tess, she smiles, but that smile doesn't reach her eyes.

Not everyone can use their skill to block their emotions, I shoot back at her.

Maya just nods, So, what are we going to do?

Become stronger, obviously.

You are not worried about the Colony?

I am, the First One was terrifying. But Nat hurt him badly and knowing him, he is after the ant to finish what he started. Especially after what that ant did to Hadwin.

But that isn't the only reason he left, she says, and I nod.

I continue, I think it's better this way, Maya, I really do. We started relying on him way too much, and the fight against the First One was a wake-up call. Yes, the situation was terrible, but in the future, it will probably become way worse.

Lily got too attached, Kim followed him like a puppy, and I kept asking him for advice, Maya counts down, I mean, these aren't bad things, there are bigger groups in Hell difficult than ours doing team play, but I do agree with you that we might have become too comfortable.

Yes, that's why we will be on our own for a while, Maya. We will level up, we will help Lily with Beyond, and we will go and take down the Fallen Hero on our own.

And if someone else dies, Tess?

I won't allow it. And if anyone doesn't want to go, they can stay here for the rest of the tutorial, I won't blame them.

Sounds like a plan, Maya pokes my shoulder and stands up, I will speak to Kim and the twins and try to help them a bit. Will you deal with Sophie and Lily? They seem down too.

Look at you, giving me orders, I stand up, with a tired smile on my face.

Maya's expression is gentle, I don't think they're the only ones that need some help and time to process it all, Tess, so think of yourself too, and if you need help, come to me. You can think of me as a knock-off version of that weirdo.

I'm the one who wanted this group to happen, and I'm the one who kept urging Nat to join us. I've been trying to make us all friends, so I'd better not let it fall apart so easily.

Having Maya worry about me feels weird, but in a nice way, as she said, with her [Focus], she can be like Nat at times. She can be calm and reliable when she needs to be, and she's smarter than she usually lets on. And now that Hadwin is I shake my head and push the thought out. There will be time for me to grieve later.

Yes, let's prove that there was a reason for us to end up in Hell difficulty.

The room we were transported to before has been destroyed, walls crumbling, crystal pillars missing. As far as I can see, the tunnels are scorched, and burned, with some lingering smoke hanging around, and ant corpses lie scattered across the floor.

Myrra and I start walking, our skills lighting the pitch-black darkness, and our senses constantly scan the area, on the lookout for collapsing tunnels and enemies.

Yet there are none, and minutes turn into hours, the never-ending stream of tunnels empty and void of any life.

At some point, we reach the parts of the tunnels made from that same gray metal that makes up some of the buildings in Virelia. The indestructible one. These parts are only scorched on the surface, and here we finally detect some life. Ants, most of them barely level ten.

There is no hesitation at all as we kill any ant we detect, it doesn't matter how much they run or that they don't even try to attack.

Skills activate, fire burns them, and projectiles made of ice pierce them. There is no mercy in our actions, and as we delve into these parts, more of the ants start appearing, and I sense the skill I left on the First One. The connection is weak and really far away, but it's something we can use for navigation, and we head in this direction.

Once in a while, we reach a dead-end, either a natural one or one caused by the explosion or the ants trying to block us as tunnels made of stone mix with indestructible hallways. We spend days mapping the tunnels and looking for a way through and sometimes even making our own way.

A few times they try to bury us down there, but the anchors I keep leaving behind us always help, and we teleport before we end up buried.

My domain's reach has also expanded, so I frequently send it as far ahead as I can, creating anchors in different tunnels and transporting us to them.

Stolen content alert: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

Other than the ants, no monsters live here, and the only sounds are those of our skills, or their chitin legs against the gray stone or the tunnels that connect to it.

Neither Myrra or I speak much and when we do, it's usually a short conversation.

We reach a point where the tunnels are blocked with skills alone, as they're all made from that gray stone that even the ants seem incapable of destroying, so we just bulldoze our way through the monsters. There are no ants able to resist us, and they are barely any trouble between my skills and Myrra's.

The fake Champion candidate Myrra likes to use fire and ice skills, but often she combines them, creating an element that is hard to describe. Myrra calls it Aurora glass, and it's a crystalline material with reflective facets that change colors according to how she uses the skill.

I sense that she is using another skill to facilitate the combination, but I don't question her any further and observe her creation. Myrra is creating barriers from it, sometimes weapons. Once in a while, she creates a surface from Aurora glass, steps through it, and reappears from another surface nearby.

I don't understand it fully, but it's a nice way to take my mind off stuff and examine it.

My eyes still hurt, my sight is hazy, and my head isn't quite back to normal, so I run my passive constantly, fueled by my thermal energy. It's slowly healing the aftereffects of Mana Wavelength Iris, the trait that allows me to see into the world of mana more than before. But at a cost, as these things always go.

Would this trait have even been offered if I had spent more points on physical stats to better prepare my body for such a trait? Or would it have been withheld if I had gone that way?

It's something I want to know and might learn, further in the future, along with methods for controlling the black mana. During the fight against the First One, I was able to use it and let it flow through my body, using that mana to power my skills making them much more powerful. It's most likely something akin to picking Potency over Amplification for a Mana upgrade.

Anything interesting going through your mind, feral one? Myrra asks as we sit in the middle of a straight tunnel that stretches on for what feels like forever.

We took a break after the ants tried to drown us and then suffocate us. Surviving it took a toll on both of us.

The usual stuff, my skills and such, I respond.

She smiles a bit and leans against the wall, It's already been days, aren't you missing your group?

I think about it for a bit and then give her an honest answer, A bit.

She fixes her hair a bit and her tail continues to sway, I noticed it before, but you are not easy to rile up or quick to open up to people. You might joke, and spend time with them, but you still like to keep a distance. Tell me, are you scared of letting people get close?

The way she says it annoys me. It sounds like she is looking for a fight.

Instead of answering, I ask her, Why are you here, Myrra? Is it really to kill the First One, to protect lynthari, or do you want to take revenge for the matriarch? Or maybe you want to take revenge for yourself? Too ashamed of your fears during the fight and your inability to do more?

Our eyes meet neither of us avoiding the gaze of the other, the silence almost threatening. After a few frustrating days down there, both of us are a bit touchy.

Myrra stands up and takes a few steps towards me, her tails standing up in a threatening manner and her pupils wide open. Both of her canines show their full beauty. She is really angry.

What, not used to a human talking back to you? I add to the fuel and I see her hand closing into a fist, veins popping on it.

So I add a bit more, Or maybe you were scared of responsibilities? You didnt want to end up like your matriarch, tied to her title, and wanted to keep your mostly careless life?

Mana starts leaking from her and she opens her mouth, You think it might be your fault that that man died. She takes another step closer. But you dont feel much sadness so that worries you so you decided to run. Hoping theyd either become strong enough to survive so that you could befriend them, or that they would die now before you get too attached.

Myrra lowers herself, her eyes in line with mine, Come on, Feral One, deactivate that fucking skill and try to say those words to me again.

I feel my heart beating wildly just at the thought of turning off [Focus].

She squints her eyes, her mouth turning into a smile, You wont do it? So why dont you attack me instead?

Fuck off, I say instead.

Myrra starts laughing, Such words lack an impact, hearing them from someone hiding behind skills.

Said the pampered lynthari who kept bothering people because they were too fucking bored. Hiding under their matriarch's skirt, instead of dealing with the Calamities. Maybe if you guys didn't fuck around all the time and actually did something, she would still be alive. I say and watch as her face changes.

I continue, Did it hit too close? Go on, why dont you attack me? I mock her.

Myrra does just that. She swings her fist at me and I duck under it, immediately following it with a kick that Myrra dodges with a speed that I barely track.

As on cue, we both use our mana at the same time to strengthen our bodies. Neither of us uses any skills as we decided beforehand and we just attack each other, using our bodies.

Her fist hits my face and rocks my head back as another punch hits my chest, throwing me against the wall. She is faster than me, even as I use the entirety of my mana to strengthen myself. Myrra seems to specialize in dexterity while Im mostly split between constitution and strength.

A few more blows to my chest and one more to my face, the last one drawing blood. They all hurt, but I hold on and when she attacks again, I let her connect and grab her arm.

Our eyes meet for a second and I bury my knee into her belly, lifting my knee to compensate for her height.

Myrra gasps for air and my fist hits the bottom of her chin. This time it's her head swinging back, only to rebound as she smashes her forehead into my face, breaking my nose and causing me to stagger backward, dripping blood.

Still I hold on and kick, aiming for her crotch this time and managing to connect.

Myrra groans in pain, shock on her face. You little bitch, she gasps and punches me two more times before I manage to avoid the third, throwing a punch to her side, and finally letting go.

More mana roars through her body and she leaps into action.

For several long minutes, we continue, exchanging blows. Its not pretty and we barely bother avoiding each others attacks, as if the pain makes us forget. Blood is drawn, bones are cracked, and we throw each other against the walls as we fight in the long pitch-black tunnel lit by my thermal orbs floating nearby.

Two beings over level 200 fist-fighting like drunkards.

And as the fight progresses, my hold over [Focus] becomes weaker and my attacks reflect that and Myrra grows more aggressive as well. We kick, we scratch, and we bite. Myrra spits blood into my eyes in an attempt to gain an advantage, so I punch her in the neck. She chokes me and I break her finger.

In the end, I throw one last punch at her chin and she staggers and then falls, face against the ground.

With a sigh, I lean against the wall of the tunnel and slide to the ground. My entire body hurts, my bones are cracked, I have wounds all over, and yet I do not use my passive, and breathe heavily.

Myrra lifts her bruised face From the ground and our eyes meet. Both of us have the same expression.

Just two losers.

Unable to stand as she looks into my eyes, she starts using her arms to pull herself closer, crawling towards me. She reaches me and then lays her head on my thigh, turning away from me, and curling up, as her body starts to shake.

Slowly I reach out with my bruised and bloodied hand and gently caress her hair without saying a word.

Chapter 258: Ancient array

We rest for a while, and the power of our stats heals our bodies. In my case, it's mostly my passive skill doing the work, but it's good enough.

When we finally continue through the tunnels, I feel a bit different. Weirdly, I feel better, as some of the tension leaves my body, and it seems the same goes for Myrra.

Fuck, feral one, I didnt expect you to kick me in the crotch, twice. Do you have no manners? Even her tone is a bit different now.

Says the person who spat blood in my face, I reply.

Feral One, I bet you there are humans willing to pay me for the experience, she says.

I stagger in surprise, and she notices, which makes her smile even more. I mean, she is not wrong, but damn.

Thankfully another group of snapjaw ants appears, and I avoid reacting any further. Already used to fighting them, we move quickly, keeping mobile and slowing them with Myrras ice and my [Redistribution].

Even with multiple Gravity ants and a Sentinel ant supporting them, we deal with them fairly quickly, and yet another group tries to slow us down.

As always, I can feel my [Tether] far in front of us, meaning the black mana orb is most likely still hampering the leader of the Colony and severely damaging him or messing with his mana control.

Hopefully, it won't kill him in the end. I have a lot to pay back. I don't care that I mostly got my ass kicked last time. This time I won't rely on others. I won't rely on Lilys healing or Sophie to slow him down, I will fuck him up on my own. Sure, Myrra will probably want to get in a few hits, but I can live with that.

I have been too reliant on others for too long, and it's stunted my growth. Instead of trusting in myself, I relied on external help. I will be careful not to do so from now on.

He is moving again, I tell Myrra.

We speed up, breaking into a sprint, killing any ants in the way as quickly as possible and, reducing the distance in the process. It takes another few hours for us to even get close, and that's when the first large group attacks us, hundreds of ants fill the tunnel, and it's impossible to see through the sheer number of bodies.

They block my yellow flames, and a constant barrage of ranged attacks forces us to create barriers to block it. Any attempt to create an anchor in the middle of them and drop a bomb is quickly disrupted.

I quickly create two javelins. I infuse one with disruptive mana and the other with thermal energy. Both of them shoot off quickly one after the other, the former disrupts their barriers and the latter explodes in the middle of their group.

[You have defeated Warrior ant - lvl 168]

[You have defeated Disruptor ant - lvl 159]

[You have defeated Gravity ant - lvl 165]

[You have defeated Spellslinger ant - lvl 195]

[Lvl 205 > Lvl 206]

More attacks follow, and Myrras flames envelop the tunnel, maintaining constant pressure. There aren't many Flame Legion ants, so I also add my flames to the mix, and we slowly burn through them all.

A burst of kinetic energy pushes their smoking bodies aside, and we continue our run and finally reach a room bigger than any we've seen in a long time.

The room is cylindrical in shape, and the ceiling seems to stretch on forever. I can't even see where it ends, and it's wider than two football fields, it's impossible to imagine normal humans doing something like this.

But I don't stare at it in awe, nor do I waste time checking the details. My eyes settle on the ant. The one with the matte black carapace floats near the middle of the room, surrounded by thousands of ants, with even more on the walls. The sheer amount of ants is hard to even count, yet I do not feel worried.

Their leader, the First One, just stands there; he does not attack, and he does not use the mana of the Colony. No, there is a black mana dagger impaling his body, it seems to have reacted with [Tether] and made it impossible to remove from its body. The black dagger constantly pulls on the skills mana and, in a twisted way, keeps [Tether] running.

I feel Myrra tense next to me, her eyes also on the First One.

Armor surrounds my body, I maintain my normal size this time, and I boost my body with the kinetic energy I've been collecting, flying right toward the First One. I use bursts of kinetic energy to brush aside any ants in my way and disrupt hundreds of ranged attacks that enter my range, tanking others and using my anchors to avoid those I can't.

Mana permeates my body, cycling, and flowing like a hurricane, as my new trait activates.

I am immediately assaulted with an overwhelming amount of information, but I keep my eyes glued to the First One, absentmindedly dodging incoming attacks. I watch the waves of invisible mana flow freely through the air, the ambient mana no one controls permeating the world.

And the entire time the First One just stands there, his eyes watching my every move, and then a push of mana from the other ants activates an array underneath him. The amount is enormous, and it needs to be for him to absorb any through that black orb.

My attack passes through the air as the First One disappears, and I observe the mana swirling in the air; I use my enhanced eyes, I can't even perceive this otherwise. I watch waves of mana swirl, move, and crash against each other, then point in one direction.

Left without their leader, the remaining ants once again send most of their mana toward where the First One disappeared, and those that rely on physical stats attack us.

It takes just a bit of fighting before we realize that most of the ants are weak. Most of the stronger ones died in Virelia or haven't returned yet, and even the ones that returned through the array had to spend extreme amounts of mana or even sacrifice themselves to facilitate the transport. Plus, we haven't seen any mushrooms around in the past few days, and the lack of food seems to have weakened them even further.

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And now, they've spent most of their mana to allow the First One to disappear somewhere, giving him what remained.

What follows next isn't even a fight. The ants are weakened, drained of their vitality and mana to keep their progenitor alive, and no matter how many of them jump at us, they are barely a threat to me and Myrra.

Every time it looks dangerous, we escape into the tunnels limiting the number of ants able to attack us, and now barely anyone seems capable of destroying my anchors, and I keep firing my tricolored orbs through their ranks, killing ants in the hundreds.

[Tether - lvl 24 > Tether - lvl 25]

[Tether - lvl 25 > Tether - lvl 26]

[Mana Domain - lvl 26 > Mana Domain- lvl 27]

[Lvl 206 > Lvl 207]

[Lvl 207 > Lvl 208]

[Lvl 208 > Lvl 209]

A few ants group together in attempts at suicide attacks or trying to endure and drain as much of our mana as possible. They cooperate, creating barriers, and countering our skills. They come up with ways to use skills against us, constantly changing frequencies. My senses are at their peak, and I activate my new trait multiple times, but only for a few seconds at a time to avoid dangerous situations.

The Colony is deadly, but not right now. Most of them are low level and the rest are severely weakened, either sacrificed by the First One or having a need to protect him programmed into them.

Myrras Aurora glass allows her to teleport when needed, and she uses it like my anchors to launch attacks. I even saw her create two mirrors from that glass, one to absorb the ants' attacks and the other one to send it back, but she rarely uses this move, as it seems to be costly and situational.

I duck to the side, as a trapjaw ant passes by me, a blast of kinetic energy burrowing a hole in him. Immediately after, I duck under a projectile and move to the side to avoid another attack.

[Resonance] activates, and I shrug off an attempt to disrupt my armor, grabbing another ant by a leg, pulling it off, and sending it away with a kick.

I jump backward as the bus-sized one charges at me, and my flames burn his face, blinding him until a mana orb lodges in his head, whereupon it expands tearing it apart. I surround myself with thin threads of concentrated mana, they are hard to detect and infused with [Resonance], causing any ant charging into them to be cut apart by wire-like threads. It always takes them a few moments to detect and disrupt them, meanwhile, they kill plenty of them while reducing the number of attacks coming our way.

Another group uses ranged attacks against me, so I duck to reduce my size, and create a small barrier in front of me that I skew a bit so attacks deflect to the side, instead of hitting it directly and consuming more mana.

I add an anchor to one of the javelins and launch it at the ants that attacked me, and when it reaches them, I send a burst of thermal energy through it.

We fight for what feels like hours, and I slip into a rhythm as if hypnotized and keep taking mana from my reservoir.

It doesn't feel dangerous, and the weakened Colony without their leader or heavy hitters is somewhat more of a chore to deal with. Yet, I feel no pity and no hesitation. I kill every single ant I can see or sense. Each one of them could have been one of the ones sending mana to the First One during that day, indirectly helping him to

A combined attack from dozens of ants crashes against my chest armor and sends me flying through the room, crashing against the wall. Right after, more attacks bombard me as I lay there. They keep crashing against the [Regalia] infused with [Resonance], barely doing any damage other than wasting my mana.

I push my thoughts to the back of my mind, and putting my hands on my knees, I push myself back to my feet, using [Infusion] to send thermal energy through my armor, making it seem like embers are glowing under the surface.

More attacks hit me, and I boost my body right into them, burning them alive.

When every single ant is dead, we move towards the middle of the room, pushing all mangled, burned, frozen, cut bodies of ants to the side to see the floor. Surrounded by all those corpses, plenty of them as big as a bus, we stare at the damaged array.

"You can fix it, right?" Myrra asks me.

"Yes, but it will take a moment; there are traps left behind, and some parts are really damaged."

Afterward, I immediately get to work, "Can you bring my bags from the tunnels? I have some stuff I might need in them."

Myrra nods, "Can do."

As I get to it, I notice that the array is more damaged than the one in the old mines, and I even have to redirect some of the inscriptions, like using plaster to fix them instead of replacing them.

Once in a while, I activate Mana Wavelength Iris to work on them, and even though its extremely taxing, it helps a lot to speed up the process.

"Did you know that when you use that skill, a golden ring appears around your pupil? It's not too thick, and I can still see the color of your eyes, but around the black of your pupil, that golden circle appears," Myrra says out of nowhere.

I pause for a moment, "I see," I nod and continue.

I hadn't realized until now. Ive met multiple people with similar effects all of whom have mana circuits in their eyes. Ruby and Obelia, for example, and even Min-Jae's new eye had some under the surface.

As I work, my mana continues to replenish over the hours I spend on the array, and I still have some left in my reservoir.

When I'm done, we sit there for a bit. Myrra takes out some food and water, and in the same fashion weve grown so accustomed to over the past few days, we share food while exchanging a few words. We do not talk much, trying to keep our minds sharp for what is to come.

When we finally feel ready, I activate the array, and Myrra steps in, both of us pulled along and transported.

Appearing on the other side a strong wind hits us, strong enough to push even our strengthened bodies, and I absorb some force from it with [Redistribution].

A chilling cold immediately penetrates my body, but Myrra starts releasing heat around us, and I absorb more wind until we create a warm, quiet bubble around us.

Looking around, I realize that we are on top of an extremely tall mountain battered by blizzards. The falling snow barely allows us any degree of sight, and after probing the area with my senses, I detect only more mountains and another array.

Gesturing to Myrra, I start walking, releasing a bit of absorbed kinetic energy to blow off the snow until we reach a cave, which we enter.

Unlike the surrounding area, there is no snow in the cave, and lights glow on the wall, likely the work of the First One as he passed by to activate another array, keeping the last bits of mana he received as he left. This array is a bit different and seems to be much older than the ones I've seen before. The design is more robust and less efficient as if it was made by someone who didn't care how much mana it would take to activate. Someone with a high enough mana pool to ignore that.

The array is not damaged at all, the First One was probably incapable of doing so.

As I send my senses to it, I start examining it and where it leads with the help of my new trait. I follow the trail of mana, and when I see where it points and get an estimate of the distance it transports over, I almost feel like laughing.

The one-directional array in front of me leads to a place somewhere high above us. To a place in the orbit of the planet.

Chapter 259: What will you do now?

One of the reasons the First One teleported so far is to put distance between me and the anchor I left on him. Probably in hopes of cutting off my connection and getting rid of the black mana dagger. Or the reason could be completely different.

Staying over the ancient array, I hear a soft ding of the notification and open the system. Going through the options, I notice that a side quest was added.

Side quest: Save Virelia from annihilation

Reward: 1000 shards

I turn to Myrra, "What is up there? Did the matriarch leave any info on it?"

Debris, or something, we were curious about it, and tried to dig up information on it, yet we couldn't find anything concrete. Just a bunch of disjointed rumors.

The tall, white-haired lynthari releases more heat, pushing against the chilly air up here on this impossibly high mountain. I notice that the longer we are here, the worse the cold gets. Still, this place is strangely beautiful. Devoid of life, leaving us with the clear white snow, and the sound of roaring wind, with snowflakes darting wildly around. The only sign of life is the partially charged array the First One left behind, and it's slowly losing the mana that charged it.

"Remains of the war between lynthari and humans. The lynthari Absolutes base was there before getting destroyed, orbiting around the planet, allowing him to move anywhere he wanted. But Feral one, even the matriarch, didn't think there was any way left to get there. This," she points at the array, "shouldn't exist anymore."

I probe the array with my senses and examine it more closely.

The side quest and its timing most likely mean that the First One is trying to destroy Virelia. Either because of his programming or he just wants to finish what he started and hurt Myrra and me for hunting him down.

Myrra says something behind me, but I filter it out and examine my body. My mana has rebounded for the most part, I even have some in reserve, and I have over three thousand shards in case I need something.

The floor quest isn't finished, so that means the First One is still alive, meaning he survived the transport and wherever he is, it is livable or he wouldn't survive in his weakened state.

I step into the array and look at Myrra.

She laughs shortly and without hesitation steps into the circle as well. There is no more need for words, and she only smiles, her posture confident.

An armor made of aurora glass forms around her epic armor. Its beautiful, almost like a work of art with thousands of multi-colored surfaces slightly reflecting the light.

I activate [Regalia] as well, blue armor surrounding my body including my head, the helmet doesn't have a visor. I make it as airtight as I can. I strengthen my armor as I prepare [Infusion]. Then, I fill the array with my mana, immediately appreciating the different circuits expertly inscribed into the circle. They are simple and elegant, not very efficient, but they are easy to work with.

I reactivate what mana remains from the previous charge and add more of mine, much more, feeling a massive drain. One after another, parts of the array light up, as my mana flows through them, reactivating it.

Lost in my work, I want to use more mana, but then I realize that we've already arrived. The transportation was extremely smooth and I barely noticed it.

A quiet hum welcomes me and a myriad of inscriptions surround us. Most of them have been deactivated for hundreds of years and some of them were reactivated mere hours ago. The room is relatively small and circular. There are no windows, just walls made out of the gray stone that I've seen so often lately. The same indestructible stone that made up some of the tunnels we passed through and a few of the buildings in Virelia.

I observe Myrra's movements as she gestures to me to wait and her helmet disappears.

With fascination, I watch as she inhales a few times and flicks her tongue, tasting the air for a moment.

It seems fine, she says.

My helmet disappears, but I keep armor around my body, just in case.

The air Im breathing feels weird, somewhat chemical or artificial. Fake, maybe? As if its been through dozens of filters or left to stagnate in a poorly ventilated room.

This way, I tell her and start walking towards my anchor.

The First One is not far.

Side by side, we walk through the dimly lit hallway, the architecture is radically different from anything we've seen so far. Simple, functional. Even the lights are just lines on the walls without any twists or decorations, just a straight line releasing a dim orange light.

We continue carefully, watching every step, examining every hallway, ready for anything. As weve been hunting the First One, weve learned about all sorts of traps and gotten used to constant danger and watching our steps.

But there is nothing. No traps, theres barely any mana to be felt, and it's eerily quiet except for a constant hum somewhere in the distance. It starts to feel like we are underground once more until we reach the window.

At first, we hesitate, seeing a panel of glass, our senses probing, looking for weaknesses, for traps. I detect the First One too and he is still a few minutes off. So I take a few last steps towards the window, Myrra carefully following behind me.

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Then, we stand there for a long minute, staring out the window.

I don't think Ive ever been so lost for words. So lost for thought. The view in front of me makes it hard to do anything else but stare. My worries, my problems, my need for revenge, all of them become so distant. So unimportant.

So small.

Behind a window the size of a small car, a planet is surrounded by pitch-black darkness with a few stars glowing dimly so far off.

The planet is so far below us and no matter how giant it is, it looks so small right now.

Myrra's planet, the Waning Realm as the system called it, is half covered in snow and wild mountains that stretch across large swaths of the surface, a wild beautiful shade of white. The bottom half of the planet is made of rocky ground and green continents with a few seas with clear blue color. Clouds lazily float across it.

It's beautiful. A view I didn't think I would ever see in my life.

I want to see things like this. I want to see them more often. I want to reach that level where even things like this will become normal. And I will get there.

But there is something I need to do first.

I step away from the window, back to the hallway, and continue to walk towards my anchor.

Barely able to take her eyes off the view, Myrra follows me.

We pass through a room with a glass floor that makes it terrifying to walk through. Nothing changes and this place seems as solid as before, yet there is this irrational worry that our steps alone could break it like normal glass.

Then we enter a room with another window, this one turned to the opposite side. A view of infinite darkness behind with lonely stars shining by.

We also detect one of the First Ones traps, trying to tear a hole in the wall and throw us into space.

I don't think it would be able to damage it, yet I still disrupt it and notice a few thin threads of mana that I take care of.

At some point, this place we are in starts shaking and the hum intensifies as if we started moving.

So that's how it is.

The First One plans to use this place, a reminder of an era passed long by, and crash it into Virelia, hoping to kill us in the process.

I create a domain around myself and try to place an anchor behind the walls, out in space. And I fail; my senses can't pierce the walls any more than the void outside can get in. We are trapped here and the shaking intensifies and as we pass by the window I can see that we are moving, passing through other debris, and remains of what used to be a much grander build. Some other debris crashes against us, making us shake even more, yet the damage is none or minimal.

I check the anchor I left on the snowy mountain with the array and it's too far. I can send my mana there, yet teleporting seems to be impossible, the amount of mana I have is simply not enough.

So we continue. We destroy the traps and pass through the rooms, ignoring the wonders that surround us, until we reach the center of all of it.

There the First One waits. A black carapace that seems to absorb light itself and a dagger impaling him through the back close to his head, constantly absorbing the majority of his mana.

The ant steps away from the pillar, barely any mana is left inside his body and he is forced to rely on the strength of his physical stats. He takes a few more steps, moving even further back, and just stands there, our figures reflecting hundreds of times in his compound black eyes.

Myrra hisses, about to charge him, but I put my hand on her, Check the pillar first.

She tries to get away from me, but I strengthen my body and pull her back, He did something. Check. The. Pillar. First. There arent any traps and I probably wont be able to activate it as it's only meant for lynthari, I repeat.

Myrra curses but does so as I take a few steps, keeping myself between the black ant and the white-haired lynthari.

Just looking at the creature makes my blood boil, but I push all those thoughts to the back of my mind, though some of them surface, even through [Focus].

As if in answer the First One clacks his mandibles a few times, a soft snapping sound echoing through the room.

We are falling, Myrra says.

Can you tell where? I ask.

After a minute Myrra confirms what I was thinking, The trajectory has already been calculated its going to strike Virelia her voice breaks in the end.

Mana radiates from her but she quickly takes it under control and channels it into the pillar, the vibrations weakening and through kinetic energy, I feel our movement slowing. Myrra is using her mana to power the base and keep us in orbit.

The First One clacks his mandibles.

Not enough, I dont have enough mana! she pushes more and more of it, weakening herself near our enemy. Hoping to redirect the base.

The feeling of the ant looking right into my eyes flows through me and there is even a question I can read or feel from him.

What will you do now?

The ant brought us here in hopes of cutting the connection to the tether. When it didn't work, he launched the base at Virelia, and now here he is, waiting for us to waste mana stopping the base, to weaken ourselves. To stay trapped here with him.

He wants us to waste mana, not even for a moment giving up on his attempts to kill us. And seeing the way he looks at us, we will need to use most of our mana to stop the base from falling on Virela, Im sure he calculated that. Using some of it to fight him would make stoping the base impossible.

"Cheeky little fucker, aren't you?" Not taking my eyes off him, I take a few steps back and put my hand on the pillar.

Without any hesitation, I release my mana and push it inside. I start infusing all of it, the mana from my body and reservoir as well.

Myrra, I bet this base has some kind of radar, so find the place with the largest number of ants.

This ant is smart. I do not believe weve gotten all of the Colony. No, he most likely saved some and hid them to rebuild the Colony after killing us.

I continue, And then when you find a place with enough ants, crash us into it.

The First One freezes, his mandibles stop moving, a sheer surprise to be felt even from his monstrous body.

I place an anchor near the pillar and start sending my mana to it, and even with my gradually decreasing reserves, I step into his way.

What will you do now?

The ant's body moves, and he rushes to stop us.

Chapter 260: The last of the Colony

There isn't any mana radiating from the First One, all of it has been sucked up by the black dagger tethered to his body. He is just using the sheer strength of his stats.

Using my mana as effectively as I can, I block his body, and the armor surrounding my body disappears, reforming only at the point of impact with the black ant.

I channel mana towards the pillar where Myrra, trusting in me to protect her, continues to steer the orbital base and looking for signs of ants to target.

Seeing how desperately The First One attacks me, my assumptions are probably right, there is indeed a smaller Colony he plans to return to and rebuild after dealing with us. The leader of the Calamity never gave up in the first place.

His attacks are quick and hard-hitting, but they are far from what they were when he attacked Virelia, and neither are mine.

Both of us are tired, our reserves low, reducing us to a lowly brawl with weak bursts of our skills.

He tries to get to the pillar and cracks his mandibles together in an attempt to cut it apart with his ranged attack, but I stick my hand in the way and cover it with dense armor, blocking it and getting a cut on my arm.

Then my fist moves, a thin spike forming around it, and I stab it deep into his body. When I try to enlarge it, the mana gets pulled in by the black dagger, and even the armor around my arm flickers.

All this time I feel the First One's attempts to cancel out the anchor binding the dagger to him, and as before, I continue to channel my mana into it to keep it from being destroyed by him or the black dagger.

An attack throws my body to the side, and I sacrifice a bit of my mana to shoot a projectile boosted by kinetic energy at his head, which he dodges, and I'm back to attacking him before he can charge Myrra.

I need more mana! the lynthari shouts.

As requested, I channel more of my mana into the anchor near the pillar. I do not hesitate to weaken myself, and instead of using it against the ant, I send it to the base.

The First One's panicked attempts to stop it warm my heart. His demeanor cracks. His movements are quick and desperate, and his attempts to cancel my anchor or control the black dagger reach a peak.

And I'm here. I block his way. I take on his attacks. I sacrifice my mana to destroy his plans even in exchange for more wounds on my body.

At some point, a laugh comes out of my mouth, as I break one of his legs and kick him away from the pillar. Then even more of my mana flows out of me, and the base shakes even more, a sure sign of Myrra's work.

The First one attempts some sort of mental attack against me, but I shrug it off with my Mantle and use some mana to stop it from reaching Myrra. Unlike before, I feel happiness as I deplete my mana. Every drop I send to the pillar means more pain caused to the black ant.

In the end, he stops moving and just stands there, staring at me.

Nearly all of my mana is gone, and Myrra finally changes the trajectory, spending most of her mana as well.

Ten minutes until impact. He won't be able to change the trajectory anymore, I locked it, Myrra says.

Instead of answering her, I continue to smile and talk to the First One, I know what your plan is. You will wait for us to get close to the point of impact and connect to the Colony to get their strength and maybe use it to stop the crash.

My mana is slowly regenerating, all in preparation for the final clash. I don't want to fight now, no, I want the First One to watch his plans get demolished, his Colony to get destroyed. And only then will I finish him, letting him know his place.

Or you might be trying to get rid of the dagger again. Maybe you want to kill Myrra and me once you get some power from the remaining ants. I take a step closer. But you will fail.

Oh, is that why some assholes like to monologue so much? I know that I hated Elydor and Emeric when I heard their cocky monologues. Back then I was curious why they acted like that, why they talked that way.

Yet, now I'm doing the same.

It's so silly it makes me giggle once more, all my hate brought to the surface just by looking at the enemy in front of me.

Minutes pass and the base takes on more turbulence. through the window, I can see the planet growing closer, the clouds closing in, and the fire caused by friction.

I form a small orb next to me and place an anchor on it. Myrra prepares her attacks.

Then the First One receives the first wave of mana and strength from the Colony, a few seconds before crashing. A majestic power surrounds his pitch-black body and the glow in his eyes changes. The black dagger dissolves, as the leader of the Colony finally manages to dispel it. He immediately removes the anchor I left on him.

He snaps his mandibles and I pull Myrra down, avoiding the slash that cuts through the air where we stood.

The entirety of the First Ones mana attempts to slow the movement of the base, he tries to absorb it. He tries multiple skills at once, the pressure destroying him even as he immediately regenerates his body in exchange for the lives of the Colony.

And I disrupt his attempts.

My Mana Wavelength Iris activates, allowing me to quickly decipher the frequency and I disrupt all his attempts. The mana that The First One has right now is too much for me to fight against, so I just find the trigger, the important part of the skills, the threads that it can't work without. And I snap them without mercy.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

[Resonance - lvl 39 > Resonance - lvl 40]

Congratulations, you have completed a side quest and received a skill upgrade token!

Then it's too late, the base too close to the ground. The ants eyes meet mine and for the first time, I can see the emotion in them despite their alien nature. It's hate.

Good.

My domain activates around as big an area as I can and I absorb kinetic energy around Myrra and me as we crash against the ground. Time feels as if slowed down and I constantly look for something, while the walls around us crumble and bend, an immense amount of energy around us.

Then I find it, a crack in the base, and finally, my domain passes through, creating an anchor outside of it.

I grab Myrra and transport both of us outside and right after I launch my orb as far as possible.

A second passes, the amount of energy and heat around us immense and putting a strain on me, and only then do I activate the anchor, transporting us to the orb that has traveled quite far in the meantime. I repeat it until I'm almost out of mana.

Myrra creates a barrier around us and we wait and fight against the shockwave and waves of heat as they pass over us. There is nowhere to hide as the sand dunes surrounding us are thrown into the air as the ones closer to the impact melt in place.

[You have defeated Worker ant - lvl 15]

[You have defeated Worker ant - lvl 80]

[You have defeated Sentinel ant - lvl 164]

[You have defeated Worker ant - lvl 67]

[You have defeated Worker ant - lvl 88]

[You have defeated Flame Legion ant - lvl 115]

[Lvl 210 > Lvl 211]

I try to stand up from behind Myrra, but I stagger and fall to my knees, my head throbbing and hurting like crazy, and my vision blurs, I can barely see with one eye.

Standing up again, I push Myrra to the side and start walking towards the impact site, my feet burrowing into the hot sand thrown aside in waves, creating a deep crater of melted material, the heat palpable in the air.

In the center of that hole, a base lies, a building made of gray stone and of a shape I can hardly describe right now, with all the broken pieces everywhere. The base, by my estimates, used to be as big as a small shopping mall.

Absorbing the heat around me, I step toward the edge of the giant crater and start sliding down toward the center of the explosion. I roll a few times, get burned twice, and I still barely see with one of my eyes, yet I reach the base.

A scan detects me, and the black ant crawls from inside. Wounds all over his carapace, unable to be healed anymore, all the remaining vitality of the Colony used to keep him alive.

My mana encompasses the area, and I find only corpses of the ants and even the notifications have stopped. The explosion has set the subterranean tunnels ablaze causing the explosion that killed them.

The First One is the last one standing.

Surrounded by the debris of the orbital base, and heat strong enough to melt the sand into glass, the ant takes a step towards me.

It's a wobbly step, a few of its legs are broken.

I feel Myrra's mana move, but I don't stop her, and a barrage of Aurora glass hits the ant from the side, cutting him in half, the back half remaining behind in the sand.

Yet the ant doesn't stop. He falls to the ground and starts using his remaining functional leg to pull himself closer to me.

Slowly, second after second, he moves closer. Sticking a leg in front, burrowing it into the sand, and pulling, half of his body sliding on the ground.

The entire time I feel his attempts to connect to my mind. It's not an attack, only an attempt at communication. Either hateful words, maybe begging, maybe something entirely else.

And I won't let it connect, not even to give one last word to the leader of the Calamity.

He finally reaches me, and his cracked mandibles snap around my shin, trying to cut it. The First One bites over and over again, his weak attack dealing no damage at all, not even piercing my skin.

Feelings roar inside me for a moment and then there is a strange calm. I stare at this being, strong enough to be considered capable of reaching the rank of Champion and kinetic energy flows through my right leg.

Then I stomp on his head.

[You have defeated Hive Confluence Sentinel - lvl 264]

[Lvl 211 > Lvl 212]

[Lvl 212 > Lvl 213]

[Lvl 213 > Lvl 214]

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the 4th floor's main quest in the fifth round of the tutorial for Hell difficulty. An entrance to the 5th floor has been created.

Next to me, the portal to the 5th floor opens.

I stomp again, the sand exploding under my feet and turning what remains of the First One into mush. And again, sending more kinetic energy through my leg, I stomp as hard as I can. Again and again, until my leg hurts and even what energy I have been able to recover is gone.

I receive 1,000 shards and a skill upgrade token from completing side quests, and then another side quest appears.

Side quest: Kill the Calamity

Reward: 4000 shards

Attention, a milestone reached. Entry into Irreversible Narrative Progression has been detected for group 4. In accordance, the Community Interface with other groups will now be deactivated.

I open Beyond Community.

Sset - Weve also completed our quest and the entrances have appeared, but we will be staying.

Noname -Take care.

Sset -Yes.

After that, I close the Community.

Myrra slides into the crater, moving slowly, tired and devoid of mana. Even then, she looks at the remains of the black ant and burns them to ash.

You keep looking there, she turns towards the entrance to the 5th floor, Judging from how you move your eyes, it's about my height and a few times wider. But I cant see or sense anything.

None of us wants to talk about what just happened, so we shift the conversation to something else.

I will try to explain it later, I say, and Myrra nods. How about we rest for a while and examine what remains of the base?

Myrra follows my gaze, curiosity also showing on her tired face. Let's do that.