

Tutorial 261

Chapter 261: Neither wrong nor right

In the end, we rested for over two days, one of us sleeping while the other took watch. After those two days, I feel much better. I even sacrifice some shards to buy food and water, which I share with Myrra. When she starts asking too many questions about where it comes from, the system interferes, and from then on, she acts like it's normal.

Such a display of control by the system over natives is disturbing, but knowing there's nothing I can do, I try to ignore it.

I look towards the small crater where the First One died. I don't know what I expected, but I feel empty.

It's not like I can say revenge isn't worth it. Not at all. That bitch had to go down. It's just that the joy I felt for killing him is slowly diminishing, and I know in a few days he will become just a memory. An enemy dealt with, a step on my way towards wherever this all leads me. Just a fake, the only proof of his existence, the empty hole left by Hadwin.

While Myrra sleeps, I sell the skill upgrade token after examining all the options for upgrading my skills. I make sure to remember the most useful ones as it helps me understand my skills and what should be possible. Even then, I follow the plan I made long ago and decide not to upgrade any of my skills.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 5000 shards?

Skill upgrade token

Yes/No

I confirm, and my shards increase. Thinking back on the skill upgrade token I sold last time, I only got 2500 shards, and this time I received 5000, meaning there is most likely a rarity to skill upgrade tokens as well.

After trying for a while, I confirm that I can't claim my rewards for clearing this Floor's main quest, I will likely need to enter the 5th floor to receive them.

Floor quest:

Destroy one of the 4 Calamities

Rewards:

Epic Passive skill

Skill upgrade token

2000 Shards

60 stat points

Access to other Communities

More shards, access to other communities, and mainly an epic passive skill. Then theres the matter of the 9000 shards I already have. I could buy another passive if I wanted to, or I could wait for the 5th floor or maybe wait for the rest of group 4 to deal with another Calamity.

They received a confirmation for clearing this quest even though they weren't here, likely indicating that floor rewards will be received by the whole party even if only a single member clears the quest. And knowing the system, all such rewards will only be distributed once we reach the next floor.

So yeah, let's wait and buy ourselves a juicy epic passive. Thinking about it, I may receive 2 epic passives on the 5th floor, so that's really something.

My increased level is now over 200, a new trait, my plans for improving the kinetic mana heart, another round of active tempering, and enchanting experiments with black mana. There is so much to do as always, but I like it. Things like this are good at taking my mind off useless stuff.

Thinking again? Myrra stretches, her tail twitching as she does so.

We are currently, in the massive crater the crash made, we've set up a tarp over the area, creating a nice shady patch in the middle of this desert.

I already ditched my warmer clothes for a more comfortable set and at times I even absorb heat from my skin and release it to cool off. At some point, I even split my mind with [Focus] using a portion to keep it running constantly. There are no enemies, no monsters, nothing, so I can handle the mana expenditure quite easily.

We've found ourselves at the edge of the desert where the fallen hero wanders, from what Myrra has told me.

You are doing it again, the tall lynthari complains.

And what will you do about it? I shoot back.

Myrra blinks a few times. You used to be so cute back when I first met you. So careful and shy, she shakes her head.

That was long ago. I get up on my feet. Ready to examine the base?

She answers in the affirmative and quickly stands up. Being a lynthari, she gets bored quite easily, especially without anything interesting happening.

Looking at the materials, I suspect that the orbital base, parts of Virelia, and many of the tunnels the colony took over were made by a lynthari Champion or their Absolute. Her hand slides across the surface of the base as we enter through the ruined section.

The material is extremely durable and it took falling about a hundred miles from orbit and crashing into the earth to even damage it.

Someone probably had a skill related to creating and manipulating stone. Look at it, it's all made from the same material, I offer as

Myrra lights up our surroundings, Or they could convert normal materials.

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

The base is tilted, and some of the tunnels have collapsed as we delve deeper inside, looking for traps that could have been left behind by the previous owners and the First One.

At least its cooler here than it was outside, so we take it slowly, examining the rooms and tunnels, looking for anything useful. But like the orbital base: It's empty, the rooms cleared of nearly everything. There are no mana stones bearing messages and no personal belongings. Just long tunnels and empty rooms.

The only worthwhile parts about it are the inscriptions I get to examine, marking some down onto cheaper mana stones. Myrra finds another pillar, which she activates making use of her lynthari heritage and starts searching for anything useful.

What she does find are mere tidbits of information, most of the useful data has been cleared, either by the previous owner before leaving the base or the system, and we learn next to nothing from it.

Myrra can somewhat control the base, but to make it run as before would require skills neither of us possess to repair it.

The most useful thing we get from all of this is a map of arrays. The old ones from the war, which have mostly been destroyed, and the newer ones the base's scan found when Myrra was looking for remains of the Colony.

We give it a few more days in hopes of finding anything useful, but in the end, we give up and head towards the closest array.

I have a strong suspicion that Myrra has figured something out, but she is trying to hide it and her behavior is off.

For now, I decide to let it be and observe a bit longer.

And so we travel through the dunes, either running or flying when we get bored. We are surrounded by a never-ending field of golden dunes that look exotic and nice at first, but the repetitive view becomes stale after a few days. The weather is too hot for my liking as well, but Myrra seems to be enjoying it. Her ears twitch and her tail sways as she seems to absorb the heat with an expression of joy.

I won't return to Virelia, she says to me as we stop for a short break.

The sun shines on her as she clamps her eyes shut. Her white hair shining especially bright.

Please don't ask, I have my reasons and I will tell you sooner or later. Is that ok with you? The determination in her voice is clear.

I see no problem in agreeing, and respond, Sure.

She opens her eyes and looks at me, same as I've been watching her and a subtle smile graces her lips.

The two of us really are alike in many ways, aren't we? It's kind of nice because it prevents conflict. Kind of. But it's also annoying because she seems to understand what I'm thinking, and I'm not used to that.

We reach the array and spend some time digging it out from under tonnes of sand and then I have to spend more time fixing it. All while the white-haired lynthari sunbathes nearby with her eyes constantly on me.

Freeloader, I snap at her.

I've heard worse, she answers, unbothered, and turns her face towards the sun.

While pushing my mana into the array and checking it for any leaks, I open the community. Beyond Community is still working, even though the system turned off the others.

Gareth -

Savant -You guys probably killed the Calamity, right? That's why your Community got blocked. And us being able to talk means that you decided to stay and haven't entered the 5th floor yet.

Gareth -Oh, you are smart as always, Savant!

Sset -Yes, we did. I see no reason to keep it a secret.

Gareth -Our group hasn't even started yet! We are still in Virelia, and everyone seems to be having fun with the guild and enjoying some rest. Meanwhile, we've done some information gathering and been trying to get to know some of the lynthari and guild masters.

Sset - Gareth, do more of you plan to enter Beyond?

Gareth - A few wanted to, but I convinced them to change their mind. Most of us have already used upgrade tokens too.

Savant - So nice of you. It's easier to control your group if you are the strongest, right?

Gareth - Yes.

Savant - How unexpected of you to admit it so easily.

Gareth - I'm their leader, so it's my responsibility to choose the way. Risking their life in Beyond is not something they need to do. Just me going through it is fine, my friend.

Sset -

Gareth - If they decide to do so, I will help and will work hard to prepare them. That much is expected of me, of course. But they trust my decision.

Savant - Disgusting.

Sset - They might end up being too reliant on you.

Gareth - Sset, from the way you talk I can tell that you are still very young, so allow me to explain. It's not bad that they rely on me, it's not wrong to look for someone to lean on in these situations. It's even to be expected.

With interest, I watch the conversation, forgetting about my mana flowing through the array.

Gareth - I have decided to take on this responsibility and be that person for them. I will protect them as much as I can, and we will cooperate so all of us can improve, together. So that we not only survive but get through this with people we can rely on.

Noname - What if they die? What will you do then?

Gareth - First, I'm sorry for your loss, Noname, I heard a lot of good things about Hadwin from Jakub. I'm sure he will be missed by a lot of people. And to answer your question, we would grieve and prevent it from happening again. Death is something to be expected under these conditions, but not something we take lightly.

Noname - What if you die?

Gareth - I am really strong. I won't die, and will do my best to not let any of them die under my watch, and I will make sure they are prepared for the case I'm not around.

Noname - You are wrong.

Gareth - I'm neither wrong nor right, my friend. The same goes for you.

I look away from the window, thinking about what Gareth said. There are some things I like about it and some I really don't.

But in the end, he still feels suspect to me, and I'm more inclined to Savant's opinion that Gareth just wants to be strong enough to control his group, and this is just a mask.

As I'm about to close the window I notice one more message.

Sset -Grumpy entered Beyond's first trial.

Chapter 262: Revisiting

I will need a bit more time for this, I tell Myrra.

Sure, I will keep watch, she answers and continues to sunbathe without any shame.

Immediately, I open the Community again and wait.

During the time I spent helping her before the fight against the Calamity, Lily improved a lot and I don't believe she entered Beyond unprepared. The problem is that the trials are customized to the person taking them, testing their weaknesses and forcing them to improve their skills, so there is a limit to how much you can prepare.

I examine my feelings; there is a hint of worry and satisfaction. Lily could have entered Beyond anytime after I left, and her doing it now means that it wasn't an emotionally motivated decision. She probably thought about it on her own and decided that she was ready, without so much as letting Tess know. I know how Tess would react.

It's what I wanted, and that's where Gareth and I disagree. Savant and I seem to think alike, and Gareth is nearly the opposite of our opinion, while Tess is somewhere in the middle.

Noname -How has she been the past few days?

Sset -Mostly fine. After Hadwin died, she threw the bow away and decided to fight close range.

Oh, I think I can see why she made that decision. Lately, shes played the role of a ranged combatant/healer. Seeing others get hurt probably forced her hand, and so shes decided to fight on the frontlines using [Disintegration] at close range and relying on [Reconstruction] to keep her alive.

I can understand that, considering what happened last time.

Sset - She should be fine.

And so, we wait, constantly checking the timer, counting down the hour, and keeping an eye on the number of people in Hell difficulty.

Easy difficulty 1340/2000

Normal difficulty 870/1000

Hard difficulty 259/500

Hell difficulty 44/250

Beyond 5/10

I find it hard to focus on anything else, so instead of working on the array, I just toggle in between the timer and member count. Its silly, honestly, as if it would even help. As the time grows closer, my eyes stay glued to the counter.

10 seconds

5 seconds

1 second

Beyond 5/10 > Beyond 6/10

Gareth - Group 4 is a bit crazy if I have to say so myself.

Grumpy -Hello.

Gareth -Welcome, Grumpy! Good job!

Sset -Im glad youre ok. Where are you at the moment?

Grumpy - Nearby, I will come to you. Is he here?

Noname - Hey, good job with the first trial.

Grumpy -

Grumpy - When are you coming back?

Noname -When you guys deal with the Calamity. Sset can tell you more.

Grumpy - You promised youd owe me after we saved Soph and the twins. So you better keep your word.

Noname -Yes.

After that, we exchange a few more words, and reaching the time limit the Community turns off.

Lily seems to be anxious and unhappy, but it's not an easy thing to solve. She's just that kind of person and she is the only one that can deal with it. I, on the other hand, have decided to be selfish and stop worrying so much about others. Yes, I have decided to stay with the group after the start of the 4th floor, but not to this point. I'm not like Gareth and never will be.

I quickly fix the array and turn to Myrra, Ready.

Unlike before, when we used charged mana stones and items to activate it, I'm fully capable of operating it on my own without any items. There is almost no need for mana stones, as there are only two of us, and I will be able to handle the expenditure with my own mana.

I thought you were losing your touch, feral one. It took you quite a long time.

You know, I've slowly lost all the respect I ever had for lynthari, I won't let her bully me.

She nods seriously, That's what often happens when you get strong. You've just reached a level of strength above our own, so you've lost your sense of mystique and reverence for us. It's obvious that you would feel differently now. Myrra enters the array and stands next to me, I've changed a bit as well. Without the matriarch and her personality affecting us, all lynthari will change.

I almost ask what she thinks is happening in the city now, but I change my mind. Myrra must know something that's making her reluctant to return, and I'm sure I will find out before the floor ends.

What I find sad is that there might be a war coming, and Eriss's last words come to me. The ancient lynthari loved her kin and humans alike. She created a system that allowed them to coexist however strange and even put her life on the line to protect the future of both races.

And with her sacrifice, she only hoped for two things. For humans not to blame young lynthari who never participated in the war and for the two races to get along. A simple, naive wish coming from someone who fought in the war of Champions and Absolutes.

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I cut off this line of thought as I activate the array. After a lot of testing, preparation, and a few minutes of charging, both Myrra and I disappear from the desert.

The desert view is replaced by a rocky area with a forest to the right and far in the distance, I can see the towers of the Old Capital.

I see that we have a few scavengers here already, Myrra's canines show as we detect the presences around us.

It's probably the camps they set up while their members go through the city.

Want to bet that they started moving the second the First One ran from Virelia? I offer.

I won't bet with you on that. It would be too easy for you. I just thought I ordered a blockade of all the arrays, but it looks like there are some we didn't know about.

The end of the floor is approaching, so there is no need to hesitate or be nice. Myrra also speaks of the scavengers with disdain, so I do not hesitate to move toward one of the camps.

On the way, I purposefully trigger one of the detection stones they've left around the camp and it sends a signal.

Hey! You two! We know about you, so come out! someone shouts and even tries to pressure us with his mana.

Still using Mana Cycling to hide my mana, I do as I'm told as a curious Myrra follows me.

Fuck, another lynthari, the man sighs when we get close to each other.

Ten or so humans surround us.

[Elemental Mage - lvl 141]

[Shadow Assassin - lvl 128]

[Terra Guardian - lvl 152]

[Storm Raider - lvl 129]

...

All of them are close in level and show no visible signs of alliance to any guild.

I have to tell you that we have the support of high-ranking lynthari, miss, so I will need to ask you to leave, he says towards Myrra. He talks carefully, bluffing with a partial truth.

Well, we did expect a few lynthari to try this kind of thing.

Oh my, feral one, what are we going to do? Should we leave? Myrras eyes glow in the dim light and her fluffy tail twitches a bit, showing her playful mood and annoyance at being told off.

Some things do not change so easily.

Give me everything you retrieved from the Old Capital, I say simply to the people surrounding us.

At that moment, I stop focusing on cycling my mana and allow some of it to leak. Before they can even say anything, the pressure of my mana hits them, and no words come out of them. To show the difference between us, I activate [Redistribution] holding them for a few seconds, barely allowing them to breathe. Then a pulse of [Resonance] disrupts their skills.

I let go of them, and without much complaint, they rush into their camp, bringing out everything they got from the city.

When they bring everything to me, it's quite a lot. Some equipment, some mana stones, and a few other items. Most of it isn't that valuable.

I pick the most interesting ones while ignoring the looks they give me.

As we leave the camp to approach the next one, I sense a pulse of mana shoot over me towards the camp I'm heading to and stop. The pulse was clearly sent through an item, most likely as a warning.

A javelin forms over me, and I place an anchor on it before boosting it towards the camp where I was heading.

Then I turn around and return to the camp we already looted.

W-what? We already gave you everything you wanted! their leader shouts.

Did you send a signal to the other camp? I ask bluntly.

What? We didn't do Before he finishes, a blast of kinetic energy sends him rolling through the camp, crashing against everything in his way.

I reduced the power by a lot, but even this was enough.

After taking a few steps, I stop in front of another guy. Did you send the signal?

Immediately, he nods, none of them even attempting to fight.

See, that wasn't so difficult, I say to calm him down, but it seems to make him shake even more.

Pushing him to the side, I reach the tent where they keep most of the items, and a small orb forms in my palm, compressing and quickly turning golden, releasing immense heat even in this state.

I would run away, I warn them and throw the orb in between the items.

Myrra reaches out to me, and I touch her, both of us disappearing and appearing near the javelin I tied an anchor to. A few seconds later, the camp we just left explodes into golden flames that devour everything in their path with a roar.

Quite ruthless, Myrra says while looking at the humans that surround us.

Im not in a very good mood, I answer her, and more of my mana radiates from my body, pressuring the men and women standing against us.

They shout warnings among themselves, preparing for a fight, but I do not stop there. Like a tsunami, waves of mana radiate from me in the center, putting pressure on them, showing them my level. The amount of mana hints at a much higher level than I currently possess, people are rarely dumb enough to invest in the mana stat so heavily.

The expressions on the faces around me change. From determination and anger to shock and fear. They drop their weapons, deactivate their skills, and step back, sweat on their brows, hands shaking.

They are the kind of people who recognize strength and know what to do in such cases. Members of guilds that do not hesitate to kill people to gain an advantage.

So, I do not stop there and reach into my reservoir, more mana radiating from me, making my presence felt for miles away.

Slowly, one after another, they drop to their knees, unable to even look into my eyes.

Only then do I stop, and my mana disappears in a moment, pulling the aura I radiated back into my body.

Bring me everything you got from the Old Capital, I demand.

After looting a few more camps, my bags start getting full, so I get a few guys to carry them for me. So far, there are some metals they got from smithies, upper rare items with interesting effects, and plenty of mana stones, some of which have inscriptions I haven't seen so far.

There are also pieces of wood that are extremely durable, and look new even after hundreds of years. Some mana batteries too.

I pick only the best things and ignore the rest, most of the guys we visit don't even try to fight with us and just immediately surrender their stuff.

Myrra, bored, talks to them a bit and learns that there are in fact two lynthari in the city that she seems to know. Mohg and Gawyn, a duo that she says is well known for their damage output. Apparently, they are lynthari troublemakers and some of the young lynthari who like to play around the most. It seems that without the influence of the matriarch, they've become even worse.

Mohg and Gawyn organized a group of humans from a few of the midsized guilds with plans to find interesting items in the city.

What pisses Myrra off the most is that they came here even before the fight against the Colony started, leaving the other lynthari to deal with it. In the end, she just sighs and says cryptically that it doesn't matter.

We leave all of our things near one of the arrays, and I position a few mana orbs nearby, some of them should last a day at least. There is no anchor on them or any effect, and I don't even explain it to the men carrying the stuff we looted. Their imagination will surely come up with more terrifying ideas than any lie I could come up with. We leave them without saying a word, seemingly without a care for our things, and that seems to scare them, so they quickly leave.

So after raiding all the camps, we head into the city, where the largest group should be, over a week into the search.

And here, we find the corpses of two dozen humans, thrown around the streets, smashed against the floor, bloody splats on the ground. Men with holes in their chests, a woman's body without a head.

Blood is everywhere, a massacre committed with the pure power of physical stats as confirmed by checking the remains with my eyes, there is no mana around.

Looks like your lynthari duo did have some fun, I say to Myrra.

She doesn't answer, and with a frown on her face, we follow the trail of blood and massacre, finding a dozen more corpses. severed limbs are everywhere and organs are splattered on the walls.

We reach one of the towers near the center of the city and find two more corpses. Lynthari with their chests caved in, one of them has had their head pulled off and the other is missing an arm.

Both of the lynthari are very dead.

Chapter 263: Child of this planet

The area where the fight happened is destroyed, the walls have been crushed and the road is full of deep craters from the duos attacks. For the first time, I detect the attackers mana in the air. And I recognize the signature almost immediately.

Oh my, isn't this interesting?

After looking over the corpses of these lynthari she's probably known for over a hundred years, Myrra follows me, and both of us enter the tower.

This is the biggest tower I've entered so far, and yet it stood in the shadow of the Living Tree, dwarfed by it. But on its own, this building is impressive, and the fact that it still looks so good after so much time tells a lot about the way it was built.

The hallway is massive as well, with polished stone floors, covered in a light coat of debris, dust, and fresh blood, accompanied by a few more corpses.

Under my feet, broken glass and the remains of old furniture crunch and clatter echoing across the room, but I don't mind it that much, and Myrra seems to agree. Currently, the lyntharis face bears a strange expression, somewhere between anger, sadness, and something I cant identify.

At the end of the trail, we find Isola sitting on the last remaining piece of furniture. The pale, black-haired guild master of Obsidian Circle greets us with a smile, waving at us with a hand covered in blood.

"Feral angry kitten and invader Myrra, it's nice to see you!" She greets us.

"Who is here with you?" I ask curiously instead of returning her greeting.

The other person I sense in the tower is somewhere far above us and using something that makes it difficult to identify their signature, no matter how hard I try.

"It's probably a secret, but who cares," Isola jumps to her feet, the old armchair behind her cracking. "It's Thalén," she says.

Isola sends a pulse of mana shoots toward the signature I've carefully detected. Most likely a warning or a call for help.

Without much trouble, I reach out and disrupt it before it even reaches the ceiling.

"That's rude, Nathaniel," I note that she calls me by name. "You know I won't have a chance against you and Miss Invader without Thalén's help."

"Isn't that your problem?" I reply.

"I guess," Isola shakes her head, and after looking at Myrra, she looks back at me. "Are you with the invaders now?"

"I'm on my own side. What you and the lynthari do is not my problem."

The pale woman laughs. "You talk as if you're not even one of us." As she speaks, the tattoos on her forearms increase in size spreading all over her body, changing their shape and effects adapting to her fighting style. And I let her, carefully observing what she does.

"But you always did that, didn't you?" Isola stretches her body lazily. Muscles under her skin move, showing the strength of her body.

[Stoneheart - lvi 228]

"What are you and Thalen doing here?" Myrra asks for the first time.

Isola answers without hesitation, "Thalen had a spy among the scavengers that went to the Old Capital, and they located a few really interesting items, so we came to get them. You know, mostly the kind of thing that only works against lynthari. Poison against you guys, paralyzing enchantments. Stuff our ancestors were using during the war."

"So it's gotten that far?" Myrra asks in a somber tone.

"Yes, the Colonys attack didn't help, and between you and the Matriarch being gone, things went to... well, to shit. You will have to tell me why you decided not to come back, Miss Invader Myrra. Still, I don't think you being there would change things much."

"Obelia's work?" When I ask, Isola turns to me.

"Mostly Thalen's. I work with him, and Obelia helps us. Both of us owe Thalen a lot, stuff like prolonging the lives of people we care about, saving our lives, and restoring missing limbs. Over the years, things like that tend to accumulate."

And here we go again.

"Doesn't Virelia have other healers?" I ask, even though I suspect the answer.

Myrra answers me instead of Isola, Only a few lynthari, and they rarely heal humans. As for human healers, they tend to disappear."

"Thalen can be quite persistent if he wants something. Feral angry kitten, did you know that he also asked Obelia to bring him your little healer?" a cruel smile climbs on Isola's lips, He only did it after you left, of course. He thought that it would be easy for Obelia, she was able to gain your trust after all. She's good at reading people, so it wasn't supposed to be that difficult for her.

Isola tries to send another signal to Thalen, but I disrupt it again, this time more aggressively. At that, she furrows her brow and smiles at me.

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She takes a step away from us, Tess was somewhere else, and even your other guild members were busy, so it was the perfect opportunity. Yet, Obelia returned with her entire arm and leg missing, barely escaping with her life. Even Thalen was unable to restore her destroyed limbs. What is with that black-haired healer of yours?

An anchor I placed behind Isola explodes with kinetic energy and pushes her toward us. Her barriers prevent her from being wounded, but it does shorten the distance, as a dagger made of blue, resonating mana cuts into her neck.

Isola ducks under my swing and shouts loudly, the floor under our feet vibrating. The shout doesn't reach Thalen, I will not allow it, so I use my resonance to create a dome around us. Yet Isola still smiles, knowing that the more skills we use, the higher the chance of Thalen detecting us.

Like snakes, glowing tattoos swirl all over her body, vibrant against her pale skin, and at the same time, she moves at immense speed, using her body to the fullest.

Isola takes on a blast of golden flames with a swing of her hand and pushes through [Redistribution], but I boost my body with the entirety of my mana for a split second, taking advantage of my epic passive to do so.

I become faster than her, and my dagger severs her hand cleanly, the resonating blade ignoring the incredible barriers she's built up over her skin and the sheer strength of her body.

The woman doesn't even flinch, and in exchange for her hand, she kicks at my chest as I surround it in armor infused with kinetic energy made with [Regalia]. My body doesn't move at all and the armor absorbs her attack.

Jumping back, she flings her bloody stump at me, throwing blood at my face, and jumps away from me, running towards the stairs.

There, Myrra stands, floating pieces of her aurora glass surrounding her.

What a fucking situation, Isola giggles. She boosts her body more, tendons and muscles tearing as she dashes towards Myrra with a leap that feels impossibly long.

Isola tanks multiple of Myrra's attacks and dodges the strongest ones, her talent showing as her body moves with a nimble accuracy, and incredible speed, each movement containing immense power.

The flooring cracks under Isola's feet, her attacks destroy pieces of aurora glass, a swing of her fist disrupts flames, and her kicks break Myrra's ice. One of the tattoos on her body glows and disappears, in the process restoring her hand and healing her body.

Meanwhile, Myrra fights calmly, with barely any emotion on her face, each attack calculated and executed with perfect timing in a way that shows her long years of experience with her skills.

Even with a lower level than Isola, I watch as Myrra destroys her, calculating the pale-skinned woman's attacks to the point it nearly seems like she is playing with her as she teleports from one aurora mirror to another and stabs Isola with the shards of glass after finding the weak points of her barrier.

And then, after a minute, Isola, unable to get through her falls to her knees, her tendons cut, terrible wounds all over her body with Myrra standing in front of her. The tall lynthari looks majestic. A proud gaze in her eyes and a relaxed stance while aurora glass flickers around her body, moving according to her will. Myrra isn't even warmed up yet.

So this is the Champion candidate I heard so much about, even now, Isolaz expression is daring without any hint of fear.

A fake Champion candidate, someone says from the top of the balcony overlooking the hallway.

A presence Ive felt moving closer the entire time stops hiding its signature, and the older red-haired man reveals himself.

Thalen, guild master of Luminous Order, the only human healer in Virelia.

[Pulsebinder - lvl 234]

The warm mana that I know so well radiates from him, and the small tattoo on Isolaz neck glows brighter. A mark left by the healer that works not unlike the Crown of Lily that I used.

Isola immediately heals, at a speed much faster than Lily can pull off.

I dont think there is a reason for us to fight, the man says. His voice is calm and confident, and I notice him holding an orb that he seems to be operating with his mana.

Little Thalen, who do you even think you are? Ive known you ever since you were a brat, barely reaching my waist, and now you take such a tone with me? Myrra's canines show and her cat-like ears stand up, her swinging tail showing her annoyance.

Miss Myrra, I have nothing but respect for you and do not wish for us to fight.

Interesting to hear from the one who went looking for weapons to use against lynthari, Myrra's canines extend even more.

Thalen looks at Isola, who just smiles playfully, and then he sighs, turning his attention to Myrra again, Its not something I want to use. The weapon will only be there to make sure the lynthari are willing to have a conversation with us. I promise not to use it as long as you dont threaten us.

Sounds quite reasonable, doesn't it? Curious, I observe the white-haired lynthari.

Thalen, dear little Thalen, I always hated you for spewing such bullshit with a straight face, taking a step towards Isola, Myrra continues to stare at the red-haired man.

It's all for us humans, Miss Myrra. I think it's reasonable to strive to be free of you, especially after we found out that our world was invaded by you. A circle of mana appears behind him, its diameter half the length of his body.

That circle starts glowing, and Thalen floats over the railing and into the air over Myrra. Mana radiates from the man, his pure white clothes contrasting with his stark red hair.

He spreads his arms, You don't even seem to be interested in the title of lynthari matriarch, so I ask you, no, I beg you, allow us humans to decide on our own. Allow us to decide whether we can live with lynthari or if we just can't bear it anymore. His face takes on a sad expression.

Thalen then turns to me, And for you, guild master of Angry Kittens, Nathaniel Gwyn, I ask you to stand on the side of your race, as you are also a child of this planet.

Even though he tries so hard, I notice his tone change slightly. Almost imperceptibly as he says the name of our guild. A hint of contempt, as if even saying such words out loud is beneath him.

Yeah, no, I respond.

May I ask you why?

I don't like the name of your guild. What is it even, Luminous Disorder?

It's Luminous Order, Guildmaster Gwyn.

Looming Disorder?

Luminous Order.

Oh, Ruminous Border.

...Guildmaster Gwyn, did I get on your bad side somehow?

Chapter 264: I won't do it again

A bit. Sending Obelia after one of my guild members is a bit rude, dont you agree? I ask the man.

Still floating there with the golden circle behind him, Thalen looks down at Isola, shakes his head, and turns back to me. There was a misunderstanding.

Sure.

My intention he starts, but I interrupt him.

Im not interested in talking with a fake, the moment I say that, his expression changes. A look of sheer surprise overtakes his face, much to my amusement.

How funny. Did he really think no one would notice?

Youre just trying to spew more bullshit. Isola pretends to be dumb while spewing out your secrets, maybe in hopes we will kill you, I say, and they exchange glances, and Isola just smiles, mostly confirming what I said.

Feral angry kitten, we did have some fun together, right? We trained a lot, and I dont think were so different, so what do you say? Won't you join me? Isola asks me.

Sorry, I don't trust you and I think Myrra wants to kill you, after answering, I turn to Myrra, who seems to be as amused as she is angry, her feelings betrayed by her tail.

Is that so? Isola sighs, I guess my only option is to fight alongside Thalen. What do you say, old man? Without me, you wont be able to get the items out of here. We can talk things out a bit later.

More mana radiates from the red-haired man, and he nods, You can go all out. I will take care of the aftermath. We will

He doesnt even finish his sentence when the anchor Ive been stealthily setting up next to him explodes, finally allowing him to sense its placement, too late for him to cancel it out. I didnt try to set it closer because he would surely have felt it, but in exchange, I send much more energy through it. The explosion throws him against the wall, the left side of his body is missing and bleeding.

At the same time, Myrra attacks Isola again, aurora glass surrounding her and creating a dome around both of the women.

Before I can reach Thalen, he is already fully healed, and the golden circle behind him reactivates, spinning wildly.

Armor forms around my body and covers it fully, and I face down an attack that reminds me of [Oscillation], Generated from the golden circle behind the man.

Thalen disrupts even the small anchors I place near him, not falling for the same trick twice, not realizing that Ive made them easily noticeable. He then lets my flames hit him. Yellow flames turn golden, burning and charring his extremely durable body, which even then regenerates at an immense speed. Ive been doing that for a while, by the time I notice the effect of the flames weakening.

No, its not like they are getting weaker, its more like he is getting more resistant to them.

Some sort of adaptive resistance? Probably a trait or passive.

I cut off the flames, and my javelins pierce his body through and through, but before I can expand them and tear him apart, he uses his [Oscillation]-like skill to destroy them.

So interesting.

We continue launching attacks against each other, and I keep testing him, limiting my output slightly to see more of his skills, while using [Perception] at the same time to observe the fight between Myrra and Isola.

You are really strong, one of the strongest humans I ever fought against, Thalen says after I throw a small tricolored orb against him.

With his tough body, he takes some of the damage and avoids the rest while healing his wounds. He's doing it the entire time, getting hit by my skills partially to gain resistance against them while waiting. Hes not attacking much, most likely the type that builds up resistance, prepares a plan, and then ends the fight in one fell swoop.

I, on the other hand, ignore his words and continue to limit my output.

Still, Im getting a bit annoyed by the way he talks, so I reach out to him with my domain, and I use [Resonance] to disrupt his skills in the middle of him restoring the leg I cut off.

While he quickly focuses on regaining control over his skills, I place an anchor that he is too late to disrupt and teleport next to him.

The feeling of my fist hitting his face is satisfying, and he crashes against the wall, then falters in the air before he starts floating again. His broken neck returns to its original position and the wounds on his face heal to a perfect state. He does that while he keeps healing Isola through their bond and through the tattoo on Isolas neck, so she can stand against Myrra.

I hear cracking, and through [Perception], I observe as Myrra is sent flying and crashes against multiple walls, breaking through each of them.

Isola immediately charges at me, her body moving nimbly like a wild animal and with a speed I had yet to see. She jumps in the air and reaches me in a split second, her fist hitting my cuirass as I use [Infusion] on to channel kinetic energy through it. The surface of the armor ripples, and it absorbs all the energy of her attack.

Isola pushes against the air with her feet, a short burst of mana or a skill allowing her to push against the air. She continues to strike at me, dozens of attacks in a moment barely longer than a blink.

And I absorb all of them, even though I can barely see them.

For a moment, I even activate my trait, watching the way she moves mana through her tattoos and the way she keeps up barriers over her skin, and make sure to remember the flow of mana.

Before my head starts hurting from all the information that I'm still unable to filter out, I cancel the trait and release all the kinetic energy I collected from Isola. The explosion throws her away and pushes me towards Thalen.

Blood spurts from the pale woman, and her broken body crashes against the floor, immediately getting restored. In the meantime, I reach Thalen, disrupting his attack and grabbing his arm. Before he can do anything, I try to disrupt mana inside his body, but he counters that while a constant stream of oscillating attacks start tearing my armor apart, no matter how much I strengthen it.

Like a lizard dropping its tail, Thalen cuts off his arm, only to immediately restore it after putting some distance in between us.

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

He decides to use the orb he found in the tower, the weapon against lynthari.

Well, he tries to.

I activate an anchor I left on his body and teleport behind him. Mana flows through my body, strengthening it, and I tear off both of his arms, taking the orb from them.

[Tether - lvl 26 > Tether - lvl 27]

I dodge Isola charging at me, and Myrra also quickly passes by, surrounded by armor made of aurora glass as she faces Isola again.

Thalen restores his arms again and turns to face me, and I activate another anchor I left on him, this time exploding the right side of his body.

Fear appears in the redheaded mans eyes while he regenerates his body.

Try to guess how many more anchors I left on you, I say taunting him.

I am getting better at masking them, I happened to notice that as an option among the available upgrades for the skill. My new trait helps a lot, that and the fact that this isn't his real body and he seems to be lacking in places.

Flying higher, I dodge Myrra as shes thrown by Isola, and when the black-haired woman reaches me, I blast her away with a surge of kinetic energy, barely doing any damage but getting rid of her for a while.

In the meantime, Thalen uses his skill to cut off most of his body. Only his chest, neck, and head remain untouched, floating in the air with a seraphic golden circle behind him. The blood and pieces of flesh drip from the man towards the ground and severed limbs. Then his heart sends more mana through his body, and the missing parts are restored, replaced by new ones.

I knew you were strong and I knew you had faced the Calamity on your own. However I have not taken you seriously and didn't show you the respect you deserve, he says and bows curtly. Then the amount of mana he is releasing doubles, and the circle behind his back expands as parts resembling wings form at the sides.

The look in his eyes changes, I wont do that aga...

His head explodes.

For a second longer, his headless body floats there before the golden circle and wings behind his back flicker and disappear.

[Infusion - lvl 19 > Infusion - lvl 20]

"I left three anchors on you when I touched you," I say to the now-dead body.

I deactivate the trait I've been using as I placed the anchors. There is no notification, obviously, as the body we fought wasn't the main one; either an avatar, a copy, or something else.

Seeing that, Isola immediately tries to flee, boosting her body to the maximum and rushing towards the door we used to enter the tower.

I wait for a moment, and just before she gets out, I activate the anchor I left there before we even entered the tower. I teleport in front of her. Unable to stop her inertia, Isola crashes against my body, and before she recovers from the shock of impact, I coat my hand in [Resonance] and cut off one of her legs. Then I blast her towards Myrra, who follows close behind, teleporting through pieces of multicolored glass.

Instead of landing on her back, Isola twists in the air, a barrier over her skin expanding and surrounding her with a sphere that absorbs Myrra's attack. The spherical barrier then shrinks back to her skin, and part of it elongates to give her a prosthetic limb in place of her missing leg.

She pushes against the floor and avoids another attack from Myrra. She then charges to my side. I track her movement, and doing so, our eyes meet. In the end, she notices and strengthens the barrier in front of her, creating multiple layers. The anchor I placed there explodes, sending her crashing against a nearby wall, destroying it and sending dust and debris into the air.

[Tether - lvl 27 > Tether - lvl 28]

I deactivate my trait, and this time my head hurts a lot and my sight blurs. I send thermal energy through my body, activating my passive in an attempt to alleviate some of the aftereffects.

Fuck, Isola groans from the ground. She doesn't move and just lays there, most of her tattoos losing their glow and her barriers weaker than before.

She is faking, I tell Myrra.

Feral one, who do you think I am?

Isola, still lying on the ground, giggles and tilts her head, looking at me. I always hated you, creepy-eyed fuck.

Mana explodes from her body, barriers absorbed into her skin, and for a short moment, she moves like the wind. Chaotic and hard to grasp. She dodges Myrras attacks and tries to flee once more, only to be blocked by Aurora glass. Then she moves even faster.

Her tendons and muscles tearing from the strain, each of her attacks sends Myrra backward and damages even the epic armor the lynthari is wearing. In the last attempt, she lets Myrra stab her with a weapon made of Aurora glass that passes through Isolass chest entirely. In exchange, Isola bites down into the lyntharis neck and giggles like a demon. She tries to bite again after tearing a chunk of flesh from it.

But she doesnt have the opportunity and freezes in the middle of the attack, as the bottom half of her body separates. However, she still tries to attack, to scratch, to grasp, her weak attempts blocked by Myrra. Gradually she slows down, and the light starts disappearing from her eyes.

[You have defeated Stoneheart - lvl 228]

Myrra lets go of her body, and it falls to the ground, the head of the dead woman bouncing off the floor. The emotions on Myrras face are hard to read, but I ignore it and come closer, searching through the pockets of Isolass clothes. Maybe she had a nice item or two.

While doing so, I also examine the tattoos on her skin, making sure I remember them all.

I spend a minute on it, but I dont find anything; the only things I can consider an item are her intricate tattoos. Isola always liked to rely on her body alone.

Feral one I hear from over me and look up at Myrra, who continues, Do you really feel nothing? You knew her, you two did spar a lot, and yet here you are, searching through her pockets, while her bodys still warm.

I stand up and dust my clothes a bit. I look over Myrra, who still holds a hand on her bleeding neck. The wound nearly healed already, either thanks to a skill or some items or maybe a hidden tattoo she possesses.

After thinking it over, I answer Myrra, She tried to kill me, didnt she? She also allied herself with someone who attacked my group, I answer. I mean, she wasnt that bad, and we did have some nice duels, but Im not strong enough to just let her live without worrying about it biting me or others in the back.

So, you would leave her alive if you were much stronger?

Probably? I mean, if she didnt threaten my group and had only attacked me I probably would. If I was much stronger, it would consider it cute rather than threatening.

Myrra opens her mouth to ask something else, but I interrupt her, You keep telling me that you know me so well, so why dont you answer your own questions?

We start walking towards where the corpse of Thalen is.

You only care about your guild, and you wouldn't hesitate if you had to kill anyone here. You might be sad afterwards, but you would do it, Myrra says carefully back in the hallway of the tower.

To answer her question, I hand her the orb, the weapon against lynthari that Thalen held. You are mostly right, but I think I would hesitate to kill you as well. As for Isola, I never trusted her.

After saying that, I search Thalens body and dont find anything interesting.

I notice that Myrra wears a strange expression, and her tail is swaying weirdly, but I decide to ignore it. Honestly? Myrra is often annoying, and we fought multiple times, but most of the time she is honest

and not the type to stab people in the back or treat them cruelly without a reason, and thats what I like about her.

Yes, its true what she said, and I only care about Group 4 out of everyone on this floor, because everyone else here is fake and will disappear. Yes, I did treat some lynthari and humans well, like Cael, Obelia, Eris, Myrra, and even Isola at times.

There is no reason for me to be cruel, to murder people for pleasure, or to kill others for their goods. Thats a path I dont want to walk. Sure, if it comes to it, I wont hesitate because there is a difference between being cruel and being stupid, and actively hurting myself. But I won't do it if there isn't a reason to.

Thats what Ive decided for now, and I will continue to do so, changing my ways only if I have no other option.

Chapter 265: Wrath

The combination of Mana Wavelength Iris and [Tether] is really strong, but its taxing, and I can barely activate my new trait for a second or two. Placing anchors that are harder to detect is nice, but I'm not sure if they are well hidden or if Thalen was just the unobservant type. Or maybe he didnt care because it wasn't his real body.

I will need more testing, and yes, there will be people quick enough to run away the moment I send something through the anchor, or people capable of disrupting or using them against me. But I will deal with that in the future. So far, I'm really happy with my new trait and will be sure to supplement my build with two nice epic passives after I enter the 5th floor.

[Perception] encompasses the room I'm in. The range of the skill is smaller on purpose as I'm trying to fine-tune it and maybe find some hidden stuff. Myrra and I split up, both of us going through the tower and searching for any interesting items, so far it looks like Thalen already found the best one and thats in Myrras hands now.

The tower bears signs of times passage that are mostly cosmetic. Dust, faded colors, worn-out carpets, furniture crumbling to dust, that kind of thing. Otherwise, the building is still holding strong, and even though its empty, I can still sense the circuits running through the walls. After checking the last room I was interested in, I channel my mana through the wall and observe where it leads, and then walk in the opposite direction. I will try to find the source, the place where mana enters the wall.

As Im tracking it, I meet Myrra in the hallway.

Two more anti-lynthari stones, three rare items, some mana stones, and conductive metals, she holds a bag in front of her, her search has clearly been much more worthwhile.

I'm trying to find the source of the mana filling the walls and powering the enchantments, I explain.

Oh, you mean the core.

Do you know anything about it? I ask.

A bit, its not the kind of thing I'm interested in. From what I know, most important buildings and the homes of powerful or skilled people have it. It can be as simple as a high-quality mana stone that the owner keeps and replenishes with mana daily, and to power enchantments, she smoothly jumps over a piece of broken furniture blocking one of the doors.

She puts a finger to her lips and after a moment of thinking, she continues, Some have mana stones so big that its impossible for one person to fill, so multiple people do it. Then there's also the option of creating an array of mana batteries capable of keeping enchantments running at full power for weeks, or in restricted mode for months or years, maybe even longer. It's the kind of stuff I never caught an interest in. I consider observing humans and lynthari to be more fascinating, she smiles shamelessly.

These mana stones you speak of, are they as big as the ones we use as currency? I ask to confirm.

Sometimes. Often they are raw mana crystals too low quality to be used like proper mana stones, or in cases where you don't care about size and just want them to hold as much mana as possible. But in the end, it still comes down to the skill of the enchanter. A good one can create a blueprint, weave a web of enchantments, and inscribe them in a way that will increase efficiency by tens of percent in comparison to someone less skilled.

Now that I think about it, I have a few mana stones with that kind of information. Nothing too good, just the kind of stuff they would teach at schools. Damn, from what I know, some of the inscriptions could be trademarked here, and I wouldnt be surprised. I think I will ask Tess to get some and leave them somewhere I can retrieve them.

After channeling my mana through the wall, I notice that Ive been following fake circuits all this time. Actually, there are so many of them that I didn't notice until now.

Thinking about it, it makes sense. These fake circuits were probably designed to prevent this kind of tracking, and there were probably more anti-tracking inscriptions that are currently inactive due to the lack of mana.

The way Myrra is smiling at me tells me that she knew and enjoyed watching me walk into a dead end.

As if nothing happened, I send my mana through the walls again and use my eyes for a split second before continuing.

Is this your trait, feral one? You didnt answer me before, but when you are using it, a golden ring appears around your iris. Its pretty.

I nod and change the subject, You said the core is powering enchantments. What are the most popular ones? I know there are some to fight against detection skills, some are strengthening the building, others for isolation, or maybe even heating.

One of the first are anti-detection, anti-teleportation, reactive barriers, and insulation. There are a lot of them. For heating, to repel insects, to absorb the shock of earthquakes. I even heard stories about enchantments capable of making entire manors fly, enchantments that absorbed mana from attacks to strengthen their barriers, enchantments that killed you if you used specific skills or said specific words.

I quite like what Im hearing; it all sounds really versatile and like something I will totally try to learn how to do. I also push my plan to steal secrets on the matter higher on my priority list. For example, I can already imagine building a manor for Biscuit and creating an enchantment that would feed him deer jerky at pre-scheduled times. Or an enchantment that would activate and attack anyone who uses an invisibility skill.

Thats nice indeed.

I don't rush my search for the core, and we examine a few more rooms in the process. Some of them are more interesting than others, but all of them feel empty and lifeless without mana or people flowing through.

The silence is nearly eerie, made even worse when we pass by windows and see the entire city like this; there is no movement, and it looks drained of colors. Even the wind seems to avoid it and doesn't pass through the streets.

Breaking through a few walls, we finally reach the core, a pillar as tall as me, made of a light purple mana crystal. It stands proudly in a simple room, and the set of inscriptions around it is extremely delicate. After examining it for a while, I channel my mana into it, but even that little trickle seems to cause problems, the pillar has likely been programmed to only accept mana from certain people to avoid manipulation.

All the possibilities fascinate me endlessly.

[Resonance]

It's something I've just started learning to do, and the advantages are just as obvious, as the disadvantages presented by my lack of proficiency and the weakened effect of the skill.

Before I get fully into it, I send a message in the Community.

Noname -Sset, is everything ok with your master?

It takes a few minutes for Tess to answer; like me, she checks the Community often, just for a second or two to see messages, in consideration of the 15-minute limit we have.

Sset -She will be dealt with.

I see, she must be angry too, after learning that Obelia worked with Thalen to kidnap or kill Lily. Tess isn't one to hesitate in such a situation.

POV Storm Brigade

Out of nowhere, a flash of light passes through the air, ignoring our defenses, and I watch as my partner for this watch gets thrown against the wall. The alarm rings in my head, and the core sends more mana into the barrier, but the flashes continue.

By the third one, I finally realize what it is.

"It's the third disciple, Tess!" I shout while activating an item that ensures the message is heard by everyone else on duty tonight.

Ducking behind the wall, I quickly crawl towards my partner and find him already dead. He shows no signs of life, a javelin is lodged in his neck.

This tale has been pilfered from Royal Road. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

My heart is racing, but I push myself back onto my feet, activating my skill which covers my body in stone armor, drawn from the ground. At the same time, the javelin that impaled Roland disappears, pulled back towards where it came from.

I track its movement, trying to identify the woman that even the guild master called a rare genius.

A few seconds pass, and only then do I realize how far out Tess is, a distance none of us can hope to reach quickly, I can barely see the tower she is standing on, let alone her figure.

Like a dart, something appears from the javelin's destination, and I feel a tug on my body and lose my balance. I reach out with my hand to stop myself from falling.

But it's not there.

I look down, and half of my body is missing, a javelin pierced into the ground behind me, red and white lightning flickering around it. My mouth opens to scream, but I feel only blood rushing out and the world starts darkening.

Out of nowhere, I feel so tired. I try to fight against it, but the javelin behind me gets pulled back towards the source of the attack and on its way back, it pierces through me again.

Before my heart stops beating, I realize it's the same javelin that killed Roland and find that funny. I don't know why, but...

POV Storm Brigade

Layering ice, metal, and mana barriers in front of us, we block one of the javelins.

"Fuck, why would Tess attack? How far is she even out?" someone exclaims.

"Maybe she's with the lynthari!" another suggests.

"Go and get Jenna, the first and second disciples, or call the guildmaster, we need to..." Jonathan screams.

Another javelin pierces through the barrier with such strength it feels like it weighs a ton. The javelin pins Jonathan to the ground, and before he can even scream, lightning burns him from inside.

Before I can move, the javelin gets pulled back with Jonathan still impaled on it. In mid-flight, his body gets torn into two pieces that fall somewhere outside.

Unable to help my fascination, I watch the trajectory of the javelin, the one our guild master sold during the auction. The attack came from so far away.

"Barriers!" I shout.

I manipulate all the metal I can reach and layer it into the barrier we create in front of ourselves, but I know it won't be enough. A flash of lightning, and another attack crashes through the barriers as if they are made of paper.

Then there is only darkness.

POV Storm Brigade

"Get out of the courtyard, hide somewhere and hide your mana. She can see your mana even through the walls!" I scream at a petite black-haired woman dressed in servant's clothes.

"Sorry!" she screams and rushes towards me, carrying a bag with her.

I scan her, and she has a bracelet that identifies her as one of the servants.

"What the hell are you even doing outside so late? Just get in and tell the other servants to..."

The young woman, almost a girl, puts her hand on mine. From up close, I notice how pretty she is: shining black hair with bangs, pretty eyes, pale skin, and soft lips.

Stop

The last thing I see is gray smoke.

POV Storm Brigade

There is no way I'm going outside! She has Primordial lightning and an epic weapon; there is no way I can stop a single attack from her. Just get the guildmaster and!

Before I can continue, I detect another presence, and all four of us turn to the newcomer. It's a petite black-haired girl dressed as a servant. Someone got into the tower! she screams. One of the warriors told me to

I identify her bracelet and let my guard down.

Okay, calm down and tell me what happened, and what's with that bag you have with you, I reach out towards her and place my hand on her shoulder. For a moment, a weird expression crosses her face as I touch her, but I ignore it.

Senna, just send her away and

In the middle of the sentence, Sennas face disappears, and her lifeless body falls to the ground.

Huh?

I send mana through my body, let go of the girl, and try to pull my hand back. Only then do I realize that my arm is gone in its entirety.

Do not touch me, the young servant says with an expression that terrifies me.

Someone screams, and then I see nothing.

POV Jenna

The 1st disciple died, the second one as well, but finally, I reach the top of the tower where the attacks came from with three of our elites. As expected, Tess stands there.

Tall, beautiful, and lit by the moonlight. Even on this night, her golden hair seems to shine, and the crown of lightning over her head makes her seem more regal than anyone I have seen in my life.

Jenna, she greets me shortly.

Behind her back, a dozen javelins float. One epic and the remainder are upper rare grade, but the most dangerous thing is the lightning flickering all around and the sheer amount stored in the crown.

Tess, I greet her back and absorb all the mana my batteries hold, a storm cloud forming over our heads as our elites surround her.

Tess looks up, observing the cloud and the lightning that flickers within. My lightning. The one I've worked twenty years to master.

Then her crown enlarges and radiates more mana. The stormcloud I created darkens and expands even more.

And I lose control over my lightning. She takes it from me and replaces it with something of hers, something much stronger. Something Primordial.

And she does it with such ease as if my years of work are worth nothing.

For the first time, the hate I always felt towards her is replaced by fear.

Fighting for control over the storm cloud I created, we attack. I watch as Tess reaches her hand up and swings it downwards, drawing a pillar of red and white light from the stormcloud over our heads.

The air itself shakes, and then I die.

POV Obelia Jenth

The wall around my doors disintegrates, destroying all the inscriptions and expensive materials, and they come crashing down, revealing a petite black-haired girl with a bag in her hands. There is no sign of the guards in the hallway, and even now I can feel and hear a constant barrage of attacks outside.

Your door needs some work, even the ones to the room he enchanted were stronger than this, Lily says and enters my office. She does so without any worry, even though she must be feeling all the protections I have.

I push against the table and stand, stepping on my prosthetic leg, and follow her eyes to look at my arm, which is also a prosthetic.

Yes, even Thalen was unable to restore it. It was the first time I saw him so terrified, I say in response to her unspoken question.

When she doesn't react I offer her, How about we make a deal? In exchange for my life, I will do anything you want of me.

My eyes meet those of hers, and I can see no mercy in them, no hesitation. They feel like she is looking at a bug.

Nathaniel would accept, I try again.

A look of surprise appears on her face, and she starts laughing. It's a laugh that I would consider cute, and that makes her look even more innocent.

You dont know him at all, she says, still laughing and smiling at me. You stepped over the line.

Lily takes a step towards me, ignoring the fact that the closer she gets, the more enchantments light up and the more mana radiates into the air.

Her voice is smooth, but dark, We are his, I AM his. She throws her bag on the ground, and from it, something rolls out.

With fascination, I stare at her lips as she proclaims, He is probably the most rational out of all of us, but Obelia, you dont have any worth anymore. You and your guild have betrayed him.

Only now do I recognize that the things that fell from the ground are limbs. Small hands, like those of the girl in front of me. There are a dozen of them.

I activate all the enchantments, and my mana moves as well, sparking the lightning, which feels somehow hesitant as if traumatized from my clash against the young healer before.

My red lightning clashes against wisps of gray smoke that surround her, and the hands on the ground vanish, and the pressure I feel from her strengthens overwhelmingly while her hair becomes shorter, and one of her hands disappears.

The wounds that she receives from the defenses of my office get healed immediately or blocked by that terrifying skill of hers. The entirety of my mana flows from me, fighting against her, enchantments, items, and even epic items. All of it is useless, and her entire arm disappears, strengthening her once more when I'm already out of mana.

You are weaker than I thought. I think Tess is already stronger than you.

Her words sting, no, they hurt a lot, and the feeling of pride and hate I hold towards my third disciple surfaces. But I push it away, there is no sense in comparing myself to a genius like her.

I can't even run because then I would fall under attack from Tess, so the only thing that remains is to fight against the girl in front of me, till the end. She stands there, petite, innocent face, her arm missing and in simple clothes. Wisps of gray smoke destroy everything they touch. It doesn't matter if it's mana, my body, or items. All of it is equal under the force of her skill.

I would recognize your sub-class anywhere, it's Wrath, isn't it? I stagger back, with a deep gash in my chest as the life leaves my body.

I feel so cold.

"You do not need to know," she says and the last thing I see is her face.

Chapter 266: In the desert

Close to two weeks have passed, and I'm ready to leave the old capital. I believe I gained a lot from this place, and I think I could discover more. Maybe find some secrets I missed, hidden items, and more about this floor. However, when I weigh it against what I could gain from the next floor, it pales in comparison.

Status.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 4 - Waning Realm

Time left until forced return: 4y 51d 14h 1m 57s

Traits (2/3): Mana Circuit, Mana Wavelength Iris

Lvl 214

Strength: 103

Dexterity: 101

Constitution: 246

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 782 + 782

Primary Class: Focused Channeler (epic)

Sub-class: [Initiate of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus Consolidation) - Lvl 42

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 43

Perception - Lvl 40

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 40

Resonance - Lvl 40

Mana Domain - Lvl 28

Tether - Lvl 28

Regalia - Lvl 17

Infusion - Lvl 20

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Kinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Passive skills:

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Pyrokinetic Resurgence (rare)

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

Tokens:

Beyond Difficulty entrance token

Shards:

I've done another round of active tempering, which boosted me 20 points in Constitution and 10 in Dexterity and Strength.

While in the relative safety of the city, I also thought about improving my Kinetic Mana Heart construct but decided against it in the end. For now, it might be smarter to wait and see what passive I receive in case it gives me some more insight into it. It seems like a good plan. Manuals are not available because of the system, so that's it.

As I walk through the empty city, with a bag filled with items, I think about Myrra. In the past two weeks, she's barely left me and shows little intent to return to Virelia and become the matriarch or help with the problems there.

From Tess, I have learned that there are daily killings of humans and lynthari. Obelia is dead, Isola is dead, and Thalen has disappeared, so the big guilds that were supposed to help are gone.

Cheeky Obelia was also sure to hide a bomb - information that surfaced after she died, blaming lynthari for her death. A last spiteful gift from a smart woman whose obsession cost her life.

After that, there is no more information from Virelia. Tess and others spent all the mana stones they could, the stones have retained some value for their practical uses. They also stole a lot of useful things from headless guilds among other places and hired a big group to help them move it all. Then they escaped Virelia about a week ago, heading to the desert to face the Fallen Hero.

That's where I will go too. Sure, I don't tell anyone about it, but I will make sure to watch them from a distance and maybe help if it looks too bad. I don't want them to know, so they won't rely on me.

I also miss that silly corgi and the occasional nights we all spent together in the small living room of our first house. It was annoying at times, but I liked that feeling of coziness and camaraderie Tess talks about so much.

As for looting, I already found one epic item, so I will be happy with that for now. It stings a bit, I had hoped for more, but it's just as well, I've never wanted to be reliant on items, and I already have so many things to work on.

Aqua Arcanum Vial (Epic): This small vial contains constantly swirling water. When uncorked, it can unleash a torrential water blast or create a protective, swirling water barrier. The Aqua Arcanum Vial can also absorb surrounding water sources, replenishing its contents and making it a versatile tool.

I wouldn't use it in combat as I already have problems spending my mana and using my skills, but it's a nice item to have, it should allow me to save some shards on buying water.

Ready to leave, feral one? Myrra greets me the moment I reach the towers where we set our base.

She still looks nearly the same, the only difference is her clothes, which are still black, contrasting with her white hair, tail, and ears. The clothes are simple, and she carries a few of the things she's looted.

I nod, Lead the way, nya.

Feral one, can you please stop? I only said it one or two times so you don't have to...

Twenty-seven.

With a confused expression, she turns to me.

I repeat, You've said 'nya' twenty-seven times.

Why would you even count that she lets her voice trail off and then shakes her head, Let's leave.

After using the array, we appear in the desert, along with a big pile of items I put on the massive metal plate and pull behind me. It's quite heavy, so I even have to strengthen my body through reinforcement to pull it across the sand.

Obviously, Myrra finds it extremely funny and continues to tease me. She is immediately in a much better mood, enjoying the heat of the sun on her skin and shedding the thicker layers of her clothes to sunbathe with a big smile on her face.

Typical cat.

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Noname - How is it?

Sset - I made Grumpy waste her community limit, so she won't see what we're talking about. Of course, this is only if the system clears the messages in the chat at the times we believe it does.

Noname - Good, how's the search going?

Sset - We already sent the guys back to pull all the items we've got with us. TheStrongestOne helps a lot with that. I also found the crater you talked about, and we've traveled north from there and located our target. I left some markers behind so you can track us. We'll start in a day or two.

Noname - I will do so. How are the others?

Sset - Excited, sad, and a bit scared. But I'll pull them together.

Savant - Noname.

Out of nowhere, Savant interrupts my conversation.

Savant - You still owe me an answer to one question.

Noname - Yes, I do. Go ahead.

Savant - You asked me before how it is to be alone, so I want to ask you this. How is it to be with a group? One of you, a man called Hadwin, died. How do you feel about it?

Noname - You would waste your question on something like that?

Savant - It will allow me to understand you better.

I see, Savant sure knows how to ask questions I don't like to think about the answer to.

Noname - Some time ago, we got a lot of money. The boys had a good idea, and we were able to leverage our items.

Savant patiently waits, so I also give myself a moment and then continue.

Noname - We spent the entire night buying things for everyone in our group. Things that would make them happy or be useful to them or their training. We bought things for everyone except Hadwin.

I stare ahead over the dunes, feeling the warm heat of the sun on my skin as memories flash through my mind.

Noname - I forgot about Hadwin, and we didn't buy anything for him. Back then it was okay; we just gave him mana stones, and he picked something on his own. But since he died, I can't stop thinking about it.

I want to write another message, but Savant interrupts me.

Savant - That's enough for the answer.

After that, I close the Community and gesture to Myrra as we head towards the crash site of the orbital base.

The ever-present dunes and scorching sun get old rather quickly, but I start to enjoy the warmth on my skin after a few weeks in the cold and cloudy old capital. Right now, even though the only thing to see are the dunes all around us, the sunshine makes things look more lively.

Soon, we reach one of Tess's markers, a small stone holding some of her mana though its already been buried under a dune by the wind that shapes this desert. But because I know what to look for, I'm still able to locate it and continue to follow the trail.

As she has many times before, Myrra follows me, and there is a hint of distant sadness to her. It's hard to describe, but it's the expression of someone waiting to hear the bad news. Myrra is smart, and like me, she likes to observe others, so she must have noticed something. The question is how much the system has allowed her to notice.

I decide to push it away, as something for future Nathaniel to deal with before entering the 5th floor. So, for now, we silently push through the dunes while I pull the iron sled of items behind me.

Minutes pass. Then hours, and a day, as we track the marks Tess left until we reach one of the biggest dunes and climb on top of it.

They are in front of us, Myrra says quietly and points somewhere in the distance.

I'm unable to see anything unlike her, so she forms her aurora glass into a big plate in front of us. The glass shifts and changes multiple times until it seems to work like a telescope, and through it, I finally see Group 4, all of them walking in line, moving multiple sleds similar to mine.

Out of nowhere, Tess stops and turns around, staring right at us. Lily steps up next to her and looks in our direction as well, but unlike the blonde she can't see that far.

Tess only shakes her head, and the smile that flashes across her face seems to be meant for me and not for Lily.

Your group can be scary at times, Feral One, but are you sure you don't want to help them? The Fallen Hero is a terrifying enemy.

I watch as Biscuit wobbles through the sand, his short legs often sinking and slowing him down, and yet he is too proud to ask for help and continues to follow the group. The snake around Isabellas arm is much bigger now, and out of everyone in the group, Isabella seems to enjoy the desert the most, even keeping two fire orbs floating nearby. I can't sense it from here, but I think she might be using the sun and hot air here to strengthen them.

Then there is a group of three boys walking closely behind Maya, all pulling sleds while Sophie walks in the back, surely casting her web all around.

They are the same, yet different, and a wistful feeling overtakes me. How silly it is, how unaccustomed I am to this kind of feeling.

When I turn to Myrra, she gazes at me sadly, For a moment, you were smiling, Feral One. A real, warm smile. It disappeared as quickly as it came, but you were.

She reaches out and brushes a lock of hair from my face, her touch gentle as if she is handling something delicate. I watch her for a moment, curious about what she will do next, but she stops and pulls her hand away.

Tutorial, I say.

She tilts her head and opens her mouth as if she wants to ask something, but then her face changes, a blank expression appears on it, and then it reverts to the state it was before I said that word.

Fourth floor, Waning Realm, Floor quest, I say quietly.

After each word, her expression changes to blank and then reverts.

So, I just stay quiet, and she smiles at me apologetically, Sorry for touching you, Feral One.

It's fine, I tell her.

It takes a day longer than we expected to spot the Fallen Hero.

Even from as far away as I am, I can sense the sheer amount of power the armor possesses, and when Myrra uses her Aurora glass, we can see it as well.

As the rumors said, it's most likely an upper epic suit of armor that, while the Champion was alive, most likely served to transfer some of his owners mana into sheer physical strength.

Now, with the Champion dead, the armor uses his still-beating mana heart to power itself and move around, searching for enemies. Either some changes were made to the armor when its wearer died, or the Champion programmed it to do that before he died. To help humans fight against the enemy.

The gray and red armor itself is scratched all over; in places, it looks like it has started to rust, and there are even holes in places, the biggest one on the back of the helmet, is most likely the one that killed its owner.

The movement is unnerving, clearly not human. Each step is somehow awkward and hesitant, yet full of strength.

Tess and the others notice it as well and from really far away, she starts to observe it, moving the group so they can avoid it while she collects enough information.

I spend that day examining mana stones as I pull the sled behind me and speak with Myrra, trying to tease her, or practicing my skills. Yet none of these actions help me to get my mind off what is about to come.

Straight and clear, I'm worried.

Pathetic, am I not? After all the things I said. All my resolve that they should get stronger or die now before we become closer. Gareth's words come to my mind more and more often as time passes, and I find myself thinking maybe he was right.

When the time finally comes, I'm ready to dash in there and help, but only until Tess's face appears in full view on the piece of aurora glass allowing us to see far into the distance.

Tess smiles brilliantly, and her gray eyes have an unnatural shine to them from the desert sun. As it has these past few days, her [Stormcrown] remains suspended over her head.

It will be fine, I read her lips.

Don't go around planting death flags, you stupid blonde, I mumble under my breath and then sit back down.

Fine, I will trust you. It's hard for me to do so, but I will believe in you guys.

Show me what Group 4 is capable of.

Chapter 267: The Fallen Hero

The group takes a formation unlike any they've used before. For the first time, Tess hangs back, opposite her normal position, on the frontlines. She is so far behind that it would be hard for her to move close to help.

It surprises me, but I soon realize why she's done so. Tess will be focusing on dealing as much damage as possible without being distracted by her opponents' attacks. From such a distance, she will be able to make each of her attacks as strong as possible.

Obviously, that also means she will be putting a lot of trust in the rest of the group's ability to stay alive. For someone wanting to protect her friends so much, it's an unexpected decision.

On the other side, Lily is back on the frontline, next to Maya, who has the epic crown on her head, and plenty of mana batteries in contraptions layered over her body.

The petite healer seems to be determined, and I instantly realize that her position on the front line was her choice.

Dennis and Aaron are both on the sides and slightly behind Lily and Maya. Seeing as no one is talking, they must be using [Connection] to communicate.

A bit further back are Isabella and Sophie, the sisters close to each other, Noodle coiled around Isabellas arm as she holds the epic bow Lily used to wield.

The last member of the group, Min-Jae, is off to the side of the sisters. He has switched to smaller projectiles for this fight, and he spins them around his body, something he started copying when he saw me doing it. The projectiles in question look a lot like golf balls, but I know they are extremely heavy because of his gravity skill.

One of his eyes is brown, and the left one is yellow, and it's already glowing and I'm sure he's improved his control of it.

I've thought about it before, but I think his eyes are similar to my own, the only difference is that I have two eyes that allow me to see waves of mana. While his eye seems to allow him to see waves of gravity.

Biscuit is also there. He stands on the dune, a gentle wind blowing against his fur, and the corgi seems to be enjoying it while he breathes quickly. His tongue is sticking out as if he is trying to cool off. So far, he is not using any skills, but he is ready.

The fight starts suddenly. Initiated by Kim shooting one of his small metal orbs at the Fallen Hero.

I watch through Myrras Aurora glass as the armor stops moving and turns around. The corpse of the Champion clad in Valorplate. Even damaged, the red and gray armor is beautiful. And most of all, it's dangerous, confirmed by the First Ones fear of it.

When the armor starts moving towards the group, I understand it. Nothing changes after it notices the group. There is no mana emanating from it, and no skills activate. No, the entirety of that immense mana is turned into sheer strength.

The armor takes a step, and the entire dune under it explodes, and with one leap, it flies through the air right toward the group.

The silence is broken by the crackling of lightning and a terrifying noise that pierces the air as a gray spear crashes against the armor. The lightning spreads, covering the armor. The sheer strength of the impact pushes the armor away, and both burrow deep into a dune, sending an explosion of sand into the air.

Lightning flashes again, and the spear gets pulled back.

Isabella attacks next. One of the fire orbs floating over her shoulder elongates and turns into a flaming arrow which she nocks to her bow. Even though the bow is nearly as tall as her, she manages to draw the string of mana that appears and fires the arrow. As it leaves the string it grows even brighter and more compressed, a brilliant arrow made of blue fire that Isabella subtly manipulates to compensate for her lack of skill.

The blue arrow leaves a wake of shimmering hot air, and when it passes over the sand, it melts. The longer it flies, the more it speeds up, and by the time it reaches the crater left by the armor, I can barely track it with my eyes.

The explosion that ensues sends flames high into the air, some as tall as a building. The impact sprays molten sand into the area, and as it falls, it shines brightly like drops of hot glass.

Even before the fires disappear, the armor climbs out of the sand, slightly charred but unharmed.

At that point, its movements change. It's not so inhuman this time, no, it's slow and elegant. The Fallen Hero stomps on the ground, and the sand explodes high into the air like a series of geysers as the shockwave blows away the flames.

It's not using skills at all; it's just sheer physical stats, Myrra whispers, her eyes glued to the piece of glass.

The armor moves again and disappears from sight, another shockwave erupting in its wake.

It takes another leap, much lower and faster this time.

Just before the armor reaches Maya and Lily, I notice Kim moving his arm, and the armor stops mid-air and crashes back to the ground, pulled by the immense force of gravity.

Mana radiates from Maya, and her mana armor envelops her, denser than anything she's ever shown me before. She uses [Boost], moving past Lily, and as the armor stands up, her ax crashes into it, sending it staggering backward.

Before she can attack again, the Fallen Hero swings its arm, and she is sent flying, as the front of her armor cracks. The armor takes a step to follow her, but Lily appears in front of it, and the armor changes its mind and punches her. The punch is smooth and elegant, looking like the result of thousands of repetitions.

Its hand passes through Lilys chest, but then the twin's illusion disappears, and Lily hits it with her fist instead and sends a blast of gray mana through the punch.

For the first time, the armor takes damage, the smoke-like mana leaving deep gouges.

The armor starts moving at terrifying speed, and I notice the bag on Lily's back growing smaller as she uses [Sacrifice]. As she does this, she moves nearly as quickly as the armor. They exchange blows until the armor feints and then kicks, breaking her arm. She rolls across the ground over a distance longer than a football field.

It dashes at Lily, but Dennis is there. He grabs her and pulls her away while a dozen illusions obscure them, each one realistic enough to fool even me, and each of them with different mana signatures.

Instead of dealing with them individually, the armor stomps, creating another crater as the shockwave destroys the entire dune along with the illusions.

Isabella shoots another arrow, but this one is different. Sophie, knowing that she can't manipulate a mind that doesn't exist, uses [Manipulation] to compress the arrow and even tie the web she's created to it.

There is no explosion of flames from the area, just a localized burst that is extremely compressed and thus pierces a hole through the Fallen Hero, exiting on the other side.

A piercing noise follows, and a spear trailed by lightning flies directly at the hero's heart, and for the first time, the armor blocks. It puts an arm in front of its chest and is sent flying.

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Before the spear can return, the armor grabs it and stabs at Maya, who charges it. She barely dodges, but the next elegant stab pierces her chest. The armor tries to move to finish the woman encased in armor but is prevented by the web Sophie prepared coiling around it and halting its movements.

Maya gets to her feet, the wound on her chest healing at a visible speed, and her armor flickers and disappears. Instead, she creates an axe larger than she is that takes on a dark blue color with a streak of light blue mana flowing through it.

Her swing is quick and deadly, the axe burrowing into the armor's neck.

Getting a warning, she lets go of the weapon and uses [Boost] to escape quickly.

The armor tears apart the skills holding it back. Not by disrupting them, no. Just by using raw power that defies any attempt to slow it down.

At the same time, a dozen javelins trailed by lightning crash against it. One after another, each of the javelins crumples and breaks, and yet they leave dents in the armor and channel their lightning through it.

A few fire arrows join in, and Min-Jae also uses his eye, closing his hand as he reaches towards the armor. As he closes it, the armor moves quickly, and instead of its chest, its forearm gets crumpled under the force of the press.

The Fallen Hero turns to Min-Jae, and its focus stays on him. Lily, pushes the attack and gets thrown by a skillful kick that leaves even more of her bones broken.

A swing of its arm destroys the illusion and the entire dune in front of it. The sheer pressure of the swing throws Maya and the twins away.

Then it rushes at Min-Jae.

Dozens of iron balls crash against it, each one that hits slowing it down a bit more as Min-Jae stacks his [Gravity Well] and increases the weight of the armor.

The dome-like web Sophies been creating shrinks and tangles around the armor, slowing it even further, but it's still not enough.

Every time it gets slowed down, more mana flows through it, strengthening it further. The heart of the Champion beats weaker than when he was alive, but its still loud, even after his death.

The spear the armors been holding starts pulling it toward Tess, but the armor just grabs it with both hands and breaks the epic weapon like it's nothing, and the pieces fall to the ground.

Another stomp sends sand into the air, blocking the view as the armor charges.

I watch as a big armored arm grabs Min-Jae and tears off the boy's arm, only for the illusion to disappear as Lily stands there instead of Min-Jae, her arm torn off. The petite healer uses her skill, and all the sacrifices in her bag disappear, her waist-long hair shortening even further.

She doesn't regenerate her arm, no, the petite maniac even sacrifices the arm the armor is still holding, and then punches the Fallen Hero in the chest, her gray mana flowing through him.

At the last moment, the armor shifts, and a burst of gray mana eats its arm instead of reaching its heart.

Immediately after, with immense speed, it punches Lily, denting her chest, and then breaks Lily's neck.

Before the armor can tear off her head, purple tentacles coil around it and tie it up, not allowing any movement.

After a moment of struggle, the Fallen Hero gets loose, and when it tries to find Lily, she is already gone, an Illusion from the twins helping her escape.

Turning towards the newest enemy, the armor takes a step towards Biscuit, who doesn't even growl, just observes it curiously.

Biscuit tilts his head, a focused expression overtaking his face, and instead of purple tentacles, an orb of purple mana materializes in front of the corgi. The orb starts off as big as a basketball but shrinks to the size of a golf ball, its purple color darkening with streaks of different colors flowing through.

Don't tell me.

The orb starts glowing bright white, and Biscuit shoots it at the Fallen Hero who tries to run away but is once again stopped by Sophie.

Aaron appears next to Biscuit and grabs him from the ground. He activates [Haste] and runs at a speed that is almost as quick as the armor.

Then the Fallen Hero changes again. The first time it happened, its awkward movements became smoother and elegant, yet this time they've become confident and domineering. Even though Sophie holds the armor, it straightens up and slashes its hand towards the orb flying at it.

The orb disappears as if it never existed, and an immense force slashes against the ground, creating a deep and long crack in the sand.

Another slash with its hand destroys Biscuit's mana arms as they reach toward it, and the stomp creates a shockwave that forms another crater around the armor.

Biscuit growls and javelins made of purple mana form by his sides as he is being carried by Aaron. The mana projectiles shoot towards the armor, which blocks each of them easily.

Meanwhile, Tess and Min-Jae finish their preparation, and from high in the air, something starts falling. It's the chest made of unknown material that once contained the eye Min-Jae now sports. The indestructible chest is falling much quicker than it should be, and I'm sure it's much heavier as well, the force behind it immense.

Dozens of purple tentacles explode from the ground and surround the armor. Sophie activates her skill, and even the twins seem to use their [Connection] in a weird way.

With a shockwave, the chest smashes against the armor, crumpling and bending it and forcing it to its knees. The sheer weight and inertia dealing immense damage.

But slowly, the Fallen Hero still stands up. Its stance changes once more, and it disappears from the spot, reappearing in front of Min-Jae and Maya. The young boy doesn't even have time to react, but Maya does. Her [Boost] gives her enough speed to face the armor for a few seconds even though she is bleeding and tearing her body as she moves, the crown on her head keeping her alive.

A dozen attacks are exchanged in a second, both of them changing positions to try to gain an advantage over each other while Lily moves nearby.

Even though the armor has only one arm, it dominates Maya, and the moment her skill deactivates, a hand swings to her face. Messages are exchanged between the group and Lily grabs the armor by the hand, her body strengthened by [Sacrifice], now capable of following the armor.

Quickly pulling its arm away, the armor dashes and disappears, attacking Isabella.

Lily disappears simultaneously and steps into its path, the two of them exchanging blows.

Giving up on her ranged advantage, Tess lands nearby, a crown over her head and lightning crackling and trailing her body. Her face appears on the piece of aurora glass, and she declares something, the armor freezing in mid-movement and turning to her.

Tess's crown disappears, the lightning that formed it flowing down her body and into her hand where it reforms into the shape of a spear. The blonde faces it and attacks the armor as it changes its stance again, to the form with elegant movements.

Lily, with her presence masked by the twin's skill, jumps on the armor's back. Her gray mana turns into a dagger which she repeatedly stabs into the armor's helmet, causing it to stagger a bit. More messages are exchanged between the members and skills activate, forcing the armor to stop its movements.

Then Tess takes a step forward and a spear of lightning pierces right through the place where the heart is supposed to be.

In the following silence, nothing moves for a while, and the wind continues to move sand over the dunes until it stops as well.

Finally, the Fallen Hero staggers and falls to its knees.

Congratulations! Your group has completed your Floor quest and defeated the second Calamity.

You have received 4000 shards.

Relieved, everyone from Group 4 groups up, smiles on their faces as they check on each other and seem to read notifications as well.

The boys, still weak and wounded, start checking the armor lying on the ground, and I notice they are talking quickly.

In the end, they did it; on their own, they defeated the Calamity, and I see that every single one of them has become stronger. Some of them by a lot, and some didn't have the chance to show it fully because of the opponent they were facing.

Another soft ding sounds, and curious I check the new Floor quest that has appeared.

Floor quest: Kill Lynthari Matriarch Myrra

Reward: 6000 shards

Chapter 268 - End of the world

I've decided to ignore the side quest for now and look at the entrance to the 5th floor that's appeared next to me. Through the portal, I see a grassy hill and a few trees to the side, not unlike the forest on the first floor.

Feral One, Myrra calls to me, Who are you and the people in your group?

I can't tell you.

The movement of her tail continues, but as of late, it's somewhat lifeless.

I observe her.

Myrra is taller than me by two heads, she has white hair and golden cat-like eyes. A deep scar runs horizontally across her face, and two cat-like ears perch on top of her head. She is slim but has the musculature of an athlete, and her tail is long and slightly fluffy.

That's Myrra, the fake Champion candidate as she called herself. According to Eris, she is capable of reaching the rank of Champion and is currently worth 6000 shards dead.

She will likely disappear after we step through the portal, so should I

That's fine then, if you don't want to tell me, you don't have to, she says simply, and the piece of Aurora glass we used to observe the fight disappears.

The lynthari then turns around and slides down the dune to where we left our things.

Meanwhile, I open the Beyond Community.

Sset - We did it. No one is seriously hurt, but we will rest for a while and then split the things before we enter the portal, just in case we get split again.

Noname - Good job.

Grumpy - You should have seen it! It was super scary, but everyone did so well!

Lily joins the conversation as well. A few weeks have already passed, so I guess she has dealt with her grief, along with the others.

I pause for a moment and think about it. How sad it is that people can adapt so quickly to someone dying, no matter how much they held them dear. Just some time, and the memory will weaken, along with the pain.

But maybe it's better that way, a life where you grieve for years would be terrible, so having someone be a nice memory might be better in the end.

It also makes me wonder how people would react if I died. Would they be sad? If so, for how long? A day or two? A few weeks? Would I be forgotten after a few weeks with barely anyone to remember that I existed?

Well, I'd rather not get there.

Noname - I watched the fight, and you all did great. I have a few things that you guys could improve on and I will share them with you later so you can compare, but for now, good job.

Grumpy - You are nearby! Why don't you join us?

I hesitate, my eyes on the screen, but Tess joins in.

Sset - We talked about it. He will join us on the next floor.

She probably also says something to Lily out of the chat, but I can't be sure.

Grumpy - Don't forget, you still owe me! I will tell others what you said and see you on the next floor!

Lily then says something extremely scary. Something about taking the remains of the Champions heart and examining it and maybe using it as inspiration to reconstruct hers. She also says that the boys are already fighting over the pieces of Valorplate.

After that, Gareth joins as well and speaks with Tess for a bit, some congratulations and his constant behavior as a paragon of all good and just.

There's no way that guy isn't evil, I'm sure of it.

I finally close the Community and lay down on the dune, the warm sand feels nice under my back, even as it's getting into my clothes, and the sun's rays on my skin improve my mood.

I've been putting off rejoining Group 4, maybe sometime during the 5th floor. Yes, there is a risk of us getting split again, so maybe it would be nice to greet them here on the 4th, but I just don't feel like it. I really don't.

While resting a terrifying monster reaches towards my mind, and I let the communication occur.

(Food?) sounds in my head.

(Yes, you did a good job.)

(Food!)

(Yes, both of us have to become stronger.)

(Food Food?)

(I need some time. To think.)

(Friend.)

(Thank you.)

(Friend!)

(Friend, yes.)

(Friend friend!)

(Yes, you are my friend. Talk to Tess, I gave her a few pieces of Archdeer jerky before I left.)

(FRIEND!)

Even though I told him about the amazing treat near him, Biscuit doesn't cut the connection and continues speaking with me.

I feel myself calm down and a weird sense of relief when I talk with him. I think Isabella said it once; it's as if there is no evil in Biscuit. I can let my defenses down.

After a bit more time, it's me who cuts off the connection so he can go and get the treats he deserves, and I slide down the dune towards Myrra.

After another two days, Group 4 leaves through the portal. Everything is distributed, and everyone is holding their items. Their bodies are healed, and mana topped up.

I get a few messages from Lily and Tess who also send greetings from others, and after they enter the 5th floor, the connection cuts off.

That's when I look down and see Myrra sunbathing there, a slight smile on her lips.

She is clearly weaker than any other Calamity, so why did the system offer me so many shards to kill her? Is it the work of the tutorial's system, or is someone influencing it to anger the Ruler of Greed and possibly me as well? Could it be the intent I met in Beyond, still angry at my refusal?

Pushing the thoughts away I lay my hand against the highest quality mana stone I have and continue working on the inscriptions.

A day passes, and feeling ready, I stand up and bury the mana stone I was working on in the sand. Then I look at Myrra for one last time and grab the bags I've packed, heading up the dune towards the entrance.

The system and its 6 thousand shards can fuck off and choke on them.

Feral One, she calls after me, no goodbyes?

Hearing her tone, I stop and put the bags near the entrance. I turn and look back at her.

How much do you know? I ask.

Not much, it's hard to think about these things, and I get the feeling that something is messing with me, right now she is just a shadow of her usual cheery self.

Myrra looks like someone sitting and waiting to die, facing something she can't do anything about no matter how much she tries.

Why didn't you want to return to Virelia?

Because it doesn't matter, Feral One. All of this is She gestures all around but avoids saying more. Her face is hard for me to look at. Her expression pleading.

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I take a step away from her and towards the portal.

I've learned most of this from observing you and your behaviors, and right now, I have a feeling that I will die the moment you take those few steps. Something terrible will happen when you leave. So, Feral One, won't you stay a bit longer? A few weeks. No, a few days, even a few hours. The expression she makes hurts me.

A majestic Lyntari I have always admired, reduced to this. Because of the system, because no way out has been offered to her.

Myrra, I start slowly, do you remember speaking with me about the human from Serpents Eye? The one you watched from a distance.

She nods, Yes, I do.

Back then, you told me he always acted high and mighty, with an arrogance that you liked and admired, yet in the end, the time came where he begged, where he cried and did everything he could to stay alive.

A short nod. I'm sure she knows where I'm going with this.

So, Myrra, allow me to ask. Are you the same as that human? Will you cry and beg?

At first, her eyes water, the sun reflecting in them, both focused on me. Then she shakes her head, and a laugh escapes her lips and she looks down at her hands.

One quiet minute passes, interrupted only by the wind blowing over the dunes we stand on, sending the sand flying.

After that, slowly her expression changes. Her posture straightens up, and she clenches her teeth. The tail that was, up til now hanging sadly moves and twitches. Myrra looks even taller now, and her determined expression makes her look the most beautiful I've ever seen her.

Instead of stepping through the portal, I step away from it, and our mana engages.

Then, as one last farewell, allow me to show you why they call me a Champion candidate, even her voice is stronger as she reaches towards the sky, Aurora glass surrounding her.

POV Myrra

Feral one... no, Nathaniel wears an expression I am seeing for the first time, but I decide not to point it out. He can count it as part of my thanks.

I'm still scared, and worried, but all of that is pushed away as mana starts radiating from the man in front of me.

His mana flows in patterns that I've never seen before, powering all the skills he possesses. Even though there are places where he is lacking, I can see the sheer amount of work he puts in. The amount of careful thinking he spends on his skills, and every bit used to push where his talent shouldn't be able to go.

Nathaniel is like a rough gem waiting to be cut and polished so it can shine brighter than anyone else. And that applies to his personality as well. Like many humans I've met, he bears some past trauma that holds him back, and when he finally gets over it, he will be even more beautiful.

Our skills clash. Our bodies move, trying to gain an advantage over each other. Neither of us is holding back; the fight we lead is a conversation between the two of us and the last goodbye.

I attack, and he dodges and counters my skills he continues to observe the entire time. He pushes, and I take on his attacks, redirecting them and avoiding them as much as possible.

Ever since I met him outside of Virellia, I kept observing him through my Aurora glass. His entertaining manners, his prideful bearing, and the love for his group he still doesn't want to accept.

Oh, how much fun I had watching this silly feral human.

A deep wound spreads across my arm because of my impatience and golden flames explode around him, melting the sand and reaching towards the sky, fed by his heartbeat. My Aurora glass moves in front of me to block the attack.

Nathaniel's expression is happy and sad at once. That much I can tell. Happy because he was able to help me and sad because I shake my head to stop thinking further. Something will not allow me to do so, so there is no sense in it.

I combine my skills, surround my body with Aurora glass, and step out from the tiniest piece I left on his clothes so long ago.

A slight movement of his eyebrow is all that slips, but anyone else would look at it with an expression of pure shock.

Leaving a deep wound on his side, I step back. My body is heating up even more, my teeth are showing, and I feel my tail swirl behind me.

He lets out a happy laugh and I attack again.

We fight, we bleed. The most beautiful fight I've ever had, both of us know each other's skills and both of us are strong enough to make each other go all out with full force and then push even further.

But it has to come to an end, and it does. My concentration slips up, and he grabs hold of his mana, stopping his attack mid-air from killing me.

I have lost, but it's a loss I'm proud of because it was against him.

Thank you, I say.

Farewell, Myrra, the expression he makes is also a new one to me.

How do I look in his eyes right now, I wonder. A small step in his grand adventure or someone he remembers once in a while? Will he think of me fondly, or will I forever be a silly lynthari he met by coincidence?

I watch as he takes his bags, and then, after giving me one last look, he takes a few steps and then he is gone. The moment he disappears, everything freezes. The sand stops moving, the wind stops blowing, and the air itself feels as if stuck in time.

The world has ended.

A day passes. I lay in the sand, and eat the food he got from somewhere. I think, meditate, and practice.

I'm not used to being alone.

A week has passed, and far in the distance, I notice dark clouds coming from all sides and heading towards me.

Extreme earthquakes hit the desert once in a while.

There is still no wind, and not a single grain of sand has moved.

I'm still staying at the same place, and I don't know why.

Two weeks have passed, and during one of my meditations, I detect something.

When I burrow my hands into the sand, it's the highest-grade mana stone I ever saw, with an extremely delicate set of inscriptions. There is an immense amount of his mana left in the stone.

The cloudy wall from all sides comes closer.

Three weeks have passed. The sun doesn't feel warm anymore, and the cloud wall is nearby. The earthquakes come more often, and only a little bit of his mana remains in the mana stone I'm holding.

Four weeks have passed.

In the air, at exactly the same place where he disappeared, a tear appears. It's jagged and uneven, and through it, a black dagger pokes, making it bigger.

Then through the hole, a beautiful woman steps out. She has silver hair and is wearing a comfortable set of clothes you could wear out on the town or into a fight. The woman is young, but the moment our eyes meet, I shudder.

I feel no mana from her, no sign of skills, nor is there any information in her stance. But her eyes betray it all; they scare me like nothing ever before in my life.

She then throws the black dagger into the ground and talks towards it, You've had enough, stop fighting back.

My world changes again. The cloud wall that was so close disappears, and the sun feels warmer. The wind starts blowing again, and grains of sand move once more. It's as if the woman in front of me brought life back to the world.

She sees that I'm staring at the dagger and turns to me, It's a bit annoying, just like its creator, an almost imperceptible smile is on her lips.

The silver-haired woman examines me for a bit longer and then nods, Little kitten, you are fake as well, aren't you?

I don't understand her words fully, but hearing her call me 'little kitten' angers me. They are words no one would dare to say to a lynthari, but I do not dare to correct her.

Yes, I think, I reply.

She stops in front of me, even shorter than Nathaniel, yet she doesn't seem to be impressed by me at all and walks around, poking me at places, Lynthari, aren't you? I met some of your race. Your Champions were always cheeky, cute things.

What is happening? What does all of this mean? I try to ask in hopes she will be able to answer.

You will forget it anyway, so there is no need to tell you, but I need someone to test a few things on, and you will do. As for a bit of explanation, she takes the mana stone from my hands. You can thank this thing for being alive. Without it The rest of the words she says disappear in the wind.

I look at the stone, What is it?

The woman observes the stone for a bit longer and then crushes it in her hand. Hes improved a bit, she mutters quietly and then looks up at me. It's a terribly inadequate attempt at a personality imprint. Pieces of the broken mana stone fall from her hand down on the sand. To explain simply, he tried to make this stone feel like him, to trick the another word I can't hear, into thinking he is still on the and another.

Her hand moves to her lips, and she blows off the rest of the stone. Without it, this again, the words I can't hear, would end, and you would be long dead.

Why would he do that? How would that thing help me?

That's something you should ask yourself, little kitten. Was it a desperate attempt, akin to throwing a letter in a bottle into the sea? Maybe he wanted to prolong your life? Maybe he knew I would be coming and hoped for us to meet? Who knows.

She starts looking around looking extremely relaxed. The confidence that radiates from her is unlike anything I have seen in my life. It's to the point where even I feel she is capable of doing whatever she wishes to.

Will you allow me to join you? I can even become your disciple. Unable to endure it all, I push against her, even if there is the option of her retaliating.

Instead, she stares at me, You remind me of someone.

She then puts down a bag, and from it, an arm pokes out. The arm of a woman, pale and smooth with elegant fingers.

The woman sees where I'm looking, An arm of someone bearing the same title I did. It will be useful, she says simply.

Then she turns to me, My name is Lissandra, the first and last Absolute of Eladore, the planet that went through more Pairings than I bother counting. The weight of my title is not something I take lightly, and neither do I take having a disciple. In my long life, I have had only two. A young woman sent to spy on me, whom I considered talented enough to declare an Absolute candidate, a greedy little thing. The second one, for but a short time, was a young man, too prideful to accept his limits and not realizing that the rank of Champion is as far as he can go.

Each of her words sounds like a declaration that has entire worlds as its witness.

You, meanwhile, are a fake, the same as me, even though she says that it doesn't seem to bother her, But who said a fake can't beat the original? The smile that spreads across her face is scary.

What she shows is a type of confidence that would make a weaker person kneel and worship her.

We have a lot to do, little kitten, she says. I'm not unreasonable. If you listen to me, I can promise you one thing, as she talks, I watch her, hanging onto her words.

Nothing else in the world matters other than the words she is about to say.

You will find out the truth about this all. About the little pup, about the words you can't hear, about your world and this place. That much should be enough, right?

I can only nod.

"Good, now, do you know about any healers? Even a bad one will do, I just need them to have a healing skill."

My tail moves on its own, "I know about one that is hiding."

Chapter 269: 5th Floor

Congratulations! You have cleared the 4th floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial. Welcome to the 5th floor: Mentorship

You have acquired:

Unique Passive skill

Skill upgrade token

2000 Shards

60 stat points

Access to other Communities

Well, there goes my 6 thousand shards for killing Myrra.

Do I regret it?

Not even a bit, nope, not even slightly. The system can go and delete its System32 folder, or step on a Lego, or something.

I confirm my decision by flipping the bird at the screen in front of me and laying down on the grass. The sky above me is beautiful and as far as I can sense there are no humans or monsters around. The 5th floor seems peaceful so far.

My thoughts keep going back to the 4th floor and the mana stone I left behind. I wonder, will it help? Will the system ignore it and delete the floor instantly? Will the stone trick it, even a little? Have things changed because of Lissandra? The stone might only prolong Myrra's suffering, yet I still find myself hoping.

Lying there I open the community.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - so how is it?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -Nat! I'm happy that you are safe!

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Who is Nat?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - oh, sorry! But don't worry, there is no one else, just our group

Noname (Hell, group 4) -how can you know that?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - no one else has talked so far!

Oh boy, maybe all the hits she took on the left some damage she couldn't heal.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) -hello, Noname! what a terrible name!

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) -long time no see

Sset (Hell, group 4) - welcome to the 5th floor

I talk for a while, and greet group 4 members. After not talking to them for a few weeks it feels weirdly nice and I feel myself pushing my feelings about what happened with Myrra and the end of the floor to the back of my mind.

For now, I will hope. I will allow myself to expect the best. I will trust that Cockroachsandra is as scary as she likes to think she is.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -so has everyone been split up?

Sset (Hell, group 4) - yes, from what we found so far everyone is in their own instance of the 5th floor. They seem to be identical to each other, but it looks like we won't be able to meet each other.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) -I have to go, my disciple is getting impatient!

Huh, disciple?

Sset (Hell, group 4) -

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Food!

We exchange a few more words and I close the Community.

Well, it looks like I will be on my own for a while. Min-Jae said he had a disciple, so what is this floor about?

Floor quest:

Raise and protect your disciple

Rewards:

???

Skill upgrade token

5000 Shards

100 stat points

Trait strengthening token

Welcome to the 5th floor! Your disciple will be summoned in 24 hours. The disciple will be chosen from the tutorial database, specially for you.

If your disciple dies on the 5th floor you will be severely punished.

If your disciple dies outside of the 5th floor you will lose a certain amount of shards.

Time until the appearance of the disciple: 23h 51min 10s

That's a lot to unpack.

Asking others doesn't seem to make sense as they surely don't have any more information than what the system has given me. The most important part is that the death of a disciple will lead to severe punishment. The weird part is that it mentions the possibility of death somewhere outside the 5th floor. What does that mean?

And what does it mean by raise and protect? Does that mean my disciple will be young?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -How old are the disciples?

Sset (Hell, group 4) -Mine is 6 years old, the others are the same. Sorry, I have to go!

Oh boy, this floor is getting messy. The rewards are too, just some question marks as the first reward.

At least it looks like I have some time so why don't I sort things out?

Do you really want to sell the following item for 5000 shards?

Skill upgrade token

Yes/No

I confirm and the skill upgrade token disappears. It looks like it was the same grade as the one from the side quest and that leaves me with 20,462 shards.

Just in case I go through the shop and look for a rarity higher than epic, but I don't find any at all. It looks like even 20 thousand shards is not enough or there is some other requirement that I need to fulfill for it to unlock. Maybe another Primary class upgrade? Subclass upgrade? Higher floor? Do I need to find something of higher than epic rarity in the wild for it to unlock in the shop?

Well, it's something to think about later.

I spend the next few minutes scrolling through the passives offered to me by the shop and then the ones I'm getting from the 4th-floor quest.

After a bit of thinking, I decide to buy a passive I thought about before. There still isn't anything better and as I've noticed with the weaker version I possess, I could be capable of learning it on my own and turning it into an active skill, hopefully. Plus, out of all healing passives, it feels the strongest, making use of Primordial thermal energy.

Yes, I could go healing passive based on the amount of mana I possess but none of those I've been offered feels like the burst of strong healing I need. It feels like an excuse, but the main reason is my hope of acquiring an active healing skill and I tried a lot while relying on my mana to get there and trying to copy Lily. It didn't work at all so maybe Primordial thermal energy will get me there.

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When I try to buy it a notification pops up.

Unable to buy another passive! Every being within the system is limited to 5 passives at most.

Please get rid of one or sell it to replace it with a new one.

And it's as expected.

I heard about it from Dennis when the boys tried to have a build with a dozen uncommon passive skills, but they told me they were unable to go over five. I had hoped it was because of their lower level or because of them not having a primary class upgrade, but it looks like there is a limit to the amount of passives one can held.

Now that I think about it, there might be one for active skills as well. Currently, I have 9 active skills so maybe it's 10? The system likes rounded numbers.

Passive skills:

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Pyrokinetic Resurgence (rare)

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

One of the passives comes from the Primary class so that leaves only 4 passive skills for the user to decide. An annoying limit, but there might be a reason for it.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 200 shards?

Pyrokinetic Resurgence (rare)

Yes/No

Then I buy the new passive.

Phoenix Embrace (epic):The user harnesses Thermal Energy, channeling controlled bursts of heat to accelerate the healing process, using primordial energy's transformative nature to heal their wounds.

It cost me 12,350 shards, leaving me with 8,312, I decide to keep them for now while I once again go through the epic passives Ive been offered for completing the 4th-floor quest.

This time there are 6 of them, but I didn't find any of them in the system shop when I checked.

Basilisk Gaze (epic):

The user possesses a passive intimidating aura, causing unease and fear in adversaries. This skill doesn't paralyze with a look, but it does unsettle opponents, making them less effective in combat.

Mana Overload Absorption (epic):

The user's mana channels are highly proficient at absorbing excess mana, mitigating the negative effects of mana overloads, and ensuring stability in challenging magical situations.

Mana Forge (epic):

The user's manipulation of mana transcends its limits, enabling them to shape mana into intricate and powerful constructs. These creations possess remarkable durability and destructive capabilities, making them formidable.

Kinetic Momentum (epic):

The user's mastery of kinetic energy allows them to effortlessly transfer tremendous kinetic force between their body, weapons, and projectiles, resulting in devastating impacts and unparalleled effectiveness.

Energy Conversion (epic):

The user naturally converts ambient energy into personal strength and stamina. This passive skill grants them increased endurance and resilience, making them less susceptible to fatigue and energy-based attacks.

Labyrinth Mind (epic):

The user's thoughts are incredibly complex and protected, rendering them near immune to mind-reading, scrying, and mental intrusion. This skill also confuses anyone attempting to manipulate their thoughts or memories.

So, let's go through them one after one.

I probably got Basilisk Gaze because I like to use my mana for intimidation lately. I don't like it much because it is passive and walking around with a field like that sounds annoying. But now that I think about it, I'm capable of turning off my passive skills so it should be fine, turning this passive into a semi-active skill.

The effect is most likely really strong because it's a passive skill, but I would rather deal more damage and kill my enemies quickly rather than scare them and kill them slowly. So this ones a pass for now.

Mana Overload Absorption is similar to a skill I was offered a while ago, the old one was only of rare grade. I like this one a lot, a lot a lot. If I don't change my mind Ill pick this one.

Mana Forge is also interesting and would strengthen my [Regalia] a lot and would probably make it easier to create the mana mecha armor I already used a few times. Yet I hesitate, as it's something I will

slowly get to on my own and I don't need [Regalia] to become much stronger, it's really strong already and I'm even using [Infusion] to give it an even bigger boost. This one is also a skip for now.

Energy Conversion sounds interesting. Does it mean the passive is capable of turning heat into strength and stamina? Maybe even cold? Would a higher rarity skill be capable of turning sunrays into more power? That does sound incredible. A being with such a passive? Turning sunrays, cold air, hot air, strong wind, gravitational force, and other energies into physical stats?

The effect likely won't be that strong otherwise the skill would be straight-up broken and this asshole system wouldn't allow that, but I should keep it in mind.

Labyrinth Mind is probably something similar to my Mantle and Reinforcement constructs. I also like it a lot, but with my immense mana, I should be able to protect my mind on my own, which was confirmed when Sophie wasn't capable of Manipulating the First One while he was releasing a lot of mana.

Well, Mana Overload Absorption it is, the question is what skill should I replace?

Thinking for a while I sell Cerebral Harmony for 200 shards and replace it with the newest one. I think the boost Cerebral Harmony gives to my mind and mana connection is too weak at this point to even notice so it should be fine.

As expected the pain is terrible and it feels like my mana channels are burning, a feeling almost as bad as when I got my first trait. The worst part of it is how long it takes. Minutes of burning pain that is made worse by the feeling of it coming from inside my body.

Using [Focus], I try to filter it out and examine the changes being to my body.

As many times before I can't even feel the source of the changes or what is guiding them. I'm also incapable of feeling mana or anything else applying the changes. It's just happening.

The system is truly as scary as it is assholeish.

Epic passives being dealt with, there is one thing I want to check before testing them. Something I was really, really curious about ever since the start of the floor.

I open the community, click on Easy Difficulty, and type my message.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -hey, what was your floor quest for the 4th floor?

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) -

Sami (Easy, AFK) - lol, another loser from Hell. Only on the 5th floor, lol.

Maria (Easy, AFK) -Ignore Sami, he likes to think he is funny.

Potato (Easy, Royals) - Noname, did you meet Ligma on the 4th floor?

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) - our floor quest was to kill some abomination ant. I couldn't even see his level, but he had two question marks. One group killed him a few months ago; we went to the 5th floor.

Sami (Easy, AFK) -we even have people who went to the 6th floor two months ago, lol.

Potato (Easy, Royals) - did you learn about Updog?

Sami (Easy, AFK) -they might be on the 7th or 8th floor already. I bet they could take you on. I don't trust that Sset guy at all. There is no way there are three question mark monsters.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) -what's your level, Noname?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Sami, I will see you during the tournament. Thanks for the answer, Channeler. Is Mana the best stat? I will keep my level to myself.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) -oooo, I like you! Mana rules! Are you also a mana build? I'm 2 parts mana and one part constitution, and people call me crazy, heh. What are you? 3 mana 1 con? Or maybe even 4 mana 1 con?

I check my stats.

Constitution: 246

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 782 + 782

Noname (Hell, group 4) - something like that. Can I ask you a few questions?

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) - sure, but you will have to answer some of mine - well, the ones you can.

Im really starting to like the guy.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -will do.

I ignore other messages as there are at this point a dozen people chatting, and I don't have that much time with my limit for community and need to save some for later.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -how many groups are there in Easy difficulty and how many people started in each? Can you tell me your floor quests and your average levels?

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) -heh, Sset asked the same questions. 10 groups in total, each group with 200 people, but plenty of them moved to normal difficulty. One group nearly all died and only 1 person survived out of all 200. We think he killed everyone else though. First floor - survive for 30 days in the forest, there were goblins and some wolves, all low level. The second floor was to stop a powerful mage mass murderer, the third floor was some post-apocalyptic city with zombies, and we had to reach the Saint and help to fight it, the fourth floor was to kill the abomination ant, two question mark monster.

Nice answer, short and to the point.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -thanks, what would you like to know?

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) -did you really have to fight 5 calamities one of which was a giant ant with wings that was over level 250 and led tens of thousands of ants?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -only 4 Calamities and the ant didn't have wings, he made them with mana. And yes, he was around that level.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) - heh, I was testing you. I wanted to compare your answer to Sset's. Thanks. My limit is gone so see you later!

After Channeler leaves, I skim through a few messages and turn off the community. Tomorrow I will check the normal one.

Chapter 270: One second

Flashbacks - Earth, 1 week before Nathaniel got into the tutorial

"Yes, as I said. Some of the lower security prisoners have disappeared, around 15 women and a similar number of men. Along with the guards, a doctor, and some of the visitors. An entire block of the building is gone."

"Explosion?"

"If it was an explosion, it's the weirdest I've ever heard of. We already had someone here, asking no, ordering us to blame it on a gas leak and declare them dead."

"FBI?"

"Most likely, the director told us to follow orders and not ask questions."

"I'm not getting paid enough to stick my nose into this so let's do that. Did you start contacting the next of kin of the people who disappeared?"

"Yes, we did, we contacted some of them, but there were a few that we couldn't find any contacts for."

"Keep trying."

"We lost one of our Typhoon class submarines, sir."

"Come again."

"I don't know how to say it otherwise, sir, we lost contact, sir."

"Did ASW not find anything? Is there any chance that it could be a secret mission from the higher-ups?"

"That's unlikely, they were supposed to return to restock and change crew."

"Their equipment?"

"Intercontinental ballistic missiles, each armed with multiple nuclear warheads. They had a hundred of them."

"How sure are we of their disappearance?"

"They were on the surface having a direct line to one of our warships and got cut off in the middle. We already sent a few ships to their last location."

"Let me know as soon as you get more information. Anything."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you hear? The train Matus was on crashed just this morning!"

"What the hell, really? How is he? Is he ok?"

"We don't know," a boy takes a few steps and opens the door for a group of his friends.

They enter the shop and quickly start picking out snacks before they go to school.

"I heard the train disappeared." one of the friends says.

"Bullshit, how can a train disappear?" another of the boys waves his hand. "I tried to call Matus multiple times but he is not answering, I hope hes ok."

Two men stand and stare at a car. Well, what's left of a car. The entire front end of the red pickup has been torn off, and the engine has been destroyed, and smashed.

"Did someone crash it and run away?"

"Yes, most likely in a tank while hiding the tread tracks."

"Then how the fuck do you explain this?" one of the men screams, this car was brand new, barely used.

The other man points at the tracks in the mud.

"There is no way it was a bear!"

His fellow grabs the screaming man and leads him to the side of the car where deep gouges have been left in the door, "Can you still say it wasn't a bear?"

"This has to be a prank!" the man screams again and they start arguing again.

Two boys sit high in a shaking tree, phones in their hands, both of them calling anyone they can. Parents, police, firefighters.

The tree they are sitting in is massive, yet it trembles constantly.

Howl.

The cause is the wolf below them. The wolf is bigger than it should have any right to be. Its skin is brown and its eyes emit a demonic glow in the dimming light.

Once again the tree shakes and the wolf howls while the boys scream.

Flashback - ???, 1 week before Nathaniel entered the tutorial

"My lord, we got a message from the Palace. It's about the planet we've been Paired with."

"That's an unexpectedly quick reaction."

"Yes, my lord, they wanted me to point out that that planet has Beyond explorers. We don't know the exact number yet, but it's likely between ten and thirty."

"That's quite a few for a planet that just entered its non-attack phase."

"I agree, my lord. Would you like me to find out more?"

"There is no need; we would need to ask one of the Rulers for more information about their tutorial, and we can't waste our resources like that."

"As you command, I will try to learn which planets got the same instance of the tutorial; maybe we can use them during the last tournament."

"Good idea, you can do that."

I observe as my newest epic item, the Aqua Arcanum Vial, absorbs water from the lake I found. It's been doing that for a few minutes already, a stream of water continuously flows through the air and into the vial. At this point, this thing contains more water than it should.

How interesting. How fascinating.

Spatial storage? System fuckery? Can I replicate it? Can I use it to store... mana? Well, I have batteries for that, but it won't hurt to have more mana, right?

Huhu. I don't have a problem.

At some point, the stream peters out, and I heft the vial. It still weighs the same, and when I use it, water bursts forth. Holding the item gives me control over the water, and I swirl it around me, creating some sort of barrier.

I try to use the water as a projectile as well, and it works. Unfortunately, the damage is terrible, more like splashing water at someone. The only advantage is the large amount of water it holds.

While examining it, I try to condense the water and turn it into a thinner and more pressurized stream, like the ones they use to cut sheet metal.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work, and I don't have much control over the item. Well, not exactly, it's more like the item itself lacks control; it feels like a limitation of the item itself, like its not made to be a weapon.

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Still, it's not so bad, so I start filling it again while I look around.

So far, I have met no monsters or detected any presence. When I flew high into the air, I saw some ruins far in the distance but I've decided to not go there right away.

I need to upgrade my construct, test my passives, and wait for my disciple. A disciple... such a strange thing. The Floor quest here is unlike any before, but up until now, there's been some intent to them.

The first was to cull the weeds and introduce us to the basics of the system and skills while gradually increasing the difficulty.

The second was to show us a civilization at its peak, with Champions and an Absolute. The floor ended with a warning and showed us what we could be capable of. All of this has been shown to us while we were still weak rather than being held back for later floors.

The third once again showed us the consequences of misusing our powers, and we had to rely on ourselves to survive, seek out information, and come up with a plan to deal with the Saint.

The fourth was the most freehand one. Plenty of options from hiring the natives, to turning calamities against each other, and a lot of ways to clear it. The Fallen Hero for those more suited to a single target, the Colony for those suited to large groups of enemies, And the more politically minded could start a war between the Lynthari and the humans. The tree as an unmoving static target for those adept at channeling and preparation.

The fifth floor is to raise and protect a disciple. This all being a tutorial most likely means that we might be training people when we get back to earth and this is probably meant as preparation. The title of disciple is important to the system. We met the corpse of a Champion's disciple on the 4th floor and heard it mentioned multiple times. I also met Ruby on the second floor, and she was a disciple of that cockroach-like Absolute.

It all makes me curious. Disciples, candidates, Champions, and Absolutes. It might take a while, but I'll get to all this.

The bottle is filled once again, and I put it into my pocket and look at the pile of items I brought here with me. At least I won't be bored with so much work to be done.

But now, the most important part!

I have Mana Overload Absorption and Arcane Resilience, plus an improved healing passive. All three are epic skills that should be capable of helping me with the black mana and my new trait. So let's try it.

Deep breath in, and I activate my [Focus] and consolidate it, [Mana Manipulation] immediately activating at high power. my two starting skills. I'm still quite fond of them.

I let the mana reach my eyes, and the trait slowly activates, and the world around me changes. Beautiful waves of mana surround me, the ones I can't sense or see without the trait. I don't even know what they're called.

Then I start to see the particles of mana floating gently, swirling and filling everything. Ever-present and beautiful like tiny lights stolen from the sky. Ambient mana.

Gradually, I feel the pressure on my eyes and brain increase, but I hold on and continue to take it all in. The longer I do, the more information flows into me, and the deeper I see into this beautiful invisible world.

When I feel like it's enough, I deactivate my trait and, as my head screams, the information overload stops.

That was good, much longer than without Mana Overload Absorption. I was worried that it wouldn't affect my eyes, but it does and I'm grateful for that.

After a short break, I start another test, this time generating and storing a lot of thermal energy inside my body, as much as I can handle. It works well and Phoenix Embrace activates, healing, and supporting me. Then I activate my trait again and try it with my healing passive activated.

It starts similarly, but when I start feeling pain in my head and eyes, the healing thermal power rushes to them, alleviating a lot of the pressure and fighting against it. Not all of it, but plenty. The only disadvantage is the amount of focus I need to keep it activated while focusing on my eyes, but that much is fine, and the amount of time I can keep my eyes up increases.

While at the peak of it, I reach out my hand and create an orb.

Blue turns dark blue with streaks of light blue and purple, then white as if about to explode, and with a stronger push, it turns black, with tiny sparks of white light inside the pitch-black orb.

The way mana waves and ambient mana move around the black orb is fascinating, unlike any reaction I have seen with my limited experience.

Carefully, while using my trait and my skills, I try to control the orb, to force my will on it. It requires a large amount of mana to do so, but it's within my capabilities, then a thin stream of my mana connects to the orb, constantly supplying it with mana.

Not willing to take it into my body again, for now, I instead use [Focus] and manipulate it into changing shape.

It turns into a beautiful enigmatic black dagger, but even this doesn't feel like its optimal form.

Still, I'm happy, even with the constant pressure.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 43 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 44]

[Focus - lvl 42 > Focus - lvl 43]

Feeling I'm getting close to my limits, I cut off the connection to my mana and, unable to cancel it, I throw it nearby where it floats in the air, gently sucking and absorbing any mana that reaches it.

For the next hour, I continue to observe it, and at some point, I create a barrier around it, similar to the one the ants did before to store my black mana orbs.

Then for the next few hours, I observe as the orb gradually crumbles. There wasn't much mana left for it to sustain itself, and I never intended there to be.

Overall, I'm really happy with the result. Sure, the black mana thing is best used defensively at the moment, with its capacity for absorbing huge amounts of mana and stopping attacks that are way over my head. So that's what I will do for now, learn to use it for defense.

The second step is to inscribe my arm again and use the orb to absorb mana and make it mine in a carefully controlled manner.

The third step is to slowly get it to flow through my body while maintaining the active state of my healing passive.

The last step is what I'm the most excited about. The black mana feels like mana+, or mana ultra, or maybe mana pro. The sheer quality of it is something else, and if I use it to power my skills, it will give me a huge boost. So of course I intend to use it. Partially it reminds me of [Mana Surge] skill I used to have, just more versatile and much stronger.

I'm about to turn around and go work on my construct, but then I hesitate in mid-step.

This doesn't feel right. Since when am I so careful?

Didn't I already decide to make myself as strong as possible? So what's with this tiptoeing, all the preparations, and careful testing?

My heart starts generating a huge amount of kinetic energy which I immediately transfer into thermal and compress it even further, golden flames blazing on my skin.

Then my eyes activate once more, a beautiful hidden world opening to me, and in that world, I create another black mana orb. I reach out, grab this orb, and squeeze it.

The black mana fights against me, tries to suck on my mana, to dominate it all.

And I fight against it. My skills surround it, my mana surrounds it, and I force it into my body where it starts flowing through my circuits, the pain increasing, feeling as if burning iron is pulled through my muscles. But I push that to the back of my mind and let myself absorb the entire orb, constantly fighting the mana in my own body.

I don't let it. This thing is made of my mana; there is no way I will let it fight against me.

[Mana Domain - lvl 28 > Mana Domain - lvl 29]

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

My domain activates, this time within my body, strengthening my control over it and all of my mana.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 44 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 45]

[Resonance - lvl 40 > Resonance - lvl 41]

[Redistribution - lvl 40 > Redistribution - lvl 41]

[Resonance] activates, constantly shifting the frequency of the two types of mana, matching them more closely, and [Redistribution] helps too.

I ignore the pain and the pressure and just send a bit more heat through my body, any wounds that appear immediately heal under the influence of my golden flames.

Then, finally, the black mana gives up and I seize control of it. I move it and I use it for a skill. I pick the one I rely on over and over again.

[Focus], powered by black mana, activates and all the healing that was being sent through my body rushes to my head, my muscles immediately twitching, bones cracking. Yet even then, the passive skill only focuses on my head, trying to keep me alive and my brain from literally melting under the pressure.

For one second [Focus] activates. Just for one, one terribly short second that almost kills me. And in that short moment, I watch as the world around me slows down to a crawl and my mind feels as clear as never before.

My thoughts rush through with a speed that feels inhuman and it terrifies me.

The moment a feeling of fear intrudes, my mind examines it, reads it, and I feel a short burst of amusement before it's pushed to the back, immediately turning to my situation and examining the effect of black mana on [Focus].

The wind blows nearby and in slow motion, the branch of the tree next to me moves.

Surprisingly, my body is capable of moving and even though the world feels slowed down, I move normally and touch the branch.

Then I watch as my muscles and tendons on my arm tear, bones crack, poking through the skin, and I pull my hand back, only for it to break even further.

Only then do I realize what's happening, all still within that short second.

The world did not slow down; just my [Focus] allowed me to take in all this information and process them at a speed that feels so inhuman. Then my dumb ass tried to move my body and without realizing that moving it at the current normal speed, I would need to move it dozens of times faster than what I usually do and what my low constitution is capable of handling.

Before the effect wears off, I realize how dangerous it is and move black mana inside my body, pushing it out and shooting it far away from me, tearing a few holes in my skin, and overloading my circuits.

Then the sounds come back to me and hit me like a tsunami. Someone groans in pain and only later do I realize it's me.

I fall to the ground, head thrashing, arm broken to pieces, eyes hurting as if someone stabbed them, circuits overloaded even with my new passive. Focusing all my attention on keeping thermal energy flowing through my body and on breathing, I lay there down in the grass near the lake.

For the following hours, I only examine my area and keep up healing that is mostly focused on my head and brain. After that, I heal my body and examine my passive.

Then when it's all done, I lay there and try to take it all in. I spend hours and hours going over that single second when I felt so so I don't know how to name it. I just know I do not regret a thing.

Only when I hear rustling and feel a presence behind the trees do I realize that the 24 hours passed and my Floor Quest has fully started now.

I look up and there, poking from behind the tree, a small girl hides. She is around 6 years old. She has light brown hair that is messy and seems to have been cut with a knife, and she is wearing clothes that are more rags than clothing.

But the most striking thing about her is her eyes, red like rubies, and the two small pointy horns poking out from under her hair near her forehead.

And over her head, hangs a single word.

[Disciple]