

Tutorial 381

Chapter 381: It's you...

Congratulations, you have won the 4th event - Arena!

Do you want to accept your reward or would you like to forgo receipt to improve your final rewards?

Your reward for winning the 4th event is:

Passive skill combination token (low epic)

"I would like to use it to improve my final rewards."

The window disappears and I look at the palm of my hand, clenching it into a fist and then opening it.

What a cowardly little bitch.

Sure, he was about to lose. He gave his all, and I overwhelmed him. But still! What the hell. Fight me, show some pride, and don't just look at me like that! Goddamned Patience, is it his subclass, is that why?

Savant my ass.

And now he's hiding. I went looking for him. I've scanned the entire area of the tournament, but I couldn't find him. So I can't even try to punch him to vent.

As has become my custom whenever I'm annoyed, I pull Biscuit closer to my chest.

We are alone in the living room in the huge armchair I've reserved. Biscuit is quiet, and I have a suspicion he is sleeping off a large quantity of meat he found somewhere.

His small body is soft and warm, and I can sense his heart beating calmly and hear his breathing. The fur on top of his head is pleasantly soft as I pet him.

I wonder if I should start referring to him as an ESC, emotional support corgi, or ESFA, emotional support future absolute, or ESAO, emotional support animal overlord? It could be something to think about in the future.

I pull up my status and check the skills that leveled up after I left the Arena.

[Resonance - lvl 45 > Resonance - lvl 46]

[Mana Domain - lvl 38 > Mana Domain - lvl 39]

[Mana Domain - lvl 39 > Mana Domain - lvl 40]

[Mana Crown - lvl 22 > Mana Crown - lvl 23]

[Mana Crown - lvl 23 > Mana Crown - lvl 24]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 45 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 46]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 46 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 47]

At least the rewards are nice, damn it.

Once this tournament is over I need a break. Somewhere with fewer people. Maybe once we get the twins out of that Black Tower I can disappear for a bit and do some hunting on my own. Staying with them all the time could also slow their growth and mine as well if the danger isn't high enough. It sounds like a good plan, I would think.

But for now, I have a few hours before the last event, so I may as well visit Miwa and check out her arm.

Before that, I can put the items I made into the store.

I open the interface, and as I do, I put in twenty mana stones. Each of them qualifies as a rare quality item, and they shouldn't sell for too high a price. But I've inscribed each one personally, making the same sort of exercises for mana manipulation that I gave Vega and Channeler.

I've already tested them to my satisfaction. Vega and Channeler have certainly made some decent progress. So I set a starting price of 300 shards and time of auction until the end of the tournament.

I won't complain about an extra few thousand shards before it's all said and done.

I find Miwa in her workshop as always. She almost seems to live there.

After a minute or two, she emerges, and her expression isn't quite what I remember. It's hard for me to guess what emotion she is feeling. Maybe she watched the duels or maybe she heard something?

"So, about the guy. You know, the number 1 crafter..." I start carefully.

The moment I mention that person, her eyes light up, and her stance opens a bit. She may still be hesitant, but she definitely has a strong interest in hearing me out.

"Can you bring me to them? My offer is still on the table, I'm willing to let you examine my arm."

"Well... about that..."

"Oh, did they refuse? I can add ten rare grade items I made. I can throw in some of the ones I made for my group members too. I will owe them, and it will be a lot of work to make new ones, but I can do it."

"It's not that. Let me show you something." I request, walking past her and into the workshop.

Inside, I find a corner with a metal table covered in inscriptions. After grabbing some low-quality mana conductive metal from a nearby pile, I start releasing mana, suspending it in the air.

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Thermal energy flows from me, and I surround that metal, imitating a furnace and keeping the heat even. I gradually increase the intensity, and as it starts to melt, I move my mana to mix it evenly.

Miwa stands somewhere off to my side, at first seeming like she wants to interrupt, before settling in to watch.

I stoke the heat, and my golden flames envelop it as I cut off the air. continuing an experiment I've been working on in an effort to learn how it might change the result. As it reaches the proper temperature I begin to release kinetic energy to hammer the metal.

As time goes on, I slowly start absorbing heat from the dagger. It took me some time to get it right, and even then, there are imperfections. Cooling it down too quickly will only serve to ruin the final product.

Of course, it could always be worse. I could use water to cool some parts, there are alloys, and oils I could have added into the mix, I could have tried layering the metal, heating it to different temperatures, and heating it for longer. I'm certainly not starved for options and I definitely have plenty of room to improve in the future.

But for now, I just let it cool as I work on shaping the molten metal into a bracelet as thick as my pinkie.

At the same time, I use my skills to engrave inscriptions across the surface of the item and lace some more along the inside. It would definitely work better with a different alloy to serve as the base, but then it would take longer as well.

The process still takes over 2 hours, and Miwa silently watches without saying a single word the entire time.

When it's all said and done, I let the bracelet drop to the table with the clang of colliding metal.

I check the results identifying it as a low rare artifact bestowing an effect that will allow its owner to endure high levels of heat as it absorbs the excess and redirects it away once the storage reaches capacity.

"It's you..." Miwa says, finally breaking the silence.

"Yup."

"You...why would you call yourself that... never mind, forget I said anything! You should have told me earlier! I've been admiring your items for a while." Miwa gushes, picking up the bracelet and smiling brightly, showing me the item, "They are ugl... that is to say they lack aesthetic appeal, the metals are often a mess, having been worked at excessively high or low temperatures. They are clearly amateur work."

"Uh, okay?" Is she trying to start a fight?

"But at the same time, I can feel the enthusiasm and the raw talent. And the inscriptions are amazing! I don't think there is anyone from our round of the tutorial better at working with them. And even on the floors, people like you were rare."

Miwa continues to talk and talk. She talks about the item and the materials it's made of. She asks about inscriptions, and she points out mistakes I made.

Without hesitation, she presents me with a notepad full of notes on crafting. There are experiments she performed, alongside their results. Along with a few methods of smelting from Earth. Methods for working metals and more.

The notepad alone is extremely valuable, but she even gives me a pair of mana stones with more information. One she got from the second floor and One from a blacksmith who worked under Champion Keiron.

There is no hesitation at all. She only tells me she already read and memorized it all dozens of times over.

In her group, there is no one she can talk with about crafting properly, so she is happy.

So I tell her about Nevan and his alloys and the things he showed me. I show her the arcane alloy he made, which I keep on me at all times. I even let her see Flamebearer.

Miwa seems like she's going to pass out from excitement at any moment, as she jumps from item to item, peppering me with questions.

In the end, I show and tell more than I had planned. But she reminds me of Cael, the craftsman from the 4th floor, a bit too much honestly. There is not a single sign of greed in her actions, and I just can't see her selling the items I leave her with for simple profit. All I see in her is a pure love for the act of creation, nothing else.

She also shows me the arm, and I examine it and the way it's connected to her body. I examine the material and inscriptions. I even copy most of them into one of the many mana stones I keep on me.

I make Miwa move the hand, send mana through it, and activate the various inscriptions. We even activate some she didn't know about, like one particularly efficient example that serves to make her arm even stronger, and a few more she will have to examine on her own. The arm seems to have been shielded from examination by anyone other than its owner, so it's difficult to parse even as she allows me all the time I need.

Still, I learn a lot and I believe that knowledge will stay with me, add to what I currently have, and allow me to create better things in the future.

Unfortunately, she still rejects my offer to buy her arm. She doesn't care about the possibility of receiving a new arm, courtesy of Lily.

I could offer to rent her Biscuit for a few hours, but something tells me she wouldn't accept, and I have nothing more valuable than that so I give up.

Lastly, I inscribe a mana stone for her. Miwa has a skill that allows her to manipulate flames, but the inscriptions I created should allow her to practice and improve that skill. Maybe even evolve it.

She is probably happiest about that part.

When I finally leave, she thanks me repeatedly and bows profusely, her behavior having done a complete one-eighty over the course of my visit.

I wonder if she saw something in me when I was crafting, just like I saw in her when she spoke about her love for the art of creation.

I spend some time with Min-Jae and examining his eye. It works very well, and I don't find any problems.

When Vega was still here, I also checked her eye. I might have gotten a bit paranoid after reading the contents of the mana stone that cowardly asshole Savant gave to Lily. Thankfully, it seems like everyone did a good job, and Vega's weakened Mana Wavelength Iris fits her well.

I wonder if I might be able to sell my eyes sometime in the future, perhaps I could even give a few away, weakened versions of course. Just pull it out, have Lily or another healer weaken it with my help, and then fit it to another person, and sell it.

Logically, it shouldn't affect the trait itself, at least I don't think it should. I'll definitely need to learn more before going through with it.

Min-Jae is still acting embarrassed, and it's fun to see. Just that short spar won't change much, but he is a smart boy, so he should be fine. He will probably get his ass kicked a few times before that, but that's to be expected.

To be honest, if I see him doing it again, I might beat him up. I dealt with a lot of bullying growing up, people called me the brother of a murderer or poked fun at my mother.

Of course, I'm a hypocrite too and I bully others as well. Bendover is an example, or to a smaller extent, others. But at least I'm an asshole who has enough power to be an asshole without getting killed by some vengeful chump. Meanwhile, Min-Jae is weaker, and it could cost him his life later. He can mimic me once he gets stronger.

With little more than an hour until the last day of the tournament, we get a new notification.

The 5th event - Chronicle of the Past will start in 1 hour!

Everyone will have the opportunity to engage in a 1v1 combat challenge with one being from the database of the Earth's tutorial. Beings such as natives from the already completed floors.

Every participant will be given 1 challenge, so choose wisely!

Challenged beings will be of the same quality as an Avatar, possessing no memories other than those required for combat. They do not possess emotions or the ability to talk and have no motivations other than defeating the challenger.

Note: There will be no rewards for the 5th event. Your performance will be included in the calculation of your final rewards instead.

Chapter 382: Chronicle of the Past

"Hey," Tess says, moving closer to me.

"What is it this time?"

She chuckles, amused by my reaction, "I wanted to confirm something. Lily seems disappointed with you over that thing with Tacita, but I can't help but wonder if that's all there is to it."

"What do you mean? I'm an asshole. It's simple."

"Really? Why then, was your first reaction to grab Lily and teleport to Tacita? I saw it, I have good eyes. I sensed you preparing to teleport."

"You must have seen wrong."

“Did I?”

“Yup, it was all Lily’s idea.”

“Are you worried about Tacita becoming attached to you?”

“You’re lying. But I wonder why. Would that really be so bad? Does the idea scare you? Having someone like her attached to you? Maybe you just like acting like an ass so people will leave you alone.”

“Totally. Anyway, did you see the last event? What do you think?”

Tess looks at me for a bit and then lets go of the previous subject, “I will be challenging The First One. Lily will probably go against The Fallen Hero. Sophie is also going to pick The First One for obvious reasons. The rest still isn’t that sure. Have you made a decision?”

“Yes, but I’ve got a few ideas about that. Could you get Channeler and a few people from Easy difficulty? I’ll give them some items if they use their challenge the way I want.”

“Sounds intriguing. I’ll give him a call. And don’t forget to set something aside for Channeler, he was helpful most of the time.”

Who does she think I am? I’m already preparing some nice stuff for my future PR guy. Enough to make him the most powerful Easy difficulty attendee.

I spend half a day training with Lily, trying to beat some sense into her and improve her efficiency. She tends to use too much mana and needs to invest more into her reserves, as the result of her duel with Tess demonstrates.

Using a lot of her stats for constitution is nice as it means better body parts to [Sacrifice], but even that consumes mana. She also spends a lot of mana regenerating her body, which now costs more because of her high constitution.

Her ideal strategy would be avoiding injury and taking advantage of her tough body through [Sacrifice], but Lily seems to like cosplaying a bulldozer during fights.

In the future, the power of constitution and some additional traits could make her investments more viable, but that's going to take a while.

Then I spend a bit of time with Izzy, demonstrating a few better ways to use her flames. Sophie helped her a lot with that, and Izzy herself is pretty good, so it's just a nudge towards a different direction.

As always, I remind Maya to not be a scaredy-cat and level her [Focus] more.

So far, no one from Hell difficulty has chosen to issue their challenge for the 5th event. We have people monitoring the auditorium, once again set up in the common area, with multiple screens displaying each challenge.

Some of the people from Hard have chosen to challenge powerful monsters they met on previous floors and couldn't defeat. Others challenge humans they want to learn something from, stretching fights out as long as possible.

Challenging to learn is the way to go, I think. Yes, some want to overcome their trauma and near-death experience, but that's not for me. My challenge has already been decided, and I will wait for the end. Not like it is that far, just a few more hours.

When people from Hell difficulty start issuing their challenges, I teleport to the common area.

It's a bad day for ants as I watch both Sophie and Tess obliterate the First One.

Something nearly snaps in me as I see that black ant again, standing there like it had never died even while seeming like an empty husk.

Tess is usually quiet about this kind of stuff, but I think The First One was something she sees as her big failure. Even though she doesn't talk about it or show it to others, I'm sure it bothers her a lot.

As I watch her fight that ant, I think I can understand that, at least partially. Even though it won't be a satisfying form of revenge and it won't change anything, it will be a step forward. She might need this more than any prize she could have gained.

Her fight isn't even that difficult. Without the support of his [Hive Mind], the First One is weaker, and the much stronger Tess defeats the black ant.

When Tess gets out, Maya makes sure the others leave her alone, and Tess sits to the side of the roof near us. There is a solemn mood around her as she sorts through things in her head.

Sophie also gets in and it's even worse for the First One's Avatar. He just freezes on the spot as his skill and Sophie's [Manipulation] clash. He stays like that for the rest of the challenge. Sophie just holds him there, tearing as much knowledge as she can from his usage of [Hive Mind] as he tries to use it to counter her skill.

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Where Sophie failed back then, she succeeds now and holds him in place with ease. But I don't think she feels as satisfied as she would have hoped. The First One is an Avatar and without his Colony may as well be a weaker version of himself. One thing I can say, even hating the ant as much as I do. He was truly formidable back then.

The Challenges continue, and at some point, Savant reappears as well. He says a name and appears inside, facing a young-looking man. The ten-second countdown starts, and Savant starts his preparations to face him.

"Champion Tristan, he said," Sophie, who's recently reclaimed her space on the roof, mumbles.

That makes me check the man again.

Tristan has a young, friendly looking face. He is slim, and his blonde curly hair makes a nice contrast to his simple black clothes decorated with a few subdued golden ornaments. His eyes are sharp and have a slight orange hue to them. He looks very dignified even for the Avatar he is now.

Back on the 2nd floor, I heard multiple people say that Champion Tristan easily classified as the closest being to attaining the title of the Absolute from the entire world Eladore. Even closer than Champion Keiron or the mind mage emperor. And that man took Savant as his disciple for some reason, even declaring him a candidate.

Now they face each other, Savant radiating as much mana as he can, focusing it all on defense. To stay alive for as long as possible and learn from the man who took him in.

When the countdown stops, the duel doesn't even take a second. Tristan barely moves, and Savant dies.

Appearing outside, Savant doesn't seem to be dissatisfied, and I see the calculations going behind his cowardly eyes. Maybe he came up with better ways to forfeit duels that just started. Maybe he learned to say the word "Forfeit" much faster.

Maybe... I shake my head and sigh.

Biscuit's challenge is a huge deer with white glowing antlers. The deer is extremely majestic, each step he takes makes him look like a being from a fable. Like the kind of spirit our ancestors would have worshiped as a god in ancient times.

The deer dies almost immediately in a single hit that seems to avoid damaging the body. Before Biscuit gets teleported out, tentacles surround the deer as he tries to bring it out with him.

Appearing outside without his prey, Biscuit seems extremely confused and disappointed.

(Food!) he shouts.

His head moves from side to side, and he even tries digging into the rooftop with his front paws, while sniffing at his surroundings.

(Gone!) He cries, with pain in his voice.

I pick him up, and while he keeps complaining over and over again, I feed him pieces of my decreasing reserves of deer jerky.

“Hang in there, buddy,” I say trying to comfort him.

I think Biscuit was a 2-year-old corgi when he entered the tutorial with us. On the 1st floor, he “awakened” for lack of a better term. He still could be considered a kid, a child, even younger than my minion or Izzy.

However, I find his naivety extremely endearing. His attempt to pay for stolen meat with pieces of glass he thought were the same as the mana stones they used as currency. Packing up pieces of meat with candy wrappers, thinking it might make us happier because he saw how much we enjoyed them. And more.

His worldview is simple, and even most of his abilities were gained just to get more food. Tentacles to reach the places we had hidden food, telepathy so he could ask for more food.

“You are one cute little thing, aren’t you?” I whisper, making sure no one hears, and boop his nose a few times.

(Gone!)

“We will get you some later, don’t worry. And where did you see that deer? Did you face a monster like that on the 5th floor?”

(Food!) He confirms.

Receiving a Notice from Sophie, I look at the screen to see Min-Jae facing down a monster I haven’t seen yet. It’s bipedal with human-like features and four arms. Its skin looks like it is made of metal. Maybe it’s something Min-Jae met on the 5th floor?

Soon the reason for this challenge becomes obvious as the monster seems to possess a skill similar to [Telekinesis].

Min-Jae, like people before him, uses this to observe the monster and try to learn as much as he can. There also seems to be a hint of fear and hatred directed at the monster. Maybe it caused him trouble before.

In the end, the boy wins. It's still not fully satisfying, but his fighting feels just a little bit less tense. At the end of his challenge, he even seems to enjoy it.

The twins go one after another, both of them summoning the same monster. A small blue one with a huge head and a thin body that keeps creating illusions. That monster seems to be much stronger than they are able to handle, and after a while, they both lose. Even so, I can see their excitement as they exchange their wordless conversation.

The next member of our group to fight is Maya, and she faces a female lynthari I don't know. The warrior is wearing simple armor and wields a longsword.

"It's Maya's teacher from the 4th floor. One of the best sword masters of Virelia. The lynthari liked Maya and taught Maya when she asked for lessons. She agreed and in exchange, Maya had to accompany her when she went to the city and shout vulgar stuff at people who tried to talk to her teacher," Tess explains with a giggle.

"Typical lynthari."

"I know, right? Still, Maya was rather fond of her and learned a lot. She didn't have time to say goodbye, and I think she wanted to see her one more time. Maybe even learn a thing or two or see how much stronger she has become."

To watch the scene play out on screen, I can't doubt what Tess said. Maya is getting pushed back by an extremely skilled lynthari. I recognize parts of her move set that Maya seems to have adopted into her own style. The lynthari also likes to quickly switch between a number of weapons created from mana. She uses a shield, then she switches to a spear, then a dagger, and finally back to a sword.

The style looks extremely confusing and very versatile. It requires a lot from its user, but the result seems to be worth it.

Maya holds back and focuses on her technique instead of exploiting her higher level. And because of that, she loses, but she doesn't seem sad at all. Instead, she smiles proudly, satisfied with her growth.

"Can you connect me to Channeler?" I ask Dennis, and with a nod he does.

(You guys can do it, I will pay as promised if it works.) I say, sending it through the connection.

(Sure thing! The guys are excited!)

Then I watch the scene down below, as one man separates from his group and heads towards one of the screens. I'm too far off to hear what he said, but I know the words. They are the words I told them to say.

"I want to challenge the winner of the 1st round of Earth's tutorial's 1st tournament."

The man then disappears, teleported inside the arena to face his challenge.

The event is called The Chronicle of the Past after all.

Chapter 383: Bloody brawl

An Avatar appears before the man from Easy difficulty. An Avatar of the man who won the 1st tournament of the 1st round of Earth's tutorial.

The rumor spreads quickly, and before the countdown ends, signaling the start of the duel, all eyes have been glued to the screen, examining that man.

He is very tall and muscular, the build you would see on strongmen. He's bald, has a bushy black beard, and looks to be in his thirties. He wears simple clothes and seems to be unarmed.

When the duel starts, he takes a few steps and stares down at his challenger. It's just a moment, but even that seems to be enough to unsettle this particular member of Channeler's group.

Then the Avatar swings his arm, and the upper half of his opponent's body disappears, and just like that, the challenger reappears outside.

"Did you see that? That one swing left a massive crater," Aaron says excitedly.

"High strength?" Min-Jae guesses.

"That dude was massive, and probably as heavy as the two of us and Min-Jae combined," Dennis says, staring at the now blank screen with his eyes wide open.

"But it seems like you were right, Nat! We really can challenge the winners of the previous tournaments."

"The next challenge is beginning," Sophie says, and we turn back to the screen.

The 2nd round winner of the tournament is a young redheaded woman with a long scar on her cheek. She is wearing simple, well-made armor, which I recognize as the armor of the Fallen Hero. Her only weapon is a huge ax with two blades.

Even so, she doesn't bother using her weapon and nonchalantly kicks a stone off the ground towards her opponent. It speeds off like a bullet and kills the man from Easy difficulty.

"Hot."

To my surprise, it's Maya who says that. She gets a few surprised looks, and I can see the twins want to say something, but neither is brave enough to do so.

The winner of the 3rd round's 1st tournament is a child. A boy looking to be even younger than Isabella. He has brown curly hair and deep blue eyes. Very deep blue, likely a result of one of his traits rather than anything approaching his natural color.

As ten seconds pass, the boy's shadow expands, and two pitch-black wolves rise from its depths, as if they were made of ink. They attack at once, dashing at the challenger who quickly dies at their hands.

The two black wolves turn into a liquid-like substance and seep back into the boy's shadow which quickly returns to normal. The entire time, his blue eyes seem to shine.

Then the time comes for the winner of the 4th round's tournament.

It's a 27-year-old woman. Most people would probably find her attractive. Her eyes are both brown though one of them is slightly lighter in color than the other.

She's wearing simple clothes. Black pants and a gray shirt with long sleeves. The design seems to originate from the 4th floor. Her black hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail, clumsily done, she never was any good at doing it herself.

Even as an Avatar, confidence, and grace radiate from her as she stands waiting with perfect posture.

"Nat..." I can hear Tess say quietly.

"Something happened? Why is your voice like that, Tess?" Maya asks, voice full of concern.

"That woman, she..." Tess hesitates, unsure what to say.

"She is my sister," I answer in her place.

I watch the screen as Victoria takes her first steps. Her movements are so familiar. The Avatar moves just like her. Confident and daring. It's as if she is daring the entire world to throw everything it has at her. And I'm sure if that happened, she would endure it all without complaining. That's how she is.

The challenger dies with a single swing of her arm.

When she disappears, I can only stare at the place where she stood.

(Boss, we tried to challenge the 6th round winner, but it didn't let us. The same goes for higher numbers. It seems like we can challenge only rounds below the 5th for some reason.)

(I see. How many guys do you still have?)

(We have five left. They can challenge...)

(Tell them to challenge the winner of the 4th round tournament. One after another. Don't ask why.)

(I... I understand. Can do!)

These five guys from Easy difficulty die one after another. Each of them receives some mana stones with inscriptions from me. But at the moment, I don't care about the cost.

The thought of testing who this event would allow to challenge disappeared from my mind the moment Victoria appeared.

Each challenge gives me 10 seconds in which I can see the Avatar of my sister and then a few more seconds as she calmly reaches her challenger. A few of them try to run away, but she catches up to them quickly and finishes it.

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Group 4 is quiet, likely in an attempt to give me space after a quick exchange in the group chat.

When it's all over, I find myself staring at the screen.

"Won't you challenge her? You could see her longer..." Maya tries, and her voice is unusually soft.

"No, I will never fight her."

Just the thought of hurting Victoria, even in the event of a sparring match, disgusts me.

She is someone who cared for me for so long. Who took so much on herself and suffered on my behalf. There is no way I will hurt her, not even for a friendly sparring match. Not even if it's only an emotionless Avatar.

Never.

But there is someone with a different idea, a silly and petite black haired girl who moves impulsively and probably thinks she is helping me. She even wastes her challenge.

Lily appears inside facing Victoria, and she turns towards the "camera" and smiles. I know she does it for me.

What a dumb girl.

For ten seconds, Lily and the Avatar face each other. Then the fight starts.

Unlike before, Victoria's Avatar acts differently. Her posture changes, and as she charges, even her speed is much higher.

She and Lily clash against each other, Victoria easily dodging Lily's strikes and hitting her a few times in retaliation. Lily takes two blows to the face, two to the neck, and a stronger one to the chest.

Lily staggers back, her tough body enduring it so far. Out of everyone from the 5th round, Lily has one of the highest physical stats, and with the addition of [Sacrifice], probably the highest. Yet Victoria matches her.

Another exchange sends Lily rolling on the ground as Victoria pounces on her. Even in a fight, she seems so collected.

Finally, Lily is forced to use [Disintegration].

Victoria shows incredible reaction time and jumps back. She glances down at the missing piece of her shoulder and, for a moment, I can see her calculating her next move. Then she attacks again. She uses more of her strength and mana while dodging Lily's burst of [Disintegration].

But then, to Lily's surprise, Victoria gets hit by a series of strong, slow bursts of gray mana, and her entire body disappears. Only a finger remains, plopping to the ground behind Lily.

Lily stands there more shocked than anyone watching.

"That was unexpected," Maya mutters.

But Lily doesn't find herself teleported outside; the duel doesn't end.

In a blink, Victoria regrows from her finger. The flesh extends from the finger, along with bones, nerves, organs, and skin. It happens extremely quickly, and Victoria grabs Lily's arm.

Lily, who was looking around at that moment, starts pulling her arm back in shock, but Victoria pulls harder and tears Lily's arm from its socket.

That makes Lily stagger back, a short scream of pain escaping her while her arm starts regrowing.

Before it's restored, Victoria takes a step swinging Lily's severed arm. She lands a blow on Lily's face, striking with great force, sending her staggering with a broken nose. And then she advances with another quick step and swing, making Lily stumble even more.

Before the third hit lands, Lily uses [Disintegration], lashing out at Victoria.

Victoria swings, deflecting the gray mana with Lily's own arm. As the arm of a person who possesses that skill and uses it often, it only makes sense that it should be able to endure it. The only sign of damage on the arm is the ragged skin at the stump and a few disintegrated pieces of flesh.

Lily continues to attack, and every time, Victoria uses her arm to block her gray mana. After a while, all that remains is a jagged bone, and Victoria attacks head-on.

She spits, and I can see a bloodied piece of something fly over Lily.

"Was it her tongue? Did that crazy woman bite off her own tongue and spit it behind Lily?!" Maya says in shock.

The moment that piece of tongue lands on the ground, another Victoria grows from it just like she did from the finger. A perfect copy of the original.

That copy quickly moves and puts her arms around Lily from behind while the original uses the bone jutting from Lily's severed arm to pierce Lily's chest, aiming for her heart.

A whip-like burst of gray mana is sent from Lily, both versions of Victoria getting hit. One loses both arms, another one its legs under the knees.

From these cast-off limbs, three more Victorias quickly regrow.

Victoria, missing her arms, knees Lily in the chin, and the one without legs grabs one of Lily's arms.

The other three Victorias each grab a limb and start pulling.

Lily screams as they tear off her limbs, and another burst of gray mana devours everything around it in a wide area, and all the Victorias with it.

Still, they had time, and further away, two bloodied fingers make their landing. From each finger, one Victoria regrows.

Lily sways a bit but straightens up as they attack her relentlessly. They are much more confident now, better at dodging [Disintegration], and after a while, one of them bites off her finger and spits it out.

The finger spawns a third Victoria. After dodging, she swings her arm and punches Lily in the jaw, staggering her and almost causing her to lose consciousness as the powerful blow shakes Lily's brain. All three of them seize the opportunity and attack Lily. Two start pulling her arms, and the third one grabs Lily's head after punching her again in the same spot.

Lily's bursts of bursts of [Disintegration] gradually weaken, still damaging them, eating away at their flesh, and blinding them, but they still continue to pull.

In the end, Lily's head lets go before the limbs, and they pull it free, dangling her spine behind it.

Finally bursting into a cloud of particles Lily reappears on the roof.

The result is a total shitshow.

She wanted to help, to have a duel so I could see my sister for just a bit longer, and yet it ended like this.

A total, absolute shitshow.

Instead of fighting with her to allow me a longer glimpse of my sister, it ended with them getting into a bloody brawl.

But I do understand. I tend to screw things up when I try to help, making them worse instead. It caused my sister so much trouble back then.

There was no ill intention from Lily, none at all. In her own naive way, she just wanted to help, without thinking it through at all. It's almost silly. What did she imagine would happen?

Lily tries to get out of the rooftop, but I move to her and grab her arm. I patiently wait until she lifts her head from the ground and looks at me.

"Thank you," I say.

Chapter 384: The end of the tournament

The remaining challenges of the 5th event continue, but other than a few of the more powerful members of Hell difficulty, we don't pay them much attention. Also, Channeler is already trying to get some last-minute people to challenge a few individuals and beings we wanted to try to challenge before I made them go against Victoria.

"So Nat, your sister..." Maya starts carefully.

"Yes?"

"She seems ... nice. Hehe."

"I see."

"But damn, why do you both have to fight like that? What kind of combat even was that, regrowing her body and tearing limbs off? She beat Lily down with her own arm."

"It makes sense if you think about it. Lily's arm should logically endure [Disintegration] at least a bit, so she used it as a shield."

"That's the problem with you, Nat. You don't even see anything wrong with that. Tess, you said you met his sister a while back. What kind of person is she?"

Tess takes her eyes off the screen and turns to Maya, "She is very polite."

I let them talk and jump down to the common area. Upon reaching one of the terminals to start the challenge, I stop and look at the screen. There are so many options for me to challenge, but at the same time, there is only one. The only person I feel anything like admiration for.

"I want to challenge Lissandra Hawthorne, Absolute of Eladore."

Feeling myself pulled, I do not even examine it and find myself inside the arena. Like everyone else's, mine is unique. It is a clearing with vibrant grass and purple flowers that cover it in its entirety. A few pillars stand in the distance, crumbling under the weight of their age, and off to the side, stands the ruins of a building that must have been glorious once, long, long ago.

The Absolute Lissandra stands opposite me, just a few steps away. She is as I remember her. Tall, in a black suit that would be more fitting on a male. Looking to be around 60 years old, and her hair is gray. But most importantly, there is that absolute confidence of hers, evident even in the form of an Avatar.

A ten-second countdown starts and black mana from an orb I create seeps into my mind, the world starts feeling as if it has slowed down. My Mana Wavelength Iris activates as well, and in this state, I stack layers upon layers of barriers around me, using all of my body's mana.

Once I'm done with that, I reach into my reservoir and start using that as well, and a third of my reservoir disappears like that.

The second third powers [Redistribution], which I'm ready to use at any moment to defend myself.

The last third I use to further power my mind and eyes while keeping a single black orb in front of me, one last attempt at defending myself.

In these ten seconds, my body gets ruined beyond measure. I've used too much mana too quickly and recklessly. All my reserves are emptied in mere seconds. But I just need to endure for a moment.

Ten seconds pass.

Lissandra looks at me and then takes a single step. The step resounds in a seemingly infinite echo, and I feel myself stumble and fall to my knees, barely able to keep myself from fainting.

Another step and the echo continues, but I hold on and force myself to keep my eyes and mind in one piece, staring at the most powerful being I have met so far, not counting the Rulers.

Lissandra stops holding back her mana, and it radiates from her. It moves like a wind that, without any effort, blows through all of my defenses. It's not even an attack, just the sheer pressure of her unrestrained mana.

All of my efforts are nothing in front of this Absolute.

Then the black orb absorbs some of her mana, and bursts open like a bubble, unable to contain the overwhelming force.

I find myself back outside and for a long moment, I stand there, replaying what happened and trying to decode what my eyes saw. I still have a long way to go, but I don't feel quite as hopeless as before. I have seen her move her mana, and with it came a tiny bit of understanding.

This kind of knowledge I value more than any reward, more than any item.

In the remaining few hours, we try to challenge the 1st Beyonder, but his Avatar fails to appear. We make multiple attempts, but no combination of words seems to work. Even the Intent or Rulers refuse our summons, but that's only to be expected.

I also catch Channeler and force him to accept a few upper rare items, making him by far the strongest and richest member of Easy difficulty.

I notice a few members of his group giving him some interesting looks, so I mention that if something happens to Channeler, I will find the one responsible. I make sure this message spreads.

We don't want my PR guy to get hurt.

Then my mana stones sell, the last few shards trickling into my account from the tournament shop.

Congratulations, your items were all sold in the tournament shop! You have gained 10,346 shards. Ten percent will be taken by the system.

The bidding still went even higher than I could have expected.

There are a lot of goodbyes, many people making friends in the week we've had here, that's far from normal in my book. It takes me months to get used to waking up 30 minutes earlier or later than usual and these people made friends.

Humans can be scary indeed.

Gareth, Brainiac, Lootenant, and even Samuel come to say goodbye. I also notice Tacita standing in the distance. She stares at Lily for a while, but she does take a moment to glance at me. Then she disappears as she is used to do.

We also say goodbye to the twins, who will be separated from us the moment we exit the tournament. They still have wounds on their bodies, something they've had to endure the entire time they've been here.

As our time approaches its end, I move to the side where, for one last time, I make use of our immortality in this space. I create a big orb of black mana and feed it to my crown.

The result is the same as before. Despite all my training, experience, careful thinking, and inscriptions, none of these help me control it.

After disconnecting from the crown which still manages to steal almost all of my mana, it crumbles and explodes in a shockwave that washes over the entire common area, giving one last scare to the people around us.

A small goodbye from me to them.

Congratulations on completing your 1st tournament! The second tournament will take place 2 years after the start of your tutorial.

In the second tournament, all rounds of the Earth's tutorial will participate.

Congratulations, you have placed 1st overall in the 1st tournament of the 5th round of Earth's tutorial. Your reward has been improved.

Congratulations, you have placed 1st in the overall crafter rankings of the 5th round of Earth's tutorial. Your reward has been improved.

You have rejected multiple event rewards in order to increase your final reward. Your reward has been improved.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

Please pick 2 out of 5 possible rewards before you are transported back to the 6th floor where your Floor Quest will continue.

Rewards to pick from:

Passive skill combination token (upper epic)

Trait strengthening token (2nd stage)

Passive skill (upper epic)

Item (upper epic)

15,000 shards

“I want the passive skill combination token and the trait strengthening token.”

Passive Skill Combination Token (Upper Epic) -Allows you to combine two passive skills up to upper epic rarity. The resulting combination will be a unique skill that cannot be obtained otherwise. Passive Skill Combination Tokens cannot be bought or sold in the system shop.

Trait Strengthening Token (2nd Stage) - Allows you to strengthen your trait by one stage, either from the base to the 1st stage or from the 1st to the 2nd stage.

After that, the scenery changes and I find myself where I was before we entered the tournament.

Both Aaron and Dennis are gone, the lush grass is replaced by rocky ground and we stand beneath a dark sky with a nebula shining across the bulk of its expanse.

We are back on the 6th floor.

I open my system and check, confirming my suspicions. the system seems to have chosen to feed me just a bit more information on passives:

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty:Hell

Floor:6 - Astral Prison

Time left until forced return:3y 357d 23h 59m 21s

Traits (2/3):Mana Circuit 2/3, Mana Wavelength Iris 0/3

Lvl 237

Strength: 113

Dexterity: 110

Constitution: 268

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1015 + 1015

Primary Class:Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class:[Initiate of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 49

Perception - Lvl 46

Redistribution - Lvl 48

Resonance - Lvl 45

Mana Domain - Lvl 40

Tether - Lvl 36

Infusion - Lvl 29

Mana Crown - Lvl 24

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 47

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Thermokinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Vortex Core (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Reservoir (upper epic)

Arcane Resilience (mid epic)

Phoenix Embrace (mid epic)

Mana Overload Absorption (low epic)

Cognitive Fortress (mid epic)

Tokens:

Beyond difficulty entrance token

Passive skill combination token (upper epic)

Trait strengthening token (2nd stage)

Shards:135,369

I guess we've unlocked a bit more of the system. The Item in my hand is no different.

Flamebearer (low Arcane, Damaged) - Flamebearer held dominion over fire, with a mere swing capable of igniting the horizon. This ax's blaze once burned with immense fury. Despite the damage and its weakened flames, moments of intense heat surge through its blade, offering a glimpse into its fiery past.

But before I can really think about it another window pops up.

You have been invited to become a disciple.

If you decide to accept, you will be summoned to train and study under your master for 2 weeks.

If you choose to reject, there will be no consequences.

You have 10 minutes to decide.

Do you accept?

Yes/No

Well, this is unexpected.

Three minutes later, each member of group 4 present takes a seat in silence, each processing the news of the invitation I got.

"I think it's an additional tournament reward. You said you rejected event rewards multiple times, so I think this is part of it," Tess says.

"It could be it. The message seems to be nearly the same as the one my disciple received before she entered the tutorial," I answer.

"Didn't you want to enter the third Beyond trial?" Min-Jae asks.

"I wanted to go to trial, get Aaron and Dennis out of the Black Tower, and do a lot of other things. This message has ruined all of my plans."

"Maybe you'll get another chance if you reject it now," Sophie muses. "Or maybe it's a one-time thing. And what does this even mean? Will you be leaving the tutorial, or will your master be one of the tutorial's natives?"

"We can't rule out the possibility of interference on the part of the Rulers either," I say, shrugging my shoulders.

"I think you should accept it. If the tutorial can be trusted, your master may be able to help you a lot. You might even get someone powerful enough to declare you a Champion candidate, whatever that means." Tess seems to be pushing the most.

She knows just as well as I that they will face greater challenges if I leave, yet she still does it.

She seems to read my mind for a moment, saying, "Don't worry about us. We will get the boys out and wait for you to complete the Floor Quest."

I wonder, is it worth it to push back the next trial of Beyond anymore than the tournament already has? But I have to agree with Tess. The rewards I picked for the tournament are more than amazing, but it makes sense for this invitation to be part of it. There is a weird twisted logic to it.

If I get a capable master, it has the potential to make me more powerful than any other reward I could get. And who knows how much information I could collect? I might even get summoned out of the tutorial.

At least I don't need to worry about group 4, well, not much. They have a few monsters in their ranks, and Tess will make sure to keep them all alive.

Okay, I guess I'll just have to follow my gut on this one.

"I'm going to accept," I tell them.

Then after retrieving a few things from our hidey-hole and leaving the rest with them, I prepare to leave.

I do not use the passive skill combination token as I have a great plan for it but I don't have enough time to work out all the potential kinks. As for trait strengthening, it's still too soon to strengthen my eyes. Mana Wavelength Iris is just too powerful as it is.

So just like that, we find ourselves being separated again. Both sides wishing the other luck and telling a few lame last minute jokes.

"I accept," I say and once more feel myself pulled away.

POV Earth

"Professor, w-we have a problem."

“Go on, Liam, don’t make me pull it out of you. You young folks are supposed to be direct. Leave the pointless tiptoeing around to oldtimers like me.”

The young man by the name of Liam gulps, “We... we found a spider on the moon.”

“Oh, you did? Maybe it’s just some kind of contamination left over from the moon landings? No, wait, since when do we have telescopes that powerful?”

“Professor, we didn’t use a telescope...”

“Excuse me? Liam, I don’t know if this is your idea of a joke, but if so I’m deeply disappointed in you.”

“We didn’t use any of our telescopes, Professor. It can be seen with the naked eye.”

Silence ensues, and the old man bursts out in a boisterous fit of laughter, but as a minute passes and he sees the unchanging face of his student, his laughter tapers off.

With a serious expression, Liam continues, “The spider in question is the size of the entire state of Colorado.”

POV Nathaniel

I immediately recognize the place I find myself in. The poisonous lake nearby, the weird inscriptions covering the sky. I even recognize the forest around me.

I’ve clearly found myself back on the 5th floor, and by the looks of it, the Veil is in the same state I left it in. It might even be the same instance.

But there is one thing that shocks me more than any other. There are three presences beyond the trees on a small clearing near the lake. I can’t see their owners yet, but I recognize their signatures.

One of them is the murderer from Easy difficulty. The other is a tall lynthari woman and the last...

"Little pup, are you going to come out or do I have to grab you by the scruff of your neck and drag you out myself?"

We were wrong. This was never part of my rewards.

Chapter 385: Five rules

Like my minion before, I walk from behind the trees and enter the exact same clearing she entered back then. There, these three people greet me.

The murderer from Easy difficulty stands there awkwardly. He is not tied, and there is no mana holding him at all. Yet, he stands there with a terrified expression, not daring to move or say anything.

Myrra looks just as I remember her, tall and cheeky. Her white hair easily flows in the wind, and her golden eyes are squinted with a happy smile.

The emotion I'm feeling right now is extremely silly.

There is just one problem: her tail sways from side to side in the manner she does when there is danger around.

"Feral one, be very careful, she made a deal with some being to kill you," Myrra warns me.

And the third person lets her say it. It's like it doesn't matter at all if I know. That absolute confidence tells me she will deal with anything thrown her way.

Lissandra sits on the stone nearby. Unlike her version I just met in the 5th event, she is young and beautiful, an ethereal kind of beauty that's hard to grasp or describe. Her silver hair flows over her shoulder, tied into simple ponytails. She is wearing black clothes, more fitting for a male, but looking easy to move in.

As before, her body is flawless. That's the word I could use. It's like it's made with the single purpose of being as athletic as possible. As she shifts, I can see that in each of her motions. Every movement sends a shiver down my back as if I'm standing in front of a peak predator.

Lissandra doesn't say anything for a while but continues to observe me very intently. Behind her eyes, I know she is thinking of something. Something very important.

"I've decided. I won't kill you, little pup," Lissandra states, as she makes her decision. She was always quick to do that.

She jumps on her feet, picks up the black dagger that was stabbed into the stone, and puts it on her belt. The moment she does so, time around us feels like it slows down, and the pressure increases.

A single giant orange eye appears there and grows in size until it covers a third of the sky, which turns pitch-dark.

"Fake one, we made a deal," the voice of that entity I met multiple times roars through the air, making it vibrate and the world shake. "Do not dare to try to..."

"I have a few requirements, of course. If you break any of them, I will kill you, little pup," Lissandra tells me, totally ignoring the thing in the sky.

"Why?" I ask her, also ignoring the intent.

I wouldn't take it lying down, but seeing her now, it feels like I wouldn't stand a chance against her. None at all. It's this primitive feeling that's hard to describe, and she is the only person who makes me feel this way.

If it comes to it, I will fight till the end, but this... this would be throwing my life away. I hate it. I dislike how weak I feel and the difference in our strengths.

This won't do. This can't go on. There is no way I will allow myself to feel this way.

Seeing it's not getting attention, the intent in the sky disappears, its anger is easy to imagine. The world becomes normal once again, and the sounds come rushing back as the sun appears back in the sky.

"Good, Envy is now gone. He won't be able to mess around with this tutorial for a year or two. Maybe less if other Rulers share the backlash with him, which could be quite possible." Lissandra turns to Myrra, "Little kitten, kill that man but freeze and keep his heart."

Myrra does so right away. The murderer from Easy difficulty tries to use his mana and defend himself, but a single hole is pierced through the middle of his forehead, and his body falls on the ground like a puppet without strings.

Lissandra takes a few steps towards me and taps with her finger right over my heart.

"Originally, I agreed to deal with Envy so I could get your heart and status, little pup. The man that just died was supposed to be used so I can transfer his status to this female lynthari you saved in such a silly way."

As she talks to me, I examine the black dagger on her belt. That thing is totally the one I made on the 3rd Floor and came back to bite my ass. It currently doesn't even try to absorb any mana. It just sits there.

I find it very, very interesting. Something I should try to experiment with. But maybe I should pay attention to Lissandra. She seems to notice me getting distracted, and I know if I push it more, there will be consequences.

So I say, "You made a deal with that entity. He wanted me dead, and you agreed, asking in exchange to be moved here, this floor was probably kept 'alive' by the entity and maybe because of my and my duplicate's attempts to have it kept running after I leave it."

Lissandra gestures for me to continue.

"The plan was to kill me as the entity wanted and for you to take my heart and status, the status of that now-dead man going to Myrra. Then you would either on your own or with some help become Earth's tutorial attendee and get out of it when it ends."

“Simple, isn’t it?” Lissandra takes a step back and gestures at Myrra to come closer.

“Are you not worried about breaking the deal you made with Envy?”

“Little pup, why would I even keep the deal with someone who would break it at any moment? Envy is just inept to allow himself to get used that way.” She says it towards the sky, to someone who might be listening, “But if he is dissatisfied, he can wait for when I will get out of the tutorial, and we will solve it then.”

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Even though her original was just an Absolute, when her word got scanned and included in the tutorial, she doesn’t seem to care. Back then, she would be weaker than a Ruler, and now, much weaker than her original self, she still shows confidence to face him.

But something has changed about her, I have noticed.

“You are different now; you seem to have more of your original memories that should be lost because of your imperfect imprint. I wonder, did you make another deal with another Ruler?” I ask.

A small smile flickers on her face, but she doesn’t answer and examines the frozen heart Myrra is showing her. Myrra does it respectfully, and her eyes quickly perk up when she catches my gaze.

Lissandra prods it a few times before sighing, “Deplorable, but that was to be expected. Little kitten, we will use it to give you the status of an attendee. It will be more annoying, but I will make my own heart.”

Myrra nods, “Yes, Lady Lissandra,” and her aurora glass flickers around the frozen heart, as if packing it before she puts it into the bag on her side.

“As for you, little pup. I will let you live, I will declare you Champion candidate if I feel you deserve it, and I will even train you,” Lissandra continues.

"Why?" I can't help but ask.

"I won't answer that question for now. But there are five rules for the following two weeks, so listen carefully."

She lifts one finger.

"If you use your concentration skill to affect your emotions during the following two weeks, I will kill you."

Second finger.

"If you use the mana you used for this dagger," she taps on it, "I will kill you."

Third finger.

"If you fail to reach level 250, I will kill you."

Fourth finger

"If you fail to get three skills to level 50, I will kill you."

Fifth finger.

"If you fail to reach Adept of your subclass, I will kill you."

She already seems to know a lot about me and my status. Too much to my liking, but I guess there are things that come with being thousands of years old and being the most powerful being of her planet for a similar length of time.

"That's a lot," I mention.

"Yes."

"Like, a lot, a lot."

"Yes."

"Why don't you just kill me?"

"I can do it if you have given up." Because of the way she says it, I'm sure she isn't joking.

"What will you do if I insult you a bit? Call you things. Be a bit honest about my feelings and what I think of your expectations?" I ask. I'm sure she knows how much I dislike it.

Lissandra stays quiet, but her eyes give a simple answer.

I have to hold myself back from saying anything too harsh, and it's surprisingly difficult. Lately, I have been relying on [Focus] a lot to deal with this kind of stuff, so this feeling is weird as I already stopped using it for my emotions. Something I'm sure she already noticed. I'm able to keep quiet for now, but I'm sure more trouble will come later.

Level 250 is doable; I'm missing only 13 levels. Adept of Pride could be tricky, but maybe doable. It's been a long time since I got my subclass, but I do not know the requirements. Black mana is a big hit to my power level, but it seems the cockroach has something in her mind.

The situation reminds me of the time she threw me into the dark tunnels full of flame imps, imps poisoning me and serpents. All for my training and because she was dissatisfied with my, in her opinion, slow growth. Maybe this is something similar? Such a lovely old lady indeed.

The worst will be getting 3 skills to level 50.

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 49

Perception - Lvl 46

Redistribution - Lvl 48

Resonance - Lvl 45

Mana Domain - Lvl 40

Tether - Lvl 36

Infusion - Lvl 29

Mana Crown - Lvl 24

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 47

This will be dangerous. The bottleneck from level 49 to 50 seems to be really big, looking at how long my [Focus] is stuck at 49.

Lissandra, probably getting the reaction she wanted, takes a step closer, and the thing I expected since the start happens.

She hits the side of my head, hand open, with her palm. This powerful attack is...

Yes, she bitch-slaps me.

I'm sent to the ground even though I kept strengthening my body a lot ever since I saw her.

It annoys me that she used the perfect amount of force to make it sting and not hurt me further than that. It doesn't even feel like an attack, more like punishing a kid for doing something stupid she doesn't want me to repeat. This is most likely for the end of the third floor. Or maybe she just likes to slap people. Perhaps it is to show dominance or something. Damned cockroach.

Seemingly in a better mood, Lissandra turns around and heads somewhere between the trees. I'm left behind with Myrra and the corpse of the murderer from Easy difficulty.

"Myrra, let's run away from her."

"It's useless, feral one." Myrra's tail moves in an annoyed manner. She is even whispering.

"Did you already try? What happened?"

"Long time no see. How are you doing?"

"Why are you avoiding my question, Myrra?"

"I didn't expect to see you again, feral one. That mana stone you left behind was an extremely cheeky way to try to help me. But it worked, so I have to thank you for that."

I decide to give up on getting an answer to my question and instead look at the tail that so often betrays Myrra's emotions. It now sways from side to side. She seems to be in a really good mood.

"You are her disciple now?"

"I wouldn't say a disciple. Maybe a candidate to become her disciple would be more accurate? Lady Lissandra is very picky when it comes to these kinds of things."

“Of course she does. Old people are like that. How much do you know?”

“Parts of it. The process is gradual for me, unlike Ms. Lissandra. If I get a status, I should be able to finally learn more. About this place, me, her, and about you, feral one. Who would have thought you and your group are even more interesting than I thought.”

As the conversation goes, I continue to observe myself. So far, not using [Focus] doesn't seem to change that much.

I was worried about being unable to use it for emotions, but maybe it won't be that bad after all.

Chapter 386: Outburst

For now, I decide not make any attempts at running away from this crazy woman. At least I should be able to get something useful out of the experience.

This version of the 5th floor seems to be a continuation of my instance, so unfortunately I can't loot the Veil Ignition Station again. But there should be others, so maybe I can raid a few along the way. Of course, I'll have to keep working hard on fulfilling Lissandra's demands.

I don't think I'm going to have much chance to sleep over the next two weeks, my first goal should be to get myself to level 250 and earn some body strengthening. Hopefully, it will help me endure that.

“Myrra, why do you guys have that arm with you,” I ask, gesturing at the slim, and pale arm that once belonged to a woman.

“Lady Lissandra brought it with her. She said it belonged to someone who used to share her title.”

Oh? Did it come from the Absolute Saint of the third floor?

I take a few steps closer and squat in front of the arm, which pokes from the bag. Surely it is better than the piece of Champion's body I left with Lily, right? Even though she was long dead, it did come from the body of an Absolute.

"Feral one, I would advise against taking it. Very strongly advise," Myrra says seriously.

"It feels weird. What did she do to it?"

"Who?"

Myrra blinks slowly a few times and stares at me.

"What? I can't remember every random guy's name."

"Thalen, the guild master of The Luminous Order? You and I fought Isola and him in the Old Capital, feral one. Lady Lissandra forced him to use his skill and took over. She did it so easily too. She used him to make changes to the arm and create a few single-use emblems. Thalen died in the process. The pressure melted his brain."

"Eh. It's not like anyone's going to miss the guy." I say, poking the arm, which retains a degree of softness and warmth.

It radiates a similar aura to the Saint's body almost as if it were still alive, ready to wake at any moment.

Looking at the arm, I whisper, "It's nice to see that you made it."

"What?" Myrra asks, and her ears perk up.

I'm fairly certain that she heard me the first time, so I ignore her question and stand without disturbing the arm.

"So she didn't declare you a Champion candidate?" I ask her.

"She didn't. Unlike the matriarch, she doesn't think I've earned it yet."

"Can she even do that? She isn't an Absolute anymore. What even is her current level?"

"You can ask her, feral one. Please let me know what you learn."

"Maybe you should ask. I'm sure Lady Lissandra loves her little kitten enough to answer."

"Maybe she likes her little pup more. Why don't you bark for me? Woof woof, my little feral pup."

"Nya."

Myrra freezes and blushes, "Do not..."

"Nya nya nya."

"Feral one, do you need another beating? How could you have grown even more annoying in the time since we last saw each other?"

"Nya?"

"You little shit..."

"Grab our things. We're moving out." Lissandra says, appearing out of nowhere. It's like she's taunting me for my poor perception. I didn't sense her at all. I didn't sense her heart, my black dagger, the heat of her body, or the kinetic energy from her movement.

She just appears out of nowhere.

Myrra reacts quickly and pulls the items from the ground, bundling them away in a number of small bags. Some of them contain food, others contain water, and a few others contain a series of miscellaneous items. Oh, and the human arm and the heart of the man Myrra just killed, of course.

“This way. You’re up first, little pup. Kill any monster that gets in our way. For the next hour, you may only use five percent of your body’s mana. Any mana you recover will not be added to this allotment. No primordial energies either,” she says.

I look at her for a while and blink.

Lissandra doesn’t volunteer any more information, so I take the indicated position, knowing all too well that she will be watching.

I sense my heart beating. A feeling I identify as hesitation and uncertainty? It’s not something I’m used to feeling.

Quickly, I reduce the reach of my [Perception] to conserve mana. I also stop strengthening my body, which becomes much weaker right away. I feel almost naked without mana feeding my Reinforcement Construct.

The feeling I get from the forest around me changes immediately. The same can be said of the sensation of danger radiating from the two beings behind me.

I know Myrra won’t attack me without a very good reason, and Lissandra doesn’t currently have one. Yet my paranoid mind can’t help but expect betrayal, leaving me in a state of concern. Even my diminished reach is leaving me fumbling.

The first monsters to appear are a small pack.

[Ebonwood Stalker - lvl 201]

[Ebonwood Stalker - lvl 212]

[Ebonwood Stalker - lvl 206]

[Ebonwood Stalker - lvl 202]

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[Ebonwood Stalker - lvl 199]

They are humanoid, but they seem to be made of black wood, covered in bark. They seem to lack any kind of sensory organs. Each one is at least two heads taller than me, and each step they take is accompanied by the creaking of branches as their limbs sway in the powerful wind.

I let the first two approach, and as they swing their limbs, I boost my body and jump to the side.

Root like spikes pierce the ground, expanding outward from the creatures.

I sidestep the attack only to watch as two more of the Stalkers enter a tree nearby only to exit another right behind me, before launching a coordinated assault on me with the help of the first two.

This time, I let a bit of my mana seep out and cover the knife edge of my hand, along my pinkie, down to my wrist. I oscillate that little bit of my mana and slash against one of the limbs.

My attack doesn't cause any damage. Instead, I feel a sharp pain in my hand and boost my body to escape the encirclement, repeating the exercise two more times to avoid the normal trees they manipulate in an attempt to grab me.

The accompanying sense of frustration almost makes me flood my body with mana, but then I see Lissandra standing calmly and watching me.

I force myself to push these feelings to the back of my mind and run towards the Ebonwood Stalker that's been using the spikes the most, only to be forced to boost my body to reach him before the

others catch me. Once again, oscillating mana coats my hand. This time, I strike at the intersection between the neck and the torso.

Spikes erupt from the monster's body, too many for me to dodge, so I shift my body, allowing two of the spikes to pierce the skin just over my collarbone and another to take a chunk out of my forearm.

I force my healing passive into dormancy given its use of primordial energy.

Then I slash three times into the monster's neck, separating the head from its body.

[You have defeated Ebonwood Stalker - lvl 202]

As I stagger back to avoid the other monsters, I notice something spreading through my body. Foreign particles seeping in through the wounds I just received.

Dodging to the side, I examine them, and then, seeing no other option, I raise my mana a bit and push them out of my body in one concentrated effort at two places, using two percent of my mana leaving me three to work with.

Four monsters remain, and I still have over 50 minutes until I get to swap out.

I attack right away, using just a bit of my mana for detection and mostly relying on my senses. I jump from side to side and then extend oscillation around my palm and cut through the tree.

It falls down, taking the Ebonwood Stalker that just attempted to use it to flank me.

[You have defeated Ebonwood Stalker - lvl 212]

Using [Focus] for [Resonance], I clash against the rest of the monsters.

They are strong and durable enough that they would probably cause more trouble for anyone without the necessary cutting force. [Resonance] is just that strong, and I can keep up with any attacks I can sense.

When the last one dies, I stop and, for the first time in a long time, I feel breathless. My heart thumps wildly, as even now I stop mana from strengthening my body too much.

[Lvl 237 > Lvl 238]

Our eyes meet, she points in a direction, saying “That way.”

With just over one percent left out of my five percent allotment, I head off.

It’s all weird. Especially the emotions I usually block or weaken with [Focus]

We reach a small clearing, finding a single monster awaiting our approach.

[Rootfiend - lvl 210]

Another humanoid figure. As tall as me, with long spindly limbs. The moment the monster spots me, it attacks, lashing out in a single smooth motion, mana coating the length of its arms in a field of wildly vibrating energy.

I boost my body just in time, holding my arms in a defensive stance, covering my neck with forearms coated in an oscillating mana.

Almost by reflex, I’m about to place an anchor on it but stop myself because of the mana cost. Instead, as the monster jumps back, I grab its arm, resonating my mana against it to stop it from damaging me.

As I take hold of its limb I take the opportunity to pull the beast off balance, the monster hisses in response, baring its teeth in a show of aggression. Revealing rows upon rows of shark-like teeth. In

exchange, I open my mouth, launching the orb I've been hiding from the monster's detection, lodging it in the monster's mouth.

I manipulate it, changing its shape, causing it to elongate into a spike and piercing the monster's brain, watching as it sways and falls. But not before it can slash my body a few times, too quick to dodge. Leaving gashes across my waist, and my blood seeping through my clothes.

[You have defeated Rootfiend - lvl 210]

One percent of my allotted mana remains. My mind feels weirdly blank, and even my heart, despite its wild thumping, begins to pound out a strong rhythmic beat.

"That way." I hear Lissandra say behind me.

It irks me in just the wrong way, and for a moment a strong temptation overtakes me.

Just a single order and my mana will move the way I want. I can use all of it. I just need to turn around and face that annoying woman. There is no need to kill her, just show her that I'm not here to be toyed with. At this moment I don't care if she is trying to teach me something.

Just a...I freeze the moment I turn around.

Lissandra towers there. At that moment, I can't even see Myrra cringing nearby. It's as if Lissandra is the only being in existence in this place. Her presence overwhelms everything around her.

There is no mana flowing around us. Lissandra doesn't even take a battle stance. She just returns my gaze. Something about it tells me she knows exactly what's going through my mind. She even welcomes it.

If I attack her right now, she might kill me.

My lips shift, and a big smile forms on my face. The biggest one I've shown in a long time.

Lissandra seems to be taken aback for the faintest moment, but even though her expression doesn't change, a dangerous light begins to dance in her eyes.

My mana flows into my body, and a crown forms over my head. I take a step towards her, extending my domain over the area. I do not use black mana, nor do I use [Focus] for my emotions. Instead, I manipulate my trait, activating it, and within my domain, I place anchors. Then I use [Redistribution] and reach out and grab Lissandra.

Lissandra reaches and taps on the black dagger on her waist. A single clear ringing sound, and I see the dagger absorb a bit of my mana. Less than the five percent I used against the monsters. Only then does she lower her body and use the skills Hadwin used to have.

[Strengthening] activates, and she moves even quicker than Tacita, each of her steps tearing the ground apart.

[Disruption] dances around her skin, changing frequency with a speed I can't even imagine, forcing me to deactivate my eyes when I try to examine it.

I stack barriers around me. I strengthen my body and shoot projectiles towards her.

She ignores it all. None of that mana damages her. Every piece of it bursts into particles when it touches her.

I kick out at her, and she increases her speed even further for an instant, slipping under my leg, and lashes out at me with a kick of her own. Under her kick, my knee bends and shatters. I send mana there to support myself, but then she touches me and all of my mana starts running out of control.

I empty my Vortex Core, all of my thermal and highly concentrated kinetic energy bursting into the area around me, flames burning everything in their path, and kinetic energy tearing through the area.

She connects to one of my anchors and activates it, and I feel myself teleported through it, along with an uninvited hitchhiker. Lissandra and I appearing in a place far away from the explosion.

For a fleeting moment, our eyes meet. Then her arm becomes a blur, striking the side of my head, and I black out.

Chapter 387: You are free to try it anytime

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is the Veil weaving its way through the sky. Feeling a presence near me, I turn my head to the side, and Lissandra sits there on the fallen trunk of a tree.

Myrra is nowhere to be seen.

"I sent her to level up," Lissandra says.

"Got it." Sending thermal energy through my body, my passive activates, and it starts healing my wounds.

Lissandra lets it happen, and waits for me to recover a bit before speaking, "You are free to challenge me anytime."

With my interest piqued, I listen as she speaks. Even after all this, I can't help but feel a lot of admiration for her. She's the only being to inspire me in quite this way. The strongest being I've met through the floors, not counting the Ruler of Greed and the Ruler of Envy.

"I never backed down from a challenge, little pup. I have defeated more than a dozen Absolutes. I have beaten every Champion who had an eye towards taking my title, everyone who thought they were ready to challenge me. Just through my own power, I have brought my planet victory in every Pairing we've experienced." A long silence follows her words.

Lissandra takes a moment before continuing, "Before these two weeks end, you will know more, and I won't kill you if you follow my rules. So come, challenge me, little pup. Test yourself and see what breaks sooner, you or your pride."

"I would ask why, but I won't get an answer, will I?"

"What did you do to my black mana dagger?"

"I'm using it as an external, temporary mana heart. As you have realized, I do not have a mana heart, so I have to rely on external mana. To that end, I modified the dagger you left behind."

"What is that black mana?"

"I might tell you if you survive."

"You used Hadwin's skills."

"Yes."

"Why would you need my status then? You can take over Hadwin's?"

"I told the Ruler of Envy I couldn't. He just happened to be gullible enough to believe me. He used one of the tutorial's functions to bring that other man here so that I could transfer his status to our little kitten. In exchange, he wanted me to kill you."

It seems like old Liss is making plans of her own. I would like to ask more, but she seems to be at her limit. All-powerful Absolute cockroaches aren't going to be accustomed to answering questions for one so lowly as me, so I better stop here. Instead, I go through the list of my skills and the ones I have the best chance of pushing to level 50 in the next two weeks.

My best choices are [Focus] which is at 49, [Mana Manipulation] which is at 47, but something tells me that I should have a fairly high chance to make it work. And that leaves me with [Redistribution], my next best option, sitting at 48. Either that or [Resonance] at 45.

[Perception] might be an option as well sitting at 46, but I don't think I would be able to level it in the time we have. It's not a skill that I can level up that quickly.

I also start right away. Lissandra doesn't seem to want to mess with my training much further, even though I'm sure she is watching. Still, for now, I push her presence to the back of my mind.

I start working on the closest approximation I can make to the mana shaping exercise she was playing with back on the 2nd floor. A ball of mana constantly growing and shrinking. That alone wouldn't be that great, so obviously I added some challenges I figure she must have thought of herself. I increase the density of mana, I spin it, and I increase the speed.

It only takes a few minutes of this before I hear Lissandra stand up and walk towards me. I look up, and she looks at me and then at the mana orb, I've been using to practice.

She flicks her hand and sends it flying far away whereupon it expands between the trees and bursts open.

Making sure I watch, she then gestures at me, and I send a chunk of my mana her way. She absorbs the mana into the black dagger and pulls it free. And with that mana, she creates a small mana orb and then another. Then more, In quick succession, dozens, then hundreds, come into existence.

Without looking away, she collapses them down, without seeming to try, until they're only as big as the eye of a needle. Like a swarm, these tiny orbs move in formation, taking on the shape of an orb of their own.

They're so small the newly created orb seems like a single orb rather than the thousands of tiny orbs forming it. The sheer control required to do something like that leaves me speechless.

Fascinated, I reach out a finger and touch the surface which ripples like water, thousands of tiny orbs reacting to my touch and reforming into a glass like surface.

Lissandra then moves her hand, and with seemingly less effort than breathing, each of the orbs burst open and in the blink of an eye form into a single orb. But it's not that simple. Sending my senses toward it, I see another orb inside of that.

Then another.

And more.

Each orb is smaller than the one before it, with an insanely thin layer of air separating it from the others. The number of orbs feel like they go on infinitely.

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With another movement of her hand, all the orbs disappear and instead, two smaller orbs form inside the third one. These two orbs inside start spinning around each other.

Gradually, the speed of their spin increases to a terrifying degree. A vortex is created between them, trying to pull in the mana comprising the orb that contains them. Yet the larger orb resists without strain, without so much as letting a sound escape despite the impossible speeds involved.

Then the orbs disappear, dissolving into particles of mana that Lissandra waves her hand and sends away.

“Little pup, it pains me to watch your clumsy attempts at shaping mana. The exercises I just showed you are something everyone capable of breathing should be able to do.”

Here it comes. This is something I really haven’t missed very much.

“The other issue is your weak body. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the results of your Active Tempering, I’ll grant that you’ve had somewhat passable success for someone so clumsy. For now, though, you are forbidden to use it. It’s obvious in the way you fight that you rely on your mana and primordial energies too much, so before you leave, I will give you a way to train your body.”

“Are you really that bored?” I ask.

“If you live as long as I have, you will learn how rare it is to experience something new. I told you multiple times that the rank of Champion is the highest you will ever climb, little pup. I still stand behind that assessment. Yet you keep refusing to accept that. You have the determination, more than enough of it, the only thing you lack is talent. So now I want to see how far you make it.”

“Lucky me.”

“Indeed. In my long life, I’ve only ever had one disciple, and the number of people I honored with my guidance could be counted on the fingers of my hands.”

“You mean Ruby. Was she really that talented?”

“I believed she was capable of reaching my level. If that’s not talent, I don’t know what is.”

Having finished talking, Lissandra takes a step closer and pulls a bit more mana from the black dagger.

“Lower your defenses,” she orders.

I do it without much hesitation.

Lissandra taps my chest with her finger just over my heart, and from it, that point of contact expands an incredibly intricate web of inscriptions, some pathways connecting to my heart and supplying them with power.

“A long time ago, even before my Keiron was born, I saw one fresh Champion do it. I have never tried it before, but it seems fairly simple to use and modify for what I want.”

The inscriptions look anything but fairly simple. The intricacy is easily comparable to the inscriptions of the damaged arcane item in my possession. In some ways, they are even more impossible to follow. But of course, for the monster in front of me, even something like this may as well be the height of banality.

“I think that man called them Burden Enhancement Inscriptions. The young ones back then always did like coming up with fancy names for everything.”

Even as she speaks, she continues to inscribe, not even for a second does her concentration slip.

“Little pup, I won’t ask you if you agree nor will I ask what level I should set these to. We both know your answer. That stubbornness of yours is one of the reasons why I find you so interesting.”

“That’s nice to hear from someone who keeps threatening to kill me.”

“I knew people like you. You are the type who does the best when they find themselves at their worst. But don’t think, even for a moment, that I didn’t mean what I said back then. If you fail, I will kill you.”

“It would be nice if you declared me an Absolute candidate if I succeed.”

“If you succeed, you will prove you are capable enough to be declared a Champion candidate, at least by my standards. That's it.” She finishes and takes her hand away, leaving the delicate inscriptions behind.

“What are the advantages of being a Champion or Champion candidate? Are there any actual advantages?” I ask.

“The system doesn’t like to waste resources on the weak. If you prove yourself talented enough to become a candidate, your body will start changing in preparation for you to become a Champion. It’s different for everyone, so you will have to find out on your own.”

“You mean like a body upgrade, but...”

“Enough.”

I shut up immediately. This is probably as much as I’m going to get from her. In fact, I might have pushed too far and asked too many questions. Old people have no patience at all.

She takes the last remainder of my mana from the black dagger and sends it towards me. Activating the inscriptions, and I fall to the ground.

It's like there's an immense pressure pushing me down. Like I'm being forced to labor under increased gravity. The only difference is that there's no external source to apply it. All of it is caused by the inscriptions, my mana, and my body. I can't even twitch my finger, and it's difficult to breathe.

"I have noticed that you possess kinetic energy, little pup. So I have to wonder, why do you keep using mana to strengthen your body? Kinetic energy is extremely rare, not to mention one of the best ways to achieve your goal. I knew knights who would kill for it, yet you're wasting it."

Unable to answer, I just lay there. No matter what I try, I can't move at all. The only reasonable way seems to be to get rid of these inscriptions preventing me from using mana to strengthen my body. They also make this bullshit happen. But something tells me Lissandra wouldn't appreciate it.

"You might try to say that using mana is more efficient than transforming it into kinetic energy with your heart. Maybe you might try to say it doesn't matter given the amount of mana you have, and maybe you could get the same result either way. You are wrong."

She takes a few steps back and sits on a stone. With one eye, I can see her pulling the pale white arm from the bag, and she starts painting on it with mana conductive paint. The lines she draws are extremely smooth and thin.

From there, she glances at me and declares, "You won't be sleeping for the next two weeks. Every morning, you will spend five hours in the state you currently find yourself in. When you show improvement, I will make changes and increase the pressure."

I would love to say a few choice words, but I can't even squirm as much as a worm, so I reach into my Vortex Core and let kinetic energy seep through my body.

"After these five hours, you will spend five more hours hunting and leveling. Then I will let you rest for one hour. After that, you will spend ten hours working on any mana shaping exercises I decide to teach you."

The inscriptions she made do not hinder kinetic energy at all, but even though I have some experience with it, it's not enough. Not even when I use a crazy amount of it am I able to lift as much as a finger.

"The remaining three hours will be randomly allocated by me throughout the day. I might have you do maximal bursts of your mana or primordial energies. I might rouse up the entirety of your mana and have you bring it back under control."

She stops drawing on the arm.

"After these two weeks, you will probably hate me enough to want to kill me."

She makes sure I'm looking at her. "You are free to try it anytime."

Chapter 388: This is impossible

Five hours later the pressure disappears as if it were on a timer, and I'm finally able to move. The whole time I was struggling against the inscriptions I couldn't even twitch my fingers. I could only blink and gasp for each shallow breath.

For one beautiful moment, I imagine myself punching her and think of just throwing all my mana against her.

Lissandra doesn't even look in my direction, even after 5 hours, still drawing on the Saint's arm.

That's also when Myrra returns, with a limp in one leg. Most likely a broken bone. Something that should heal fairly quickly for someone like her. The wound must have been much worse a few minutes ago.

"Shitty day?" I ask her.

Myrra nods, "I'm glad you haven't gotten yourself killed yet."

"We're best friends now. She wouldn't hurt me for anything."

For a short moment, her canines peek through her smile, "I can see that."

Lissandra joins the conversation, “We’re changing location. Little pup, 10 percent of your mana, this direction.”

I cheat a bit. I let the monsters wound me when it allows me to save mana or to land a blow here or there.

It doesn’t matter if they damage me. I just need to endure their assault for 5 hours. After that, I can heal my body with my passive. So I think it’s quite a good idea.

I’m not allowed to use Flamebearer either. Myrra carries it for me instead.

As I fight my way through the monsters, I think about what possible goal could be served by this. Of course, the first is to level. The other might be to improve my efficiency.

Lissandra already pointed out that I tend to rely on my big mana reserves, and someone like her is clearly going to have issues with that. You could even say we come from different schools. Whereas I tend to solve problems by throwing large amounts of mana at them, she tends to do so with lesser quantities of high quality mana. But I can deal with it for now, even though it annoys me. I don’t mind all that much, she has a reason for each of her lessons, and it’s going well so far.

Of course, I’m pretty sure the difficulty will increase. Just as the Veil becomes more and more visible in the sky, Lissandra will step up her training. Her reason for doing it all is still a bit of a mystery. I don’t believe for a moment that she’s doing all this out of boredom, or the goodness of her heart.

I step to the side, just enough to avoid a nearly invisible attack slicing its way through the trees behind me, and before it can come into contact with the two women, Myrra uses her Aurora glass to divert its path.

Infusing my dagger with thermal energy, I stab the monster and jump back, watching as the yellow energy seeps into the monster’s body, causing the beast to start screeching.

In an effort to save mana, I spin an orb around my body and sling it through the creature's eye.

The wolf-like monster lies twitching on the ground its shark-like maw gaping for a moment before finally dying. A notification rings, and I check my reserves.

I've already expended 80 percent of the mana allotted to me, leaving me with two percent of my max, and I still have three hours to go.

For a long moment, I stand there.

"Continue." She says a single word from behind me.

A wave of anger washes over my body, and I find myself surprised by how difficult it is for me to suppress. I always considered myself logical and, on Earth, I was quite good at controlling my emotions. But what was easy back then now requires a bit more effort.

I have to wonder if my reliance on [Focus] weakened that part of me.

Instead of complaining, I head deeper into the forest.

An hour passes. Two hours remain, and with it, another 10 percent of my allotted mana.

Another hour passes, and the mana is nearly gone. Just a small amount remains, and with it, one more hour. That amount of mana isn't even enough for me to strengthen my body for ten seconds or to create a dozen mana orbs.

"This is impossible," I say, coming to a halt.

Lissandra doesn't answer, and it irks me. I turn around, and seeing her expression only serves to annoy me more. I know it's all because I can't use [Focus], I've grown too accustomed to relying on the skill after the past year.

Yet I still can't stop myself, "You deliberately sent me in the direction we would find the most monsters. You allowed me too little mana, you want me to fail."

"I calculated an amount of mana that should have been enough for a beginner like you," she says.

I finally manage to control myself and shut my mouth before saying anything else stupid. Somehow, my lack of control angers me even more than that silver-haired woman.

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She takes a step towards me and says, "Send me your remaining mana."

"I know what you want. Your efficiency is better, of course, you can..."

"Mana. Now."

I do as she says, and that tiny bit of mana gets absorbed by the black dagger making it her own.

Of course, this monster will be able to endure it for one hour longer. Her handling of mana is just that much better. I do not need to be shown that. What I do not expect is what she does show us.

For the following five hours, she obliterates every monster in her way. She does it in a way that doesn't require her to use her body. She creates an impossibly thin thread of mana which she uses to cut through high-level monsters and anything else in her way.

Without absorbing any other mana. That tiny bit, barely enough for me to create a few mana orbs, lasts her for the next five hours.

And then, when it's nearly gone, she stops, the remaining amount creating two tiny orbs, floating over her palm. The orbs start spinning in intersecting circles. Gradually, increasing in speed until it seems like two circles hang in the air over her palm, nearly touching but failing to collide.

Just watching it sends a shiver down my back.

Lissandra then lets them clash against each other, controlling the shockwave to concentrate it, using it to bore a hole through a nearby boulder and a dozen trees behind it.

“You have wasted one hour of your leveling, one hour of your rest, and three hours of mana shaping. For the next seven hours, you will try to recreate what I just did.”

She then enters the forest, leaving me and Myrra behind.

“Why do you keep antagonizing her, feral one?” Myrra asks moving closer.

“Both of us are the types who hate being pushed around, so it’s obvious we will clash.”

“Maybe you just like it when people are mean to you.”

“Totally.”

“I’m not joking, feral one. You seem more comfortable when people treat you with disdain. It’s like you don’t know how to deal with kindness.”

Maybe something to think about. I shrug in response and create two small orbs over the palm of my hand, spinning them around each other.

“Did she also make you do this?” I ask.

“For a bit. Then said she would probably have done better a few days after being born and compared me to a level ten animal some lady from her court used to have. So I got different kinds of exercises.”

“Sounds like her.”

Myrra then sits on the ground near me. With her back resting against the tree, she puts her feet on my knee, the one that's not broken and healing.

In exchange, I reach out and pull on her tail, which gets me a surprised gasp and a soft kick.

Returning my attention to the two orbs, I increase the speed of their spin.

What Lissandra did was move both of the orbs at exactly the same speed, even a millisecond of error would cause them to clash as their trajectories met.

The other thing is I can't figure out how the hell she makes them spin so quickly. Maybe I could do it with kinetic energy and a little bit of cheating. But moving two mana orbs just with her [Mana Manipulation]?

As I set myself to work, I find it much more difficult than I had expected.

Maintaining their shape, adjusting their trajectory, adding enough speed, and synchronizing their speed. When Lissandra did it, the orbs moved too quickly to observe, so I wonder, did she change their shape to pierce through the air more easily? Did she do something else?

How did she cause the shockwave? Was it the force of the orbs' collision, directed by a hastily constructed barrier? Or maybe she changed the shape of the orbs before the end to direct the shockwave the way she wanted.

Perhaps she did something else that looked like a shockwave. Was it something to do with the frequency of the mana? Did she need to reach a certain speed to reach that result?

The two orbs spin over the surface of my palm, I keep shifting their trajectory bit by bit, I change their shape as well. I also reduce the mana they contain after a bit of testing. There seems to be a reason for her sparing use of mana, well, other than her low reserves.

I sense Myrra shifting and Lissandra coming back, but all of it happened somewhere in the back of my mind. This place is safe with them around, so I allow myself to dive deeper into practice.

When someone taps on my shoulder, I get annoyed. I just started, so who...

"The time dedicated to mana shaping has passed," Lissandra says.

I make the two orbs over the palm of my hand disappear, and she doesn't say anything. Surprisingly, she doesn't compare me to a toddler or some random animal.

"Give me twenty percent of your mana," she says.

I do so, and when she takes it from the black dagger and reaches toward me, I lower my defenses. Once again, she covers my skin in inscriptions, though this time it's just my arm with a few connections to my mana heart. These inscriptions are something I could get rid of if I really wanted to, the same as before.

"We've been discovered, and too many monsters are coming our way. This time, you'll take the lead and concentrate on using the most powerful attack you can in a single burst without collecting mana beforehand."

"Any skill?"

"Yes, just take as much mana as you can handle at once and in a single burst, focused through your skill and channel it through your arm without damaging it."

Interesting. So it's like trying for your personal best in the gym? A single repetition of the exercise with as much weight as possible?

"Where are we heading?" I ask.

"North."

I don't even bother asking for more.

According to the natives, the north is where they placed the bulk of the Veil Ignition Stations. That, as well as bigger bunkers and the most powerful Skyhold Islands. And the ruined continent where the body of Absolute Tassian lies. The man who made Nevan's emblems.

Last time I was here, that healer Irvin, the soylent guy, spoke of the Absolute Tassian with a great deal of respect. He told me how the man was capable of fighting off the forces of the Veil and the enemy even after they lured him into a trap. So I have to wonder if Lissandra's interest lies in one of these places, or if she's after something else?

Much like the previous floors, I left the 5th floor without bothering to explore much, so being here once again makes it interesting, especially with so many things to find.

After packing our stuff, we head off in a direction indicated by Lissandra, and I start collecting as much mana as I think I can handle. The requirement that I use my arm to direct it is going to hold me back a little but it makes for an interesting exercise.

The question is how much mana will I be able to channel through the arm without damaging it? I'm supposed to be improving my control after all, with an eye towards moving higher amounts of mana through my body at once.

I hate to accept it, but so far it seems like Lissandra's totally seen through me. All the things she's requiring from me are tailored to target my weaknesses.

When the first monster jumps in our way and I send a burst of mana through my arm, activating [Resonance]. I even reduce the amount of mana to what I think I can handle just to be sure.

The monster dies as the oscillating mana tears it apart. There's no thought of efficiency, just me using as much mana as possible. Trees splinter, the ground cracks, and everything in the path of the attack is vaporized. A chunk of the forest is obliterated along with the monster.

Looking at my mangled, bleeding arm, I also realize that I've severely underestimated how much more difficult Lissandra made it with these inscriptions.

Inscriptions that I now realize aim to weaken my already low constitution even more.

Chapter 389: Dumb of you

“Again,” Lissandra says simply.

As before, I collect mana and concentrate, sending another burst through my arm. Taking more damage in the process, shredding the limb. This time, I feel my mind waver. Having to concentrate and expel so much mana is difficult.

Usually, when I do these kinds of things, I keep my body strengthened, lately even with black mana. My eyes help as well. Often, I don’t even need to think about the backlash, letting my passive take care of any injuries I might sustain.

With a weakened body, the inscriptions making it even more difficult, it’s on another level.

“Little pup, want me to tell you what you did wrong?”

I’m already collecting mana for another burst and nod.

“You were and are too impatient. One of the worst things that happened to you was getting access to that black mana of yours. The problem isn’t your ability to use it, the problem is that you cheated. You exploited the healing aura of that place and discovered all the things it could do.”

Another burst of mana I send through damages my hand even further, but I watch as the tears heal under the influence of my passive.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 47 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 48]

The fourth burst takes a bit of mana from my Mana Reservoir. The grove of trees that once stood in front of me is now non-existent, reduced to a clearing devoid of any greenery, and huge chunks of the ground turned to dust.

“If you continue down that path, you will reach the rank of Champion, little pup. Just the sheer power of that mana will grant you this. You will even gain a degree of mastery over it, and there won’t be a single mana user who doesn’t fear you.”

I pause to give my body an opportunity to heal, especially my throbbing skull, which feels as if someone had decided to drill into it with a red-hot metal rod.

“But?” I ask.

“But that’s all you would ever be, little pup. Compared to the other Champions, you would never rise beyond the middle of the pack. Extremely dangerous to some but weak against others. Perhaps some of the weaker Absolutes, those barely deserving the title, those dependent on mana, might even think to avoid fighting you, but that will leave you an easy target for the others. Why have you stopped? Again.”

With a groan, I reach for more mana drawing it from my Reservoir. This time I even manage to damage bits of my body other than my arm as I move it. I put my mind into it, I grasp that mana, I mold it, I control it. I’m currently channeling more mana than is available to most of Hell difficulty.

It roars through my arm, tearing through my circuits, before exploding in a burst of oscillating mana, damaging the area even further.

I feel tired. It reminds me of a gym workout, like maxing out several times in a row, injuring myself in the process.

“You said your goal was to become an Absolute, with an eye towards pushing beyond even that. The probability of that is not something I will address again. But to even have a chance, you have to become a powerful Champion. The kind even Absolutes will think twice about messing with. Challenging you needs to be costly enough that the best case scenario is just not worth it.”

She doesn’t order it, but I collect my mana again. It’s so difficult; I don’t remember the last time I had so much trouble managing it. The inscriptions she made are straight-up evil, requiring an insane amount of control and concentration to work around.

It’s fun.

"Honestly, watching you fumble is annoying, so I will do everything in my power to beat these bad habits out of you." She says.

"Lovely." I reach to grab more of my mana.

"Stop," she orders.

Something in me wants to do it anyway, but knowing her likely reaction, I just sigh and stop.

"Heal yourself. Your output and control are decent enough that you wouldn't be considered a mana cripple, but your body is a disgrace. I understand your decision. I can't say it isn't stupid, but I understand."

"It's worked for me so far."

"As you said, so far. But having to constantly strengthen your body and divert your focus to hold it together robs you of resources you could be using to improve your skills. In the end that makes your investment into mana useless. Honestly..."

Here we go again.

"...the court ladies had pets that were smarter than you."

"Of course they did."

"Tomorrow, I'll be giving you something else. Something one of Keiron's disciples came up with. She called it a Restrictive Training Emblem. Out of all our Champions, she had one of the most powerful bodies and one of the highest mana stats. It's a shame she was such a musclehead."

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

This sounds interesting. Training is fun, but eventually the time for variety training ends. Lissandra then activates the inscriptions she made before, and I fall to the ground on my belly, unable to move at all, forced to rely on boosting myself with kinetic energy.

Myrra stays nearby, working on her training while Lissandra goes wherever she goes when she leaves.

Unable to move, I can only act with all the patience and grace I can muster while enduring Myrra's teasing.

As she pinches my butt and tickles me under the nose with her tail, I promise revenge in my mind.

She then, for the remaining five hours, uses my back as a pillow under while gets her training in.

The five hours of leveling ensue, and this time I'm also forced to deal with monsters. Lissandra tells me to use mana and mana projectiles, and up to 20% of my total mana for the next five hours.

We meet many more monsters this time, hundreds of veilshriekers and a Veil Guardian.

Each time a veil monster dies and sends a signal towards the Veil, Lissandra stops it. When I ask her what she thinks of the Veil, she tells me it's decent.

That instantly raises my assessment of. Lissandra generally seems to think that most Absolutes barely deserve the title, relegating them to clueless beginners, even that small admission may as well be high praise.

I level up once in the process, and [Resonance] gains a level as well.

So far, my body's handling it well, and the lack of sleep and intense training aren't bothering me much. Even so, I'm sure it will get worse, much worse. My body might be strengthened, but I still require sleep, food, and water. I'm sure it's something Lissandra means to use for the purpose of pushing my body and mind to the limit.

To a degree, I welcome it and soak up everything she teaches me like a sponge. I'm already thinking of ways to implement all of this in the future. The inscriptions she made, any bits of knowledge she shares, and her training methods.

I thought I might hate having someone to teach me like this, and to be honest if it was anyone else, I would probably protest much more.

Lissandra isn't used to people rejecting her, and she never shows hesitation. Even when things do not go her way, she has an unshakable faith that she will find a way to turn things around.

She's quiet most of the time, focused on doing her own thing, and when she interacts with Myrra and I, it feels like we're turtles she's pulled from the road to keep cars from hitting them. Compared to her long life, ours is barely a blink, and I still remember the decisiveness of her actions on the 2nd Floor. Killing everyone she knew without hesitation and then turning her body into a construct, just out of pure spite for the system and her refusal to be used.

But even then, she planned ahead, in an act of revenge and self preservation.

Simply, she irritates me, but I clearly admire her and believe that she's someone I could learn from. However, I tried to avoid it for a long time in favor of exploring on my own.

"Can I ask you a question?" I ask.

"Ask."

Catching a breath after the fight and eating a piece of dried meat, I think of it seriously.

"Are you a member of your planet's 1st Generation?"

"No, I was born years later, in the middle of our 1st Pairing. We were losing, and like everyone else, I've had to fight ever since I could hold a weapon and use mana."

“Are there differences between the 1st Generation and their descendants?”

“Obviously. The 1st Generation goes through the tutorial. They have access to the system shop and have more control over their growth. They have tokens, they have more options to customize their growth. They’re not even comparable to those who didn’t.”

Even saying that she stands here. Not a member of the 1st Generation, but she was the Absolute of her planet for millennia. Honestly, it feels like a waste. Just how powerful would she be now if she was also of that generation?

She continues, likely knowing my next question, “The 1st Generation becomes protectors and teachers. The first ones to awaken, future Champions, and among them, an Absolute as well. They gain all this power earlier than anyone else to lead their planet through the changes that come with its awakening.”

I had expected the system to censor some of these words, but this amount of knowledge seems to be allowed to me at the moment. Lissandra’s basically confirmed our suspicions on the matter.

With that, I decide to stop asking questions for now, before she gets annoyed. There is still plenty of time left, surely enough to get more information out of her.

I think she had a plan when she said she wouldn’t kill me and that requires me to become stronger, and for her to maintain a somewhat neutral relationship with me. She knows my personality and knows that if she does, I won’t be as willing to reject her as long as the request is somewhat reasonable. Why else would she be so forthcoming?

I don’t mind though; honestly, it seems like a win-win situation with little to lose for either side and plenty to gain. What interests me is what she wants from me. She’s probably getting help from at least one other Ruler, so how much can I help her?

There is also the option that she really is that bored, perhaps she actually took a bit of a liking to me and decided to teach me. As she said, she is very old and has often implied that beings like her tend to seek new experiences, and I seem to have caught her interest.

Well, I have no complaints. Cowardly Savant can screw off with Tristan; I'm getting free lessons from an Absolute.

In the last hour of my power leveling for the day, we move much faster. Lissandra allows more mana, and we run at a speed that obscures the environment around us in a blur of motion.

Even then, she requires me to use projectiles. It's difficult to do, I have to account for my speed as well as that of the monsters straining to match it. I fail a lot, and my projectiles are way off, but towards the end, I start to improve.

We eventually come to a mountain, and even at this distance, I can recognize the giant iron door covering the side of that mountain.

The road that leads there seems to have been damaged by shelling, riddled with craters and strewn with slag, and debris. Though it's still wide enough to admit a number of passenger airplanes side by side.

As we begin our approach I start to realize just how huge everything actually is. The path, the door, and the mountain. Yet it all seems to have been abandoned, left unattended for years on end. Leaving what once must have been solid roads to be overgrown with all manner of greenery, from shrubs to trees.

"There's a Champion inside. She's hurt and very weak." Lissandra states, refusing to elaborate as she guides us on our way.

Even though her level is currently likely even lower than mine, she proceeds without worry.

Chapter 390: The Workshop

So far, I have seen multiple places survivors had holed up in. The first was the obsolete bunker where Nina and others lived AKA the Sanctuary. Another one was the Fallen Bastion, the Skyhold Bastion with its running defenses and city-like structure.

Then there were the bunkers in the Valley. One of them was abandoned, higher tier than the Sanctuary, but empty just the same. Lastly, The Veil Ignition Station. A Top-notch laboratory with a number of facilities and a core of such high quality that it still held an immense amount of mana even after 100 years.

The place we find ourselves now is hard to compare to any of them. It doesn't look like a bunker, it's makeshift at best. I'm also fairly sure it's not a Veil Ignition Station, given the bare bones accommodations.

"It used to be a mine and a workshop," Lissandra says.

"It's massive, what could they have been making... ah, Skyhold Bastions?"

"Yes. The people of this world seemed to be obsessed with them, this was probably one of the assembly lines for the larger portions.."

"I can't find any monsters," Myrra notes.

"Even though they seem to be wounded, this place is still being guarded by a Champion, little kitten."

"So what are we doing here?" I ask.

I don't even bother mentioning that that might be a bad idea. Not because everyone is trigger-happy. It has more to do with my fear that this cockroach-like ex-Absolute might just try to deal with that person the same way she does with Myrra and me. That does beg an interesting question though. Who would win?

Another thing comes to mind now that I'm thinking about it. It's currently my one hour rest period. Did she time our arrival here on purpose?

What a demon, I'm sure Vega would like her.

We stop near the giant iron door that likely served as an entrance for the larger parts of the Skyhold Bastions and wait for a response.

Even I have noticed a web similar to Sophie's and to the Veil all over the place. Not moving covertly, Lissandra even triggered some parts on purpose. Something akin to sending a message. The reaction doesn't take long, two men exit a much smaller entrance nearby which opens with an eerie silence.

[Frost Reaper - lvl ??]

[Solar Ascendant - lvl ??]

Just a glance betrays that they come from the generation before the war. An additional piece of information for me. Somewhere between levels 200 and 300, your aging slows on the order of centuries.

It's not like they could pass for twenty, but they could easily pass for someone in their forties. The most likely cause I can think of is a combination of stat investment and body upgrades, especially the one at level 250.

The more I learn, the more of a mess I expect to find when we return to Earth. The consequences of someone being able to live for hundreds of years won't go over well with some people. It will create a clear division, separating us from normal humans.

One of the men, a slim individual with a friendly face, bows quickly. In exchange, Lissandra makes an elegant gesture, acknowledging the greeting.

"Lady Niall told us about you. Please allow me to offer you a greeting, lady...?"

"Lissandra."

He nods, "I greet you, Lady Lissandra. I extend an invitation to the Workshop on behalf of Lady Niall. You will be safe as long as you show no aggression. This, we promise."

"Thank you. Lead the way and please extend my greeting to Lady Niall along with my interest in having a conversation with her."

I almost don't recognize Lissandra right now. She is extremely graceful, authority seeping from her words, without seeming arrogant, There's just enough command in her bearing to make her seem regal. She slips into her role as easily, as a comfortable pair of shoes.

When she introduces Myrra and I, I feel like a country bumpkin.

Well, it's not like it matters what two random guys think of me, so I don't even bother trying to imitate Lissandra.

What interests me more is the place they call The Workshop. The moment we enter the door they lock it behind us, and an intricate set of inscriptions washes over the surface, The surrounding stone following suit, totally sealing us away from the outside world.

We are in a tunnel that's at least as wide as the path outside. And making it even more impressive is the fact that they had to carve this out of the mountain at some point. Even so, the walls are extremely smooth, and the lights are evenly spaced throughout. The shining points of light lead us deeper into the mountain, illustrating the monstrous size of the place.

There are a series of gardens, framed by a sort of railing along the center of the path, giving the passage a needed splash of color.

The tunnel is full of greenery and it boggles the mind to see how much dirt they must have brought in here to sustain the sheer number of plants in here, with everything from fruit trees and vegetable patches to decorative flowers and shrubs.

There are people scattered about the place, in various stages of work. Either resting under trees or taking care of the plants. Most of them are under level 50, and they readily greet the two men escorting us with a great deal of respect.

The quiet hum of the air filters is ever-present. The same mana that powers the lights powers it as well. The deeper we go, the more people we see. There are some facilities full of animals, and huge pieces of what should be another Skyhold Bastion lying all over the place.

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

And Myrra, like me, looks around with open interest, her twitching tail giving her away. Though she's been getting the most looks from those we pass, her being something of a curiosity herself, even the two men leading us can't seem to help to take a glance here and there.

Myrra towers over both of them, not to mention Lissandra and I. Her pure white hair and cat ears don't help much, and neither does her fluffy tail.

When we enter the giant cave full of buildings and towers, I'm not even surprised. This place contains more people than the Bastion did. Much more. Tens of thousands easily.

We enter another tunnel, and there we are led to what seems to be an isolated apartment structure. There are multiple rooms housing a small group of people.

This place even has windows on one side, and as we approach I begin to hear and eventually see a waterfall, tucked away inside another huge cavern, the water crashing upon the stone below and continuing on to form a large underground river, crisscrossed with dams and bridges, before snaking along its bed to somewhere else.

"Lady Lissandra, when you are prepared, please leave the room, and we shall escort you to Lady Niall. Your companions may remain here in the meantime."

After that, they exit the room.

"Is this all being powered by a single person?" I ask Lissandra.

"So you have noticed. Not fully, but most of the mana seems to belong to the person I came here to meet."

"They called her Niall, I've heard of her. Apparently, she was one of the Champions who was too late to realize what had happened to the Veil, she helped kill the people responsible. She also was powering at least one of the Veil Ignition Stations with her mana for weeks before the advent of the Veil."

“That much makes sense with her Potent Mana.”

“The same attribute upgrade as you? Before you said you hadn’t reached the 3rd stage yet, so do you think she’s going to be like you?”

Lissandra doesn’t even bother answering the question, likely dismissing it as stupid.

“I’ll be heading off to meet her. Little pup, you will continue working on the mana shaping exercise I showed you the last time. Little kitten, you will work on your mana circulation.” She exits the room.

“I wouldn’t eat any suspicious meat,” I tell Myrra who’s already making a beeline for the kitchen.

I turn my attention to a pair of mana orbs I form in the palm of my hand. For now, I may as well ignore my curiosity and work on my training. I’m on quite the time limit here. Not satisfied with just training, I attempt to make it as difficult as possible by changing the frequency and density of my mana.

“Are you not worried, feral one?” Myrra asks, jumping into an armchair nearby. Even while talking, I sense her working on the mana circulation techniques Lissandra showed her.

I keep part of my mind on the exercise and turn to her, “About the Champion?”

“Yes.”

“I never got a real look at what a Champion can do, so it’s hard for me to judge the danger. Plus, she’s apparently wounded. But you have been with Lissandra for weeks already, are you still worried?”

“I’m worried Lady Lissandra might...”

At that exact moment, the lights flicker and I could swear I feel the place shake. The tremors gradually stop, but in their place, I feel an immense wave of mana wash over us. The lights flicker again, and somewhere in the distance, I can hear alarms ringing.

Just in case, I keep my eyes on the door, and my mana at the ready. I have anchors placed all across the room, going so far as to place a few behind the window, near the waterfall. Myrra's activated her Aurora Glass as well, the tiny pieces of glass-like material sparking in the light as it hangs in the air.

One more burst of mana flows through our surroundings before rippling out into the distance, covering an area I find hard to imagine. Then the mana disappears and the lights stop flickering.

There are no guards rushing in and gradually the alarms stop.

A minute later, the doors open and Lissandra enters the apartment, closing them behind her.

"We will be staying here for three days, after that we will head north," she says.

I try to examine her but there are no wounds to be seen, no damage to her clothes. She looks like she just came back from a short walk.

"How was Champion Niall?" I ask.

"Her mana heart is damaged and can't be restored by her own body. She's failed to find any healer capable of working on a mana heart belonging to someone at her level. She has three years at most before she loses control and kills everyone around her in one of these seizures. That, or the thing lodged inside it, will kill her."

"You said you intend to make your own heart, are you thinking of helping her?"

"It could be possible with the arm of the Absolute in my possession, but I already have a different idea for that and there is no reason to waste it on a fake who allowed herself to end so pathetically."

The contempt she displays now is genuine. She has no mercy for someone so powerful who's allowed herself to fall into such a state.

Seeing how far this fake Absolute went, through all her mad schemes, it is evident she has nothing but contempt for Champion Niall's apparent surrender.

"I will teach her a method of containing these outbursts that should buy her a few more years. In exchange, she will give me the information I want and give you a lesson, little pup. It's for something I can't do currently."

"Lesson from a Champion? I guess I'll be owing you quite a lot, that is if you don't kill me at the end of these two weeks."

"You might be having fun now, little pup, but I give you a ten percent chance of succeeding."

Her words remind me of the situation I'm currently in. Without [Focus], the hint of fear that washes over me feels more real. Ever since I stopped using it to suppress my emotions it's like everything changed. It's not like I'm watching things happen from a distance, instead, it's like all my emotions have come flooding back.

But that much is fine. There is no way I will let a small bump in the path stop me. Part of me even welcomes it.

"Sounds good, but why don't we add a little extra to the rules?" I challenge her.

Lissandra turns to me and I can see Myrra gesturing wildly for me to stop. That silly lynthari knows me too well. But I let the emotions take over.

"Let's raise the stakes and say I need to get 4 skills to level 50 for you to spare me."

Just for a short moment, a hint of surprise flashes behind Lissandra's eyes. She observes me, and seeing I mean it, she gives me that small, almost imperceptible smile.

"Little pup, think very carefully about what you are saying right now."

She underestimates me, and it irritates me.

“Five skills,” I declare.

My emotions are wildly swirling inside of me. To be honest, it's annoying how accustomed I've grown to dampening them.

Yeah, it won't be that bad being unable to use [Focus] for my emotions, it will be much worse than I expected. But I think, in the end, I will like it more.

If I don't get killed before that.