

Tutorial 401

Chapter 401: I will come to see you

The door into the armory is extremely thick, and the door leads to an unassuming hallway that opens into a wide room.

Of course, I was smart enough not to power up this section, so the only defense I need to worry about is the door.

While I think of it, I add another evil mana orb so I don't become lazy, and when I feel blood dripping from my nose, I send thermal energy through my body to deal with it.

Unsure how to deal with the door, I take thermal energy from my core and concentrate it into a thin laser stream which I focus on the metal surface of the door. Gradually, I increase the quality of that stream as it begins to glow with a brilliant golden light, biting into the metal as the heat spreads through the surface. In an effort to speed the process along I absorb any stray heat and reincorporate it into the main stream, tightening the beam's focus as I go.

It takes a good minute until I feel it break through and lance into the room as the resistance of the materials gives way, so I start moving it to the side.

After a minute, I pause, an interesting thought taking hold of my mind.

Is my laser cutting through the items inside?

Shouldn't I have thought of that sooner?

Could I create another evil orb?

Whatever. I just raise myself into the air and start shooting at an angle, directing my line of fire toward the ground.

After a few seconds, I stop again and sigh. The thin stream of thermal energy disappears, and I send my mana through the thin cut I made and place an anchor inside, which I use to teleport inside before recreating my evil orbs. The crown and my thermal orb, nicely filled, now teleport with me even at the higher cost of mana.

The armory lights up in the golden light of my orb, revealing rows of weapons hanging on the walls. Surprisingly, there aren't that many of them here, only about ten or so.

When I send my senses further, I notice a few dozen more on the other side of the armory, though they tend to be on the lower end of quality. Rare at best, both weapons and armor. The ones surrounding me now are all epic grades.

First, I examine the one that seems to be damaged. A shield with a smooth line carved into it. Around which the metal of the shield seems to have been melted. Almost as if someone...

Oh.

Unlucky.

Frostguard Shield (mid Epic, damaged) - A shield imbued with the essence of eternal ice. When activated, it can project a barrier of freezing cold air that slows down incoming attacks and chills enemies upon contact. This shield can also create a field of icy terrain centered around the user.

Hehe, it's a shame it wasn't activated.

Damn it.

What catches my interest is the reference to the essence of eternal ice. I think I remember an item that had been imbued with the essence of eternal wind. I wonder if it's something I should know about. Maybe I'll find out sometime in the future.

One after another, I examine these ten items. Three of them are of upper epic rarity, three of mid rarity, one of which is a mysteriously damaged shield, and four of low epic rarity. One after another, I also sell

nine of them for close to 7 thousand shards. None of these items are attractive enough for me to even try learning anything from.

Once again I've found myself in a place I probably shouldn't have reached. The system is really sloppy at times.

I spend the next thirty minutes going through the remaining items and examining their effects, searching for new ideas in the variety of weapons I've claimed.

For example, in between the epic items I sold, there was:

Basilisk Fang Whip (mid Epic) -A whip crafted from the fang of a basilisk, imbued with its petrifying venom. Strikes from the Basilisk Fang Whip can temporarily turn flesh to stone, immobilizing enemies. It can also be used to create stone barriers by striking the ground.

The item sounded cool. Not that it really fits my fighting style, but it was nice to learn that beings like the Basilisk exist, doubly so given that their venom can apparently turn you into stone.

Then there was another thing that caught my eye:

Void Lantern (upper Epic) - A lantern that contains a fragment of the void, emitting a light that can pierce through illusions and invisibility. The Void Lantern also has the ability to nullify weaker spells cast within its light, making it a powerful tool against magic users.

I had thought about keeping it, but in the end, I decided against it. I have my eyes and I have [Perception] and I wouldn't want to rely on an item for this. And I have [Resonance] if I need to disrupt the mana in an area.

Of course, I activated it a few times just to look over the effect, but in the end, I felt that it would be incompatible with my skills if not weaker overall. But now I know there is void primordial energy, and seeing this lantern, that energy might be a good means of disrupting and against magic users.

That's why I go through descriptions of any item I see, even rare and uncommon. Because I'm a curious person and you never know what might be useful to have. It's just something I like to do.

But in the end, I sell all of the common and uncommon items I've found, which nets me another a bit over 4 thousand shards.

Maybe I really shouldn't be able to reach this place. It can't be that easy to make shards, right?

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

By the time I leave, my total sits at 153,488

I do have one item that I didn't sell though.

Astral Projection Amulet (upper Epic) -

I jump from room to room and visit a few workshops along the way, and as I do, I sell anything that's not nailed down.

Some clothes for 1 shard? Sold.

A few mana stones for 5 shards? Sold.

The entire building? Impossible to sell, unfortunately.

My minion would be proud.

When I'm done, I examine a few workshops and pocket a few mana stones inscribed with information and experimental data. Something to play with when I have a bit more time and energy.

Lastly, I lock myself in the safest-looking place. Something akin to a panic room with thick walls made of laminated plates of various materials. Surprisingly, there is still some food available which seems like it was made to last. It's a bit weird tasting, as one might expect of the calorie-dense bars that I still eat regardless, and drinking plenty of water to wash them down. I even store some for later.

Then, once I've locked myself inside, I pull out the amulet and activate it.

My mind separates from my body as it slips into some kind of invisible ghost-like form. The world loses some of its color, and I can feel the ways my senses are restricted now. I can only see and hear. Even so, it's amazing, and I look at the body of the man resting against the wall with crumbs of food soiling his shirt.

Damn, that poor guy might need some sleep.

I move closer and try to slap him, but my hand passes through, so instead, I fly through the walls. It's an unnerving feeling, but I'll just have to get used to it.

Firstly, I start moving in a direction, seeking the exact center of the pyramid. A place whose location I found in the core of the living quarters.

My movement is quick, and no heat or monster will stop me, as I fly directly through the walls.

When I reach it, it's a huge room supported by dozens of pillars. Even though there are so many of them, they seem dwarfed by the space between them. Most of the floor is covered in molten metal, continuing to bubble and shine like an exposed lava bed.

There is no center to it. No special location. The entire place seems more like the core of a planet, its pillars and walls covered in metal that constantly melts and reforms, creating simple inscriptions.

All of the heat is directed and absorbed here. To the center of a monolith, erected in the caldera of a long dead volcano whose heat was once harnessed in the form of mana by a Champion.

And there is something else.

A being swimming in the molten metal and sending ripples through as it passes by.

I can't sense more in this state, but I already have a suspicion about what awaits me beyond that being. Somewhere deep below the surface.

Sending the projection away, I head straight towards the top of the pyramid, moving at the highest speed possible.

Let's see what cockroach is getting up to. She is surprisingly quiet lately. Part of me expected her to pull me out of the pyramid by my ear.

As I exit the pyramid, the projection becomes weaker, and the quality of the image begins to suffer, but not much later, I locate the top.

The tip of the pyramid is hollow, like a building unto itself. There are even trees planted in the dirt that probably had to be brought here and meticulously watered. Flying in, I find luxurious rooms with vibrant carpets on the floors, paintings on the walls, and a lot of gold. It's so unfitting, it's crazy.

I also find the man who declared himself a Champion, Zey I believe his name was. Near him lie five more bodies, probably his disciples. All of them are fairly well dead.

A bit further, I find Lissandra and Myrra. Both of them are sitting in a small room that seems to be exactly in the middle of the hollow tip of the Veil Ignition Station known as Cinder.

On a small stand is the head of a man. It doesn't seem to be from any of the natives killed outside. The head's eyes are wide open, both orange in color, while his hair is red and curly.

"It's the Champion with whom they built this station. They built it here, right over the biggest active volcano they could find. I don't know the Champion's name, but he used to be second in rank after their Absolute."

"Lady Lissandra?" Myrra asks, confused.

"I'm not talking to you, little kitten. The head was what I was after here, a lot of it can be used. I have no need for his body, so play with whatever remains of it. Well, if you can."

Lissandra then turns around, looking directly into my eyes, "You made your decision, and I will respect it but after I deal with things up here, I will come to see you."

The meaning of that message comes through loud and clear.

After that, the connection cuts off abruptly, and I find myself back in my body with a throbbing headache.

There is a long crack across the entire surface of the amulet, and its description has been appended with a new word, "damaged."

Do you really want to sell the following item for 390 shards?

Astral Projection Amulet (upper epic, damaged)

Yes/No

I confirm and then stand up. Once I've gotten the door open again I exit the panic room and start heading for the core, not having to deal with all the heat I subconsciously try to create a fourth evil orb, and finally, a notification rings out.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 49 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 50]

Disappointingly, there is no additional notification. No change. No boost, unlock, or addition to the skill. It just levels up. A system giving notice of a threshold crossed.

For me, it feels weird for such a breakthrough to happen without the life and death struggle of combat. But in the end, it's one of the many things Lissandra has said that I agree with, even though it seems more boring.

When I reach the core, I take all of the mana out of it, the lights dying off one after another until the place is dark. The only light coming from my thermal orb as I continue to feed it energy. I use [Tether] and place an anchor that should last me a week at least.

Then I grab the ax, the voidsteel blade, and a bag with a bit of food and water, and leave the rest here.

I reach the tunnel serving as an exit from the living quarters and unlock it after resting for a moment.

Passing by and closing the door, the living quarters disappear from my view, and the harsh heat of the pyramid attacks me once again. Accompanied by the presence of a group of monsters sneaking ever closer.

I recall the layout in my memory and then head towards the center of the pyramid. The place with molten metal pool and being just under the surface.

There are preparations I need to make to welcome someone very hard to kill.

Chapter 402: Follow through

As I stop to endure another heatwave and wait for more Heatseekers to pop out, I stop to think.

The heatwaves have been occurring at regular intervals. Three times in the span of 5 minutes, a five-minute pause, another heatwave, a thirty-minute pause, another heatwave, 15 minutes, heatwave, 10 minutes, heatwave, one minute, heatwave, thirty minutes again, and then another 3 heatwaves in the span of 5 minutes.

That's all I've grasped so far and I'm currently in the process of confirming and getting more exact timing with the help of the countdown timer in my status. And I'm already planning to use it to my advantage.

Finally, the Heatseekers appear bringing more heat with them. This time there are five of them.

I let a bit of thermal energy flood through the Flamebearer and take a step towards them.

I wonder how I should deal with them this time.

A day passes and my level goes up once.

Other than Heatseekers, weaker monsters are abundant here. These ones move in bigger groups, but nothing I can't handle.

[Redistribution] has reached level 49 thanks to my constant use of thermal energy. Overall, it's not bad.

My passive uses heat and thermal energy to heal my body. However, something seems to be getting in the way. It's even managed to bypass my mantle without me noticing and no matter how hard I try I fail to identify the source. I think it's probably connected to the Champion who died here.

At this point, I'm sure that man, whose head Lissandra stole, once possessed primordial thermal energy.

Lissandra said it before but his body, well, what remains of it should be down there. I have a few theories but I won't be able to confirm them until I get there.

Overall the slowing of my heat-based healing only adds to the difficulty and once again leaves me frustrated with my inability to learn any other form of healing.

As a result, I have only 1 evil orb over my shoulders and find myself forced to act with more caution. It's also taking a lot more effort to deal with the heat which is rising with every moment. It's frustrating.

The current tired me prefers to take a minor blow if it provides an opportunity to deal more damage. It's tiring to be constantly avoiding them, and to be honest my mind isn't as fresh as it could be.

Still, I force myself to be a bit more careful and see results in the form of fewer and smaller wounds. Well, they could be lethal if it weren't for my boosted stats but it'll probably be fine.

I pause again as the next heatwave hits. Right away I check the time and make a mental note.

Heatseekers like to come exactly 11 seconds after the heatwave starts. Lately, there tends to be at least five of them. Three of them will engage immediately while the other two will hold back for several seconds. Usually, one of them attacks from the ceiling, and two will strike from the walls.

In preparation, I place a few anchors in places I expect them to be and prepare five thermal orbs. Precisely calculating the amount of energy in each one.

The three Heatseekers appear right on time. This time two on the ceiling and one on the side wall.

Cheeky things, maybe they felt fancy and decided to change their strategy a bit.

I send two orbs through the anchor at the ceiling and one to the wall. The orbs explode in golden flames the moment the monsters reach them.

[You have defeated Heatseeker - lvl 299]

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Then seven seconds later three more appear instead of the usual two.

Two of them die falling victim to the orbs I send through my anchors.

[You have defeated Heatseeker - lvl 299]

[You have defeated Heatseeker - lvl 299]

The third one stops on the spot. Turning his humanoid head towards my anchor and the monster hesitates.

Tired of waiting for a reaction I boost my body with kinetic energy and throw Flamebearer at him, the weapon is filled with thermal energy and lodges itself deep into the wall, melting the metal around it under the heat of my golden flames.

The Heatseeker, having nimbly avoided my attack, rushes me, its dozens of legs turning into a blur and the heat around him rising in turn.

I look towards the ax and then at the monster. I step a bit to the right. Then changing my mind I step just a tiny bit to the left.

As the Heatseeker opens its mouth I activate the anchor I left on the ax and use [Tether] to pull it towards me.

The ax dislodges from the wall and flies in a straight line, piercing through the monster as I use a burst of kinetic energy to keep its body from falling on me.

[Tether - lvl 36 > Tether - lvl 37]

[You have defeated Heatseeker - lvl 299]

For a very short moment, I'm happy with the result but then the handle of the returning ax bangs into my shoulder, causing me to stagger before I can catch it, leaving the weapon to clatter to the ground.

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Five out of ten points for the cool factor, I judge as I retrieve it from the ground. But my poor man's telekinesis isn't that bad.

I sit down and take a sip of water from a bottle I brought with me. Those bottles are ones I'm constantly reminding myself to protect from heat. It's really nice to be able to drink something cool. And to that end, I use [Redistribution].

Still, the water tastes terrible and yet manages to be the best water I ever drank at the same time.

While sitting there I think about why I'm not using black mana or [Focus] for my emotions. I've already decided to fight Lissandra so is there a need for that?

I know I had a good reason not to stay and continue her lessons, but recently, it's been getting hard to remember.

Partially I don't even care about the reason anymore. I just know I made the decision after thinking things over and now I'm just following through.

It could be said that I trust past Nathaniel.

I yawn and blink a few times, rubbing my eyes. Damn, I really want to sleep.

Another heatwave comes and I take note of the timing. It seems like I was wrong about the timing, it's even more chaotic than I expected. But there is a rhythm and I will use it to my advantage. That along with my crown and the thermal orb next to me. After days of channeling these things are scarily full of their respective energies.

The funny thing is that the crown is still light blue in color, meaning it's nowhere close to its limit. Yet the amount is easily more than my body and Mana Reservoir combined. The skill might be scarier than I thought.

The passage of time is hard to estimate currently. Well, it shouldn't be, I just need to check the timer, but I'm too lazy to bother.

It's annoying to calculate the passage of time by checking the countdown to our forced return to Earth.

After a long time, I begin to think. It says forced return. Does that mean it's possible to return earlier? Or does that imply that someone might try to stay beyond the 5 years and the system has a failsafe in place to send them back regardless?

I mean, it wouldn't be so bad, climbing the floors of the tutorial for the rest of eternity.

It's a shitty place, yes, and sometimes the difficulty is truly hellish, other times it feels too easy. It might be part of the strategy behind the tutorial's design, to lure us into a sense of security and then bombard us with bullshit.

Anyway, I think a few days have passed but I'm too lazy to calculate it. I just know I still have enough time. And I trust myself.

I know I won't fail.

Another break and I sit down to think once again. It lets my legs rest and makes it easier to deal with my growing collection of wounds that continue to heal slowly. There is a lot of heat so why isn't my passive overcoming the debuff?

What does the cockroach need the Champion's head for? The man did have orange eyes so maybe she's after some kind of trait. Could she steal his trait with just his head? Does she want to dig some kind of information out of it? Could she learn his skills?

I bet I would have found out if I had stayed with her but I've already made my decision, I just have to follow... I pause.

Didn't I already go over that?

Well, who cares? Past Nathaniel made the decision and I will follow through.

I stand up and add another evil orb to the one floating over my shoulders.

Huh. Since when were there two of them?

Whatever, I add the third one there and head to the hallway leading to the center of the pyramid.

As I work on the last set of inscriptions the heatwave hits me and I take note of it.

With it, my theory is confirmed and the timing of heatwaves is deciphered. Another one will come in thirty minutes and this time seven Heatseekers should appear.

Without pausing my work I place anchors and attack, fully intending to kill all the monsters the moment they appear. I miss a few times and some of their attacks land dangerously close, but I continue with my strategy until they are dead. After the fight, I feel a new wound somewhere on my body but ignore it. What is one more added to the mix at this point?

My level doesn't change but at this point, I'm sure I'm getting close.

Then I check the timer.

One day and a bit remain until I return back to the 6th floor, my two weeks here coming to their conclusion. The past few days have turned into a blur as I fight, train, and intentionally move slower to reach the center so I can level up.

The cockroach is weirdly fair at times so she will wait until the last hour to go after me so I still have plenty of time. It's all been planned out and I just need one more level and four skills to level 50.

For a moment I pause my work on the inscriptions and check the doors. Only now do I notice how huge they are, tall as a multi-floor building and about as wide. The metal they are made of is slightly different and they flaunt a number of decorative ornaments.

Things like these are one thing I've started to ignore lately, they don't tend to matter much, but nevertheless, they are pleasing. I bet I would appreciate it a bit more after some sleep.

With a sigh, I reach for my bottles and stop.

Where is my left arm?

Checking closer I notice a clean, healed cut close to my shoulder.

The Voidsteel blade on my waist is nearly gone, just a piece as long as a dagger remains. All the water and food are gone too. Only Flamebearer remains, reliable as always, by my side, undamaged.

I have plenty of shards, should I buy an arcane weapon instead of saving for a passive?

Shaking my head I make an arm of mana to replace my missing one. I concentrate, improving on my design, most of the changes coming about as a result of my examinations of Miwa's arm back in the tournament and other bits of information I managed to acquire.

I even assign part of my [Focus] to keep it up.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 50 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 51]

[Focus - lvl 49 > Focus - lvl 50]

The arm then flickers and with some annoyance, I check to see what's taking so much of my mental capacity.

I identify the source right away, four evil mana orbs floating above me. Each one changing its frequency in an unpredictable manner, forcing my mind to work in overdrive. They also seem to constantly change the amount of mana required to maintain them which only adds to the strain.

What kind of dumbass decided to keep so many of these things running.

Shaking my head I deactivate all of them and for a short moment, I feel like losing consciousness as a wave of relief hits me. It's as if an immense pressure has been lifted from me, the constant annoying buzz in the back of my mind gone.

The arm made of mana instantly solidifies, turning dark blue with streaks of light blue, moving just like my normal arm would. I lift my mana arm to compare it to the right one and stop in surprise.

A second passes as I just stare at my arms.

The right arm is also made out of dark blue mana, this one severed just over the elbow.

I giggle, my laugh sounding weird even to me as it slips from my parched throat.

Not wasting my time on useless stuff I then turn back to the door and continue with my work.

Chapter 403: Savi

The doors open and heat washes over me even harder than before. The hallway outside the room starts to melt as its walls absorb the heat from outside. The walls on the other side of the door seem to be made from a material different from what I've encountered until now.

Detecting the doors starting to close I slip inside and look at the view in front of me.

It's a massive room. I don't even know if it can truly be called a room. Some time ago, back on Earth, I saw a documentary about the Tokyo flood tunnels. Giant structures that served to redirect water to keep it from flooding the surface. This place is similar, though it's bigger and taller. Instead of water, I find a lava-like layer of molten metal. The space I find myself in stretches over a huge distance leaving the ceiling to be supported by a number of massive pillars.

A quick pulse of detection is all I need to confirm that all the heat being absorbed from the surface is being pulled through the pyramid and absorbed by this massive pool of metal. Perhaps by design, maybe it's being caused by the entity swimming around inside of it, or it may be something else entirely that lies deeper within.

I know that the being inside the pool has detected me already, yet it's not attacking for now. It seems to be wary of me. Well, more likely it's wary of the thermal orb I have with me.

I wonder if it ate the body of the Champion. Is it something that came into existence as a result of the Mana Radiation from the champion's corpse? Is it some creation of the Champion's skills? It could honestly be either.

But now, standing here, looking through the lens of my [Perception], I confirm that the body of the Champion is still there. Lying at the bottom of the pool of molten metal. The heart continues to pull in the heat, using the pyramid to do so. It even beats with long pauses in between. These pauses are perfectly in sync with the heatwaves that push their way through the pyramid and the appearances of Heatseekers.

I give the shy guy in the pool of molten metal an opportunity to attack but it doesn't take the bait. Annoyed, I create three tricolored orbs and fire them off, targeting what I think is the being's location. The molten metal explodes into the air sending ripples through the surface and pushing me back with the shockwave, almost making me fall even as I activate my defenses.

Even then no counterattack seems forthcoming.

I land on the surface of that solidified metal and tear out a few huge chunks which I send through my [Tether] to the anchor I left in the living quarters near the core. Being done, I boost myself up and land on the ridge in front of the doors on the pillar's side. They are extremely smooth, almost feeling painted on. My mana doesn't even seem to do anything and even my senses can't feel much.

While thinking, I throw another tricolored orb to where I think the being is. Then I take a bit of thermal energy from my orb and send it to the door. The lines light up and it looks like they are melting the surface and it spreads through the entirety of the door until they melt away entirely.

I go inside and the door starts reforming behind me and only now do I see how thick the wall of metal is, at least as thick as I'm tall.

Infusing my mana arm with thermal energy, I tear off a chunk of the metal and send it through the anchor as well. Then I do it a few more times until the hole closes. Only then I turn to the room I found myself in.

Of course, the room is nearly dark, lit only by a few lines that seem to be powered by the bit of thermal energy I used before to light up the place.

The control panels near me don't react to my mana and there don't seem to be any other doors. It's just a circular room that encloses a space in the shape of the pillar it sets within.

Knowing now what the problem is, I let thermal energy seep out of me causing the panels and devices to start lighting up. Even the ceiling changes, the lights taking on the appearance of swirling lava.

I don't think thermal energy powers it all, that would be weird. It's more like thermal energy serves as the key. That or the room has some means of converting it into mana and using the result as fuel.

Anyway, is there anything I could sell?

I grab one of the chairs and try to send it through the anchor only to find myself unable to do so.

Cheeky place seems to have engaged some form of shielding after it closed itself off. Hell, my thermal energy may have reactivated the defenses. For some reason, I find the idea funny.

I release more of my thermal energy and more devices light up, some of them even projecting a map of the pyramid and an uninteresting series of letters and numbers.

So where do I find the last will stating: "If you're reading this I'm long since dead."?

It takes a few minutes but I do manage to find a switch and when I activate it the walls of the room become transparent, allowing me to see the pillars and pool of molten metal outside.

More than that, it allows me to see the monster coiled around the pillar as one of its huge eyes tries to stare inside.

[Volcanic Hydra - lvl ???]

My laser-like stream of thermal energy hits the now transparent wall and starts melting through, right over the monster's eye.

The monster doesn't react in any way and my attack continues to melt through the wall very slowly. It would take minutes for it to pierce through. Annoyed, I throw a tricolored orb against the uselessly thick wall and cancel my thermal attack.

As I watch the tricolored orb turn bright white, I come to think that that might not have been such a great idea.

My eyes activate for a moment and I quickly move my mana, tearing the orb apart before it fully destabilizes. There is still a small shockwave, but most of the devices survive it just fine.

That also makes me realize that the monster can't see me; the room only allows for a one way view. Most likely even cloaking what's happening inside.

Watching the hydra for a bit longer I only become angrier.

Cowardly little thing. Did it wait until I went inside to crawl from its pool? What, Is its subclass Patience? Should I go to sleep?

At this point, I may as well temporarily nickname the monster 'Savant,' lovingly shortening it to 'Savi.'

Savi has three heads, each one exactly the same. They grow from a single lizard-like body with long nimble-looking limbs and a similarly lithe tail. Savi's body is entirely covered in dark gray scales and his heads keep snapping and biting at the pillar.

After a while, Savi becomes uncomfortable; the pillar seems to be absorbing even his heat so he disappears back into the pool of molten metal.

Turning away and back to the devices, I examine what I can, but most of it's been encrypted. The ones I can't gain access to, I try to pull the mana stones from but the moment I do so, the mana stone crumbles into tiny particles. Maybe it's some kind of mechanism to defend against spies or something.

The narrative has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

I'm in the middle of examining a file when Savi starts attacking. Waves of molten metal crash into the pillar, hot enough to cause damage, and parts of the pillar start slowly melting.

I let it continue for a few minutes while learning more and more.

The Champion here was truly the second strongest person on this planet, right after Absolute Tassian. His name was Laten, bearer of the Ignition Wavelength Eyes and a skill called [Thermal Convergence]. Some of the records even theorize that if he had been given a few hundred years he could have become even stronger than Tassian, even with Tassian's head start.

All the notes I'm reading seem to have been left behind by the people who helped build the pyramid. People who were essentially mana scientists, some of whom were Champion candidates, and disciples. All were people who worked with Laten, examined his body, traits, and skills to find the best ways to apply them.

They did it here, right over the biggest active volcano on the planet. A volcano they estimated could throw out enough ash to bring about a new ice age. Yet, these beautiful maniacs used it to help power the Veil. This ignition Station does a huge chunk of the work even when compared to the other stations.

Of course, a lot of these people were from the Enchanters' Guild, they were the people who attempted to enslave the young divine beast. But damn if Laten isn't a fascinating if dumb man. Why did he allow his skills and traits to be noted here? Not like I intend to complain though, it's fun reading.

Another attack shakes the pillar and with an annoyed sigh I release a huge amount of thermal energy and this place takes it all in, using it to fix the outer surface which has begun to take damage. The metal of the pillar quickly melts under my thermal energy and restores itself to a perfect state.

Savi stops attacking, most likely shocked or scared. Maybe he wants to forfeit now, coward.

I turn back to the mana stone I was examining. A lot of the information on it has been redacted. Some by Enchanter Guild and some by the system, likely containing knowledge I shouldn't have yet. Letting go I check the timer and decide it's enough. I need to deal with Savi before Lissliss comes so I open the door to break the shielding and send a few more things to the living quarters. A mana stone, a piece of a device, and a chunk of a wall.

For some reason, a memory of watching shows about hoarders filling their houses with trash flashes through my mind. Could never be me, the things I collect will surely find a use later.

Done with it, I exit the pillar, the heat hitting me right away. This time Savi's waiting for me outside, his three heads lowered and air reverberating under the sound of his hissing and a threatening amount of mana surrounding him.

Savi is scared of me. Of my thermal energy. Thermal energy so similar to Laten's, even if it is so much weaker than the Champion's.

He is scared because Savi is probably all that remains of the giant snake that attacked the pyramid. Something like the slivers of intent.

A monster from the planet that paired with this one, one that was once just below Champion rank.

Savi failed, probably because the head of the Champion served to maintain the defenses and killed Savi when he attacked the pyramid.

The nearly dead powerful monster, its intent, its egg, perhaps even a piece of his flesh, whatever it was found its way here, mutating and trying to regain its power within the radiation of Laten's dead body and his still beating heart. The body and heart of a Champion too strong and hot for Savi to take over.

So close to pulling it off, yet still unable to take over. All while feeding on the Heatseekers over hundreds of years and leveling up.

That's the theory I go with after my many observations and what I found in the records.

Looking at the way Savi moves through the molten metal, collecting more and more heat, I don't think he wants to tell me anything new. He seems to agree as he starts hurling rivers of flame from all 3 heads.

I quickly create a shield and infuse it with golden thermal energy, the orange flames of the hydra rolling off the surface impotently. Savi hisses, just that single clash telling him more than enough.

Decisively one of the heads moves quickly and bites into the neck of the next. With one strong pull, it tears the head off and along with the second one, they devour it.

I should probably use the opportunity to attack but at this point, I'm too fascinated. So I watch as the two remaining heads fight each other before one of them devours the other.

Bones tear through the back of the monster and pierce through the air, forming a shape reminiscent of wings. The blood still drips from the white bones when mana flows through them.

Then the monster roars, sending ripples through the pool of molten metal, and the inscriptions on the pillars light up in response.

My body is pushed against the pillar, my crown and thermal orb threatening to destabilize. I activate [Mana Domain] to bring them both back under my control, the blueish light of it clashing with the dark orange color of the heat radiating from the volcanic hydra.

The pool of molten metal ripples and from its surface emerges dozens of spear-like spikes the length of my body, all aimed directly at me.

[Redistribution] activates, and I absorb all the heat, causing the attacks to visibly lose power and speed until the metal spikes sit frozen, pointing at me as they pierce the surface. A few coming to a stop just an arm's reach away.

These spikes made out of metal fall back into the pool where they melt once more. I boost my body with kinetic energy and fly off to the side, avoiding another wave of spikes piercing through the surface of the huge pool.

They follow me as I fly, some crashing into the pillars I'm using to avoid them. The amount of heat they contain is impressive and even with my defenses, I can still feel it scorching my skin.

Savi looks dried up now and much thinner, his ribs beginning to show. Yet the bony wings are bigger than before. The thinner he is the quicker the attacks are and the more heat they carry.

Over time bigger and bigger sections of the pool begin to fall under his control.

Sometimes I absorb the heat of entire wave-like attacks, which creates waves of metal, seemingly frozen in time.

The spikes coming my way continue to fly even as I absorb the heat, piercing into my shields or causing injury.

Then there are Savi's attacks; even though he's found himself looking at his deathbed, the hydra continues to move quite nimbly, swimming through the lava and snapping at me with apparent vigor.

I form a suit of armor around my body, increasing its size until we find ourselves the same size. It's so much easier now, my mastery over kinetic energy is much better, allowing me to move the huge armor with less resistance.

So we clash, my mana corroding and melting every time it touches the pool and Savi seizing the advantage. His attacks have even changed now, accounting for my ability to absorb the heat.

As the fight goes on he becomes stronger and stronger and at the same time, he comes closer to his death. His body is just skin and bones, and his bone wings are beginning to crack and for the first time, he starts taking damage from the lava.

However, the Volcanic Hydra continues. I know I should save as much of my mana as I can to use against Lissandra but at this point, there are no such thoughts dwelling in my mind. I just fight, one side trying to kill the other.

[Redistribution - lvl 49 > Redistribution - lvl 50]

And then when the time finally comes and Volcanic Hydra slows down, I redirect my attacks, barely avoiding its head. The monster is missing three of its legs, its tail is broken from one of my attacks, one of its eyes has been destroyed and its bone wings are nearly gone.

Even then it still has that determined gaze in its eyes as he stares me down in challenge as I float over him. The hydra doesn't try to escape and in the end, we both know he gave it his all. One last hurrah from a monster trapped for over a hundred years, unable to break through its limitations and regain its previous power.

"You gave it your all, didn't you?" I say, sure he can understand.

The Volcanic Hydra doesn't say anything but its eye seems to confirm the sentiment.

"I'm no Champion yet but I hope you had fun fighting one last time."

The monster's neck straightens up and its eye stares at me full of expectation.

I let golden thermal energy flow through my arm of mana and for the first time during our fight, I use it to attack. The golden flames devour the monster and I let its bones sink back into lava without stopping to take any of them.

[You have defeated Volcanic Hydra - lvl 329]

[Lvl 249 > Lvl 250]

Level 250 status reached. This marks a significant leap in human potential.

Your body will undergo a crucial upgrade, designed to enhance your cellular regeneration, bone density, and muscle efficiency.

This upgrade will enable your body and mind to endure the strain of higher leveled skills and support more powerful traits and passives.

Note: Following the upgrade, your body's requirements for air will diminish.

Well done!

Chapter 404: Shall we start?

Well, the body upgrade goes more or less as expected. Nothing extra, but it does entail some nice additions. Much like the previous upgrade, the changes seem to be taking some time to apply, so it'll probably take a few days at least.

As a test, I let my mana flood my body, but once again, I immediately start taking damage. There might be a tiny difference in the degree of damage, but that's it. I'm curious if the fully applied upgrade will change that, at least a bit.

In the end, it seems like I still have way too much mana for my body to handle.

Good.

At least I won't have to breathe as much.

Rereading the description, I also don't think my improved cellular regeneration will be enough to replace my healing skill. The system just isn't going to give out powerful regeneration to everyone over 250. Though it might be for those with high or upgraded constitutions.

I also start to wonder what would happen to my body if I didn't get body upgrades? Going by the notifications, it seems like it wouldn't be able to handle active skills, traits, and passives. It could be interesting to observe and compare the difference between a body upgrade and a high constitution.

The timer continues to tick down so I locate the body of the Champion. It's easier now without the Volcanic Hydra messing with my senses. Unfortunately, the body seems to be very deep below the surface of molten metal. Deep enough to be surprising. I expected it to be just a few lengths of my body, instead, it's deep enough to hold a small skyscraper.

Feeling that I know I won't be able to reach it. My senses barely pass through and placing an anchor is impossible.

My shields would be unable to endure that amount of molten metal and heat.

Hell, I'm sure even our resident cockroach would have trouble reaching it with her current capabilities.

It also explains why there isn't that much Mana Radiation. Most of the residual energy generated by the body is being used to send heat through the pyramid, create these annoying monsters, and keep a pool of molten lava the size of a small city liquid.

Should I jump in? I mean, I'm sure I would be able to move around for a while just with my chest and head. I can recreate the rest with mana and slowly regenerate it later.

Or maybe I could go in with nothing but my heart, spine, and brain?

Maybe I could just send my brain and leave my heart behind connected through [Tether] to feed me mana. It could be possible to create a smaller barrier around my brain.

Hmm, maybe not that, the molten metal would cut off the connection to my heart. Also, it would be unfortunate if the cockroach found me like that.

What about the main pillar with the rooms, I could try cutting it loose and using it as a submarine to get there? Or maybe create a capsule out of the metal for me to dive in? That probably wouldn't work, my thermal energy will only work against me there and whatever the body below is generating should be more than enough to destroy me.

Fish the body out? Am I even capable of creating a thread powerful enough to get there? Not even mentioning how easily it's going to melt as it gets closer to the body.

Even the Volcanic Hydra wasn't swimming that deep, keeping itself just below the surface.

I shake my head and then scratch my cheek. At least I try to, both of my mana arms are disrupted as I forget to concentrate on them. It leaves me standing there without arms which I can't help but find funny for some reason.

Annoyed, I shoot a tricolored orb in the direction of the Champion's body and then head to the solid metal around the control pillar. There I sit and nearly fall, losing my balance due to my lack of arms. Even so, I do not recreate them. I don't need them right now and may as well use my [Focus] for other stuff.

First, I reach into my crown, and the amount of mana in it makes me both happy and terrified.

Slowly I reach for the threads I've been forming around the crown. My own web heavily based on the Mindblender's. It's not as good or delicate but it doesn't need to be. Thread after thread I uncoil it, making a few last-minute changes.

These threads start covering the area around me. Starting with the pillar next to me, then moving to the ceiling, the adjacent pillars, and the walls of the room. More and more I continue as the invisible, intangible threads fill almost the entire room.

I use [Infusion] and [Mana Domain] to fill them up. Adding my Pride to the skill makes the threads more "mine", less susceptible to external influences. It's almost like expanding my [Mana Domain], but it's also more than that.

Gradually, I redirect a bit of mana from my crown, creating a dozen pockets of mana all over the room. Each one contains enough mana to compress into a tricolored bomb or a few.

I create multiple layers of the web, each with a different frequency. I even make a few smaller webs with less mana running through them. These webs, I keep disconnected from the main one. I fail a few times, and it costs a lot of mana. I just don't have as much experience with it as I would like. But I still continue, using everything I have learned.

[Mana Crown - lvl 30 > Mana Crown - lvl 31]

[Infusion - lvl 32 > Infusion - lvl 33]

My creation, my web then stays there, anchored, with the help of [Tether], to the surroundings and myself. And it's huge.

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I also place a few mana stones and melt mana conductive metal into the inscribed pillars.

And once I'm done, I let the crown disappear from its place over my head. I can activate it later when the time comes. Instead, I focus on converting my mana transforms into thermal energy which I use to fill the orb. At this point, it's about as big as my fist and could be bigger if I didn't compress it.

It's fun to watch as it melts anything it comes close to. Even the pillar just an arm's reach away is being scorched, a thin layer melting off the surface.

For some reason, it becomes difficult to stand up and for a moment I rest against the pillar.

Damned body upgrade, could do something for once. Sure, making sure my skills and traits don't kill me is great and all but a bit more healing would be nice. I get that the system is cheap and doesn't want to give out regeneration but this cellular something bullshit isn't going to regrow my arm. Best case my stamina comes back a bit faster, and wounds close faster.

I summon the status window and flip it the bird only to realize I have no arms. Huh, why are they not regenerating?

Oh, it's because my healing is based on thermal energy and the body of that chump is messing with its ability to function. An annoying guy, indeed. Shouldn't dead bodies float to the surface or something like that? If I can't take the heart I at least want to examine it.

I shoot another tricolored orb toward where I think his body is and step away from the pillar, boosting myself up onto the ridge. There I concentrate my thermal energy, opening the hole into the pillar.

It becomes comfortably cold as the hole behind me regenerates and instead of creating an arm and hand with mana I just create a single tentacle to touch the control panels. Maybe I'm getting lazy.

Using detection systems I locate all the heat signatures inside and outside of the pyramid. There are thousands of them, displayed as tiny dots on the surface.

At the top, I find two of them in particular, and as the time ticks down I continue to watch them. As I'm waiting, I get bored and recreate a few evil orbs, part of my mind continuing my training.

A question pops into my head.

Why didn't I at least take a few hours to sleep? It would have helped me a lot and I wouldn't have lost much in the way of preparations.

It was because of that Pride of mine, right? Because of the cockroach's rules. For the same reason, I haven't used [Focus] for my emotions and nor did I use it to create black mana.

Well well well, if it isn't time to face the consequences of my actions.

Even so, I wouldn't change anything. Though maybe I'd have tried to loot a bit more and get more shards.

While I'm wasting my energy on these useless thoughts I train and explore the options the control pillar gives me. The longer I do it, the more I learn about the functions and how I could use them in combination with the timing of heatwaves being generated by the Champion's body.

Five hours remain until my two-week stay here ends when one of the dots starts moving, leaving the other behind.

In one hour, that dot moves through a distance multiple times greater than I was able to. There are no stops, no fighting monsters. It just rushes straight here.

Four hours remain when I begin manipulating the pyramid through the control panel. I start closing the doors, opening them, controlling vents. I do it all with the heatwaves in mind, redirecting them through openings and closing doors to hit the red dot as much as possible.

Heatwave after heatwave washes over the dot, slowing it down and forcing it to waste mana.

At some point, the dot disappears from the detection array and I just open and close the doors where I expect it to go, knowing the heatwave will hit it fifteen seconds later.

Lastly, I close some doors further away and activate some of the barely working devices with the intention of increasing the temperature in this place. Then I take a bit of my mana back from the control panels and pop the evil orbs.

My heart beats wildly in my chest and after a long moment, my mind feels as sharp as can be.

Three hours and ten minutes remain when I exit the pillar.

My [Mana Crown] forms over my head, and [Perception] checks the web one last time, making last-minute changes. A pathway added or removed. A twist changed, mana redirected.

I move my thermal orb to the stump of my right arm and then I create a golden arm prosthesis out of its energy. My flesh burns to the point where it touches the golden thermal energy, emitting too much heat for me to redirect.

Taking a few steps I grab Flamebearer from its place with the blade half submerged in molten metal, finding it untouched by the heat.

I swing the ax to clean the blade, molten metal shooting free in its wake. Then my thermal energy moves through the ax which starts shining with golden light.

Parts of the ax sizzle, the metal at its surface melting slightly as the metal starts to glow, the air around it beginning to shimmer from the heat.

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 50

Perception - Lvl 49

Redistribution - Lvl 50

Resonance - Lvl 49

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 43

Tether - Lvl 37

Infusion - Lvl 33

Mana Crown - Lvl 31

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 51

Two more skills, that's all I need and I still have a few hours.

If I fail I will die.

If I die it will be my fault.

If I survive I'll only have myself to thank.

That's how it should be. That's how I want it to be from now until the end.

The doors I used to enter this place open, and a single figure steps through them, striding confidently in my direction. Her silver hair moves in the scorching hot air, contrasting starkly with the surrounding colors; it even seems to be glowing in this place.

She enters and the doors close behind her without her giving them a second look. On her waist, there are two daggers. One made out of black mana, and another made out of flesh, skin, and bones. Embedded in that fleshy dagger is a single orange eye.

So that's what she did with the Saint's arm and the other Ignition Wavelength Eye.

Lissandra Hawthorne, Absolute of Eladore, a fake, a shadow of her original self, is just as relaxed as ever. With a single glance, she examines the room and its contents, taking note of the ax, and my preparations.

Then she takes a step forward and stands on the pool of molten metal, around her feet a faint amount of blue mana glows. Each of her steps sends a ripple through the otherwise calm surface and she comes to a stop a few steps away from me.

"Shall we start, little pup?"

Three hours and two minutes remain when a heatwave generated by the body of the Champion fills the room and I attack.

Chapter 405: Candidate

The ax in my hand radiates thermal energy as I swing it, adding to the heatwave that fills the room. The heat doesn't bother me anymore, but it surrounds Lissandra, who has to radiate a field of mana to surround her body. She's likely being limited by the amount she got from Myrra before coming here.

The mana around her isn't anything impressive from a quantitative standpoint, yet it interacts with the heat of the room in such a way that it drastically reduces its effect on Lissandra.

It reminds me of a tiny flame refusing to be extinguished by the tornado.

When she swings her arm, the heat in front of her disappears as if it were being blown away by an immense pressure wave, and I block the invisible cut with the ax. Even then, I find myself being thrown into the air, nearly colliding with one of the pillars.

I activate one of my webs, and it reaches down and surrounds her. Multiple tricolored orbs explode all at once while the rest of the web disappears, consumed to send a powerful disrupting wave of mana at her.

Lissandra even now refuses to use her daggers, and the orbs stop mid-explosion. I can see the shape of their mana expanding but it's almost like they've been suspended in time.

Surrounded by the explosions, she takes a few more steps, her eyes still on me. Clearly challenging me.

More heat crashes into her, a stream of concentrated thermal energy shooting from the ax in my hand.

She dodges to the left, breaking into a run as my attack tracks her movements, sending more ripples through the pool of molten metal and gouging the pillars with their heat.

One of my anchors launches a spike of kinetic energy at her, another web, made out of extremely dense threads meant to entrap her, shrinks and coils around her.

Lissandra ignores the jamming field; it doesn't even seem to bother her. She tanks the kinetic energy with her forearm, and something she does makes my threads disappear as if they had been dispersed by the wind.

The tricolored orbs I shoot her way freeze in the air, and when she stomps, another wave ripples out from her, blowing away another thermal attack. None of it really seems to be causing her any trouble, but I just continue to press the attack.

I never expected to get her with any of these attacks; I'm just trying to make her waste as much mana as possible. Even now she is missing some because of the encounters she had on her way here, and now she has to use some more.

No matter how efficient she is, at some point, quantity will win out over quality. And while she faces me, I watch her, I read her movements, and I perceive her techniques.

I make changes to my web, I switch frequencies. I modify my anchors. The way I'm using thermal energy changes, and even my offensive use of kinetic energy begins to adapt. All to find a way to deal with her.

[Perception - lvl 49 > Perception - lvl 50]

Finally, that annoying skill levels up, and I activate my Mana Wavelength Iris, the powerful trait taking over and working in tandem with my crown and domain.

Immediately, I release half of the thermal energy remaining in my arm and ax, causing it to swirl through the surroundings, melting the pillars and causing them to fall.

A wall of golden energy surrounds the woman while tricolored javelins shoot toward her from every part of my web. Others are filled with wildly disruptive mana, some are just dense mana launched through the air at immense speed. All of these attacks bombard her, and for the first time, she touches the black dagger.

At that moment, the main web activates and disrupts my own mana, dispersing it into shiny particles before she can absorb any to use against me.

The attacks that seemed ready to tear her apart disappear at the cost of a huge backlash to me, and instead, the wall of golden flames shrinks, surrounding her.

Lissandra lowers her body, and her eyes land on me. I don't even have time to blink, and she's there, leaving the flames left behind her.

With a wave of my hand, I pull the flames towards me, and kinetic energy fills my body, absorbing some of the energy of her attack and staggering me anyway.

Her fist lands on my face, she kicks me in the side, and I release a blast of heat only for it to be blown away by her mana. The golden flames surround us, pressing on the faint glow of mana around her.

Lissandra still looks perfectly fine. There isn't a single wound on her body, even her clothes are mostly intact.

When I shoot a thermal orb at her, she dodges easily, and the last remains of my web and domain press in on us while she punches me in an attempt to break through my kinetic armor.

It's efficiency vs quantity. And I win that matchup. The sheer amount of mana and thermal energy I've collected is too much for that little amount she took from Myrra.

Finally, Lissandra uses her black dagger and stabs it into my side. And for the first time, a look of surprise appears on her face, if only momentarily.

I try to catch her hand, but she is quicker, and after breaking my nose and a few ribs, she jumps back to avoid wildly resonating kinetic and thermal energy attacks.

There is no mana in my body for her to absorb, and neither is there any in my Mana Reservoir. It's all somewhere else.

I check the timer, and just in time, another heatwave fills the room. The remains of my web also disappear, reduced to a cloud of fine light blue particles, too fine for the imperfect dagger to absorb.

Lissandra can't kill me. Not because it's impossible for her, but because of the promise she made not to kill me unless I failed the tasks she gave me. And I don't think she's willing to break that promise, not with me. She wants to defeat me cleanly and decisively, that's why my head isn't rolling into a pool of molten metal at the moment.

Of course, part of it is that this is just how the two of us communicate. Neither of us is really good at anything else.

More and more heat surrounds us both, the golden whips of flame following her, the laser-like streams piercing through the air. There is no mana for her to absorb, and everything I generate immediately becomes more primordial energies.

But she reaches her breaking point and stops, "That much should be enough."

The Mana that's been softly radiating from her body up till now is gone, and then I feel my body lifting into the air, with Lissandra below me.

Another punch throws me to the side, and a third one leaves me staggering backward.

The fourth one tears off the arm made out of thermal energy and throws it far away whereupon it explodes into flames that I try to pull to my side, but she hits me a fifth time to break my concentration. This time, I can barely stay conscious.

Even so, I did what I wanted, and there is her black dagger held in a hand made of mana.

Lissandra tilts her head, and a tiny orb of thermal energy misses her, masking the black dagger behind it as they fly through the air, boosted by most of my remaining kinetic energy. The monster reacts in time and tries to grab it, but [Redistribution] activates for a tenth of a second, pushing on it with all my effort, causing her to miss the timing.

She turns her head, watches the trajectory, and dashes to grab the dagger while I attack with everything I have.

The thermal orb hits the main pillar, opening the door into it partially, and the black dagger flies through the entrance. The thermal orb in question was just large enough to open the entrance by the slightest margin, allowing it to close before Lissandra can reach it.

But there was something else in there.

A mana orb hidden in the pillar. An orb containing an amount of mana equal to the contents of my entire reservoir and body placed next to an anchor through which mana seeps back into my body.

[Mana Domain] extends further, and the crown over my head grows while my mana surrounds me like a beautiful suit of armor enhanced by my subclass. I use [Focus] to mind my skills, and all of my mana floods into [Resonance], powering it.

The high pitch of screaming man fills the air, as bits of mana surrounding Lissandra are torn apart by the sheer amount of mana I'm using.

She keeps changing the frequencies and even appears in front of me, striking at my armor infused with kinetic energy. The monster of a woman damages me even then, her hits cracking the armor and forcing me to repair it.

Her, no, Hadwin's, [Disruption], and [Strengthening] active and powered by the last bits of mana she got from Myrra.

My mana depletes more and more as she endures it all.

While defending against the heat.

While keeping herself standing above the pool of molten metal.

While using someone else's mana.

While having been awake for even longer than me.

While not even being that serious about this fight.

While lacking a mana heart.

Slowly, she starts backing off, just a split second of hesitation as she checks her reserves. There is no way she is used to having so little mana after thousands of years of being an Absolute. There is no way it's easy for her.

But it's not enough for me.

More mana pushes on her as I release it without any mind to my wounds, my body breaking within my armor under the force of my own actions and her attacks.

It's far from enough.

I add kinetic energy to the mix and force her back a few steps, leaving a wound on her skin for the first time.

Does she want to play my teacher? To mess with me and do the things she has until now?

I pull heat from the molten metal and increase the heat around her, forcing her to expend a touch of effort there as well. I don't bother making mana arms and focus instead on making the armor around my chest and head stronger.

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

If she wants to be like that, she can. But she needs to prove it.

Prove to me that she is truly that much stronger than me.

Prove that even in such a pitiful state, she can kill me.

Prove that all my tricks and all my days of preparations are meaningless faced with her.

Only then will I accept it.

And Lissandra does just that.

Instead of being pushed back more, a smile slowly blooms on her face.

Her palm hits my chest and my heart beats. She risks it all and, with the last bits of her mana, she pierces through my armor and defenses. We stand and push against each other. If she loses against me here, it will be her who dies, and she knows that for a fact. She also knows that inside my body, my control is even better thanks to my passives, traits, and constructs.

But she doesn't lose. She connects to my heart and makes it generate mana for her instead of me. All of my skills deactivate, the armor is gone, and I stagger back.

It's over so quickly.

With mana coating her hand, she holds it to my neck, still smiling.

"Still far from satisfactory, but it's enough for a Champion candidate."

Congratulations, you have been declared a Champion candidate by a person judged by the system to be capable of such a declaration!

I have lost, but out of all the losses I have suffered up until now, this feels the least upsetting.

Some time later Lissandra and I find ourselves sitting near the core of my Living Quarters where I've transported us with my anchor. After a bit of rest and sharing a bit of my mana with her through the black dagger, the mood feels awkward while we eat old rations and drink water.

"You do know you would have died if I hadn't used the dagger to heal you?" she mentions.

"It would have been fine." I wave it off with mana arms I still use while my body now regenerates with my passive. "What did you even do to that Saint's arm?"

Lissandra pulls the dagger made out of bones, flesh, and the orange eye of a Champion. It's creepy, very much so. Somehow it reminds me of that time on the 3rd floor when she was a fleshy brooch.

Such a cockroach queen.

“Did you just call me a cockroach queen?”

Huh? Can she read my mind?

“You just said it out loud, you do realize that, right?”

I really need to sleep.

“Yes, you do. As for the dagger, the arm of the Saint will be used as a base so that the healing function can prevent my body from rejecting it, while the eye will ignite and start the heart I intend to make for myself out of Niall’s. She had a Potency upgrade as well so it’s fitting.”

“I see,” I say while taking another sip of water.

All around us are the various chunks of metal, and items I’ve saved, along with a bunch of other stuff I collected. There is really a lot of stuff. I use the opportunity to pack them down while I watch the timer.

Not much time remains.

“You don’t want the Champion’s heart down in the pool of molten metal?” I ask.

“It doesn’t fit me. Do you want it?”

“Yes, but I don’t think I can get to it.”

“Neither can I, but in a few months, I should be able to do it easily. You reminded me of something nice today so I’ll grab it for you. If you grow well, it will be yours the next time we meet.”

“Months?”

“Yes, it’ll take at least that long to reach the palace where the Absolute lies and for me to prepare the heart to my standards. I also need to fully gain status for myself and a little kitten.”

I don’t even want to imagine how difficult it must be if it’s going to take so long for the cockroach queen.

“You said it again,” Lissandra says, sighing. “You didn’t get one of your skills to level 50.”

“You are right,” I respond.

Moving a bit closer to her, I offer her my mana hand and she puts her hand into it without hesitation.

Concentrating, I close my eyes and try to remember the feeling of what she did to me. It takes me a few attempts, but in the end, I mimic it just the tiniest bit, and a similar effect makes its way through her arm.

The cockroach is too rude to let it pass so it doesn’t affect her much and it’s nowhere powerful enough to disrupt her control over my mana. But it’s good enough as a starting point.

[Resonance - lvl 49 > Resonance - lvl 50]

“I guess you can’t kill me now,” I quip.

“I guess not.”

Something bounces off my chest, and as I catch it, I see a pouch containing a few mana stones.

“One of them contains a Restrictive Training Emblem. Break it and it will appear on your body. The second one contains more information on the mana shaping exercises I taught you. Just those three. The last one details a few improvements on Mana Cycling.”

“I see.”

“Yes,” she says simply.

And just like that, the time passes. There is no more training. No more fighting or conversation. We eat together, food and water placed on a square piece of clean cloth.

The timer ticks down and my two weeks under her tutelage are finished.

During this time, not even once did I call her my master, and not once did she call me her disciple. I’m sure she understands why.

“Say hello to Myrra from me,” I say as I stand up.

The entrance to the sixth floor appears next to me and looking at Lissandra, I guess she can see it. She can see it but not pass. But even that is something that will change.

“I will, little pup, and I will see you during that event in one year.”

The second tournament will for sure be interesting.

I look at her one more time. Her clothes are still scorched in places and torn where I damaged her. And even sitting, as she is, on the floor, she seems so dignified and confident.

“Cockroach,” I mutter quickly and grabbing my stuff, pass through the door.

Even then, a mana projectile burrows into my shoulder, but it was well worth it.

I'm still not done with her. The next time, I will kick her ass for everything she has done.

POV Myrra

As she said she would, Lady Lissandra returns without Nathaniel. It might be because I already have traveled with her for quite some time, but as far as I can tell she seems to be in a better mood than she was before.

"Did it go well?" I ask her.

"It exceeded expectations. And you? What do you think of your Ignition Wavelength Eye?"

I hesitate, looking at the eyeball in my hand, the eye of a Champion. A being I heard of only in legends. Being declared a Champion candidate by the matriarch so long ago doesn't change anything about the awe I have towards a being that has reached that level of power.

"I don't know yet..."

"Keep trying then."

"I will, Lady Lissandra."

She sits on the chair nearby, her eyes somewhat absent.

Led by curiosity, I finally ask, "Why did you treat him that way during these two weeks?"

When she doesn't respond, I think she might not answer, but in the end, her expression changes just a tiny bit. But before I can decipher it, it's back to normal.

And she doesn't answer my question.

"You know what's funny, little kitten? He didn't accept me as his master, not fully. That crazy Pride of his wouldn't let him."

Even saying that she doesn't seem to be disappointed.

"I'm a fake. My body isn't mine, most of my memories aren't mine: Even my original was a fake. It's so dumb it's almost laughable. But that stupid man doesn't care. He would treat me just the same as my original self."

"That sounds like him," I agree.

"Yes, and there is something even funnier in the way he thinks. My original was an Absolute, aiming for a higher rank. But, little kitten, me being here can mean only one thing. My original has failed. Otherwise, there is no way I would be here. And he, that man, doesn't want to accept such a failure as a master. He's challenging me to prove to him that I can do better than her."

After that, she doesn't say anything else. She just sits there and slowly, orbs appear around her. Each of them is as big as my fingernail.

At first, there are dozens of them, then a hundred.

These orbs float around her, each one having its own unpredictable frequency and ever-changing mana requirements to keep them from bursting or disappearing. I know these things well. Just a few are terrible to deal with.

Lady Lissandra seems to be more motivated than ever before as she trains.

For a moment, I think of that man and smile. Things never fail to be interesting with him around. It was a short time we spent together here, but I know it's not the last time. No, between him and Lady Lissandra, I'm sure our paths will cross again.

I will see you soon, Nathaniel.

POV The First Disciple of Nathaniel Gwyn, minion Vega

“Stop hiding!” I shout.

The presence that’s been following me for days still refuses to show itself. It doesn’t have a heart so it must be weak, but it’s good at hiding. Surely it’s a coward.

Maybe it’s one of those invisible monsters my master hates so much. Or maybe it’s part of Bambi’s curse.

Even so, it doesn’t attack so I continue through the forest. I need to find some monsters to fight. Gray lizards have started running away from me on sight recently, That’s a shame because they were really tasty. I wish I could eat them with master.

“Hello,” I hear a voice say.

My barrier surrounds me and I curse at myself. I didn’t sense anything. Master would be angry with me.

There, to the side, sits a woman on a boulder. She is young and has long red hair. Her eyes are yellow and they’re covered in a weird pattern. There is no heart beating in her chest.

“I’m just a projection, little minion, I do not have a heart,” she says with a smile.

“I’m not your minion,” I answer while collecting kinetic energy to use in the coming fight.

“I apologize, he always called you that and I wanted to try it. It sounded fun.” She continues to smile as she speaks.

“You know master?”

“Not personally, but I like to watch him sometimes. He is a very entertaining person.”

“Creep. What do you want from me?”

I blink and she stands in front of me and then squats, her eyes at a similar height to mine. She smells nice.

But how can she have a smell as a projection? What is a projection even?

“I won’t hurt you, don’t worry. But there is a very envious guy around who might try to. So I want to make sure you are safe from him and I will watch from a distance. If he tries to do anything, I will beat him up.”

“This doesn’t seem like watching from a distance.” What a silly human. Indeed, the master is the most reasonable person I have met so far.

“I got bored,” her teeth show in a smile.

“So you want to protect me against a bad guy. Why?” Master always said to ask many questions. It’s better to look dumb while asking a lot of them than not to ask and pretend to know.

“It’s complicated, but I promised the man whose eye you have, little half demon. That and I’m greedy too.”

“You don’t seem greedy.”

Her smile scares me even though it’s so pretty.

She moves her face closer and I can see the pattern in her yellow eyes, “That’s where you are wrong. You could even say that I’m the greediest person that ever existed.”

Her finger pokes my cheek, and I can feel it. Then I blink, and she is gone. I can't find her no matter how hard I try.

In the end, there is nothing I can do now, so I push it away. I can deal with it later.

I send my senses through the area and continue to search for monsters to fight. I need to become stronger.

All this trouble smells like Bambi's curse.

Chapter 406: Unique

I appear on the 6th floor with my arms still missing and a few other unhealed wounds. Though they're slowly being taken care of with the help of my passive.

I find myself in the exact place I left from, leaving me separated from the other members of group 4 including our silly healer. It will probably take a few days to get back to them.

Too tired to deal with anything at the moment, I send my domain as deep under the surface as possible, and find the hidey hole we made for our items. Inside is some arcane alloy, assorted materials, a few interesting mana stones, water, clothes, food, and more. Mostly my things, as the rest of the group took theirs.

I place an anchor and teleport there and light my way with a single orb, which I make to last for a day or two.

Before going to sleep, I check my stats for the first time in a long while. And they are beautiful.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty:Hell

Floor: 6 - Astral Prison

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

Lvl 250

Strength: 121

Dexterity: 115

Constitution: 272

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1054 + 1054

Primary Class: Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 50

Perception - Lvl 50

Redistribution - Lvl 50

Resonance - Lvl 50

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 43

Tether - Lvl 37

Infusion - Lvl 33

Mana Crown - Lvl 31

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 51

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: 156,638

I can now use my passive skill combination token. I can now check the stuff Lissandra left with me. I can now do Beyond's 3rd trial. But first, I need to sleep.

Using my [Tether], I let fresh air into the hidey hole. I wouldn't want to suffocate in here.

I set up defenses and traps, I strengthen the walls with mana and give it enough to hold out against all but the strongest of attacks. I also make orbs designed to burst and injure intruders in case someone tries to get in.

That should be enough to wake me up and trip up anyone who tries to disturb my sleep. Then I create another thermal orb which I position over my chest, allowing the heat to power my passive.

I fall asleep even before I fully close my eyes.

When I wake up, I open my eyes very slowly and let out a long yawn. Then I close my eyes again, grabbing one of the blankets nearby with a hastily constructed mana tentacle and pulling it over myself.

It feels almost too nice and cozy.

Well, until a scary thought enters my mind.

Did I have so much trouble and have to go so far to get my skills to level 50 because I didn't have the proper body upgrade? Did my body and mind fight the process because of the pressure the skills would put on me?

There is no way, right? But it's the cockroach we're talking about; she's more than capable of setting such messed-up rules just to push me that much further.

And another thing.

Lissandra didn't explain what black mana is. Did she "forget" on purpose because I called her a cockroach or something? She wouldn't be that petty, right? She was an Absolute; there must be some dignity in her, right?

Knowing her, she probably wouldn't have told me much anyway. I also decided not to use black mana for a while, maybe until I get my skills to level 60. It's already been proven that I need to work on my basics and grow without sacrificing everything in pursuit of black mana. It could be said that, at least for now, my black mana has been sealed away. Perhaps I should wrap some bandages around my left arm and seal it there.

Anyway, it all ended up fine. Training arc Nathaniel did pretty well, the scary jerk.

Checking the timer again, I find that nearly 24 hours have passed. Once again I yawn again and stretch, finally opening my eyes.

A few more thermal orbs float into the place and light it up while I eat some of the food reserves and start actively using thermal energy to heal my body.

Two evil orbs pop into existence over my shoulders, and I finally decide to use the token I wanted for a long time. I've just been waiting for the title of Champion candidate which even now shows in my status. I was hoping that the title, the sheer "achievement" of it, would improve the final offerings.

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.

"I want to sell Mana Overload Absorption."

Do you really want to sell the following item for 4220 shards?

Mana Overload Absorption (low epic)

Yes/No

I confirm, then I spend 32,465 to buy an upper epic passive skill I've been eyeing for a while and I think it will be nice to use in a skill combination.

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Passive Skill: Adaptive Defense (Upper Epic) - The user's defensive capabilities automatically adjust to counter the nature of incoming attacks, providing optimal resistance whether the threat is physical, magical, or elemental.

"I want to combine Adaptive Defense and Mana Reservoir," I say.

A feeling of a request for confirmation hits me, and when I do so, they disappear from my list of passives.

You have used your Passive skill combination token (Upper Epic) to combine Adaptive Defense (Upper Epic) and Mana Reservoir (Upper Epic).

Analyzing passive skills used in the combination.

Analyzing user performance up until now.

Several options have been devised.

Adjusting for Champion candidate status.

Creating a passive skill for the user.

Congratulations, you have obtained a Unique Epic passive skill!

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

The user's body passively channels mana from the reservoir into their kinetic responses, creating a feedback loop that adapts to physical impacts and nearby bursts of kinetic energy. When the user is struck or near a powerful energy source, their body can absorb the kinetic energy and store it as mana.

Okay, let's breathe it out. And stop trying to use [Focus] for your emotions. You haven't done it for over two weeks and you've already decided to use it very sparingly. Things seem to be working better that way.

Calmed down? Good, now read the description at least five times.

I do just that after checking my ex-Mana Reservoir, but the original effect doesn't seem to have been changed. It still can store three times my body's capacity for mana, but there is also something else like it's changed a bit.

There is one sentence in the new description that I really, really like. When the user is struck or near a powerful energy source, their body can absorb the kinetic energy and store it as mana.

There is, of course, something I don't like. I can absorb kinetic energy on my own and store it as kinetic energy. I can use it for defenses, I can even counterattack. I've even started actively training with it, and I'm getting a lot better. Just having some passive takeover for me, potentially with less efficiency, is just annoying, and I really don't like the implications.

However, there is that one thing that makes my frustrations disappear.

The ability to turn kinetic energy into mana.

I mean, the heck? Should I have that? Isn't it illegal? Isn't it too good?

Of course, I need to get hit for the passive to activate, and the efficiency might be poor. I could find myself wasting a lot of mana to turn kinetic energy into mana to the point where it may not be worth it.

I still wouldn't care though.

For the first time, I've found a way to turn one of my primordial energies into mana.

So far, I've only been able to take my own mana, run it through my Thermokinetic Mana Heart, and convert it into one of my primordial energies with a little help from [Redistribution].

This is huge. I mean, really, really huge. Wasn't Laten the Champion supposed to have been so strong because he could convert thermal energy into the mana they used to run the ignition station?

Of course, I have no expectation that my thing is anywhere near as good, but I know for sure that if I'm getting it now, there is a huge chance that it's going to influence my future class options, traits, and passives. I may even get something better in the future. I'm only level 250 anyway, so it's obvious it wouldn't be Champion-level.

But I also have to wonder if attaining the title of Champion candidate really helps all that much? Did having 5 skills at level 50 allow the system to improve what I got? Maybe my subclass affected it. Maybe the cockroach knew that and... well, whatever. Good stuff.

If the efficiency is any good I can probably overload my heart a bit, in much the same fashion that almost killed me on the third floor. That way maybe I could force my passive to work constantly and gain another source of mana.

Wouldn't that be perfect? There would be no damage, I could go more wild with that construct and would still get the bonus.

For that, I will need to do some testing with efficiency. But first, I check the rest of the notifications from my declaration of Championship.

Congratulations, you have been declared Champion candidate by a person judged by the system to be capable of such a declaration!

You may now challenge beings with a similar rank to yours, beings such as Candidates, Disciples, Vessels, and more.

The both sides can set wagers.

The terms of any challenge shall be agreed upon by both parties, and there will be heavy penalties for breaking them.

All wagers shall be overseen by the system itself.

So I can engage in duels with other Candidates?

I wonder if I can bet my stats and passives? It's an interesting thought in any case.

But I can also see it being abused. Let's say some dying Champion wants to pass on some skill or other to a son or daughter who was a Candidate. Would, in such a case, the Champion be able to throw a challenge after wagering his status to pass it along?

It's a very interesting thought and something I should consider more.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I'm back on the sixth floor.

Knight (Hell, group 4) -wow, so you didn't die in the end.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -weren't you trying to become my minion? Be nicer.

Knight (Hell, group 4) -I gave up.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -food!

Noname (Hell, group 4) -hello bud! I hope you're eating well.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -food! Food!

Noname (Hell, group 4) -I'll speak with them when we regroup.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -Hey! I bet you need healing.

I check my partially missing hands and some of the slower healing wounds. It doesn't seem all that bad, my passive is helping a lot now that it's actually working. Though I still remember Lissandra stabbing me with that dagger made of Saint's arm and the champion's eye.

Being the cockroach that she is, she didn't heal me much, though she said it saved my life, something I strongly disagree with. Such wounds are barely worth mentioning.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -no healing needed. Sset, are you here?

Sset (Hell, group 4) -yes. Are you at the spot we were when you left?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -yes, exact same spot.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -that's perfect. Can you destroy a small fort for me? The highest level there should be close to 300.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Tell me where to go.

After finishing my conversation with Tess and others, I check the timer. I have two days to reach the place.

The plan is simple. Tess and the others will attack the Black Tower where Dennis and Aaron are still being held. They will deal with the leader there. A combination of Tess, Lily, and Sophie should be able to do so quite easily. Their next step will be to deal with everyone else trying to get in their way.

I know it's not that simple, and Tess, Maya, and Sophie probably prepared some cool, complicated plan to pull it off.

Meanwhile, my job will be to take out a place called the Bone Fortress. It's exactly what it sounds like, a fortress built around the rib cage of some giant, long-dead monster.

The Bone Fortress and Black Tower tend to cooperate a lot, so Tess is worried they might send help through a portal or something. That's where I come in, to mess these guys up before they do.

I will fly there as it's in the opposite direction of the Black Tower. While flying, I will practice a bit and get used to some of my new skills. And I will open up some of the "gifts" Lissandra gave me. Then, when I reach it, I will attack when Tess gives the signal. During my attack, I will test the new passive, the difference in handling my mana, and how much I've grown. I certainly hope they have a strong guy or two.

When it's all done and the twins are free and group 4 is safe, I will go and do Beyond's 3rd trial. I can sacrifice a day or two before going. That should also be enough time for my body to finish healing.

My crown is already active and being filled with mana. It should be able to collect a decent amount before I reach the Bone Fortress.

Chapter 407: Bone Fortress

I don't really have all that many items on me, I left most of them back in the hidey hole deep underground, I've only kept the most valuable ones on my person. For example, the stones I was given by Lissandra. As I fly I study the improvements she made to Mana Cycling. At the same time, I also do the mana exercises she showed me, focusing on the evil orb that I'm currently maintaining.

I thought of triggering the mana stone that would give me a Restrictive Training Emblem but knowing the cockroach queen it would immediately activate and nearly kill me. She wouldn't be so lax as to include an easy way to control it or change the difficulty. So I decide to use it after Beyond's 3rd trial.

Going by my conversations with Lissandra, I have a strong suspicion that Beyond is an actual place I go to before returning to Hell difficulty. It's an extremely dangerous place, but it's also very rewarding, despite the fact that just being there takes a lot out of you. Well, I'll see very soon.

Anyway, my flight passes quite nicely and I find the Bone Fortress right where Tess told me it would be.

I come upon dozens of buildings coiling around what seems to be the rib cage of some giant monster.

It's still night and the cold tears through me and in the sky offers the most beautiful starry view I ever saw, particularly with the purple nebula covering a huge part of the sky. Holding to the same pattern as before, the monsters don't seem to come out during the night so I don't even meet any on my way to the fortress.

As I close in on their fortifications I detect something that reminds me of a mana web enclosing their perimeter. A veritable mesh of weird threads all laced together and marks left hanging in the air. The bulk of it seems to be sensor arrays set to trigger a host of nasty traps. Many of them are sensitive to mana, some are tailored to detect heat or movement, and some seem to work in more peculiar ways.

My Mana Wavelength Irises activate and with a bit of help from [Resonance], I pass through the defenses and land on the ground. I have to repeat these steps multiple times, finding it interesting to see how others set their defenses.

In the end, they'll turn out to be nothing too special, just a first line of defense, not really meant to stop people from entering, just a measure for detecting large groups and significant spikes of mana. Of course, as I move closer I sense more of them, some are hidden deep underground, and others are embedded in the boulders along the way.

Thanks to my efforts, I manage to enter the place fairly easily without anyone seeming to care. At first, it confuses me a bit but soon I notice groups of people and individuals going in and out at all times.

There isn't a huge number of people here, a few hundred at most. Plenty of them are level 200 and higher and I notice a few with level over 250 too.

"Who are you and where are you from, human?" one man says, interrupting my musings with his hand on my arm, and the tips of his fingers burying themselves into my body in a clear attempt to hurt me.

I look down at the stunningly short man and notice something strange about his legs, they're scaled.

[Skybreaker - lvl ??]

So around 270? And some races I haven't met till now. Did he sense me entering and took an interest?

I move and he moves as well, desperately trying to react to my movement. Even so, I'm faster, and with my body boosted by kinetic energy, I grab his arm and twist it, dislocating it. I let his punch hit my chest and watch with interest, as the resulting kinetic energy is absorbed and turned into mana in some extremely complicated fashion before flowing into my reservoir.

The efficiency is much better than I expected. Though it didn't absorb the full force of the blow and some percentage of the force still dealt damage, but it's still fascinating to watch. Other than giving me free mana, it seems to be really good passive protection against blunt physical attacks. Though I don't know how well it would fare against an edged weapon with a smaller point of impact.

My attacker rouses his mana and I pull him closer, still holding his arm. Unable to resist, he staggers towards me and my left hand hits his chin, sending a burst of kinetic energy through his skull and he staggers back.

Neither of us is using much mana in an effort to avoid affecting our surroundings.

I let him hit me several times, observing my unique epic passive in action.

It is fabulous, it is beautiful and I think I'm in love. It's amazing passive defense and it also allows me to gain more mana. If I can make my body stronger to endure physical damage I could manage to continue fighting entirely without mana, the passive restoring my reserves as I absorb blows.

So I will try to mimic Potency with black mana, mimic Regeneration with this passive, and have Amplification as my attribute upgrade.

The system is indeed fair and beautiful.

With another punch, I send the man staggering back with a bloodied face. Yet even so, he smiles.

"You're not bad, for a human," he says, bearing his teeth.

The atmosphere around him changes and I see him getting ready to kill. There is no hesitation on his face.

Everyone in this place is a murderer or something worse, this moon serving as a dumping ground for them. There is also an effect covering the entire moon making it impossible for anything other than monsters to be born here. It's something I learned from the others.

So there is no real reason to be hesitant.

The man doesn't say anything else and attacks, his body radiating some field that seems to have oscillating effects. Anything that touches it gets destroyed. The stone under his feet starts crumbling, a

wall of the building begins to crumble. Even some of the mana I left in the air crumbles and gets destroyed.

My [Resonance] supported by my eyes sees through it and when he reaches me his field has no effect, my skill countering it easily, much to his surprise.

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His head gets separated from his body by a quickly forming long dagger.

[You have defeated Skybreaker - lvl 273]

When I look around there are a few people watching the fight but no one seems to mind. Many of them just laugh and a small group even seem to exchange currency, seems like there were bets on the result of the fight.

“Mister, mister, are you going to take the body? If you don't want to deal with it I can take it. I'll pay one small pouch of bone dust, there are even a few small pieces in it!” An older man chirps, rapidly approaching with long arms and legs. He's very thin and his long hair is messy. His eyes are nervously ticking from side to side.

I remember the people grinding the bones of the giant serpent that were resting against the pyramid and to hear him tell it it might be the same here.

“Sure, why not.” I say, reaching out with my hand, and as the man shows his crooked smile and starts giving me the pouch I add, “If the bone dust is fake I will find you. I've already marked you.”

That makes him stop and I can sense his heart beating widely.

When I move my hand to grab the pouch he quickly pulls it back and giggles, “My bad, mister! I was about to give you the wrong one!”

The pouch he gives me this time is smaller and he watches as I take it. There is a dagger coated with poison strapped to his body and I see his hand twitching towards it.

Before he grabs it his eyes meet mine and I return his gaze.

Very slowly he lets his arms fall along his body. Instead, he turns to the corpse and goes through the pockets.

"Here, mister." He gives me all of the things he finds in them and grabs the legs of the body, quickly pulling it away.

I take a look at the items I received but most of them aren't even worth mentioning. Only the bone dust seems somewhat interesting and I add it to my bag with the increasing number of curious things I can live without.

There is also a bag with very valuable items such as the alloy from Nevan, mana stones from Lissandra, and some interesting pieces of metal. I also have Flamebearer strapped to my back. I thought of taking a voidsteel blade with me as I still have a few of them I didn't sell, but I decided against it and left them in the hidey hole for future experiments along with some of the other metals.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I'm at the place

Soph (Hell, group 4) - Sset is busy. You're early. We're due to start in around 18 hours.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I will locate the portal in the meantime and examine the place.

Soph (Hell, group 4) - good idea. But they might have a backup they can activate if the original one fails so please hold off on destroying it until we attack.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - fuck I can't wait to deal with these shits.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - make sure to take as much revenge as you can. If they escape try to mark them for us to hunt later.

Soph (Hell, group 4) - as if they could ever escape Sset, she could snipe them from miles away. I will also try to find the Black Tower's portal and we destroy it in sync with you Noname. Not one of the fuckers will be escaping.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - language!

I ignore the rest of the conversation and turn off the Community. A small group of people has gathered before me, this time they're all human. All three of them.

Their levels are lower than mine, but I sense five more signatures nearby. Most of them feel ready for a fight.

I don't know why but it feels weirdly comfortable. So far no one has shown me even a hint of goodwill and everyone I've met has been dead set on robbing, killing, or scamming me. For some twisted reason, I can't help but enjoy that.

I continue wordlessly on my way, without any concern for the trio blocking that direction. My mana rouses itself within my body along with the energies stored in my core.

They just curse, jumping out of my way. Even so, none of them attack me, they even hold their mana secure inside of their bodies, as the ones trying to hide follow suit.

Somehow I can't help but feel a bit disappointed but I continue to delve deeper into the Bone Fortress. At the same time, I carefully send my senses into the area. I can't really attack the place before I find the teleporting array. I don't think I could quickly get rid of everyone without at least a few of them sensing me preparing to attack.

If I were to try they would probably use the array and move to the Black Tower which would only cause trouble for the rest of my group.

Sure, there are ways to deal with it. I could just use the array to follow them to the Black Tower but there's also a chance they would destroy it to keep me from doing so. It's not much trouble so I can wait the 18 hours Sophie requested.

And it's interesting most of the people here don't seem to mind my active [Mana Crown]. I get a few looks but it's probably being thought of as a bluff, they probably don't sense the amount of mana I've already stored inside.

There is also another reason I have it active though. I'm hoping to fish out someone who knows what it is so I can ask questions and learn more about it. That would be nice.

As I reach one of the taller rib bones, the one with the least buildings around I stop for a moment. A presence that's followed me ever since I entered the fortress is still there, following me while staying out of sight.

The bone is white and the surface is extremely smooth, either it's always been like this, or every bone has been scraped of imperfections on the surface to be turned into that bone dust. I poke it a few times and send my senses inside, finding, to my surprise, that the bone is even more mana conductive than I expected.

Estimating the level of the being it belonged to is difficult but I would say something akin to the remains of the snake resting on the pyramid.

Creating a dagger out of my mana I make it very dense and as sharp as possible. The dagger ends up noticeably heavy and not far off from being turned into a tricolored bomb. Even so, I can't even slightly damage the bone. The dagger's tip just grinds against the surface and there isn't even a scratch left behind.

That might be why it seems to be used as currency here. I wonder what they use it for.

I activate my eyes and [Resonance] for a moment and create the sharpest edge I can on my dagger.

It takes a decent chunk of my mana and even some kinetic energy but bit by bit I cut into the bone and after a few minutes cut off a piece as long as my finger. Quickly storing it away I rouse my mana again and reach to cut out more.

“That’s enough,” the voice from behind me sounds, my creepy stalker.

[Ember Knight - lvl ??]

The man is short, barely reaching my chest. Interestingly though his legs aren't human-like; they resemble those of a lizard, slim, nimble, and covered in black scales. Otherwise, he seems fairly normal.

When I do not answer he continues, “I have been watching you ever since you came and have a few questions. Where are you from? Who sent you? What is your name, and position? Who are you looking for and how the hell did you manage to remove such a big piece of bone so quickly? Answer.”

Like the others before him, he’s posturing rather aggressively. It's not that he’s underestimating me, instead, like the men before, he just feels wild, ready to attack even an enemy stronger than himself.

Even so, I push my annoyance with the man away. Just for a few more hours or until I find the array. I'm searching for it even now.

“I'm from Ruminous Border. My name is Elydor,” I introduce myself.

Chapter 408: Should it be so easy?

“Good, so Elydor, are you going to come with me or do I have to make you?” he asks threateningly.

He even releases a burst of heat into the air around him. Not unlike Isabella's blue flames, though his have a hint of white at the center.

It's not bad at all. Laughable after what I just went through, but not bad. He even seems to have a trait or two supporting those flames.

Curious to see where it takes me, I answer, “I'll come along peacefully.”

“Good, give me the bone you took first,” he says with a greedy look in his eyes as he reaches his hand towards me.

Should I deal with him right now?

“What are you waiting for? Want to attack me?” he smirks. “Do it and we’ll see how you will deal with my flames and defensive enchantments. Now give me that bone and the pouch with the dust. The ax too.” His smile grows bigger with each word and I can see how much he hopes I snap and try to attack him.

“Sure, here,” I say as I place an anchor on each of the items as I hand them over.

I observe him but the man with lizard legs doesn't even notice my anchors as he greedily takes it all. I watch as he swings Flamebearer and sends his blue flames through, extremely happy with the weapon.

“Why not?” I shrug and get to it while he watches me.

We then spend an hour doing just that.

After a while, I find a better way to do it and my dagger cuts through much smoother. I don't even use my eyes so he can't see them now.

The more time passes, the more his bearing changes from arrogant at the start to wary and arrogant at the end. The weirdo even seems to feel a sense of danger but enjoys the experience nonetheless.

As he takes a few pieces of bone from me, I see his eye flicker to the crown over my head. There's a lot of mana collecting under his skin, as his skills prepare for instant activation.

“I could get a few more,” I offer.

“How do you still have mana, do you even... forget about it. No word about this to Uros or I will fuck you up. And go first. I will point you where to go. If you try anything, I will kill you.”

“Noted,” I say and ask a question as I start walking where he pointed. “So what are these bones and what do you use them for?”

“Obviously they came from a powerful monster. You're asking very suspicious questions.”

“I'm new here and we didn't hear about this place, so I know barely anything. You're using it as currency though?”

On our way, I take notice of a few more people of this man's race. It seems like the only people around are them and the humans. The atmosphere feels cutthroat even though there seems to be some sort of organization, some acting as guards while others bustle about on their way out of the fortress on some errand or other.

Often there are smaller fights where blood is drawn, and going by the reactions of the people around us, they seem to be a common thing.

“We're going to have a lot of questions for you,” he laughs cruelly. “These bones are from powerful monsters so of course they have many uses. For enchanting, for inscriptions, mana conductive paint, some junkies love to mix them with mana and snort them.”

“Seems like fun.”

“Sure, if you want to mess up your brain.”

“Got it, so who's Uros? The boss around here?”

“Yes, when you meet him, don't ask questions and stay quiet. He'll probably beat you up a bit but if you play your cards well, he'll at least spare your life so you can continue to carve out bone pieces for us.”

“You don't have enough people of your own?”

That gets a laugh out of him, “Most of the peeps can barely get bone dust out of them even with the items. For others, it would take weeks to get what you got in hours. You must be a crafter, right? We had a guy like you a while back, and he was also able to get a lot of bone quickly. For you it's a shame you had to get caught by me, but it's good for me. You're going to make me fucking rich.”

I don't even bother answering and scan further out instead.

My senses have improved a lot, and it's easier to detect mana without being noticed. Even my anchors confirm that given the way, this lizard-legged man didn't notice them even while holding the items. But the system always likes to increase the difficulty, so I'd rather not get too cocky.

He kicks me from behind, “Faster. You have long legs, so why are you so slow?”

Does he really think so much of these defenses? Is he just provoking me to see my reaction? Is he dumb?

My mind is then taken by something else. A dozen or so guards in front of the nicest-looking building around, its foundations resting against the bone with the largest inscriptions painted on the surface. It seems to be connected to most of the defenses he mentioned, and I wonder if the array is somewhere nearby.

I should let them bring me inside, and I might be able to detect the array when I get closer.

“Ren, give him a suppression mark. No, give him two, just in case, and make sure they're well-placed. Then add a suppression bracelet,” the lizard-legged man barks at one of the guards, a woman of the same race.

“Are you sure? He doesn't seem that strong.”

“Just fucking do it. This human creeps me out; he's barely changed his expression ever since I met him.”

"Aren't all humans like that?" Ren asks, and followed by two men by her side, she reaches me.

"This one's weird."

"Got it," Ren nods and then turns to me. "Your arms, human, and don't fight it or it will hurt a lot."

"Sure," I say, presenting my arms, and she takes some device from her pocket. A round piece of bone as big as my palm. Its entire surface is covered with dense inscriptions. It seems to be made from the bones surrounding us.

As she puts it in the palm of my hand, I testingly create an anchor on its surface, and she doesn't even seem to notice that.

Right after, the item activates and sends a scorching pain through my body. It feels similar to the Burden Enhancement Inscriptions Lissandra created for me. But where I could use kinetic energy to move in her inscription, now I can't do much.

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Every time I want to use a bit of my mana, it feels like I have to fight against waves crashing onto my body.

As annoying as the feeling is, I find it interesting as well. Maybe it could be used for training.

"Damn it, it took nearly all of my mana just to activate the mark and it's still not enough. Who the hell did you bring us, Evvran?" Ren staggers back a bit, seeming lightheaded.

In reaction to her statement, the others touch their weapons, and I guess only my calm behavior stops them from attacking.

“You’re useless, Ren,” Evvran hisses, and still holding my Flamebearer, he kicks up my leg. “This man is spineless. A coward, but a useful coward. Most likely some pampered weirdo with one or two useful skills. Lirim, Otek, you two go and use suppression marks and give them to me.”

They do just as they are told, and soon a second and third waves wash over me. Even Lirim and Otek seem to have problems with their mana, barely able to place their marks. Evvran then takes the three round pieces of bone and puts them into his pocket and examines me.

Satisfied with the result, he puts bracelets on my wrists that add to the suppressing effect placed on me.

Everyone seems to be a bit more relieved after that, and we head inside the building.

The stone of the halls within is roughly hewn. But interestingly enough, the walls are painted with lines reminiscent of inscriptions. The lines are white, likely mixed with bone dust from the monster’s bones.

Their usage fascinates me. Are they doing it because it makes paint more effective, or is it cheaper than using ground mana stones? Are there different materials you could use?

“He keeps looking around, do you think he is a spy?” one of the men asks.

“If he is, then he really sucks at it. Evvran noticed him almost instantly,” with a laugh, another one answers.

“But he has to be decent, right? He even has a crown.”

“It might be fake or one of the common ones. Hey, you jerk, what is your crown called?”

“[Water Crown],” I try. It’s blue, so it should be able to trick them.

To my surprise, it seems to shock some of them, and Evvran puts a hand on my shoulder. “You said [Water Crown]?!” the greed in his eyes seems to be even bigger than before with bone pieces.

Is water maybe very valuable here?

"I lied, it's a [Mana Crown]," I say instead.

That gets me a round of laughter, and someone kicks at my legs from behind, copying Evvran.

"Fucking funny. Next time, pick something more reasonable. Phe! Some random guy with a crown for one of the attributes, sure." Evvran continues to laugh. "But don't worry, we'll get our answers out of you."

"Are you sure, Evvran? He seems too calm for my taste." Ren says, seeming wary. "It took a lot of effort to use the suppression bone on him. We should kill him while we can."

"Even if he is dangerous, it's too late now, isn't it? Even the boss can't handle three suppression bones, and we also gave him two bracelets."

Ren seems to be the smartest out of the bunch, so she tries again, "There are people who could do that, Evvran. Don't forget...."

"None of them would let me do this," Evvran smirks and kicks me again. "And they are too important to visit rural places like ours."

As if to confirm his statement, he kicks me again.

That's when we exit the hallway and enter the room, one side of which is entirely made out of bone. In the middle of that room, there is also an array, its design similar to the ones on the 4th floor. Looking at the inscriptions, I would say it's a two-way array, similar to those I've already seen. And from what Tess said, it probably leads to the Black Tower.

Curious, I watch as Ren and Evvran split from the group and go talk to the man who has lizard-like legs as well and is of a similar height to the others. They wildly gesture something, and Evvran shows him a pouch with bone dust and the few pieces of bone I got. I notice that Evvran only shows part of what I cut off, the rest hidden in his pockets. I find it very amusing.

Ren, on the other side, is probably trying to warn him as she gestures to me while handing the man three suppression bones and seeming to explain.

The leader then takes Flamebearer from Evvran, greedy excitement creeping across his face, though in a much more controlled manner than his underling.

When they are done talking and he moves closer to me, his expression is more careful.

“Who are you?” he asks a simple question.

[Blaze Templar - lvl ??]

This one feels closer to level 300 than Evvran.

“My name is Elydor, and I'm a Champion candidate from Ruminous Border,” I say, deciding to try a different approach.

As I say these words, there is that weird feeling that's hard to describe. As if the system reacts to my declaration.

“Fuck,” Evvran and others shout as they react, their mana firing up and weapons sliding out of their holsters.

“I see, it's nice to meet you, Elydor. So, what the hell are you looking for here, and where are you from?” Uros says. I can see that he is nervous, but he is trying to act calm in front of his men.

I guess showing weakness could end badly for him in a place like this, but the mood is still very tense.

Instead of answering, I ask, “Why do you trust my claim of being a Champion candidate?”

For a moment, he looks confused but then laughs, a relieved laugh coming from a few others as well.

"You must be a very new candidate. Did your master not teach you anything? Your body also smells weak," he sniffs. "Are you maybe an enchanter?"

"Maybe."

"Well then, Elydor. If you weren't one, you wouldn't be able to introduce yourself as a Candidate." Even as he says this, I can feel multiple inscriptions activating all over the place - the defenses they were talking about. All of the guards are also rousing their mana.

"I met a guy calling himself a Champion when he wasn't," I mention.

That gets another laugh out of some of them. As if reacting to something dumb I said.

"He is so clueless it's almost cute," Evvran smirks, but as he tries to act tough, I can hear his voice shake, just a little bit

"To put it simply, there is a huge difference between a declaration as you just did and spreading rumors. But enough of your questions. You will tell me what you are doing in my fortress." his voice gradually becomes louder, and with it, the feeling of pressure on me increases.

"Sure, but one more question. Should it be so easy to take these things off?" I ask showing him my hands, as the bracelets fall from my wrists.

Instantly, screams erupt, and something holds me in place - the Fortress's defenses, activated by the people in the room.

Blue flames with a white core surround me, Evvran pressing the attack first, the flames blazing around him with impressive heat. Someone like Isabella would probably have trouble dealing with them.

The suppression bones in the leader's hands crack one after another, each one crumbling into dust, and with each one destroyed, his face becomes paler and his red flames surround him defensively.

My mana floods my body and then radiates out of it, encompassing the entire room. A few of the weaker guards start vomiting, and the stronger ones move erratically, the attacks tearing chunks out of the ground as they land all around me and tumble off the barrier I create.

I use [Redistribution] and grab a hold of Evvran.

My items and Flamebearer fly from his body, as I use [Tether] and my anchors left on the items to pull them.

Unable to move at all, Evvran watches me with a horrified expression. His only defense the flames encompassing his body.

Thermal energy seeps out of me, golden flames meeting his blue and white ones. They barely clash, and my flames envelop them, pressure them, and dissipate them. My flames then surround him, and while he stands there, they start burning him.

I watch as they melt his skin and flesh, and bite into bones while his flames keep firing up, trying to fight back only to be extinguished by my own.

In the end, he is unable to do anything, and the golden flames devour him entirely.

The annoying feeling I had is now gone, and I turn to the others in the room, my mana flashing in the air as it clashes with the attacks.

Chapter 409: Start of the 3rd Trial

POV Black Tower

Something moves on the edge of our detection web and I quickly send a signal to the headquarters and reposition to another balcony with stronger defenses. Mieru's already waiting.

“What did you see?” he asks me quickly.

“I don't know yet, but I asked the headquarters to check it.”

After a while, a signal comes back with a declaration of danger level 5, the lowest one. It seems they think it might be a monster.

“Did you get scared of a tiny little monster? Did you...” Mieru doesn't finish his words and disappears from my sight.

I turn to the right and find his body, head pierced through with a javelin and pinned deep into the reinforced wall.

Something like this shouldn't...

Whistling noises pierce the air along with something like a crack of lightning and then the world turns black.

The signal indicates a danger level 2, just a few seconds after it was declared level 5. Very serious, most likely another group attacking us.

“What the hell!” someone shouts pointing with a finger.

I follow the direction of his gaze and there, suspended high in the air, are a multitude of huge stones. Each of them is as big as a building but they look as if they weigh nothing.

Then they start falling at an ever-increasing speed.

“Barriers!”

“Someone shoot them!”

“Activate defenses!”

Multiple orders are given at once, but it's all for naught, because the sheer inertia and weight of the stones breaks through our hastily constructed defenses, breaking through multiple walls and buildings.

Afterward, a rain of blue flames drops from the sky.

The only thing they burn is people, causing no damage at all to anything else.

“Where are the guards? Why are barriers not in place? Why...”

From the rubble, steps a single woman. Her expression is unnervingly calm even as she strides through the destruction and mayhem.

Beautiful blue armor envelops her body as a sword of radiant blue mana materializes in her hand. A few javelins hover just above her shoulders, while a small shield, also made of mana, rests in her other hand.

A few guys work together in well practiced formation and a disrupting wave crashes against her to no avail. She just shakes it off.

With the same expression on her face, the armor turns darker blue and she disappears from my sight, the floor cracking under her feet.

The world around me spins and I watch as my headless body falls to the ground while the woman moves on to someone else.

POV Black Tower

“What’s happening here? Where are the barriers? Why...” I freeze and look around.

The control room is completely trashed, barely anything remains in one piece. It's almost like something exploded in here and the bodies of the assholes that were supposed to be defending it have been scattered about in unceremonious heaps. Standing in the middle of the room is a single creature.

It's small, barely reaching my knees, and is it wearing clothes?

I manipulate my mana, and spikes made from the densest earth I can muster pierce the ground. Behind me, I hear others rushing in, just as surprised as I am.

Purple mana surrounds the creature and it turns to us.

An astounding amount of mana radiates from it and moves to a single point where it compresses into an orb which quickly turns white. The last thing I hear is someone calling me an asshole.

POV Black Tower

"I would start running if I were you."

"Yeah dickhead, run away."

"Shut up, both of you!" I scream at the twins. Unlike our other prisoners, they can't seem to stop giggling while this chaos ensues.

"Oriel, what's happening?" asks one of the good-for-nothings I'm working with.

"Fuck if I know, we're under attack. Danger level 1."

"Is it really that fucking bad?"

"Of course it is, you dumb fuck, now shut..."

The doors open and I redirect my weapon, but the newcomer is Kelen, who's supposed to be keeping guard just outside.

"What are you doing here? Any further orders?" I ask her.

She shakes her head and glances over at the annoying twins. She even smiles for a moment and takes a few steps towards me.

"What do you want?" I ask, letting mana seep into my body.

As she puts her hand on me I look down at her.

Why are her eyes a different color than usual?

Before I can react, gray mana flashes out of her, and then, nothing.

POV Black Tower

The wave of mana encompasses the entire building with a speed that surprises even me and it starts interfering with our defenses.

Out of the windows, I see flashes of lightning, and any one of our men who tries to escape finds themselves pinned by lightning-fast javelins. They move at such speed they break through any defense. They even come from so far and yet no one seems capable of detecting them.

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The control room for the defensive array is destroyed, I'm getting no signal from guards on the walls. Everything is a fucking mess.

“Defend the entrance, I will activate the array and we’ll escape. Plaid, go and take the emergency rations and as much as you can from the treasury.”

I turn away and start working on the array leading to Bone Fortress. Those scaly midgets will surely make me eat it, but it's better than the other option.

While I’m working on that I notice that something seems to be wrong with the array. It still works and we can move to Bone Fortress but teleportation from the Bone Fortress to here seems to have been disabled on their end.

Weird.

“Why are you not fucking moving...” I ask, turning back to the room realizing that I can’t hear them working on the evacuation. Even the treasury and emergency rations are still locked.

As if frozen in time, all of them stand with their eyes wide open. All ten of my strongest men.

Then, one after another, they start killing themselves.

One grabs a dagger and stabs it into his eye. Another one detonates a fire orb in his own face. Another starts tearing chunks out of his neck with his bare hands, blood flowing from the wounds like a waterfall.

Plaid seems to be trying to fight it but even he fails in this task and I watch as he grabs his head and starts twisting until he breaks his own neck.

Then I feel the pressure reach toward me. I find myself unable to move, and at the same time, lightning pierces through one of the walls - something that shouldn’t be possible.

My skill activates, and dozens of my invisible mana arms move, slowing the lightning down and defending me against another attack from behind.

I protect my mind and, with a lot of effort, push that presence away. What is a mind mage even doing here? I thought they were all locked in their own goddamn city in the central region.

Ignoring the items or rations I jump through the active array and destroy it so they can't follow behind.

Appearing in the Bone Fortress I stop in shock.

Most of the room is melted and destroyed, there I find the remains of the scaly midgets I once knew, and all of them are very dead.

My senses extend throughout the entire fortress, but only a few seem to be alive. Buildings all over the fortress have been destroyed, cut cleanly to pieces, and evaporated, and just these few presences remain, hiding in the city. And the kicker is that all of this seems to have been done with extreme cold-blooded efficiency.

By the man in the room with me. A man standing with his back turned to me next to the rib bone that makes up an entire wall of the room.

At his feet is a pile of bone shards. The amount of which would have taken the entire fortress weeks, maybe months to produce. An immense amount of wealth.

And that man ignores me and continues to cut with a dagger made out of mana.

"Just a moment and I'll get to you."

Too shocked to react I continue building up my defenses.

He has some sort of crown and I can't identify which, but it doesn't matter. In one versus one combat against someone within my reach, I don't think I will lose.

"Thanks for waiting," he says, finally turning around.

His eyes, one brown and the other gray, reflect a calm expression, barely showing any emotion.

So, is he a concentration skill user as well?

“You know, it was rude of you to destroy the array right after you used it. I get that you did it to keep them from following, but it's annoying nonetheless.”

My attack crashes against his barrier and then another and another one. He blocks all of them while keeping that same calm expression on his face.

His mana moves and crashes into my own barrier, immediately followed by the most powerful attempts to disrupt it I've ever felt in my life. I barely manage to endure and face it with my own counterattack, contesting his attempts until they nullify each other.

A dozen projectiles shoot away from his body and I weave the air around me, making them miss and crash right behind me.

I reach for the amulet and break it, as an immense amount of mana I had stored floods the area around my body. I create a hundred invisible arms of mana and reach through the air. Some of them tear chunks from the ground and throw them at him, others attack him directly. The arms are impossible to see with the naked eye and I know how terrifying they are.

I aim for the neck, some of the arms turning sharp and thrusting for the jugular, and others go to grab his limbs. They cannot be seen, they cannot be sensed and they cannot be disrupted.

Golden circles appear in the man's eyes and in an instant, multiple layers of dark blue barriers surround him, creating a spherical defense.

I create disrupting orbs and fire them off as well; they splash against the barrier and stick to it, slowly corroding it. It's only a question of time as I get to him and my arms also pummel against the barrier.

“That's surprising, I can't even see or sense your attack. What's the name of that skill?” he asks.

Ignoring him, I push further and break another amulet, more mana surrounding me and powering my arms.

Good, in terms of mana, I should win. Just a bit longer and...

The air shakes and reverberates. The barrier around him crumbles as if under immense pressure and the crown over his head disappears as well, causing even more mana to radiate from him.

He lifts his hand and a small orb hovers over it, the amount of mana it contains sending a shiver down my spine. That mana is being quickly compressed with astonishing speed and control. The orb turns pitch black and even from where I am, I feel my mana being pulled away. I find myself unable to move at all, held by some skill of his.

My mana arms disappear at shocking speed, the mana they contain sucked into the orb as it hungrily devours everything in its reach. There is no stopping it.

The barrier on my skin cracks and gets sucked in as well, the remaining amulets on my person breaking as the mana is torn free and absorbed.

With a final surge of effort, I use what remains, trying to disrupt the orb, but it's futile. The orb absorbs everything, leaving me utterly depleted. My vision blurs, the edges darkening as the last of my mana leaves me, mere scraps remaining inside my body.

He doesn't even look at me, instead observing the black orb he made.

I feel a thud in my chest and looking down, half my body is missing. Falling to the ground, my eyes stay on the ceiling until it blacks out.

Nathaniel's POV

After dealing with the dude, I watch the array, but no one comes through, which confirms my suspicion that he blocked it before he came here.

He couldn't have been the leader of the Black Tower, could he? He was terribly weak and other than an invisible attack that would have made a nice party trick and the corrosive orbs he stuck to my barriers, he didn't show much.

I open the community.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - you got him? The leader escaped and he destroyed the array.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -I got the guy, no problems here. Your side?

Sset (Hell, group 4) -everything here is fine. NotAaron and NotDennis are safe, Knight and Grumpy are mopping up the rest. I had Soph check the array, but she doesn't think she could fix it.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -that's fine then. Say hello to the others, I'll be doing the 3rd trial as planned.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -will do. Take care.

I close the Community and turn my attention to the black orb. I still don't plan to use it for a while, even though I've come to realize that I was relying on that black mana too much. Even so, I wanted to test it before the 3rd trial to know what to expect in case I'm forced to use it.

And it exceeded expectations. I used a lot of mana to do it, even by my standards, but it was easier to create and control than before.

It also dealt with that weak guy's mana in seconds, with no trouble at all, pulling it from a greater distance than before and even from the skin.

Lissandra said that if I relied on black mana then any mana user would be at a huge disadvantage compared to me, and it is getting more and more confirmed.

When I glance at the corpse of the man, I can't help but feel disappointed.

Wouldn't Tess, Sophie, or Lily be capable of winning a 1v1 fight against someone of his level if they leveled up a bit more?

Was he just that weak, or are they just strong?

I move over to him and search his body.

Finding a few epic items on him, I quickly sell them to the shop and then find a pocket very deep under the ground. There, I store all of my items with the exception of Flamebearer, some supplies, my epic water storage vial, and a few less valuable things.

Waiting for a while, I let my mana fully replenish and then I use the token.

The world around me spins until the surroundings change leaving me in a jungle-like area. The trees surrounding me towering high into the sky, their trunks as thick as buildings. The gravity around me increases, pressing me against the ground and the air is hot and humid, my body sweating immediately.

I catch flashes of flying monsters through the branches as their screeches echo from everywhere around me.

Welcome to the last trial, after which you will be able to enter Beyond.

I check the quest and reward.

Beyond's third trial quest: Hunt the king of the forest

Quest Rewards: Beyond Three-Day Stay Token

Chapter 410: Dangerous beauty

Once again, the system's latest message only brings more questions to mind. The rewards for completing a Beyond trial have always been very generous, so being able to enter Beyond for 3 days as a reward strikes me as odd. What kind of place is Beyond?

I let kinetic energy flood my body and boost my movements as I leap from branch to branch, climbing the tallest tree I can find, rising higher and higher until I reach the top.

The jungle stretches on seemingly forever, and there's nothing but forest as far as I can see. No mountains, lakes, or seas. Just one big never-ending forest. And high in the sky rests an orange sun that seems almost bigger than the one we have on Earth.

I won't lie; the view is kind of alien, but it has a raw, dangerous beauty all its own.

Moving a bit lower, I rest against the trunk and think, watching the back and forth sway of a leaf as big as I am tall.

The King of the Forest is probably some big baddie here. I would be very surprised if it's lower than level 300. Hell, it might be as strong as the Gaiathra.

The gravity pressing down on me provides its own complications as well, but I'm getting used to strengthening my body with kinetic energy, so it shouldn't be a problem. I even feel like I'm being lazy because I'm not working on any of the mana shaping exercises Lissandra showed me, but first I need to assess the danger. I can play around later.

As if on cue, I feel mana move nearby and the trunk of the tree below me explodes and the skyscraper sized behemoth begins to fall with a deafening crack.

I move and the trunk explodes where I was resting, splitting the falling tree in two.

Once again, an attack lands nearby and a second tree explodes and begins to fall down.

The screeches of the monsters from further away become louder and more presences start moving in.

My crown activates and the next barrier I create easily absorbs the attack as I boost my body heading back the way I came.

The attacker decides to change its attack pattern and launches a multitude of smaller assaults my way, each one moving at insane speeds. One of which even manages to pierce my barrier before grazing my arm.

Each strike is composed of extremely compressed air, and the smaller ones are sharper with a limited area of impact, while the larger ones have an impact zone the size of a small building.

I place multiple anchors and teleport, avoiding the attacks while I trace their origin.

As I do another monster jumps out of the foliage below me, Its yawning maw wide enough to swallow a car as it tries to snap me up.

In response I send out a burst of kinetic energy sending the huge monster flying and crashing into the tree, leaving it scrambling to get its four legs beneath it as the beast howls in preparation to rush me again.

It's then that I realize the creature may as well just be an oversized hairless wolf.

[Pale Howler - lvl ??]

I ignore it, leaving the beast to fade into the distance behind me along with the massive trees crashing down around us as I finally reach the primary attacker.

[Galeproowler - lvl ???]

Seeing me so close, the monster quickly moves. Its elongated and noble feathered form racing down the tree and coiling around its way down a branch before leaping through the air to land on another.

It moves with an unearthly grace as it rushes about on its eight legs and its feathered, snake-like head watches me intently.

This time I bombard it with attacks and my mana javelins, boosted with kinetic energy, tear chunks out of passing trees as I boost my body to follow it. A few of my attacks even manage to land, red blood staining the beast's white feathers.

I dodge to the side as a burst of compressed air tears into the Pale Howler behind me, who's somehow managed to keep pace, and next destroys the trunk of an adjacent tree.

An anchor I place explodes into golden flames and the Galeproowler coils into a ball, allowing itself to be pushed away by the immense burst of wind it creates before uncoiling to land on another tree and continuing to flee.

I teleport through multiple anchors and just when I'm about to grasp it with [Redistribution], I stop. A barrier surrounds my body and I pump it with as much mana as I can as I find myself unable to teleport.

Right after I find myself bombarded by dozens of attacks, cracking my barrier and almost breaking it as I'm forced to support it more and more with increasingly compressed mana.

When it finally gives, I boost my body with as much kinetic energy as I can handle, moving behind a tree that immediately explodes almost in its entirety, as it's peppered with attacks meant for me.

My eyes activate and I disrupt another wave of attacks.

[Galeproowler - lvl ???]

[Galeproowler - lvl ???]

[Galeproowler - lvl ???]

[Galeproowler - lvl ???]

...

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A dozen monsters crawl from their hiding places and out onto the trunks surrounding me, as the one I had been following up to this point almost seems to be staring at me with an annoyingly smug look on its face.

[Focus] activates and [Mana Domain]

I can run away, I know that.

A suit of armor surrounds my body and I boost myself with kinetic energy, flying right into the middle of the group. A disruptive wave ripples out from me and [Redistribution] activates slowing the monster currently trying to flee.

I land on its back and Flamebearer roars with golden flames as I bury it into the monster's flesh, setting it ablaze.

[You have defeated Galeprowler - lvl 311]

[Lvl 250 > Lvl 251]

I jump away, its body explodes into a cloud of bloody feathers and gore under the weight of my attack.

The monsters try to mess with my [Tether] but with the help of my eyes, I still manage to place a few and reach the next monster despite needing to tank another blast of compressed air. The bark of the tree under me explodes, shattering the huge branch and sending it crashing to the forest floor below.

I hold myself in the air, sending a blast of kinetic energy after the feathered serpent, and tearing through another blast of compressed air while gouging a huge hole in the monster's side. Then the other monsters hit me with a barrage of attacks, sending me crashing into yet another tree. But I endure, using [Infusion] to bolster my armor as I do.

I follow the freshly lamed monster and skewer it with a javelin as long as I am tall, pinning it to the tree while the javelin explodes, tearing the monster in half with a blast of kinetic energy.

[You have defeated Galeprowler - lvl 309]

The remaining monsters pick up speed as their attacks grow more and more dangerous. They're clearly beginning to improvise and change their strategy to deal with me.

Long slashing cuts, more effort into disrupting my anchors. They even try creating a few projections to confuse me. They go into overdrive and move faster, resorting to engaging me in melee, venom dripping from their fangs and corroding my barriers as it spreads through the air leaving me blind in one eye.

Even so, I take them on, one after another, until only one remains standing resolute in the aftermath of our battle.

The monster that first attacked me, and lured me here to die.

It doesn't try to run away anymore, staying with its pack until the end, with a determined look in its eyes even as it dies, pierced by my javelins as I pin it against the tree.

[You have defeated Galeprowler - lvl 314]

After thoroughly checking my surroundings I let out a deep sigh and rest against the tree.

My wildly beating heart begins to slow and I find that I've burned through a sizable chunk of my mana, proof of my struggle. That and my freshly healing wounds, especially my newly blinded eye. It heals slower than usual, likely an aftereffect of the venom they used.

I take a step and then stagger and fall to my knees.

Confused, I look around and examine my body once again. It doesn't seem... The world around me spins but I force myself to stop collapsing, radiating as much mana as I can as whips of it tear the area apart.

My senses latch onto something touching me and track it, leading me upwards, into the air.

Releasing a blast of kinetic energy, I boost my body away and crash into another tree and the place I once stood explodes as the flying monster dives at me from high above.

[Mesmerwing- lvl ???]

I feel my body sway once more, about to lose consciousness, as the bird two times my size flies at me again.

Golden flames surround me but a sweep of its wings disrupts them for a moment. The Mesmerwing reaches me, claws extended, coated in sickly looking yellow mana.

A thin cone of kinetic energy reverberates through the air, gouging a hole in the monster's chest, and tossing it aside.

It tries to stun me again with its weird mental attack, but having finally found the right frequency, I disrupt the attempt. As I do so I place an anchor, allowing me to reach the monster as it tries to take off.

Another suit of armor surrounds my body, doubling my size as I latch onto the monster's leg with no concern for the talons trying to tear me to shreds.

Boosting my mana mech with kinetic energy, I pull the monster back and swing, smashing it against the side of the tree, bark, and wood exploding into the air.

Then I send a burst of thermal energy through my arm enveloping the avian beast in my golden flames as I hold it in place. The creature screeches in agony and tries to escape, breaking one of its wings in the process a constant stream of mental attacks tries to pierce my defenses but I hold steady and swing it again, crushing the monster once more against the tree.

When its struggles finally ebb to a weak flailing I put the beast down by stomping on its head.

[You have defeated Mesmerwing - lvl 315]

More presences appear on my radar, all monsters of similar strength to the ones I just killed.

This place is different from any other I've visited before. The gravity here is much stronger, the air feels different, the flora is huge and the monsters are all high enough level to be considered Calamities on any of the prior floors.

I boost my body and move by jumping instead of flying as flying requires more kinetic energy than normal just to fight against gravity. Monitoring the monsters around me I continue to think.

How do The Living Tree, The First One, and the Fallen Hero of the 4th floor compare to the monsters I just killed? They're all about the same level, but in some ways, the Calamities from the 4th floor just feel stronger. Is it a difference in skill? What is the quality of their traits, passives, and actives compared to "normal" monsters around that level?

Perhaps the system is skewing the levels of the monsters we meet. After all, they could always be much stronger in reality.

I let another Pale Howler reach me, the monster in question still reminding me of a hairless wolf, as it pounces on me, activating my passive. The kinetic energy from its attack being absorbed and converted into mana which floods into my reservoir, already perfectly tailored to my needs.

Dodging to the side, I avoid one attack and let the other land while observing the effects. The passive is highly situational and it could even be said that it's mostly useless at the moment. Sure, the insane defense against physical attacks is good but it's not really my thing.

I'm someone who likes to live dangerously. I think Tess called it being dumb. However, I don't mind my weird passive at all, no, in fact, I love the newest addition to my arsenal.

It might take a while but I will do as Champion Laten did with thermal energy and the heat of a volcano, I will learn to actively turn my primordial energies into mana. And if I can do one I should be able to do

the other, turning my mana into my primordial energies anytime I want without being limited by my heart.

Kinetic energy reverberates through the air around me, turning the Pale Howler into a pincushion, and tearing chunks from its flesh as the last attack pierces its head.

[You have defeated Pale Howler - lvl 301]

The system didn't give me any limit to finish the Trial quest. So, let's see how long I can stay here and turn it into my own private leveling area.