

Tutorial 431

Chapter 431: Deathtrap

A week passes. A quite nice week full of training and ideas.

We also got to fight a few monsters with levels over 300, often ending in a group effort.

Of course, I took some of them on my own to not become too rusty. An earthworm that kept burying underground.

Letting it swallow me while in my mana armor and burning it from the inside proved to be a good strategy.

I'm normal here.

Or that huge bug with its extremely durable shell that I couldn't pierce without using too much mana that I was saving.

Letting it swallow me while in my mana armor and burning it from the inside proved to be a good strategy.

A great strategy even. Greatest strategy of all time.

I'm normal here.

Putting people into life-and-death danger is something I think is a must, and Tess agrees.

We could fight weaker monsters and level easily. We could do it in groups. But sooner or later, humans tend to become confident, used to that, forgetting where we are. Reminding them is a good thing.

Even if you get hurt and bleed. Even if Lily has to literally put your guts back into your belly or regrow your limbs. Even if Izzy then nicely sits next to you and pats your back while you sit there in shock. Even if Biscuit lets you pet him to calm your shaking arm.

Tess doesn't want anyone to die. She hates the thought of it the most out of the entire group. If someone said Group 4 is her group, I wouldn't argue. Tess did more than anyone else to keep all these people together, and the strain it puts on her is something everyone can see.

So how can you then go to her and complain? How can you sit down, cry, and refuse to fight when you see her doing the same things?

Over and over again, Tess pushes herself to the limit. She bleeds, she suffers but she clenches her teeth and pushes through and grows, her talent tied together with strong determination.

She expects a lot, but she offers more, and when she declares she is willing to die for this group, everyone trusts her.

People like Tess will be worshipped on Earth. Millions will look up to her and others. I'm sure of that.

The tall blonde with a crown of lightning floating over her head, forcing her will onto the world. Discovering the road she wants to take and then having enough confidence to think it's the correct one.

We stop at the palace called the Last Rest. It's an outpost without any walls, just a few dozen simple stone buildings made without a single brick. All the surfaces are smooth, the buildings likely made with a skill or with the help of a skill. That place is overseen by a man called Ottis.

Ottis is someone from the central region who stays in the Last Rest to organize caravans heading there. It's something he takes very seriously.

There is a rumor he tortured a few guides for over 10 years, keeping them alive just to cause them more pain until they went crazy. He did that because these guides led a caravan the wrong way, causing the death of all the people in it. All in order to get the items and other things from the bodies.

Why Ottis did it is still a bit of a mystery. Like everyone else here, he is a criminal thrown onto this moon.

That also makes an interesting point. Why are these people ending up here instead of being killed? There is no way this is simpler than a swift death.

Rules? Traditions? Something we don't know yet? It's something I'm sure we will discover later as we progress through this floor.

Passing through the place, we aren't annoyed too much, something I think is caused by the crowns over my head and Tess's. Some people notice them; the skills must be rare enough to not make us look like just some random guys.

Of course, a few assholes try to put marks on us or do some other bullshit, but it's something either I or Sophie detect quickly, attacking back.

Where I just reach that person and break a few bones, Sophie lashes back with something that feels like the result of our defenses instead of a mind attack. But she makes sure it is painful.

It's fascinating to see so many people moving around, and plenty of them of different races. From some point of view, it reminds me of the Entrance Floor of Beyond. Just with weaker people.

Hmm, maybe weaker wouldn't be the correct word. Some of these people probably have higher levels than plenty of people I met in Beyond. The difference is the quality.

Even so, we don't meet anyone over 300; the highest levels feel around 280.

I wouldn't be surprised with such a setup and system if there are more powerful people in the central region. Even so, most of them here are at around level 200. I think level 200 is somewhere around the average the attendee should be after reaching the 6th floor. Some a bit lower, some with a bit higher level.

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My level of 260 is a rarity, but it's something I can thank my skillset for. Large-scale powerful explosions. As my minion would say, Kaboom.

There are advantages to it, as shown by my level, but disadvantages as well. I still do not have a single-target, very powerful attack. Lily and her [Disintegration] is something I can't compare to. I also think Tess, with her potent mana and primordial lightning, could cause more damage to a single target if she tried.

It's fine by me. I can cause large-scale damage; I just need to compress it more. Even more than the tricolored orb, compressed thermal energy, or kinetic energy. I think it's difficult for Tess and Lily to "uncompress" their single-target damage and turn it into large-scale.

Future Nathaniel will appreciate all the work I put into all of that. Avoiding falling into the trap of quick returns and focusing on future growth instead. It got beaten into me by Lissandra as well, the reason why I decided to not use black mana as long as I can. All out of worry that if I did, I would only end up as a very powerful Champion or a weak Absolute, unable to go higher.

I detect another touch in our group. This one feels more disgusting. An attempt to put marks that would mess with our mana, causing backlash or something more sinister.

The target of that is Isabella, Biscuit, and the twins.

(I got it,) I send to Sophie.

Placing an anchor, I reach the man and woman on top of the roof of a smaller house near the street.

I stop them from moving with [Redistribution]

The reason why this is happening is quite simple. All these people are to join the caravan and are already attempting to weaken groups that will go there. It likely serves as improving the safety of their group, or more likely to make us weaker and hope we die so they can take our equipment.

Even though there are guides who won't do that for fear of being tortured, there is nothing like that for people passing through. No one would complain if most of the groups die, just keeping enough to stave off the dangers of the Mana Desert is enough.

"I think it was quite a dick move to focus on our youngest," I mention to the two unmoving people. "Did they seem like an easy target? Did you think them dying would cause distress to some of us and make it easier for you? Maybe you liked the items you saw on us and didn't think much."

I take Bloodthirst off my back and stab it into the belly of the man who even now doesn't move.

As always, the blade absorbs the blood of its target, none of it seeping from the wound.

The woman's eyes tick from side to side, the only part of her body I'm not blocking. They try to gesture something to me, they plead, they glance at the man and then away.

"You should have thought of that before touching them."

Pulling Bloodthirst from the now-dead man, I slash it towards the woman.

Sophie and I monitor people around us and our group while Tess and Lily head toward the guides who organize the caravan. Other than little fights here and there and some backstabbing, there isn't much annoying stuff happening.

All of it is overseen by the presence I can feel even now. Just like everyone else, as that presence lets itself be known. The Guardian of Last Rest, Ottis, does so, and to be honest, he feels strong. I mean really strong.

My suspicion is he's over level 300, but not seeing him around, I can't confirm. That would mean he got his Primary class upgrade/change, and who knows what else.

(I don't like it,) Sophie mentions, and even now she keeps strengthening the web around our group.

Together with me and the twins, we make sure to keep up the link between our group members. There, I find out that if I were a bit better, I should be able to do very, very interesting things through that connection.

For example, if set properly, I should be able to use [Tether] and teleport Group 4 around in a similar way Gareth did with his group. That and some more interesting things. But that's what I plan to work out when we split, so I push it to the back to not distract me.

(Luck favors the brave or something like that?) I send to Sophie.

(Or they are not asking for any payment for joining the caravan because we will go to the central region to become slaves or something worse. A few hundred dumb dickheads crawling over each other just to get there.)

(For someone who already passed through the 1st Beyond trial, I would expect you to be more daring.)

(I know, I know, just this smells so bad.)

(Now you make me feel déjà vu.) I shake my head. (Just continue with the plan and save your mana as much as you can. Your mindblender stuff will be good against people if they decide to do some crap. Even in Beyond, not many of them had good defenses against it.)

I then listen as she talks about being worried about Isabella, as the true siscon she is. But I ignore it so far and continue to look towards where the Mana Desert is.

A never-ending stretch of dunes. The sand is white and not orange, brown, or yellow.

It isn't simple sand either. There isn't any other place on this moon from what we've heard. Those dunes are made of something entirely different from simple sand.

Ground bones of giant Champion or Absolute rank monsters. Remains of giant cities turned into tiny white particles. Mountains destroyed and turned into this after millennia. Something left behind by one of the Rulers. Remains of a powerful attack by the Absolute.

No one knows.

And there, a clear line between where the Mana Desert starts and where the Last Rest is. An impossibly straight line as if someone drew it in the air and made it be. Not a single speck of that white sand crosses beyond that line, and the grayish stone surface of the barren world contrasts with it.

There's also a giant vehicle for lack of a better word. It's a combination of a giant ship and a train.

It's entirely made of thick metal. There are scratches, there are holes, there is a lot of rust, and some parts are missing. The metal plates are interwoven with inscriptions, offering it more defenses.

And it floats, currently just slightly in the air, all of it reminding me of Skyhold Bastions from the 5th floor. Just more rough and insane-looking.

I think it has some fancy name, but everyone here, even the guides, calls it simply Deathtrap.

There is also a new side quest:

Side quest: Reach Central Region

Reward:

5000 shards

Food and water supplies

The system really wants us to go there.

Chapter 432: White dunes

Deathtrap is old, rusty, smells, and lets out constant annoying noises, and I can feel the heat from it as we approach. Even so, I can't take my eyes off it.

It's beautiful.

A giant transportation vehicle floating just a bit in the air, with an intricate set of crystals at its bottom and rough inscriptions.

Deathtrap is also tilted slightly to the side, and the damage is obvious. You can feel the history of that thing.

The defenses it has are mainly the metal plates that frame it. A defense against monsters that live there, defenses against sand itself that is extremely sharp and pierces through the bodies of even high-level people and mana barriers.

So the seemingly only somewhat safe way to cross Mana Desert is in this beautiful rusty thing that seems like it's about to fall apart.

There are barely any windows, just thin visors on the sides, and then there is an upper deck with some railings. At the top of it, there are things needed to fly this thing, some weird pillar, and even more inscriptions protecting the deck. Otherwise, all of the living quarters are inside that iron thing.

How crazy it is that I'm about to enter it and head to the godforsaken place where mana can't regenerate. Moments like this always make me thankful for the abilities I got and awaken that sense like I'm heading on an adventure.

It's something I thought of more after I met with my assholeish wannabe handler.

So as we head onto the platform and then inside, I enjoy those feelings.

A few hundred people head in as well, all moving in groups big and small. Unlike in Beyond, there aren't that many races. Mostly human, the tiny ones with scaly legs, and the ones with bluish skin and four arms.

We find ourselves a big room near the top of the Deathtrap. It requires just a bit of fighting against a few other groups that try to push us away. Neither side uses too much mana or damages the place, but the clash is short and violent.

The insides of the transport are even hotter than the outside. Its thick metal walls absorb the heat and radiate it inside. It combines with a thick smell of something like hot oil, rust, and old house. That and a constant hum of what I guess are engines or devices keeping us afloat.

There seem to be ways they tried to mitigate it: a cooling system, dampening, and some other stuff. But it's all either damaged or pieces of it are gone.

I let Isabella take care of the heat for now and observe as she absorbs that heat into her blue flame orb that floats near her.

That part of her ability is similar to mine, just in her case she can do it with "natural" heat, and if she wants to do it with skills, it requires much more effort and mana than when I do it. But for natural sources, she might be even more mana-efficient than me.

It might be her connection with Noodle causing it, her trait Burning Blood, maybe her skill is good at that? Maybe her other trait? Or maybe I'm only better at manipulating flames and heat that came into existence from mana, unlike her natural source?

I could ask her, and I think she would tell me, but I find it interesting to think about it instead of having the answer handed to me.

Tess and Lily come back to our "room," opening the rusty door and then closing it, letting Sophie reactivate the defenses we put there.

The room is circular without any furniture, just our baggage thrown in the corner and some hides used to sit on the floor. On the side of the room, there are metal plates, one of them with a three-finger-thick gap I use instead of my usual windows for a view.

I sit in a simple chair made of mana. To amuse myself, I even made the design exactly like a monobloc plastic chair. The only difference is that mine is made of transparent pale blue mana. The amount I'm using is as little as possible to save it.

Tess seems to be taken aback for a moment and keeps glancing between me and my monobloc mana chair. She then shakes her head and looks away.

(We will head out soon, apparently. As they said before, there is no payment, and when I tried to dig in, it looks like it's all organized by powerful groups from the central region. Ottis might be from one of them,) Tess says through our link.

It's the best way to avoid curious listeners.

(I would ask why they do that, but they most likely wouldn't tell you,) Sophie mentions.

(No mention, but no matter what it is, it's survivable. The system wouldn't give us a quest just for us to die there. Plus, we are stronger than average Hell attendees, with a few of us in Beyond, so that's something to consider.)

(Maybe they will send us to the mines. Maybe they will use us for target practice. Or maybe they pick stronger people out of the ones coming for their groups,) Dennis tries to guess.

(Maybe they are nice and will offer us a big house near the sea,) Aaron nods.

(Food!)

(And food, of course,) Aaron adds.

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(Whatever it is, don't forget that everyone we meet got thrown here for a reason. There are people who murdered entire cities of "civilians," there are ones who were experimenting on people, some traitors

during their Pairing,) Tess interjects. (But a good part of them are ones who gained powers quickly and abused them, killing dozens of weaker humans in their wake.)

It's easy to imagine what Tess says. Just imagine a level 50 Hell difficulty person entering a city with normal civilians on Earth. If such a person decided to do so, the damage would be immense.

(Are you sure they are all criminals? Not people the powers that be wanted to get rid of? A competition to some rich dude or someone pissing off a noble?) I ask.

(We did check what we could with Izzy and Sophie, and it doesn't seem to be the case. As far as we could find, from all the attempts to kill us, a brutal majority of the people are just that, criminals. There might be some system they have in place to not get innocent people inside. Sure, some people here could be tens or hundreds of years old and could change, regret their past actions. But none of us should hesitate when it comes to it.)

(That much is obvious. I will go out to check out the place,) I say as I stand up.

I do so slowly as my body hurts and burns. RTE activated. I continue using the emblem for training, even now that I can't regenerate my mana. I simply draw the necessary mana from my crown, where a vast reserve is stored, and reduce the training time to an hour or two per day.

Even I wouldn't be so foolish as to spend all my mana on training while heading into this Mana Desert. Yup.

Activating my emblem, I could swear I feel the inscriptions burning through my body like a red-hot wire.

A truly evil thing.

"I will join!" Lily jumps on her feet nimbly. "You walk like a grandpa, so you might need some healing."

"Don't you have anything else to do?" I answer out loud, "Maybe growing wings or bigger muscles."

"The only thing she is growing bigger is her ass," Aaron shamelessly adds with a wide smirk.

That seems to shock even his brother, but quickly Dennis starts laughing out loud. Gradually he laughs even louder and louder.

So brave, yet so foolish.

Min-Jae, smarter because of previous experience, laughs quietly and only after making sure Lily doesn't see him.

Lily, changing aggro to the twins, turns to them with a dark expression, and I use the opportunity to escape on my own.

The hallway of Deathtrap is as hot as the rest of the rooms, and without Izzy here, I start absorbing some of that heat on my own to keep the air around me cool.

I catch one interesting inscription and follow it along the wall where it coils over the doors into rooms where other passengers are.

That inscription seems to be of sets that spread power from the core through the Deathtrap and power the inscriptions. So I examine it a bit more, I still have something to learn about moving mana for inscriptions in massive creations like that.

At some point, I'm in front of one of the doors and then it opens energetically, nearly slamming against my head. I barely grab it with my hand.

Annoyed because of the interruption, I kick it, adding kinetic energy into the mix and slamming it against whoever opened it.

Someone screams in pain, and I hear a body crash against the wall inside of the room as I return to what I was doing.

The door, held by my [Redistribution], tries to open, but I keep it at bay until I'm done and disrupt the mana that tries to perceive what's happening.

I let it feel a part of my mana pool that I release just for a moment, and all the attempts stop.

Kudos to Lissandra. If it wasn't for her, I would probably be using [Focus] and dealing with it more peacefully.

Or maybe not. I was always a bit of an asshole. Just the right amount.

Continuing my walk, I head upstairs, walking onto a set of rusty stairs made of metal that creak under me, bits of dust falling off.

Even more than on the outside, there are holes all over the place, damages as well. The vibrations can be felt gradually increasing as the engines "heat up" and we are slowly lifting.

By the time I reach the deck, we are floating higher in the air. Not too high, probably just a few stories high. Just the process of that is somewhat impressive, considering what we stand on.

I really want to examine the core and power source, control room, and other interesting rooms of this place, but through sheer will, I hold myself back.

Proud of my progress, I look around. Even though we are not that high in the air, the view is quite nice.

On one side, rocky plains full of hills with the Last Rest nearby.

On the other side, white sand dunes stretching on forever, the air shimmering over them because of the heat.

I might risk a bit, but I need some samples of that sand, even though like 20 times the guides told us to never do that or we will all die.

Lastly, I still feel that presence from the Last Rest. The man who makes sure things run smoothly and people reach the central region. I'm sure that man has sensed me examining him multiple times, yet he humors me, perhaps out of some sort of cold amusement.

Maybe I should really send a few tricolored orbs through the anchor I left in the Last Rest.

Reaching the railing, I rest against it and watch people moving all around. There are a few groups present at all times. A schedule was decided, and Group 4 is part of it as well.

At all times, there are multiple groups defending the Deathtrap in case of an attack. To not use all the mana, a frequent change of guard is set.

When we finally start moving, the inscriptions on the metal plates covering Deathtrap activate. A strange, very specialized field surrounds us. It just seems to be tailored for Mana Desert and it's white sand and useless for anything else.

Then, the moment we pass that line separating the desert from the plains, my mana stops regenerating.

It happens immediately as if someone turned off the switch. My heart keeps beating, and it even feels like nothing changed. The only difference is that the mana is gone.

I examine it, trying to identify the part of the process where it gets cut off. The moment it leaves my heart? The moment it enters the rest of the body? Maybe it is still here but I can't use it? Is something taking it away? Is it some kind of specialized disruption?

I try and try, but I fail to locate the source. Even so, I delegate part of my mind through [Focus] to continue inspecting while I lean against the railing, studying the white dunes.

Chapter 433: Man overboard

Everyone on the flying ship/train thing seems to have mana batteries on them. Some just have a few of lower quality, others have dozens of them woven into their clothes.

Most of them don't like me looking at them, counting the mana stones, but mostly just a glance at my crown is enough to convince them to leave me alone. I don't think they know it's a [Mana Crown], but

crowns seem to be rare enough for them to avoid messing with me. Especially now that they can't regenerate their mana the moment they spend it.

I've been saving my mana as well, even though I have plenty. My crown, my reservoir, and my body. I would be very surprised if there is anyone on the flying ship/train thing with more mana than me. Plus, after my training with Liss, I'm constantly working to improve my efficiency. It still pisses me off that I haven't made any progress during these two weeks, so I've been training constantly to make up for it.

It is a shame how much rarer it's gotten for me to use all of my mana, but at the same time, it could be said that increased efficiency means more mana? And more mana is good. So I may as well start taking efficiency more seriously.

Just a few hours ago, my efforts gained me a level of [Mana Manipulation], and the crown not long after.

When I feel a presence moving closer to me, I let it approach, revealing itself to be a man around my age with a blank expression, long brown wavy hair, and blue eyes.

He has two short swords strapped to his waist, and his movements are nimble and well practiced. In particular, the way he leads each step with the tips of his toes before resting on the entire foot.

Unlike most of the others, he has a single mana battery, of high quality. A big blue mana stone embedded in the middle of his black chainmail shirt. His movements displaying a complete disregard for the weight.

"[Mana Crown]?" he asks, coming to a rest against the railing, looking out over the Mana Desert we fly over.

"I see," he answers.

Unwilling to leave first, especially since I got here first, I continue to look at the desert as well while continuing my attempts to trace the thing that dares to mess with my mana.

So far, my Mantle construct doesn't seem to be affecting the process at all, and neither does using my [Mana Domain] and concentrating it in my body. The effect creating the Mana Desert is either that powerful or that tricky.

"If things go to shit, would your group be willing to work with mine? I've already been going around to ask a few of the more powerful groups. There's already four others working with us, and yours would be fifth and last."

"Because of my [Notyourfuckingproblem Crown]?"

"That and your friend's [Lightning Crown]."

I examine him again. He seems like he's on the stronger side, taking the rest of the passengers into consideration.

(Tess, some guy wants us to join their secret 5 group super secret alliance. To stick together if things go to shit,) I send through the link.

(Is he strong?)

I glance at the man again.

[Dawnslayer - lvl 265]

(I like his class name. It's Dawnslayer, and he is level 265, decent equipment as well. A few upper epic pieces.)

(I think I saw him already. You can agree for now and tell him to meet me on the deck in around 30 minutes.)

(Will do.)

“Sure, our group leader will be here in thirty minutes so you guys can talk. The blonde with the crown.”

He looks at me, his blank expression unmoving, and tilts his head to the side a bit as if something surprised him.

“I will do that,” he says.

After that, I let him be and leave. Once on the stairs, I slow down and reduce the effects of my Restrictive Training Emblem just a little bit and rest against the wall for a moment.

Damn, that thing is evil.

Still, I refuse to look at my stats for fear of disappointment, and after a while, I head back down and allow myself to lower my guard a bit as I enter our room.

My monobloc mana chair... no, my manabloc chair is still there, with Biscuit laying on it.

(Food!)

“I didn’t find any.”

(Gone?)

“Something like that.”

(Sustenance?)

“Probably a week.”

The next message doesn't come, Biscuit looking too shocked to say anything. Reaching my manabloc chair, I lift him, sit down, and put him on my lap. As he turns around, I meet his eyes, and they are wide open.

"It will be fine," I say, petting him and ruffling the top of his head, even giving him some scratches until he calms down slightly.

"You promised me, so don't eat people, okay?"

(Food!) he complains, how could I even allow myself to entertain such a dumb idea.

"Just making sure," I say, pulling him closer and leaning back.

"We should be able to talk out loud now. Sophie improved her web, and I don't think anyone will be able to listen in, but can you check just in case?" Tess asks me.

I do that, and it seems like it should work the way she said. The web was made to detect eavesdropping and block the sound from passing through.

After making a few quick changes here and there, I nod at Tess, and even she seems satisfied with that.

"Are you not ashamed, leaving all the annoying stuff to Tess all the time?" Maya turns to me.

"Would you like me to deal with these people instead?"

That makes Maya pause, and after a moment of thinking, she seems to change her stance. Even so, to my satisfaction, she doesn't say anything, and on some level, she must know how I feel, and that seems to annoy her.

"Evil orb?" I ask.

“Evil orb,” Maya sighs.

I create an orb I modified especially for her. The idea is to help her improve [Armament] with the goal of making her mana creations stronger.

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I had plenty of fun working on it, and I believe this will help me with crafting and, surprisingly, to increase the efficiency with which I use my mana.

“You two too,” I say, turning to the twins and sending one orb to each of them.

Theirs are slightly different, more focused on pure [Mana Manipulation]. No changing frequencies, just an ever changing hunger for mana.

They grab them already knowing the drill.

“Here Nat goes again, making us play with his balls,” Dennis sighs.

“Two of them even,” Aaron replies, nodding seriously.

“Sophie, do you remember when they said that...”

“I fucking remember that, Nat, you don’t have to bring me into...”

“Well, they said a bit more, but I understand if you don’t want to hear.”

That makes Sophie pause, and she glances at the twins whose orbs shrink... ehm... disappear. Heh.

Their expressions have gone a bit pale, and I sense them trying to open a private link to talk with me through [Connection], but I resist the effort.

In the end, Sophie just shakes her head and turns to Tess, “Want me to go with you to talk to the guy?”

The blonde, already on her feet, nods, “Why not. Nat, please don’t bully the boys.”

“Want to hear what they said about you? It’s...” I lift my hand and block the bolt of lightning she sends my way, and then another one.

She adds a dozen more, each small as a pinkie, flying my way in quick succession, even forcing me to use kinetic energy to boost my movement. Even so, it’s just playful prodding at this point. It’s probably about as dangerous as a pistol round, but playful nonetheless.

As Sophie and Tess head towards the door, Biscuit jumps from my lap and wobbles quickly after them.

(Food!) he shouts as he joins the group.

“Please make sure he doesn’t eat people. They’re dirty,” I call to Tess.

(Asshole!) Biscuit shouts, turning to me before following them out as they leave.

The door closes, and the defenses reactivate, leaving me in the room with our two youngest and Maya.

“There’s a lot of young people in the tutorial, don’t you think?” I ask Maya while creating orbs for her and the twins, the first ones I made having already disappeared.

“Young people are quicker to adapt, that could be the reason,” she shrugs furrowing her brow and focusing on her orb.

Knowing how annoying it is when someone interrupts your training, I leave her be and turn to my experiments. My never-ending pursuit of mastering mana and as of late increased efficiency.

Not needing to move or walk, I increase the setting on my Restrictive Training Emblem and feel my muscles burn. A constant painful reminder in the back of my mind. No pain, no gain, right? Some people would kill me knowing that I can train my muscles just by sitting, but sooner or later, I will need Lily and her modifications.

I've started to delve deeper into the circuits of the Restrictive Training Emblem, and the thing is more interesting than I thought. There are multiple parts to it. Some focus more on dexterity, others on strength, and some focus on constitution.

Currently, if I'm correct, it seems like the main objective is my strength, followed by dexterity and constitution.

Following this path, history will repeat itself, my constitution rapidly growing less capable of handling my other stats. It's already gotten used to mana, and there are multiple ways I help it along, but strength and dexterity are different things.

Body modification seems like the way to go. That and modifying the emblem a bit, but I'm still a long way off from being able to do that.

Part of me wonders if Sandra the Cockroach did this on purpose.

Hah.

Who am I kidding? Of course, she did.

The emblem is exactly as evil as I thought.

POV Dennis Dalton

Nathaniel just sits there. Menacingly.

For some reason, even that sitting seems to cause him trouble, and once in a while, tears appear on his skin, blood flowing through the cracks. At some point, one of his fingers twitches and then bends with an audible crack.

That makes him open his eyes and glance at the wound for barely a second before closing them again.

Whatever he's doing, I don't want it. I also don't want four of these orbs floating over my head like they do his. Just one of them is scary enough.

Then a few hours later, he stands up, clearly moving with extreme difficulty. He calls it a Burden Enhancement Inscription and says it's for his kinetic energy training. Over and over again, he repeats a simple set of movements and mumbles things like, "That's not it," "It doesn't feel right," "She did it differently," and then proceeds to curse someone called Sandra.

(Who the fuck is Sandra?) I can hear Aaron.

(I don't want to know. Do you think he will make us do that too?)

(Most likely. You heard the way Kim spoke about Nat's training.)

(Fuck.)

(Yea, fuck...)

A few hours later, our group is at the deck meeting up with a few of the other groups. According to the schedule, it's our shift on defense, but up until now, no one's bothered to attack the creepy ship we find ourselves on.

Bored, suicidal, or straight-up dumb, two smaller groups, ten people combined, start trying to antagonize our group.

At first, they, sure of their numbers, make fun of Nat, who falls down a few times as a result of the training he's doing even now. His expression is even more empty than usual as he focuses on his training, and he seems straight-up unaware or weak. Even so, he glances at the group, completely unbothered and choosing to return to his training instead.

Kim is the first one to push for a fight with these people, to defend Nat, but he is stopped by Tess.

Our Korean friend just doesn't seem to understand why Nat just lets it pass. He never does, but he should know by now. Izzy and Tess already told us, plenty of times. Nat tends to be laid back and patient, especially when harm is done to him. He seems to be more at ease when people treat him like that as if he were used to it. Of course, there is a line you pass, and when you do, you're done, but that line is usually very broad.

That all changes very quickly when Nat stops being the target of these attacks.

The group harassing us, made up of three different races, notices Kim itching for a fight. They start mocking him, even activating some of their skills and drawing weapons. Do we really seem like such easy targets, or is the system deliberately making the natives antagonize us for the sake of the tutorial?

Tess sighs, knowing what is to come, and holds back, gesturing for us to do the same.

Galvanized by our reaction, which they interpret as fear, they shove Nat away and start poking at Kim, who holds back, following his orders from Tess.

Nat opens his eyes and watches, his gaze cold and deeply curious. Often so unfriendly, but with surprising moments of kindness.

Unlike us, Nat has a lot of mana, so Tess lets him deal with it.

A severed arm flies into the air, and the ex-owner looks down at his shoulder and then at Nat, who already stands at his side. Before the man can even scream, another punch sends him flying across the deck. Nat moves again, in a way that can only be called creepy - with rapid bursts of incredible speed, each one ending in a powerful, fluid attack.

(W-wasn't he mostly a ranged, bombardment fighter?) I Aaron shouts in my head.

Nat moves from person to person, his movements unpredictable. Sometimes he stops mid-attack as if he's completely unbothered by the inertia of his movements, so even I can't predict where he will move.

One after another, he beats the other group in a span of a few seconds, without using a single external skill. Just his body and who knows what else. Not a whiff of mana can be felt from him, and he acts with extreme efficiency.

The guy we rarely see engaged in melees is now tearing through a group of 10 people with levels over 200 as if it were nothing.

Finally, he grabs the man who appears to be the leader by the neck and throws him over the railing. The rest of the members scattered across the deck, bones broken, limbs missing, holes punched through their bodies, but still alive. Their only casualty, their leader crashing into the white sands below. No one calls for the ship to stop, no one tries to help him. And Nathaniel stands there, watching with the same curiosity as he watches events go by.

The man starts screaming and running, trying to catch up to the ship. Bursts of mana erupt under his feet, as he tries to climb a set of his barriers.

But it's all useless. Each step causes the white sand to fly into the air and pierce through the barriers with ease, and just as easily, it does the same to his legs. It peels away his skin like some kind of nightmare sandpaper, tearing away his flesh, and bones as he runs.

Just a few moments later, the only thing left below his knees are scraps of flesh and bone as the man falls to the sand, his blood seeping out around him.

We're a lot farther away now, and Nat moves to the back of the ship to watch longer, golden circles enclosing his pupils.

The wind outside blows into the white sand which even now moves across the tall dunes, and its waves crash against the dying body. Each pass takes more and more of him until there is barely anything left, and then, even that disappears.

Chapter 434: Guides

A day passes, and we're still flying. The rusty thing we are trapped in has not fallen.

There were some incidents where guides had to rush towards somewhere in the center of the Deathtrap as we started losing altitude.

It looks like it's fixed now as we fly at the height from before.

I wonder what would have happened if we had crashed. Just how long would the power source last maintaining the inscriptions on the metal plates and the field around the deck? How long would it take for the white sand to grind us to nothing without it?

As pretty as the sand looks now, we also know how deadly it is.

A day goes by, and as we make our way deeper into the Mana Desert, the attacks start.

Huge swarms of insects. Scarab-like monsters, each one as big as a human head. There are dozens of them, each around level 150.

As far as I notice, they never touch the ground, and their chitin armor seems to have no trouble handling the white sand for some reason.

They attempt to land on the side of the Deathtrap and bite through the armor or otherwise damage it, but so far they've failed to do so. All the groups currently on deck start a barrage of attacks, and they even call in a few support groups.

But what's surprising is that there are monsters down in the sand, their heads and tails poking out as they shoot projectiles laced with acid and poison, literally launching pieces of their bodies at us. For some reason, these monsters aren't affected by the white sand.

The mood had been starting to get better but this has thoroughly soured it, and it shows in the eyes of everyone aboard.

It's our turn on the deck, along with a few of the other groups.

I approach a tall man with four arms and bluish skin. His clothes have clearly been tailored for his anatomy, and each of his arms is covered in a dense set of white paintings, some of them having been traced out with mana-conductive paint.

I wanted to ask, what does your race call themselves?" I say as I approach.

At first, he seemed to have his guard up, but hearing my question, he smiles, glancing towards his group, who chuckle as well.

"Crazed human, who walks like a drunk and throws people overboard, why should I answer?"

I throw him a small pouch which he catches, glancing at me, as he uses his senses to examine it. Only then does he open the pouch to find the mana batteries inside.

"Crazed human, my race is called thylarin."

"And the little ones with scaly legs?"

"They are called vyssari."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"I will need more..."

"Don't push it."

His eyes meet mine, and I can see him thinking about it. His group even moves to get ready behind his back. For a long moment, I return his gaze and wait. I don't even bother to move kinetic energy or mana, knowing I can activate it quickly enough to deal with them.

"I was joking, joking with you, human," he smiles in the end, waving his four arms defensively. "I won't tell you much about thylarin, as one of them, I won't share information that could give me a disadvantage. But I can say that vyssari are said to be a result of experimentation by a Ruler that has long since been forgotten and replaced. They have a talent for elemental magic and don't tend to be very smart if I have to say so myself."

To that, the group behind him, most of them thylarin, laugh. This group doesn't seem to be very smart either.

"Got it. One last thing."

"What is it, crazed human?"

"A few hours ago, two of your group members left an item near our room. It was well hidden and contained a mix of sleeping and poisonous gas. I got curious so I tested it a bit. It hurt a lot, even for someone like me."

The mood immediately turns quiet, and silence encompasses the deck.

"I swear I didn't know, human. I..."

After I lift my finger, he shuts his mouth, and I observe him.

(Is he lying?) I ask through the link.

(He is not.) Izzy confirms.

"I trust you," I tell the thylarin man, "but I also believe you can imagine how unhappy I am."

"Yes, human, yes... here, take your mana batteries back. It will never happen again, I swear."

I take the pouch and gesture, "You can throw in that pouch on your waist as well. Not the one with stones, but the one with the mana-conductive paint and ground mana stones."

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

"Sure sure, here, take it all." he babbles, hurrying to hand them over.

I do just that and nod, "Good. Now throw this and this thylarin overboard. They're the ones who planted the bomb."

The tall thylarin stares at me for a moment, and I gradually start releasing my mana. Bit by bit, I loosen my hold over my Mana Cycling, and it starts seeping out. It feels comfortable as my mana surrounds me, but I can see their reactions as I do.

At first, he seems calm, but when I fail to stop and my mana continues to increase without any attempts on my part to hide it, his demeanor changes.

He quickly shouts something, and the other members of his group jump on the two thylarin I pointed out.

There is a little bit of fighting, and mana explodes into the air, but the two are quickly subdued by the others before they can cause any real damage or engage any of their more powerful attacks.

Both of them are thrown overboard, and I watch as they land in the sand below, their bodies instantly pierced through by the white sand washing over them. Even falling from this height doesn't seem to have harmed them, but the sand did. They try to crawl on top of each other, even as their bodies get ground to dust by the sand caught in the wind.

They seem to be more durable than the other man, given that they survive a bit longer, but they have no chance at all. Even as they struggle in vain to jump high into the air, their landings inevitably cause the sand to explode beneath them and cause more damage.

And just like before, their bodies disintegrate into the dunes.

As the time passes a small group ends up picking a fight with Maya, Izzy, and Sophie, who delved into another part of the Deathtrap, seeking out a place Izzy wanted to explore, having grown bored with shuttling herself between our room and the deck.

The attacking group was dealt with in short order.

Tensions are high and there's not much to be done, as Izzy confirms later. Our group isn't the only one getting into fights like this.

The deeper into Mana Desert we delve, the stronger the monsters are, and the less mana remains after their shifts at the deck for defense. Some groups try to refuse to take these shifts or choose not to fight and waste their mana, but they quickly find themselves threatened by the others.

In these situations, the guides speak to the more powerful groups and make threats of their own, and the smaller groups are quickly dealt with and forced to cooperate.

There is another smaller group who still refuses to cooperate no matter what, most of their members were unlucky and had to rebuff monster attacks twice in a row while they were on shifts. Their mana reserves have noticeably dwindled.

The other groups can see that, and that group is bullied like sheep surrounded by wolves, cornered deep in the ship as their possessions are slowly taken away, knowing they cannot dare to waste mana.

So that group refuses to go to the deck.

They are thrown overboard, without mercy, down to a man.

One of their members is capable of levitating and slowly flies after us, screaming in desperation as the rest of his group gets ground down by the white sand. Even as he flies, small particles of sand pierce his body. A single speck every few seconds, sometimes more.

It takes minutes, but gradually he stops and falls into the sand, the damage accumulating until he can no longer maintain his flight. The grains having burrowed through his head, brain, and heart as if they were never there, and that damage accumulated.

(What do you think?) I ask Sophie, who is standing next to me, watching this go down over the railing of the deck.

(I think you may be right. It really felt just like you said. But I don't know how it's going to help. Even you wouldn't be so crazy.)

(Anything can happen. Just think about it and tell the others.)

(Other than you and me, there's no one even close to being able to do that. It would take them months, probably years to pull it off. Even you would probably fail.)

I just shrug my shoulders, and as she leaves, I stay and stare deep into the never-ending desert. It's night again, the nebulas hanging in the sky as the cold air fights the heat rising from the white sands below.

The monsters here in the desert attack both day and night, unlike the ones outside. And I can sense another group coming. They're stronger than the ones we encountered before.

I give them one more look and leave the deck, letting the scheduled group deal with them.

The hours stretch into another day. The monsters are getting closer and closer to level 200 and we even see a few stronger than that, and 4 more days remain. This time even our group got to fight during our time on deck.

I make the others hang back and save their mana, as I take on the monsters with the other groups on deck. I even do well enough that no one dared to say a thing about the rest of group 4 hanging back to watch.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 53 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 54]

[Mana Crown - lvl 35 > Mana Crown - lvl 36]

It's almost laughable how much mana there is still stored in my crown. Even with all this fighting, my training, and using it for the emblem, there is so much remaining.

The monsters die, killed by mana arrows as long as my finger. Each of the arrows having been boosted by a bit of kinetic energy and infused with a little extra to increase the piercing and impact damage as it hits the monsters.

A few hours later, one of the guides dies.

There were 7 guides when we started, now we're down to 6. Each one is over level 200, wearing thick robes even in this heat, their faces covered by simple white masks.

I watch with interest as panic ensues, as people push and shove to stand over the guide's corpse. There is no mana hanging around the body, there are no wounds. The only damage we find is his broken mask, revealing the face of a human with a terrified expression even in death. The corpse is unusually pale. Extremely pale, and I don't think it's just from the lack of sun.

Izzy shares the emotions of the crowd with me, and I let them flow through.

Fear, a hint of panic, distrust, anger, opportunity, hunger. It's overwhelming, so I cut it off, and so does the 11-year-old girl.

There is no mana anywhere near the body that I could examine. No matter how much I try, I can't detect anything.

I glance at the guides who are speaking to each other in frantic whispers. Three of them clustered together, examining the scene, while the remaining three focus on controlling the Deathtrap, and that seems to be the bare minimum. They cover most of their body, and I can't see their faces, so it's hard to guess what they're feeling, and Izzy says they're protected well enough that she can't either. But they still seem a bit panicked.

There shouldn't be anyone on this ship willing to risk their own lives by killing them. It's strange.

The proximity of that many people and all the shouting gets the better of me, and I use my anchor, reappearing in our room.

I get back to my training and wait for the others to return, which happens a few minutes later.

Tess confirms that I don't have to do anything at the moment, so I continue and let them talk it out.

Some hours down the line, another guide dies, along with the group of three men assigned to his protection after the first guide died.

We still have almost four days until we reach our destination.

Chapter 435: Fucked-up situation

(We need at least 3 guides to stay afloat. In that number won't be able to change shifts, or for that matter, sleep or rest, but it's something they would be able to deal with,) Tess says.

(Wouldn't one or two be enough?) Sophie asks.

Tess shakes her head and continues to talk through the link, (I spoke with them and some of the others, and they said it's impossible to manage over any significant period of time. The protective enchantments seem to be special. They also refuse to let us help control the ship. I think they might have something like your [Geas] on them that won't allow them to share the knowledge involved. Some of the groups said they heard rumors of guides exploding when they tried.)

(Aren't they getting a little too cocky? We can just have Nat take over the controls after they die. Vega said he and "uncle" managed to pilot a Skyhold Bastion,) Lily joins in.

(I don't think it's that simple,) Sophie disagrees. (The alloy that makes up the metal plates, the defensive field, and the inscriptions all seem to be something the people of the central region want to keep to themselves, even at the cost of all the lives aboard.)

(Like Sophie said,) I confirm.

So far, I haven't gotten anything from the metal plates I've been examining, nor have I deciphered the field. Not even with my Irises and senses. Well, maybe "nothing" isn't the right word for it. "Nothing useful" would be more accurate.

I can now guess how it all works and see parts of it, but whoever made all this is operating on a higher level than me. So there's nothing I can do about it.

Tess stands up and gestures to Sophie and the twins, who rise as well, (For now, we'll set up a secondary web for the others to communicate, for everyone who will be protecting the guides. The guides refuse to join, and there is nothing we can do about that, but at least their bodyguards should. Nat has already placed anchors on some of the bodyguards so we can rush in if anything happens.)

(Starting now, we try to stay together as much as possible. If we ever split, then we limit ourselves to two groups, one with me and the other with Nat.)

(Can't Sophie control the guides?) Maya asks.

(I can't. I tried, but they are protected. I could probably breakthrough, but I don't know how much damage it would cause. You know... they could go boom,) the mind manipulator shrugs.

(The same goes for my anchors; I can't place any on the guides. Someone from the central region did some interesting stuff to them,) I note.

(Food!)

I shake my head, (I don't think so.)

(What did he say?) Maya asks curiously.

(He said someone is killing the guides because they've been hoarding all the best food for themselves,) I explain.

(Oh...)

(Food! Food!)

(I told you already, that's not it.)

(Anyway,) Tess says, jumping back into the conversation, (we have a plan, so let's stick to it.)

Another day passes, and everything goes well. There is no trouble, not a single attempt on the life of a guide. There are stronger monsters attacking, and I'm forced to use a bit more mana to create bigger projectiles to take out the flying scarab-like monsters.

I kill one of them and make sure that his corpse falls to the deck so I can examine it, and Sophie joins in as I start cutting it apart while using my eyes.

The Dawnslayer stands nearby, his group having been scheduled alongside us.

"What?" I ask. "I've killed plenty, more than the other two groups combined, so you guys can pick up the slack for a moment while I examine it."

He doesn't voice any complaints and returns to his group instead.

(What do you think?) I ask Sophie as we drop into a squat over the corpse of the scarab.

She sighs, (I think you're right. It also explains why they use poison and physical attacks instead of skills and the like.)

(Yes, and all the monsters who attacked us were the same.)

(You're crazy if you try this.)

(You could join me,) I note.

She stares at me, blinking slowly, (Are you an exhibitionist?)

(Huh, that's what's bothering you? What is there to be so shy about?)

(Whatever, I knew you were crazy, but don't count me in. And focus on the guides.)

(Wanna bet another one of them dies soon?)

(Why do you sound so eerily happy about it?)

(Things have been going way too smoothly, and the system is an asshole. This might even be another setup to weed out attendees. As for being happy, I don't know. I just know something will go wrong, so instead of being worried, I may as well enjoy the ride.)

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

(Someone could die. You, me, it could be anyone from our group if that happens.)

(No one will. I'm here.)

(You and your hubristic pride. Hasn't anyone ever told you that pride goeth before the fall?)

(Funny you say that. I have been told that my pride will make me stronger, but once I fail, it will destroy me. Even as far back as the 2nd floor, I was told, and I paraphrase here, that I will either go big or screw up so badly that gods will shit thunder and fart storms.)

Now that I think about it, It was Ruby who told me that only for her master to repeat the sentiment a few weeks ago.

Sophie pokes the scarab again, and I notice her smiling, (That sounds very much like something that would happen to you. Also, gods, any idea why natives on the 2nd floor had anything to say about gods?)

(The 2nd floor was special, and the natives were more "modified" than the ones we met on the other floors, I think. It's possible they replaced the word "Rulers" with "gods" for some reason. Or maybe most people even think of them as gods outside of the tutorial. Maybe the natives weren't as restricted as we thought, perhaps the 2nd floor was one of the oldest, maybe the Rulers were called gods back then.)

(You're always thinking about this, aren't you?)

I take a moment to think about it, and then I grab the scarab and throw it off the deck. Watching as the corpse falls down to the sand I turn back to Sophie, who is still seated on the ground. Around us, the monsters' attacks have begun to weaken.

(There were times when I couldn't ask questions when I couldn't go where I wanted and do what I wanted. I couldn't be curious back then. Do you think I'm compensating for it now?)

(I don't know.)

(I see. Well, it doesn't matter anymore, it's all in the past.)

As expected, a few hours later, another guide dies. We get no message through the secondary web the twins and Sophie set up. My anchors also disappear before the attack happens.

The five people guarding the guide are dead as well. The same terrified expressions, pale skin, and not a single speck of mana on their bodies.

Four guides remain, and we still have three days until we reach our destination.

The panic among the other passengers is readily apparent at this point and this time we allocate 50 guards to each guide. This time our group goes on shift as well, and we ditch the secondary web.

Every group is allowed a bit of rest once in a while from guarding the guides to sleep and eat. When we get back to our shift, we get to follow one of the guides as they control the ship. It's something I'm excited for.

But the mood in our room is different now than it was before, and now everyone sits in a manabloc chair of my creation. I even added a circular manabloc table seated in the middle of the room.

Honestly, I kind of did it on purpose. Maybe this wasteful use of mana will calm the others, showing them my lack of fear and my confidence in our ability to get through this situation.

Surprisingly, it doesn't seem to work all that well. I don't know why.

Tess opens the conversation, (We have a few options. The most ruthless and simplest tactic would probably be to kill everyone aboard, given that the killer is almost certainly one of the passengers. It could also force their hand.)

(Simplest...) Maya laughs wryly.

(Yes. Nat, could you do it quickly, without damaging the ship?) Tess asks as multiple eyes turn to me.

(I think so? If I got a bit of help from Sophie to mask my behavior and a bit of healing from Lily, I wouldn't even have to use much mana.)

(That's not what I meant!)

As she speaks her voice becomes weaker and weaker.

(I know, Maya,) Tess says, smiling gently and taking a moment to squeeze Maya's hand. (But before we think of the others, we have to think of our group first. As this situation has shown, we aren't strong or skilled enough to do it the way we would like to.)

(They are fakes,) Sophie adds.

(I fucking know that,) Maya sighs, leaning back in her chair.

Izzy glances rapidly between Maya, Sophie, and Tess, the stress clear on her face. And Noodle coils his way up to her face and rubs his head against her cheek in response.

I let go of Biscuit, who proceeds to approach Izzy and nudge her shin until she lifts him into her lap.

(What if, while we're looking for the murderer, it turns out to be one of the guides?) Min-Jae asks, finally joining in the conversation. (Some people here have nice items, so maybe a guide decided to risk it, kill the other guides. Have the ship fail while everyone dies. All you'd have to do is survive somehow and run away with the items. Nat alone has plenty of good ones, they might decide it was worth the risk of punishment by that man from the Last Rest.)

Huh, maybe Min-Jae does have a good head on his shoulders.

He continues, (Or maybe a powerful monster managed to sneak onto the ship. I think either one would be more plausible than one of the passengers doing it. Though that still doesn't rule out one of the passengers.)

Dennis looks at me, (Nat, you're the highest level out of all of us. Are there any passengers here stronger than you?)

(Nope.)

(So you can see everyone's levels?)

(Nope, there are a few who show to me as two question marks.)

Dennis looks at his brother, probably intending to exchange some rude message, but he doesn't go through with it in the end. He knows I would sense it.

Amused, I answer, (There are a few that are more than 20 levels higher than me, so they show as question marks, but none of them are stronger than me.)

(How do you...) Dennis pauses mid-sentence as Aaron shoves his rib with his elbow.

(There are three. Two thylarin and one vyssari.) I see confusion in their expressions, and continue, (Thylarin are tall, and blue, with four arms. vyssari are the shorties with elemental skills and scaly legs.)

(Oh...)

(The thylarin are a Manashroud Shaper and a Manabreaker. The vyssari is an Ashenfoot Shaman.)

This information starts another round of conversation, and I watch with interest, as they theorize about what each class should be capable of, and what the potential is for said class to cause any degree of significant damage.

Some shade gets thrown my way for not sharing this information sooner, a criticism for which I have no answer.

The danger might be real, to me and to my group, but I already have my own ideas on how to deal with the current situation. I even have plans in place just in case all the guides die and we find ourselves having to control the ship. I know if I needed to I could do it. I could even power the ship on my own for a while with the amount of mana I have.

It might not look like it, but I take the task of keeping the members of group 4 alive very seriously. I also know group 4 isn't going to be easy to kill. Split into two groups, there is no way for someone to kill them before I rush to their aid. They even have a good chance of taking out the killer before I can join them. If the enemy was truly all that powerful, there wouldn't have been any need to be so covert.

So the question remains, do I enjoy the mystery and watch things unfold while trying to solve the problem on my own? Or do I just... who am I kidding, of course I do.

I enjoy this fucked-up situation way more than I should.

Chapter 436: Storm approaching

I observe the guide's movements while he works. There are twenty of us inside the room and thirty more outside. The entirety of group 4 is also present, along with one of three passengers ranked at 2 question marks.

[Ashenfoot Shaman - lvl ??]

Today it's the vyssari, and like the rest of his brethren, he's a short scale legged humanoid. Otherwise, there doesn't seem to be anything special about him. I could probably probe for more information, but he might take offense, or see it as a challenge almost like a slap to the face or drawing a weapon. But he isn't all that important right now, so I let Sophie keep an eye on him and occasionally check in on him.

I continue to work on moving my mana. Currently, I'm working on transferring all the mana from my reservoir into the crown, and When I'm done with that, I'll do the same with my body's reserves.

[Mana Crown - lvl 36 > Mana Crown - lvl 37]

[Infusion - lvl 34 > Infusion - lvl 35]

And on that note, I'm working on a new kind of training, I got the idea a while back and I still don't know much, so it's slow going, but my intentions are clear in my mind.

It will work, I'm sure.

You could easily say that I shouldn't be wasting mana like that in this situation, or that I should keep my attention on the surroundings. I am though, Part of my mind is constantly focused on checking the area. And as for the training... it's more of a variation on something I'm already used to. Mana Cycling has started to feel like the kind of thing I can just keep running in the background, almost without thought. After all, I've been doing it constantly for almost a year and nearly nonstop. Sooner or later my body will get used to it, and at that point, it should be as simple as breathing. At least that's what I'm hoping. Who knows how mana affects our bodies? It could easily happen.

This one wears the same thick robe as the others, with a deep cowl to cover his head, and a white mask covering his face. There are only 4 of them remaining now, so he seems fairly busy, moving from control panel to control panel while remaining in constant communication with the others.

From what I've seen, he seems to be in the process of controlling the defensive plates and fields that surround the deck. Another one takes care of the movement, and the third one handles the distribution of power. And yet it seems like any of the three stations could be used to control any of these functions, and that even if the guide in front of me were to die right now, it would still take a few minutes before anything got out of control.

Sophie seems to take some joy in our current application of mana, and out of our whole group, her skill at [Manipulation] is second only to me. I might even be able to convince her to put more stats into mana. I have a feeling that even some of the others are starting to open up to the idea after seeing my success.

Surely.

"You're watching me. Why?" says a voice next to me. Originating from presence I felt approach before they ever made a sound. It's the vyssari with two question marks over his head, meaning he is between 281 - 299 in level. If he was over 300, he would have three question marks instead.

"I'm bored," I answer.

"Maybe I'm bored as well, maybe I'll be inspired to gouge out those eyes of yours."

"Sure. Why don't you try?"

"Your [Mana Crown] doesn't scare me."

"It's [Notyourfuckingproblem Crown], and how exactly did you recognize it? Aren't they supposed to be rare?"

"You have one of the 4 attribute crowns and know nothing about it?"

"The people around me are jerks who like to withhold information," I shrug.

"Human, I don't know if I should laugh or go through with gouging your eyes out."

"I will give you a pair of mana batteries and some upper rare items if you'd be willing to answer a question or two."

"Screw off."

And on that note, my fact finding mission ends. The more time passes, the more I find myself appreciating Tess and the others for being so willing to deal with people and collect information. Some time ago, I even dared to be a bit disappointed that they didn't find out much about the 6th floor when I was gone. But now?

What legends. Absolute gigachads, or at least I think that's how the twins would say it?

Damn, if the twins and Min-Jae ever get to spend some time with Myrra, they will ruin her.

A few hours later, our group ends up on the deck, having been sent to deal with the most recent swarm of monsters. And once again, it's me sniping them down while the rest of group 4 acts like a hoard of slackers.

It's beginning to cause noticeable levels of discomfort in the groups tasked with defending alongside us. So far, they haven't seen anyone from group 4 attack, just me. To their apparent surprise, I fail to show

any sign of stopping, and my attacks are just as powerful as before and have in fact gotten stronger at a similar rate to the monsters.

[You have defeated Glasswing Moth - lvl 235]

These ones are quick and nimble but prefer to move alone, preferring to attack from below. The best way to deal with them seems to be creating a small orb infused with a bit of thermal energy and launching it at the wings.

After crashing, with bits of mana from the orb still lingering on them, the white sand takes care of the rest.

[You have defeated Dune Wasp - lvl 245]

[You have defeated Dune Wasp - lvl 235]

[You have defeated Dune Wasp - lvl 226]

...

These ones are smaller and much quicker, but at the same time, they're much more vulnerable.

For them, the best approach tends to be attaching an anchor to an orb and launching it into the group before releasing a burst resonating mana as the orb enters their range. A second burst of oscillating mana takes care of the rest, lacerating and lingering on the monsters as they fall to the sands below.

The genuine version of this novel can be found on another site. Support the author by reading it there.

The last type of monsters we encounter rarely shows up and they tend to have extremely powerful bodies.

They're the size of a small car, and have the capacity to cause a lot of damage. But thankfully they're slow compared to the others.

It actually turns out to be pretty simple, and I keep learning new things about the white sand and the Mana Desert, so dealing with the monsters is barely an inconvenience for me.

Of course, it's not the kind of information I'd freely share; though the rest of group 4 already knows since we confirmed it with Sophie.

I'm almost sure the guides have to know as well. Though I don't have proof just yet; it's just the feel, and I would be very surprised if they didn't.

So my orb slams into the Boneclad Scarab and moves just the way I programmed it to. The dark blue orb collides with the beast as tendrils extend from the compact form, surrounding the scarab with threads of mana that quickly shrink around it, sealing its wings shut.

It certainly has a pretty decent amount of mana in it, so of course it works exactly as I intended, and just like the monsters before, the scarab falls to its doom in the white sand. And just like all the times before, the white sand grinds the monster to nothing.

[You have defeated Boneclad Scarab - lvl 291]

Hunting them like this is boring.

The monsters also seem to realize this weakness, at least the ones who seem to have been tracking us for the last few days have. Their heads poke from under the white sand as they launch compressed acid and poison at us.

These attacks often hit the metal plating of the flying train/ship and sizzle on the surface as they melting away a thin layer of the thick plate beneath.

It's definitely the kind of attack the Deathtrap has survived dozens of times over, and the inscriptions have been carved deep into the metal, alleviating any fear that they might be destroyed by mere surface damage.

I enjoy sniping these monsters the most. I just shoot a few orbs in their direction and let the sand take care of the rest.

Even so, there are so many more to take their place. It's not something I got from my senses, as they are unreliable outside of the field of Deathtrap. No, I just need to look out over the desert, and I can see it for myself.

The desert monsters really don't like us.

They don't like our mana.

Another day passes, and no guides die, surprisingly. Everything is going smoothly for once, and that makes the passengers even more pissed off.

A constant stream of noise rises up from the engines. The ship has taken on a tilt and shudders through the air as it moves, its constant vibration rattling throughout. The heat persists inside the ship, even through the cold nights, as the metal plates release all the heat they've collected during the day. I'm starved for sleep, now that I'm practically forced to guard our guides, and the deck at all times, except for the odd moment here or there to rest and eat.

(So, have you made any progress?) Sophie asks as we guard on top of the deck.

(I don't think I can do anything about our clothes and equipment. It's much more difficult than working on my body.)

(Do you think the white sand would be able to destroy damaged arcane items?)

(Given enough mana, probably. What about you, any progress on replicating the Deathtrap's inscriptions or the field around the deck?)

(No progress, but I've got some ideas. You?)

(None, the material and the inscriptions must be working together in a way I just can't replicate yet.)

(Yet?)

(Yes, yet. But I don't think I will be able to do it in a few days. Given a few months though, probably, even without the alloy that makes up the plates.)

"Storm," Tess says calmly out of nowhere.

She doesn't even bother using our link, speaking out loud while pointing in the relevant direction.

I look and see nothing, no matter how I strain my eyes, and it's way too far to feel anything with my senses. But it's no surprise Tess might see something with her [Farsight].

"Are you sure? Really sure?" asks the man in the bejeweled black chainmail from before. The one with whom we made our unreliable 5 way pact.

"Absolutely sure," Tess answers.

"If it's a white dust storm, we might be royally fucked. Will you come with me? We need to talk to the guides in case they haven't noticed." Despite his cursing, he manages to speak with a calm expression.

"Sure. Nat, will you be ok staying here with Kim?"

"Yeah, no problem."

“Thanks. Let's go.” She takes the lead and followed by the rest of group 4 and a few of the other members of the man’s group, they head down the ship.

“Min-Jae, can you keep talking with the twins, Constantly? And let me know immediately if it cuts off?” I ask.

“Sure!”

This time no attacks seem imminent, but a large number of monsters are assembling rather close to the ship. As if greater numbers would change anything. Min-Jae even seems to enjoy sniping them, and he’s actually doing a good job - using tiny orbs that drain as little mana as possible.

For now, I clear my mind and prepare to use my skills. A few slow breaths in and out to calm my heart, as I wait for the inevitable fuck-up.

“Nat!” Min-Jae barely finishes saying my name, and I move.

I try to teleport to the anchor I left on Izzy, but it's gone. Immediately I switch the target, trying to pull myself to the anchor closest to where they should be.

Mid teleport something feels wrong, very wrong. The space around me twists in a way that it shouldn't, and I find myself unable to do anything about it as I spin and the unstable attempt at teleportation damages my body. When it finally stops, I find myself outside of the ship. My feet touching the white sand.

[Focus - lvl 51 > Focus - lvl 52]

The world around me loses most of its color, and everything goes quiet as a range of scenarios filter their way through my mind in a fraction of a second.

Even that seems to be too much, and because of the amount of mana In my body, the white sand grinds at me, piercing my body.

It gets pulled towards me.

There is no resistance from my body at all as my feet grind to nothing and the floating grains pierce through my chest, neck, and hands, drilling holes fine as sand through every part of me.

I use my anchor again, sharpening my focus. I bend it to my will, despite the resistance. I grab the remains of it and force it back together and teleport away from the sand at the cost of even more wounds.

Then I take damage from the teleport. My body twists and cracks, there are tears. I feel like I'm about to fall apart under the pressure I strain to endure. Even so, I refuse to use the black mana.

I do not fail, and I teleport through the ring of skill notifications as they ping in the back of my mind.

Back on the ship, I reform my missing feet with mana prostheses, disregarding the rest of the damage.

I feel a smile crawl onto my face as I once again use my anchor, the same one that sent me into white dunes.

Despite the damage to my body and the pain ringing through my head, I refuse to fail, breaking through successfully even as interference tries to shunt me from the ship.

Appearing on the other side, I boost my body with kinetic energy and move quickly through the hallways and rooms until I reach the others.

The barrier tries to stop me from getting in, and someone launches a mental attack on me.

Activating my eyes and checking the barrier's fluctuations, I resonate mana across my skin, pass through the barrier, and shake off the mental attack.

In the same control room as before, two guides stand along with a powerful monster with three question marks over its head. A few groups are with them, led by the two thylarin with two question marks over their heads.

All of these stand arrayed against group 4, who are fighting back, corpses piling up at their feet.

Good, I like mysteries, but I much prefer it when things are simple like that.

Chapter 437: On the sand

A burst of mana surges from me and crashes into the barrier. For a moment, they collide like a tidal wave crashing into a jetty. My mana constantly shifts frequency, and in the end, it overwhelms the barrier.

The barrier bursts like a bubble, and tiny particles of blue mana fall from the air around us.

Sensing the broken barrier, the fight stops for a brief moment, and all eyes turn to me.

Blood drips from my body due to the wounds and damage caused by the interrupted teleportation and white sand, while golden flames flicker around, fueling my passive and healing me.

Even the monster, from which I can't sense any mana at all, stops, its piercing eyes turning away from Maya to me. Some sort of mental attack crashes against me but with a burst of mana, I shake it off.

[Sandwraith Marauder - lvl ???]

The monster even seems as if it repels mana. Not with the help of a skill or trait, but just because of the composition of its body.

The Marauder is humanoid and very thin, white plates cover its body like armor covered in spikes. It's currently facing Maya, while the twins provide support nearby. Sophie is helping them too and I can sense the way she's defending the group against some weird attack. Tess is fighting against two thylarin with two question marks, and Lily faces the rest of the people with the help of the rest of Group 4.

“You should be dead,” one of the thylarin calls with surprise.

“If you think you can help the remaining two guides control the ship, deal with these two guides, maybe leave one for Sophie. We will take care of the rest,” Tess says calmly, interrupting them. Then rather than using her javelins, she surrounds her body with red and white lightning.

She crashes into the thylarin, and the fight starts anew.

I dodge a rapid stream of attacks thrown my way and blow the head off one of the random guys trying to block my path. The monster tries to charge me, but Maya grabs its arm and pulls it back, followed by the use of [Boost] to strengthen her armor against the monster’s coming attack.

The monster tries to use its strange mental attack again, but Sophie counters it, protecting the group.

Blue flames burn through the terrain, scorching our enemies around us while group 4 remains untouched by the heat.

It looks enjoyable, and I want to join the fight, but it seems like Tess did something to force these people out. Would it really be fair for me to interrupt their fun just like that? I know how annoying it is when someone does that to me.

Well, just for once, I'll let them be.

My mana activates around me and deflects multiple attacks heading my way, some of them really nasty. A burst of flames infused with disrupting mana burns through the body barrier of the nearest melee chump, and I boost my body toward the guides.

Seeing that I ignore the monster and am about to reach them, the two guides quickly reconsider the situation and disappear, their figures passing through the wall as if it wasn’t there.

The remaining people panic, and the two thylarin with question marks over their heads start searching for an escape route. The monster, on the other hand, now free of the guides' control, either as a direct

result of Sophie's actions or because the guides decided to let it go when they escaped, begins attacking anyone in its path.

I let the others deal with it and send my senses through the ship like a wave, before placing a few anchors and teleporting until I catch up to the guides.

The defenses of the ship, which seem to have dissipated for the most part, still seem to work in the place I find myself, and a rough set of vibrations starts shaking their way through my wounded body as if they were trying to tear me apart.

I strengthen my body and shake off the strangely awkward attempts at disruption thrown my way. And it's then, after teleporting one last time, that I reach them.

The guide, sensing my anchor behind him, waits for me to appear and tries to stab me, but I just move to the side with a short burst of kinetic energy.

Swinging my arm, coated in oscillating mana, I pierce through his defenses, and his head flies away from his body, and a notification rings.

The second guide tries to pass through the wall again, but I disrupt his mana, and instead of passing through, he crashes into it.

"No, no, no, listen, if you kill me here..." I burrow my knee into his nether region and then smash the side of his head.

Then I do it again, put some mana threads around him, and kick his crotch once again.

Sending his location to Sophie, I then cut off his legs just in case and burn the wound closed so he doesn't bleed out.

At that moment, the Deathtrap shakes, and I can feel it start to drop out of the sky. An explosion sounds somewhere nearby, and a burst of powerful mana washes over the ship. An immense amount is released at once, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the ship from what I can sense.

Teleporting a few more times, I reach the location of the tear, before quickly being joined by the two remaining guides as they pass through the wall. Each of us stopping to stare at the giant hole in the wall of the ship, and the Mana Desert looming outside. There are tiny particles of white sand already crashing into the field covering the hole, the same as on the deck.

The guides are still wearing their signature white masks, so I can't see their expressions, but I would say they seem scared.

"Backup source won't be able to handle it for longer than a few hours..."

"...wall, we need to move the plates to defend it..."

"...Just two of us..."

"Should we run? But how?"

"...don't know what happened."

There is a conversation going on quickly between them, their movements taking on an increasing sense of panic.

"The two guides I just took care of were the ones killing the other guides. They even brought a monster onto the ship and were cooperating with some of the passengers. Why?"

That makes them stop, and they turn to me.

"What makes you think I would know?! He and I are the rookies! The two you just killed were among the longest-serving guides around so why the fuck would they care one whit about us!.. But if you stop interrupting us, we will decide what to do to keep us all alive. We need to..."

"I'll help, just tell me where the backup core is and I will give it some mana," I say gesturing at my crown.

“[Mana Crown]?”

“Yes.”

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“Do you even realize how much mana you would need to...”

“That’s my problem. Plus, we saw a storm heading this way; it’s still far away in this direction,” I say, pointing in the direction of the threat.

That seems to scare them even more than the broken core.

“Take him to the backup core; I will check the sensors to confirm.”

“We’re going to need to change direction as quickly as possible. If it’s the big one, it will...”

“I fucking know! Now go.” With that, the guide enters the wall and disappears.

This time I observe the process, and it seems like he is using some minuscule inscriptions left on the metal of the wall, in concert with a skill or item to do it.

I gesture to the second guide to wait a moment and teleport, going through the pockets of the guides I neutralized to take a few items and mana stones. Though I don’t find anything too interesting. That done, I follow the man to a well isolated and thoroughly hidden room. Given a bit of effort, I’m sure would probably have found it myself.

“You can go,” I say, gesturing dismissively, and he leaves without comment.

I enter and find a small room with a single pillar in the corner and a control panel directly attached to the crystal.

And yet, despite the amazing design of the ship, the equipment looks old, damaged, and somehow even the goddamned crystal manages to look rusty.

And to top it all off it only seems to be 20% full, and it's depleting rapidly.

I spend a few minutes figuring out the rate of depletion, and when the ship starts shaking and lifting itself higher into the air, that rate increases. And then it speeds up even more as I sense the field around the ship change.

There is a control system to join in, and it only takes me a few minutes to realize that the hole in the side of the ship is eating through a lot of mana to block out the white sand. Without those metal plates, it's going to be much hungrier than usual.

I think we still have somewhere around 2 days before we reach the central region. At this point, it's a very rough estimate. Who knows what they did to sabotage us.

The crystal seems to be able to last for a day at most, probably even less.

Well, time to get to it.

I activate my skills and traits and start modifying the crystal.

Lily and Biscuit find me ten minutes later.

I get healed against my will and almost fall as my mana feet get replaced by new ones. As the wounds close, only then do I realize how much damage I actually took and register the presence of a small pool of blood at my feet.

"So?" I ask to take my mind away from it.

"A few got hurt, but nothing I couldn't fix," Lily says. "We killed the monster, but it deleted the web, so Sophie is rebuilding it and needs a meeting with you to add you in. I already let them know you are fine."

"Sounds good."

"A few more groups joined the attack, and we had to kill them, but it was doable. Tess also caught two of the 4-armed men. Sophie is trying to get into their minds, but it's difficult. She's just learned that there seems to be something very special in the direction we were heading."

(Food!)

"I'm sure that's not it, Biscuit. Lily, the guide is on his way, so don't be surprised, and don't kill him."

"I wouldn't..."

And right at that moment, the guide appears with a lovely new message, "We are fucked."

Just like me, he quickly checks the remaining mana reserves, and his shoulders immediately drop, as if all the hope were leaving his body.

"Mind explaining?"

"We're way off course; they must have messed with the navigation. It's going to take at least a week to reach the central region. But that doesn't matter because we can't change our direction - they've locked it. The storm is one of the biggest I've ever seen, and we're heading straight into it. We have enough mana for one more day, but not enough to outlast that."

He crumples to the ground, sliding down the wall, and finally removes his mask, throwing it away and revealing the unshaven, tired face of an otherwise normal-looking man.

Looking at my preparations and the designs I've painted on the pillar in mana conductive paint and the inscriptions I've scratched on the surface, he sighs, "It could work, but even if you do have enough mana, we are screwed."

"Can you pass it along to the others? Sophie might be able to get some information."

Lily nods energetically, "I'm doing it already."

"How long until the storm hits?" I ask, turning to the guide.

"Two to six hours; it's hard to estimate, with how unpredictable they tend to be."

"Is it so dangerous because it has the potential to overwhelm the field and defenses in metal plates?" I ask.

"Yes, plus the wind there is very powerful, it will..."

"Nat, the two blue men escaped. They... they are out in the desert?!" Lily has her eyes wide open as she processes the information she's getting over the new link.

"Deck?" I ask.

"Yes," she nods, and I put my hand on her shoulder and Biscuit, teleporting us to the top.

This time there are no interruptions to my teleport, and here I find the rest of group 4. All of them are glaring down at the two thylarin walking through the white sand.

There is no damage caused to their bodies.

"They had some kind of weird teleportation skill that let them get to the deck before they jumped down," Sophie notes.

“Why are you not killing them?” I ask her.

“We need them,” Tess answers for her. “The guide you kept, Sophie couldn’t get any info out of him. Even as she pierced through his defenses, something the people from the central region put on him killed him.”

“So, you want me to get them? That’s so cruel of you; I might die, you know?” I say as I observe the fleeing thylarin.

They aren’t using any skills or mana, and just with the power of their bodies, they’re trying to run away. Right towards the storm, in the same direction as the ship.

It would be very simple to kill them, and they seem to realize it, but just that small chance of escape is probably better than if they had stayed on the ship.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m asking you to do. Can you get them?” Tess says without hesitation.

“Yeah, I can get them,” I say, nodding as I do.

Then I hand Maya all my weapons and equipment, which she accepts with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

After that, I unbutton my shirt and pull it over my head before handing it to her.

“Yooo,” Maya mumbles, and the other members mutter their reactions.

Some shamelessly stare; some seem to be a bit embarrassed.

I’ve been getting ready for this for the past few days. My constructs, my unique passive, and all my other passives have been turned off for a while. All of my mana is also stored in the crown.

Currently, there is almost no mana in my body at all. I went through a lot of effort, going through multiple rounds of testing, and checks with Sophie just to be sure of it.

The only things inside my body are thermal and kinetic energy along with whatever tiny bits of mana I couldn't get rid of.

Then I get to my pants, pull them down, and take a quick glance at Group 4, before turning around to remove my underwear and the rest of my clothes.

The only problem is my clothes and gear. I just found myself unable to get rid of all the mana clinging to them. There was always some remaining. And just that little bit would have been enough to doom me. As I've learned, the white sand only really becomes dangerous when it absorbs or detects mana or whatever it does. Then it grinds you into nothing, no matter your defenses.

That's why the monsters in this desert have no mana at all. That's why splashing a monster with even the slightest bit of mana lets the white sand finish it off.

"What do you think, Sophie?" I ask her without turning back to group 4. My back is still facing them.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHAT DO I THINK!? WHAT DO I THINK OF WHAT!?... oh... your mana." She says, suddenly quiet. "I can't feel any mana from you, none at all, just what's in the crown."

Even though my natural barrier is weaker from the lack of mana, it still seems to be working. One more thing to look into in the future. Still, I had to lower it so Sophie could scan me.

"Good."

After that, I give the last order to the crown to float there. It consumes quite a bit of mana as it goes against its usual behavior, but it needs to be done.

I expunge mana from my body one more time and then jump over the railing. Right into the white sand below the ship.

Chapter 438: SDAT

POV Kim Min-Jae

“That idiot! We still need more testing!” Sophie shouts, and together we rush to the railing to watch what happens next.

I've seen it before, the other passengers ground to nothing by the same white sand. I still remember the screams and the image of their flesh being torn apart. But that doesn't happen to Nat.

Before hitting the sand, he slows down and gently lands on it. He then stands there, butt naked, and watches as the wind blows a large cloud of white sand towards him, washing over the surface of the dunes like waves.

I could swear I saw him smile for a moment there.

Lily screams and covers her eyes as the sand smashes against Nat's body, and I just can't look away even though he could be dead the next second. A part of me can't even imagine him dying. Not him. Not like this.

And just like that, he still stands there when the wave of sand is gone. There are wounds on his body, blood flowing down his skin. More than a failure, they seem like a small mistake and lack of efficiency in his efforts.

Nat spits bits of sand from his mouth and then charges towards the two blue figures. He moves in that weird twitchy movement of his and uses boosts of kinetic energy to get him over larger distances, quickly catching up to the two thylarin.

“I don't think Nat cares about your testing,” I note.

“He wouldn't fail like that,” I shake my head. I just can't imagine it.

“But why'd he ditch his clothes?” Aaron asks.

"We couldn't come up with a way to reliably expunge mana from external materials. It's easier to rely on your own body."

"Is it just me, or does Nat have a nice ass?" Maya interrupts her words causing people to stare, and Tess giggles, breaking her stern mask.

"I can't judge that as a man, but Lily might be able to answer," Dennis blurts, ever eager to seize the opportunity. "She might send Izzy for the smartphone so she can snag a few pics."

"Shhh, she's too busy staring," Aaron adds.

"I'm not! I... just shut up, both of you!"

"It's fine, Lily! I even saw Sophie and Tess sneaking a peek." Maya chuckles, throwing her arm around the petite girl's shoulders.

Sometimes Maya manages to read the mood just well enough to lighten the tension, and I'm not even sure if she's doing it on purpose or if that's just how she is.

Everyone's anxious. Even I can see that. Just a single mistake will mean Nat's death. But at this point, it almost feels like It's the only way we can expect him to behave.

That worries me a bit.

What would happen if Nat fails to live up to our high expectations? What would I do if the man I admire most fails and breaks?

I then watch as Nat reaches the two four armed thylarin. They seem to be as shocked by his apparent nudity as the fact that he followed them and survived.

Nat moves in a short burst of immense speed, white sand exploding under his feet, and the three of them rapidly settle into a melee combat.

POV Nathaniel

I expected it to be an easy fight, but they turned out to be stronger than I expected. The two of them work well together, and they wouldn't be able to do so without a lot of experience.

So why the hell are you so good at melee combat? You can teleport, mess with my anchors, and have decent control over your mana, so don't go learning melee tactics like some brute. Not to mention that the extra arms might just be slightly unfair.

I dodge another punch and boost my body to the side. I can't even absorb anymore right now, that would require mana. And it's a good thing I turned off my unique passive too. With the way I'm getting pummeled right now, it would generate enough mana that the sand would kill all three of us.

Even so, I don't need any of this. I'm already getting used to the way they fight.

One of them is more defense oriented, using his upper arms to defend and the lower set to grapple. The second one likes to go all out on the attack, often combining the lower left and upper right arms to strike while making feints with the others.

I plan a bit ahead, and, in exchange for a few wounds, I maneuver them into position and grab the arm of the more aggressive thylarin, then just as I move my other arm to strike... the world blacks out for a moment, and I feel my head being thrown back. I lift my arms to catch myself, but even so, I still get thrown to the ground.

"So naive, human. Did you really think it would be that easy?" one of the thylarin taunts, smiling as he stretches all four of his arms.

"Maybe he thought we wouldn't notice his clumsy attempts to corner us," the other one boasts, taking a step to the side.

Well, it seems like my pure melee combat isn't where I would like it to be. Honestly, it does make a little bit of sense, given that I only have a few years of experience from Earth, especially in comparison to these two, who are both most likely over 50 years old, maybe even 100. Still, the way they're treating me irks me.

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Do they think this is all? Do they think I'm giving this all I have?

Staring at them, I reactivate my unique passive, and then, while they watch, I lift my arm and close my hand into a fist. I send kinetic energy to my hand to make the impact stronger and slam my fist into my chest - in a single powerful strike.

The kinetic energy transforms into mana, and just a trickle of that enters my reservoir.

Even that is enough, and the sand immediately starts attacking me, even as I quickly mold it into an orb and shoot it at the feet of the two thylarin. The white sand grinds down the flesh around my ankles, my shin bones start poking through, and one of my calves is nearly gone. The individual grains of sand boring tiny holes, almost like tunnels through my legs and chest.

And to think even the tiny amount of mana I held, just for a moment, was enough to cause so much damage.

I let thermal energy seep into my body from my vortex core, slowly closing my wounds as I take a step toward my disabled opponents.

Both of the thylarin are groaning in pain - and missing huge chunks from their legs, along with their arms, and sizable portions of their chests, all eaten away by the sand's reaction to such a small amount of mana. But they are alive. Both of them clearly tried to run as far and quickly as possible before collapsing into twin heaps in the sand, unable to move any further as they continue their struggle to crawl away from me.

“C-crazy! You are fucking crazy!” one of them shouts, holding his bleeding neck, as his crimson red blood stains the white sand.

“I hope you didn’t think it would be that easy,” I repeat, feeding him his own words before kicking him in the head. And doing the same to his partner even though he’s already been knocked unconscious.

They both turn out to be too heavy for me to carry, so I use kinetic energy a bit more to remove a few more of their limbs before grabbing them and boosting myself back to the Deathtrap.

Getting back on the deck, I throw them on the ground and then turn to my crown. On my way, I pick up my underwear and put it on, being careful of my wounds so as not to cover them in blood.

My crown floats back to its place over my head, and I check the amount of mana it used to maintain itself without bursting open or disappearing. It’s a bit more than I had expected, but I guess it makes sense. It is just not meant to function away from my body. Still, it contains quite a bit of mana.

As I take some of that mana and reabsorb it, I almost feel like smiling. Welcome back, my precious.

Lily comes closer, and I notice her staring at my chest and belly.

I look down and notice a few wounds here and there, “Oh, don’t worry, it isn’t anything serious. Save your mana.”

“W-what?” She stutters, quickly lifting her head, her big eyes staring up at me through her bangs.

“My legs are fine too. I’ll heal them on my own. Just make sure these two don’t die, but don’t restore their limbs for now.”

“Oh, uh, sure!” She says, before rushing over to the two thylarin, one of whom has already awakened and begun talking to Tess.

After putting on my pants and shirt, I head to Sophie. “How much mana do you have left?”

“Should be more than enough to get some information out of them. Though the guides are being troublesome,” she answers simply.

“Got it. I’ll just let you guys take care of the rest here. I’ll go check on our guides,” I say and, resort to using stairs like some schmuck instead of teleporting. I don’t train anymore; and I’ve even turned off most of my passives, at least the ones that require mana.

I leave just in time as more groups start making their way up to the top deck.

Back in the backup core room, I find the guide, still there, sitting in a different position, with the vyssari who wanted to gouge my eyes out.

“Any good news?” I ask the guide.

“Heryd here can help you with the core. He has some experience with...”

“I see. There’s no need for that. Anything else?”

The guide looks between me and the scaly legged shorty and then back at me, “I still can’t stop the SDAT and...”

“What’s an SDAT?” I ask, interrupting him.

“Are you... SDAT means Sand-Defensive Air Transport.”

“Got it, please continue.”

“I still have no idea where we’re heading but we should find out soon. Though there shouldn’t be anything in the Mana Desert so I don’t know how much help it will be or why we’re heading there. There is no sense in trying to run away even if we could change course; the storm will catch up anyway.”

“What if we bury ourselves in the sand?” the short vyssari asks, turning away from the core.

“That would either force us to keep the field running to ward it off or to turn off the field. In that case, any sand that got into the SDAT would be the end of us. And we don’t have enough mana to hold the field against that much sand.”

“Any rest stops around here? ” the vyssari continues.

“None, there is nothing here as far as we know. Not a single place free of sand.”

I listen to the rest of the conversation with one ear and turn back to the mana pillar. Just in case, I check the inscriptions and preparations I made, and it seems like no one’s messed with them. So I continue to work on them, I even manage to connect a few more of its functions and even though it still feels half-baked, it’s better than nothing.

When the conversation between the guide and the vyssari starts to drag on too long, I interrupt them. “You,” I shout, pointing at the guide, “shouldn’t you be controlling the ship?”

“It’s an SDAT, not a ship. It should be fine to leave it for a while. Our course is already set, and Kallus is taking care of the defenses. With how little mana we have, we don’t even have to focus on controlling how it’s being used.”

“Good, go back to the deck. Find the tall blonde, she can tell you what to do. They might already have more information on what happened.”

I watch him hesitate for a moment, but he does stand up eventually and head towards the deck without another word. As he said before, he was just a rookie following orders.

As I work, I can feel Heryd’s eyes on me, the vyssari, who was supposed to be helping me is one of the only three passengers with a level higher than mine. Much like the two thylarin I just brought back.

“You can fly; you could run away,” he says out of nowhere.

As I turn to him, I can see how carefully he's observing me.

"Sure," I respond, returning to my work, placing an anchor inside the core which I use to feed it power from my crown.

There is no way I would just put my mana inside to let just anyone use. No, I'd rather just feed the ship more as needed. While doing so, I also think about his question.

Could I really just fly away if I felt like it?

I think I could. Sure, there could be some specks of sand that high up, and if I had any mana inside my body, I would take significant damage, but I think I could push through. The trip that took this rusty old thing days would take me hours if I used enough kinetic energy.

It would be simple, but back when I was considering my options for survival, it never once crossed my mind. And I can think of two reasons for that.

The first is that I'm so confident in my ability to survive, even this, that the thought of running away never entered my mind.

The second is that I didn't want to leave this silly group of mine. Angry Kittens, group 4, Biscuit and Co., whatever the name of the day turns out to be.

I've always liked watching others, and now here I am examining myself and taking stock of my feelings, asking questions. And the one that eventually sticks at the front of my mind is: Would I be willing to risk my life for them, and could I walk away if I truly had to?

The swirl of emotions I feel even asking that question absolutely fascinates me.

Chapter 439: Thylarin brothers

The guides don't seem to tell me how to control Deathtrap or operate the control panel. Even getting access is difficult, and just looking into it, I have to go around, wasting time and mana.

It's clear that they have a vested interest in restricting access to the controls, and all our guides seem to bear some kind of mark that makes it easier for them to control the flying train/ship and while barring them from taking specific actions. Otherwise, they go kaboom.

At first, I think it must be the work of someone like Sophie, and yet the guide's marks feel more limited in scope. Sophie, on the other hand, should be able to do more given some time.

Even so, while guides no. 1 and no. 2 take care of our defenses and mana usage while paying special attention to the engines, fields, navigation, stabilizers, and auxiliary functions, I try to learn as much as possible about the controls. I've done more difficult things, this shouldn't be a problem and I've been studying the wide variety of blueprints recorded on the many mana stones I've taken from the previous floors every night before bed.

It won't be long before the guides can screw off. I'm sure if I split my mind with [Focus] I should have no problem controlling this rusty thing on my own. I can just use [Infusion] to get myself in, I can [Resonance] at the right times and then use my eyes and [Mana Manipulation]. Easy as that.

Even so, I may as well let them handle it for a while and teleport back into our room, where the rest of group 4 is waiting, along with some of the leaders of the more powerful groups abroad.

Tess, Sophie, and Izzy seem to be busy talking to the blue guys so I head towards the corpse of the marauder. Lily stands there as well, poking and probing at it.

"Was it strong?" I ask, my voice taking on a hushed tone. I don't want to bring attention to myself.

"It cut me in half, here," she gestures horizontally from one side of her waist to the other. A part of her shirt is missing, allowing a section of her belly to peek through.

Yeah, more typical Group 4 behavior.

"What about the mental attacks?" I ask.

"We don't know. Twins think it might have been some sort of hypnosis that didn't rely on mana, Sophie theorizes it was a gas we couldn't see or smell. Kim thinks it's something like primordial energy given that they don't seem to affect the sand. Though there might be other stuff like that."

"Do you think one of the guides was keeping it as a pet?" I ask, giving the body a prod as well. It feels like glass to the touch but it's still slightly warm and very tough.

"Izzy thinks so," Lily nods. "We also got some information from the groups that were colluding with them and each one has a different story. Some were promised positions of power in the central region, others were told stories of great items, while others were told we'd be looking for a way to leave the moon."

"So they were just pawns to be thrown away as needed and our blue friends are the only ones left who might know something."

"Yes."

"They know something but they've been refusing to talk. They want to strike a deal," Sophie says, joining us with a sigh. She seems tired. "I couldn't get much from them, they have good mental defenses and they set traps, if I push any harder they will die."

"They shouldn't have any mana," I note.

"No. They shouldn't. And yet they do. I'm almost certain they didn't have any when you brought them back so maybe they have a passive that's let them in some way recover the little bit of mana they needed to set their mental traps. Maybe it's just a trait that makes them resistant to mental attacks, one that might not need mana to operate."

"That sucks. We're going to hit the storm in a few hours and the guides can't change the trajectory. Even if they could, it's too late." I poke the marauder's corpse one more time and stand up.

"Yes, they passed me the information. Did you see the new side quest?"

Huh?

I open my notifications in surprise and sure enough, there's a new quest.

Side quest: Survive

Reward:

???

Beyond 3-day stay token

Objective: survive. Oh, how I missed this kind of quest.

After that, the room becomes too rowdy as some of the leaders start screaming at the two blue guys who simply laugh in their faces. The Dawnslayer however, is quiet, just going by his expression and behavior it wouldn't take a genius to guess that he has some kind of concentration skill.

I watch as Tess kicks a few of the guys out and zaps a few more rendering the room more or less silent.

She doesn't even seem to be all that angry, it's more like she'd gotten stuck dealing with a particularly annoying set of kids, issued spankings, and left them sobbing quietly in the corner.

I leave the room and walk through the hallway as it begins to fill with people jockeying to get even a bit closer, wanting to be the first to receive any new information. Some start asking me right away. I ignore it all and walk through and lash out when some especially annoying vyssari jumps in my way, trying to threaten me into revealing anything I might know, I kick him away, sending him crashing into a rusty wall, While one of his friends gets blasted away with a weak burst of kinetic energy.

I feel a bit awkward, with how short these guys are, almost like kids. Kids with beards and raspy voices.

Meanwhile, Deathtrap flies on, listing off to one side, It's noisier than before, now that it has such a massive hole in the wall. As I pass by I see one of the guides, directing groups of emergency conscripts to carry huge metal plates and stack them into a series of makeshift constructions being built around the hole.

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The guide doesn't have his mask either and is profusely sweating and cursing every time they do something wrong. He seems to be trying to connect the plates and integrate them into the web of inscriptions running through the ship so they can power them while saving that bit of extra mana. I know he doesn't have much time, he can only leave the control room for so long at a time.

I find myself wondering if we shouldn't have someone strong protecting him. Sure it might seem like we got all the perpetrators but what if one happened to be hanging back?

In the end, I decide to ignore my concerns and leave a message though group 4's new group link. I'm sure Tess is already dealing with it. Worst case I can seize control of the ship myself.

Upon reaching the backup core I meet the vyssari there, the Ashenfoot Shaman to be specific. He's moving around, poking at the control panels and examining my modifications to the core and the anchor I left there. I give everything a quick check, finding that he doesn't seem to have made any changes, though he seems to be annoyed when he senses me looking things over.

"You formed this part wrong," he snaps, pointing out a set of inscriptions.

"On purpose. It uses less mana that way."

"But you completely disregarded the inscription matrix designed to amplify mana concentration. You're also missing a failsafe sequence or an emergency dispel layer."

"I don't know what that is."

"You what?"

"I don't care about fancy things like that, but if you have them written down somewhere you can give them to me. It's the least you can do for all the work I'm doing to keep this thing floating."

"Crazy human, you're going to blow something up one day."

"For the most part that's the goal," I shrug, waving a dismissive hand.

While he watches I move on to working on making smaller changes. Nothing fancy like the failsafe or the supporting whatever, he mentioned. Just backups, increasing the stability of my anchor and making it more resistant to interference.

I'm still not happy about the way those blue boys managed to mess with my anchor before.

Two hours later it's Tess visiting me down here. She glances at the vyssari sitting quietly in the corner, watching me work, and immediately proceeds to ignore him.

"We made a deal with the guys you captured. Lily restored their bodies and I gave them my word that we wouldn't kill them if they didn't give me a good reason. Can I rely on you to help me keep my word?"

"Yup, no problem there."

"Thank you, Nat. They want you to be there when they start talking."

"I just got to the fun part. Did you know this rusty thing used to be able to do loops? There's a 'switch' just for that."

"What for?" Tess seems to share my confusion.

“No idea but it's interesting that it could do it. It also used to have weapons but they're long gone now. And If I'm correct there's a button to make it drop all its plating.”

“Wouldn't that make us nearly defenseless against the sand? If I remember correctly these plates are what's generating the field.”

“Exactly! I also started helping with controls and I'm in charge of proper mana redistribution. I remember laughing at them, but this ship is terribly optimized, there's barely any automation and I think it was made that way on purpose.”

“I hate to interrupt you, but...”

“Got it, got it.” Having finished speaking to Tess, I turn to the vyssari and remind him, “Don't break anything.”

He dismisses me with a weird gesture I don't recognize. Maybe it's their race's version of the middle finger?

Once again, the ship's hallways are full of people from three different races, but this time they just let us pass. The crowns over our heads have turned out to be rather memorable making it easy for the others to identify us. And in that fashion, we reach the door to our room, our defenses untouched nearby while a few groups under the control of the man in black chainmail stand there waiting. Sophie, sensing our presence, lifts the defenses for a moment and we enter unimpeded.

Much like before everyone from group 4 is there, along with a few group leaders I haven't bothered to remember and the blue guys I captured.

[Manabreaker - lvl ??]

[Manashroud Shaper - lvl ??]

Not gonna lie, I liked their class names before and I still do. They certainly seem to be a bit more civilized than the rest of the heretics.

Now that all their limbs have been restored they stand there surrounded by others, and yet they don't seem worried, hell they're even smiling.

On the other hand, Lily has much shorter hair now, and while I can't see it at the moment, I think she also sacrificed a body part for more mana. She probably used [Sacrifice] to keep her mana topped up, just in case she needs it.

"I'm Dravos and this is my brother Drekar, what's your name, crazy human?" One of the blue ones says, introducing himself; they look nearly identical to each other.

"Does it matter? Just tell me what you want."

"I thought we'd show some respect to each other. As fellows who walk the path of mana."

"Sure. So how did you mess with my anchor?"

Someone from the people around us mumbles, "We do not have time to..." but gets interrupted by Biscuit who woofs at him in a warning. That makes the man shut up immediately and his expression as he looks at Biscuit seems to be full of fear.

Dravos lifts one hand and flicks his fingers, bringing my attention back to him, "Your anchor functions on a fixed resonance within your mana spectrum, directly linked to your signature. A slight adjustment—modifying the mana field around it to disrupt that resonance—is all it takes."

Another hand gestures to his brother, Drekar, who nods. "We calibrated the surrounding mana flow to dampen the anchor's resonance. Not enough to shatter it—you'd detect that—but just enough to destabilize the connection. A minor phase alignment shift, and... well, we had a pleasant surprise waiting for you."

Dravos grins, his eyes glinting with amusement. "Of course, it's much harder when you're dealing with someone as skilled as you, crazy human. But we couldn't resist the challenge."

"So you just disrupted it slightly without breaking it."

"Crazy human, it's not that simple."

"But that's what you did, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Got it. So what did you want to say?"

The two brothers look at each other, just as confident as before.

"We want to live, obviously," Dravos says.

Drekar nods and says, "Dying in this shithole wasn't part of the plan, and your group seems to be the one in charge."

"So we have an offer for you." Smoothly following his brother's words, Dravos joins in.

"Just say it," I demand, challenging them.

"So impatient."

"We were like that once, brother."

"Not as much as him."

"No, not as much, but we can understand."

“Yes, we can,” Dravos turns back to me with a big smile, “This place is called Mana Desert. Do you know what its purpose is?”

“No,” I answer honestly. I have ideas, but nothing I can be sure of.

His brother spreads all four of his arms wide and announces theatrically, “There are five unique Containment Arenas, also known as Containment Cells, within the Astral Prison. Each one is distinct, designed specifically to restrain a powerful being.”

Dravos continues, “The Mana Desert is also one of these places—a solitary confinement cell—and we’re currently approaching the Champion it holds.”

Chapter 440: Arrival at the destination

Looking at the two before me, I take a step and grab one of my manabloc chairs. Lately, I have been testing longer-lasting mana constructs with quite a bit of success. The chair’s still holding strong even a few days later.

There are a few small pieces missing though, mostly on the legs. Almost as if something had taken a few snake mouth-sized bites out of it.

I plop into the chair, cross my legs, and over at the thylarin duo. What should I do with them? I promised to hold Tess to her promise but I could probably beat them up a bit. The way they’re acting is pissing me off.

“Who’s the prisoner?” Tess asks instead, and I decide to just lean back and listen.

Meanwhile, I connect to the anchor I left in the core and send bits of my mana into it. I was able to connect the anchor with some controls, but it's an extremely weak connection even after the hours I’ve spent on it. Just enough for me to take care of some of the less important functions.

“It's a thylarin Champion. We were Candidates to become his disciples, so he should recognize us.”

“You have to realize that it will be better to keep us alive,” his brother joins in.

They have very similar voices, even their bearing is similar. I can also sense they have a bit of mana. It somehow replenished slightly during the time they were here.

There's no way they should be able to ignore whatever's keeping us from regenerating mana here. If they speak the truth and this whole area is a trap for the Champion, what chance would these two, or I, have to ignore it?

"That much is true, but we intend to leave this moon, and people like our Champion might be our only choice. Surely such a person would be thankful if..."

"What's he here for?" Tess interrupts him without a blink.

"He's here just because he got just a bit too carried away with experimentation." Dravos waves it off.

"Seeking knowledge should never be grounds for punishment. But why do you care, lightning human? You're here for a reason just like the rest of us, the same goes for your group and the crazed human over there." Drekar says, pointing at me.

"I did nothing wrong," I say defending myself.

"Sure, none of us did, crazy human, we were all just unlucky. So let's cut to the chase, what do you say lightning human? The Champion's prison is hidden but we know the way." Drekar says, pointing at the center of the storm

"If we enter now we should be able to outlast that storm but we need to get there before it reaches us."

That part he says louder, his intentions clear. He just wants to make sure as many passengers hear it as possible, to put more pressure on us.

Well, that's kind of pointless. I would rather throw all the passengers one after another into that white sand than let them decide my fate.

"So what was the plan? In a nutshell." I ask.

"We befriended a guide."

"The one you killed, crazy human, he was a nice guy we met in Last Rest."

"He also had that interesting monster from Mana Desert for a pet. A cute, if deadly thing."

"You could say it all came together. Him and us meeting..."

They continue to talk, one filling for the other while they maintain their bearing. The duo certainly seems a bit twisted in the head.

"The guide, like us, was always intrigued by the secrets of Mana Desert and rumors about the trapped Champion. You could say he was obsessed with it."

"He was a bit crazy, but he was still a fine guy, he even paid for the drinks once, do you remember brother?"

"Yes, he did. So we found the coordinates. A message in a bottle cast out into the world by our Champion."

"He was always a smart guy. A terrifying guy."

"He was indeed. Truly the finest of Champions. He's been trapped there for a hundred years, enough time to start corroding the locks of his prison. Our guide friend's pet was proof." Dravos says, gesturing at the corpse of the monster, "Each monster from the area seems to have coordinates hidden in their bodies."

"A message in a bottle."

“What a monster, that guy.”

“Indeed, brother. What a monster.”

“If he could break free of his solitary confinement, would it really be so hard for him to get out of this Prison given enough time?”

“To have the knowledge he possesses. To taste the possibility of becoming his disciples, even the possibility of being declared Champion Candidates. Oh, crazed human, I have to believe you, of all people would understand.”

And I do, maybe more than they expect. But I stay quiet, gesturing for the talkative brothers to continue.

“Brother, I think he understands, even if he doesn't say anything. Maybe we made a mistake, we could have befriended the crazy human as well. It would have made things easier.”

“It's too late now, but let us continue. We killed the guides as they began to notice the changes we made to the navigation systems. They weren't willing to cooperate. They were weak and lazy.”

“Some people from the central region are also like that. Too accustomed to their comfy prison after the years they've spent here, unwilling to escape their cage.”

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“Pathetic.”

“Yes, pathetic.”

“So the SDAT is heading for the prison cell. We didn't expect the storm, but such is fate. Nothing is ever perfect.”

That's when Tess interrupts again, "You seemed fully capable of going there on your own, why did you point the SDAT there?"

Dravos smiles, " We needed the extra mana reserves, lightning human. The mana batteries that people would bring, the mana in their bodies. Something for the Champion to use, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"And fodder against the monsters, traps, and defenses we might encounter."

"We also know some interesting inscriptions that could help, though they would require... sacrifices." He says, unbothered by the people who would have been their sacrifices.

"Well, I think that's pretty much enough." I use a bit of mana to create a barrier around them making it opaque and soundproof.

I turn to Tess and begin to speak, "So..."

"You want to go see the Champion," she responds, grabbing one of the manabloc chairs to sit in.

"It's not like we can change where we are heading. Do we even want to with the storm approaching?"

"Okay, so how about we skip visiting the guy who could kill us all like it were nothing. Wait out the storm and then head to the central region?" I can almost hear the frustration in Sophie's voice.

"Not enough mana."

"Are you sure, Nat, is there really no way for us to generate enough mana to return after the storm?" Tess's eyes pierce through me.

"Okay, there might be a small chance." I acknowledge.

I won't say it in front of others, but I think I could abuse my unique passive to get enough mana for us to reach the central region. We could also try modifying the flying ship/train, by putting all people on deck and turning off defenses everywhere else. Or even getting rid of other passengers and focusing on defending the vital areas of the ship.

"Famir, can you take others out and share the information we just got? I want to talk to my group," Tess shouts, turning to the guy with the concentration skill and black chainmail.

"Ten minutes and then we bring others in to discuss options?" he asks.

"Sure."

He leaves with a nod, and with a great deal of complaining, the room clears out, leaving only group 4 inside and the two thylarin confined in my barrier.

"How much mana do you have?"

"I was storing it over two weeks so quite a bit, but I'm already using bits of it to feed Deathtrap. I'm doing it even as we speak. The wind's already started hitting us, and it's sending more sand into the air and that means it's crashes into the field. If it gets very much worse, it should be enough for a few days at most."

"And your passive?"

"You know how it works, right? I told you already. Are you really so eager to beat me up?"

"It said something about external force, right?"

Just in case, I read the description again.

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 or nearby

bursts of kinetic energy. When struck or near a powerful source of it, their body can absorb the kinetic energy and store it as mana.

“It says that, but I haven’t gotten it to work yet. If it activates during the thunderstorm, it could end up badly for all of us without the field of Deathtrap.”

“Well, worst case scenario, we just have to beat you up for a few days.” Maya smiles.

Tsk. I knew she was still holding a grudge for the way I treated her back on the 1st floor. I bet she would love to “help out” with my passive that way.

“With the amount of mana we need, you would need to beat me for weeks. Sorry to disappoint.”

Though, that might not be all that disappointing for them.

“Could that prisoner really help? If we shared our mana with him?” Min-Jae asks, looking at me as he turns away from his examinations of my barrier.

Sophie responds with a question of her own, “Are we sure we want to be left at his mercy?”

I can see that Tess, like everyone else, finds herself deep in thought. She’s playing with her hair, coiling it around her finger before letting go and then doing it again. She’s always been like that, right down to her absent-minded expression when she gets caught up in thinking about a problem.

In the end, she stands up, having made her decision, “We don't have many options. We will survive the storm first. We can't avoid it so we may as well let Deathtrap land at the palace we expect to find the Champion. Then we can see if we can't gain a bit more information and think things over before we decide to make contact.”

“Got it. I’ll head back over to the backup core.” Leaving the rest to them, I reclaim the mana from the barrier and leave the room.

Thirty minutes pass as I get deeper into the control systems of Deathtrap, the guide helping me as much as he can without going kaboom. All while the horizon grows darker, as sand continues to pummel the sides of the ship. White grains of sand bouncing off the protective fields and metal plates.

Any other time, it would look pretty, but I know just how deadly they can be.

We evacuate parts of the ship and I redirect the reserves into the places we've gathered the passengers with the help of the guide who takes more direct control of mana, while I feed the engines fighting to reach our destination before the storm hits us.

The other guide in charge of defenses barely has any time, constantly locked in his own control room, struggling to keep the field active.

As the edge of the storm hits us and starts shaking the ship, it's all I can do to keep the defenses and engines supplied. I even send some of my mana through in addition to the reserves in the core. The guide in charge of defenses sets them to their maximum, muttering that we won't be able to survive if the storm hits us at full force. He's speaking through the communication systems in the control panels. A worse version of Sophie's constructs.

As the ship tilts even more, the rust starts falling off its metal walls. The tilt is noticeable now and the creaking sounds like someone squeezing an empty can.

Then the guide in control of our defenses dies.

His last scream having been picked up by the control panel's connections, his guards likely meeting the same fate.

A thought about what must have caused his death immediately comes to mind, and I can't help but chuckle. This surprises the vyssari who is still in the room with me, along with a few of his men - the same number of guards as the recently-dead guide.

Deathtrap then nosedives, people, and furniture flying all over the place. The contraption's creaking increases and the storm raging outside sounds more intense and the sky has gone dark, but at the same time, a light shines through, reflected by trillions of grains of white sand.

Like a waterfall, sand washes over Deathtrap, and then even that little light disappears, only to be replaced with pure darkness.

Darkness and quiet.

The sounds of the storm disappears as if it had never existed and then Deathtrap hits the ground, its metal plates screeching against the rock of the surface until it crashes again slamming into something we can't see and coming to a full stop. Then the engines turn off, the vibrations and sound that were so ever-present wane away, to be replaced with silence while Deathtrap creaks deafeningly and tilts over, collapsing onto its side with a loud thump that shakes through the frame.

All movement stops.

We have arrived at our destination.