

THE TOURNAMENT OF RELICS



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NOTES

Before you begin reading, I'd like you to know a few things.

First of all, you may find references to an "item and ability index" in brackets after the narrative comes across an item of interest. Because the book is LitRPG (incorporating traditional elements of RPG games into the story), I've taken the time to come up with some tooltips for various items and abilities.

There are also paragraphs written in italic at the start of each chapter. These are not connected to the events of the story- they're just a little tidbit I added to give you some insight into religious ideals held by various sides of the conflict.

All unit values (length, mass, etc.) are translated from Aetheiopeian versions to the metric system for ease of reading.

PROLOGUE

THE REVALUATION

All things must come to an end. All prosperity and beauty are bound to disappear when the time is up. There can be no overflow of Light, no overflow of Darkness. There can be no overflow of Life, no overflow of Death. There can only be Equilibrium.

Behind the grand cathedral was a small, secluded plot of woodland that all the citizens avoided- the Veneration Sector. In this wood, layers of catacombs hid belowground, with twelve surface entrances around the wood and one in the cathedral. In the centre of the plot was a clearing, letting a small domed building touch the moonlight.

The Primordial Shrine stood tall and dark against the starlit night sky. Its twelve pillars rise unevenly around the central pedestal below which the sacred fires light the shrine. The slanted domed roof is reminiscent of an observatory, with multiple short columns sticking out of it, each pointing to a star in the sky.

Every settlement in Aetheiopeia had a patron Primordial Immortal- the Eternal Light (the Keeper of Light), the Mist Lord (the Keeper of Darkness), the Reaper (Keeper of Death), the Saviour (Keeper of Life), and the Primal Equilibrium (Overlord of Balance). These are godlike beings with an area of influence they represent and control. This shrine was here for the High Priest to make offerings to Infinigate's patron, the Eternal Light.

A lone figure stands before the pedestal. The man's robes are pure, unadulterated silver, not a speck of dust. Gold trim lines the fabric, further contrasting with the night sky. He wore a mask embroidered with a silver lantern. He places a wrapped object on the pedestal and kneels before it.

A silver glow radiated from the pedestal. The wrapped object disappears as the silver light increases in intensity. The man frowns under his mask, backing away. Something is wrong.

Suddenly, the light disappears, replaced with fog dense enough to blot out the moonlight. Black mist forms as ribbons, wrapping around the pedestal and converging at the top to create the floating form of an empty cloak containing a concentration of pure darkness. Twelve trails of darkness wrapped around the floating garment, coiling around where the head would be. The trails formed some manner of face, disembodied in the space of the cloak. It was a horrid image, six eyes swimming through the murky surface of the face around a mouth and with no visible nostrils.

The eyes of the holographic face remained closed, but it opened its mouth and spoke in a deep voice.

I am the Mist Lord.

"I am the High Priest, and Infinigate's patron is the Eternal Light. You have no business here."

I am here to begin the Revaluation, the Mist Lord said in a cold, emotionless voice.

The Revaluation was an event that happened about once each millennium. The Primal Equilibrium would realign the forces of Light and Darkness, Life and Death. It would then repeat when the Immortals were once more out of balance- usually a millennium. After fifty or so of these events, the Equilibrium would depart to places unknown and return when the forces needed to be realigned once more. So far, the Equilibrium had done its job well, and no force had overpowered their adversary in the millions of realities.

Untold disasters would happen should the forces become too far unbalanced. The Equilibrium assured the High Priests of Aetheiopeia that it would be a terrible fate for the world in question and eventually add up to affect the integrity of all physical realities.

"The Revaluation is due three centuries from now. The Primal Equilibrium has already balanced the forces of Light and Darkness."

Previously, yes. But it has come to the Equilibrium's attention that it is time to balance the scales again.

"It's too early."

The Equilibrium has been distracted from its duties. This world was due a realignment two centuries earlier.

"I... you can't begin."

A chattering sound echoes around the shrine, the eerie laughter of the Mist Lord.

You think the Immortals care about the welfare of even the greatest kingdom in this world? Aetheiopeia is only one world among hundreds of millions- scratch that! One world among numbers that the mortal mind is incapable of comprehending! To the Primordial Immortals, what good is one world when so many others are out there? The Immortals may have mortal roots, but there is no denying that we are no longer the frail beings we once were.

The Immortal laughed again.

Your great Sevenshard is nothing in the face of the power of the greater cosmos. No mortal substance can last forever.

Darkness engulfs the shrine as the sound of footsteps gets closer and closer to the shrine. The High Priest stands up and turns around just in time to receive a dagger in his face.



The world of Aetheiopeia resided in a multiverse with a measly sixteen other universes, compared to much larger multiverses comprised of thousands of worlds.

This multiverse and many others in the same “region” (the multiverses exist on the celestial plane; a spiritual existence where physical matter cannot exist- geography is the best metaphor to describe it to the mortal mind) had a strange property of a spiritual system that transformed into words the properties of an individual or object in the form of floating screens. It had a complex system of magical advancement where any entity would gain the capacity for magical power in the teen years. This magic granted the inhabitants six unique and blatantly supernatural abilities. They could gain more abilities by infusing themselves with different magical artifacts, unlocking a random power synergistic to their existing ones out of a pool of millions. Only a few intelligent species were capable of this.

The four pillars of magical advancement were the four attributes- strength, soul, agility, and vitality. These increased when the beings did certain things in their purview. When a being's attributes reached a certain threshold, they needed to find a sufficiently challenging task relating to the specialization of their abilities that would push them over the line to the next rank. Each rank was a new threshold of magical power on the path to a godlike existence. So far, none had reached higher than amethyst rank, the twelfth rank.

Aetheiopeia was home to many humanoid races- harpies, elves, and dwarves, and many more (though they were a minority), along with a wide variety of animals. The main populous of Aetheiopeia was a race known as the K'arva, humanoid creatures with skin colours ranging from pure white to warm grey. They also had strange bony protrusions along their limbs and torso.

Aetheiopeia had four kingdoms- Sevenshard, Khrovan, Aether, and the Fortress Isles.

Sevenshard was a large, prosperous kingdom run by aristocracy since its founding. It was the biggest of the four and controlled a sizable portion of global trade that the others, lacking Sevenshard's unique resources, depended on. When it first became a proper kingdom, the kingdom had been attacked by the neighbouring kingdom of Khrovan. People called the pre-war era Ancient Sevenshard. Many ruins still stood, buildings and whole cities razed to the ground during the rebellion. After the war, Sevenshard society had been thoroughly destroyed and it took decades before the kingdom pieced itself back together, during which much ancient knowledge had been vanquished, the new kingdom a mere shadow of what once was.

Khrovan was a disorganized “democracy” with very lax laws. It was a breeding ground for criminal activity. After their thorough destruction of Sevenshard, they had not claimed the razed land for unknown reasons. They soon faced a rebellion, for which the reasons were long forgotten. The revolution was successful but were unable to rebuild Khrovan any better than it had been before.

Aether was a kingdom heavily invested in magic research, full of innovators and founded after the Sevenshard-Khrovan war. They maintained good relations with the others, remaining neutral in most conflicts and never interfering enough to draw the attention of the other empires.

The Fortress Isles was an island nation founded by a mix of anarchists and idiots. The founders settled on a small island on Aethiopeia's outskirts. Aether supplied them with meagre resources, and the Fortress Isles gave them insights into their technological advancement to add to their magical studies.

All four kingdoms had a shared currency dubbed “Shardcoin.” They also shared the same calendar, which consisted of seven months named Altechime, Hailbrin, Jalkan, Delarte, Bwaya, and Hewn from first to last.

Aside from these kingdoms was The Roots of Nonexistence or simply ‘the Nonexistence.’ It was a flat island, a gigantic wasteland of eternally smouldering ash. It was uninhabitable due to the unpredictable volcanic eruptions in random places and the fact that it somehow repelled living physical matter, sending any living being smouldering into ashes the moment they stepped onto the plains, regardless of rank. Nothing had ever lived long enough in there to come back. Its environment also somehow spread, making many places uninhabitable, such as parts of northern Khrovan and eastern Sevenshard, along with various islands around Sevenshard.

Another infected area was Ancient Halsend, an entire continent, formerly a prosperous kingdom, now reduced to smouldering ash and crumbling ruins. It was previously known for its investment, not in magical power, but in advanced technology unseen anywhere else in Aethiopeia, even in the technologically advanced Fortress Kingdom.

Sevenshard's capital was Infinigate, located at the centre of Sevenshard in the Duskfel province. The city was a circle laid over two circular mountain ranges with basins of water inside them, forming next to each other like an infinity symbol. High stone walls entrapped the

city, sometimes replaced by mountains. A thick swampland forest surrounded the base of the walls, filled with enough water to act as a natural moat.

The city was composed of thirteen districts- twelve surrounding a central hub island in between the mountain ranges. Each had unique architecture while staying within Sevenshard's architectural guidelines. Only the Hub District violated this, tall amalgamations of glass, crystal, and stone towering high up into the skies, with square stone towers topped with spire-like roofs. Lanterns hung in the streets, attached to buildings or floating unanchored overhead.

The Palace of Sevenshard was an awe-inspiring sight in the Hub District. Its towering spires pierced the skies, and its dungeons stretched far underground. Massive walls built from smooth, turquoise-grey metal encased the Palace, gleaming in the auspicious sun. Watchtowers lined the walls, rising to challenge the spires of the main fortress staffed by legions of vigilant archers. Autonomous catapults lined the walls, a moat of some scorching liquid below.

Two monolithic statues guarded the tall wooden doors. Above the door was the aethein- two purple ribbons winding their way around a black two-pronged trident with a ghostly silhouette between the prongs. The aethein was the seal of Sevenshard and appeared on all official documents and buildings.

A woman cautiously walks towards the doors, dressed in adventurer gear- a black, lightly armoured jacket, white pants with multiple pockets, a belt, a crossbow across her back, and several sheaths at her waist, each containing a blade. She wore a silver crown encrusted with three gems glowing with transcendent light.

The strangest thing about the woman was the aura that hung around her. It wasn't transcendancy but something unnatural, an eldritch amalgamation of spiritual flavours.

The aura was a natural atmosphere around all souls, along with particularly strong magical items. It represented the soul, a sixth sense for those with the skill to use it. To manipulate the aura requires such extensive training that most people don't bother. However, when used correctly, it can strike fear in enemies and empower allies, be used as telepathy, and breach other auras to attack the soul.

The woman walked up to the tall doors and knocked. The doors autonomously opened into a long throne hall. At the end of the hall, the Throne of a Thousand Deeds stood between two pillars that held up the ceiling. Braziers lined the blood-red carpet that led to the throne and branched off into two doorways on either side of the throne.

The woman walks through the empty halls of the Palace of Sevenshard, entering a well-lit room. A conference table sits in the centre, surrounded by various ambassadors from the adventuring dynasties of Sevenshard and a few civic council liaisons. At the head of the table sat King Lardune Sevenshard. His attire consisted of the blood-red and gold robes commonly worn by Sevenshard royalty.

The woman saluted the King and sat down in the empty seat. "Good evening, Sir. Lardune. The Ambassador of the Aroruas reports for duty."

The King nodded to her. "Good evening, Lady Aurora."

The Aroruas were one of the greatest adventuring dynasties ever created, founded before even Sevenshard. They were all some manner of fae or elf, pure white skin paired with piercing blue eyes.

The rest of the ambassadors only scowled at her. The King turned towards the rest of the ambassadors. Only the most prestigious adventuring dynasties were present.

"Last night, the High Priest of Infinigate was assassinated."

Low muttering filled the room as the ambassadors conferred with each other.

"Such a tragedy has not happened since the first Revaluation." The King continued. "Either the forces of the Mist Lord are on the rise once more, or Khrovan is about to attack. Because of this, I have called upon you to prepare our nation for war. Sevenshard must be ready for battle within the year. Even if we survive, we must continue vigilance, for it would be our weakest point in years and the perfect time for any other Kingdoms to attack."

"From now on, the Infinigate Academy will be open to all who wish to join. We must defend our kingdom like never before. So, let us begin our conference. What ideas do you have for the defence of Sevenshard?"

Suggestions were issued, mainly to give their dynasty more money so they could protect Sevenshard, though some were valid. Very few, however, would be practical. One was to set up floating defence platforms all over Sevenshard. However, without the abilities of the High Priest, sufficient transcendent power could not be invested to keep those platforms afloat while fueling the other essentials. Another was to invest more into research to develop even stronger alloys to build weapons and armour- they hadn't been able to forge anything stronger than metal weapons infused with amethyst and various other gemstones. Another idea was to recruit another High Priest and pretend nothing ever happened. The King almost approved a few of them but decided against it.

When it seemed they were at a loss, the Aroruan ambassador spoke.

"A prime opportunity to train new defenders is the old Tournament of Relics. Teams would prepare for weeks on end to compete. The challenge this time could be to invade repurposed ruins turned into an enemy stronghold- and the Mist Legion practically lives in those. It wouldn't be to defeat them but rather as a reconnaissance mission. I suppose it could be a little sensitive for our older citizens, but I doubt it will be much of an issue."

All the other ambassadors ignored her.

The Tournament of Relics was an age-old tradition hosted by the Arorua dynasty that was banned decades ago. It was an opportunity for adventurers to raid a high-rank ruined complex, city, or other ancient construction. The first team that retrieved a specific artifact from the ruins would be granted exotic prizes beyond simple currency. However, these Tournaments

would often result in massive casualties, resulting in the aristocracy of Sevenshard banning the practice.

"The Tournament is too dangerous," one of the representatives said. "We banned it for a reason."

The King held up his hands for silence.

"It's a valid idea. We need all the help we can get."

The ambassadors protested.

"But Your Majesty-"

"Enough. It's a legitimate solution. The adventuring job always had a high chance of death. Why do you disagree simply because the idea is from the Aroruas? Have they ever abused their power? How many times have you done so?"

The King glared around the table at the indignant ambassadors. "Meeting dismissed."

CHAPTER I

A RISK AND REWARD SPORT

The pursuit of Equilibrium is not a common aspiration. Many choose to leave the peace of Equilibrium behind to chase after those lofty goals that will ultimately mean nothing when the world meets its inevitable end. But those devoted to Equilibrium thrive in the shadows, for manipulation is their sport and Equilibrium their pursuit. The plot for the Revaluation begins now.

The crowds always flocked to the portal square at noon. At noon, Infinigate was the best version of itself, lanterns lit, streets bustling. For returning citizens, however, it was a nightmare. Infinigate customs were the strictest in all four kingdoms. They would check every item in every dimensional storage space you had. They would look through all your meticulously updated citizenship documents. Then they would let you in. Maybe.

The hub warp square was the home of the thirteen warp ports in Infinigate's Hub District. The ports were constructed as a ways of fast travel around the city, given that the circular city had a diameter of at least eight thousand kilometres. The first twelve ports were capable of sending one to any of the other districts in Infinigate, the thirteenth able to send you anywhere out of a list of common destinations- for a key of course.

Right now, the square was a mess, civilians pouring through the thirteen tall stone monoliths, each engraved with shimmering runes, never one single colour at a time.

A dark-skinned man strode through the crowd. His silver hair curled across the sides of his face forming unnatural, almost grotesque shapes. Light stubble reached across his face, crossing past an almost comically sharp chin. He wore mahogany spellcaster's robes, staff across his back, dagger sheathed at his side. His deep purple eyes had an all-seeing quality that sent the crowd scrambling out of his way.

Amitt Castell pushed through the throng, eventually reaching the security desk. He handed the border officer a citizenship certificate.

"Afternoon, Yarthurr. How are you?"

"I'm quite fine," the officer replied in a bored and dismissive voice. "But thanks for asking."

The officer examined the certificate for fifteen minutes and brought up a scan of Amitt's dimensional bag that hung at his waist (ITEM: [Warpskin Dimensional Bag]- see item index Amitt Castell).

"What's this?" he said after a few seconds, pointing to a wrapped item. The object's wrappings camouflaged to the background of the dimensional scan systems that Sevenshard authority used. Only the guard's trained eyes could catch the slight discolouration.

"Classified info," Amitt said sharply, drawing a stamped document from his dimensional bag and placed it on the officer's desk. The officer read it over and nodded his approval.

"Continue through," he grunted, raising the barred door. "And see if you can snatch me a pint or two next time, yeah?"

"Got it," Amitt replied. "Cockatrice tail, I assume?"

"You know me so well."

Amitt strode through the archway, relieved to have crossed through customs so quickly. He stalked through the dense streets of Infinigate, ducking under lanterns and around supply carts. Throughout the complicated maze of buildings of the Hub District, the people of Sevenshard crowded the streets.

As Amitt walked further north through the city, the hustle and bustle began to fade as he crossed the grand bridge to the Twelfth District. The glorious Hub District was all flash and flair, but this was where the business of Infinigate was- a place of quiet power. It didn't need to flaunt it- the rich history here practically radiated through the air. The buildings grew taller and darker the further Amitt travelled. The structures became more intricate, carved with mosaics

and columns, developing into an architectural style that radiated riches and power- the remnants of legends staged long ago.

Amitt turned down a narrow corridor that opened to a wide street. At the end of the road sat a fortress-like structure- three towers arranged side-by-side, connected by thick crenellated walls. More crenellations adorned the two outer towers, but the central tower had a sharp, conical roof topped by a thin metal spire stretching high into the sky. Banners hung from the walls, emblazoned with the Sevenshard seal, a trident and longsword crossed over it.

These buildings were the headquarters of the Sentinel Crown. The Crown Guild was the most prestigious in Sevenshard- they were the loyal guards of the aristocracy of Sevenshard.

Amitt cautiously strode inside, moderating his expression with confidence. The foyer was the size of a public library, with a large archway in the back of the room and a balcony supported by thick columns. A reception desk stood in the middle of the foyer, flanked by two guards. Amitt walked up to the receptionist.

From his aura, Amitt could tell that the receptionist had recently ascended to ralite rank- the eighth rank. The receptionist was two ranks above Amitt's gold-rank status.

Sevenshard etiquette was a complex system. Some foundational elements were naming conventions and at what rank titles were applicable, along with aristocratic status and relations if applicable. iron rank and lower people had to address silver rankers as Mr./Ms. Iron rank to diamond rank had to address ralite rank and above individuals as Madam/Sir.

"Handing in a commission for the Crown Guild, sir," he said, showing the receptionist the scroll he had shown the border officer. The receptionist looked it over.

"Clear. You may enter."

Amitt nodded solemnly. He walked at a carefully moderated pace down the foyer and into the Crown Hall, which was the size of a cathedral. Five bright chandeliers lit the room, covered with a mass of vines and other plant growth. More vines hung from the ceiling, harbouring kaleidoscopic flowers to break up all the green. A dozen columns rose upwards, holding up the cavernous ceiling. Staircases led up to balconies that lined the walls for the first few floors, and braziers held soaring flames. Natural light entered through windows on the uppermost terraces, each one oriented to shine the light onto a pedestal in the centre of the room.

The pedestal held a crown of the darkest crystal (ACCESSORY: [Crown of a Thousand Deeds], see item index Soiravis Sivarios), a deep purple stone embedded with the blazing light of an incarnation of transcendency. The relic radiated power transcending that the mortal mind lacked the sheer capacity to comprehend. It had been forged some millennia ago, back when Sevenshard had its revolution and transitioned away from what was now referred to as Ancient Sevenshard, made as a demonstration of the new order's power.

Lining the walls were more relics that had played a crucial role in the creation of Sevenshard, unprotected to the eye. However, anyone with basic aura control could sense the hundreds of layers of protection laid over each other. If one were so much as touch a relic, they would be dead in an instant.

Amitt left for one of the mezzanine overlooks. He crossed through rooms and hallways, a large communal hall, and finally arrived in a small office room at the top of the northernmost tower. The guild director was waiting for him.

"Good evening, Master Borghum," Amitt greeted the man.

"Good evening, Amitt Castell," replied Borghum. "You have the confluence?"

"I have the confluence," Amitt said, retrieving the wrapped item from his dimensional bag.

"Unwrap it."

Amitt hesitated.

"As in, unwrap it."

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Just do it, you dolt."

Amitt flashed a frown at him and carefully unwrapped the object, averting his eyes from it.

The object was a glowing blue cube (**ARTIFACT: [Confluence of Souls]- see item index Gregor Borghum**). Inside it, haunting faces swirled through the blue mist, overseen by a pair of scythe-wielding shadows. The cube didn't have any worldly smell, instead emitting an aroma that terrified all that stood before it, inflicting primal fear in even the bravest of souls.

Borghum gazed at the cube, the red glare of the lanterns flashing across his pupils. He stood up, satisfied with Amitt's work.

"Well done," he said warmly before turning away and briskly exiting the room.



A half-hour later, Amitt had travelled to the other side of the city- the Sixth District. Infinigate was arranged like a hemisphere- a circular ring surrounding a central district, buildings rising higher and grander the closer you went to the centre.

The Sixth District was the home of the Balm Bazaar- one of twelve markets in Infinigate. The Bazaar was also the most adventurer-oriented, home of some of the highest-quality gear in Sevenshard and the business location of many adventurers like Amitt, who took commissions to do adventurers' jobs for people with the money.

Amitt had come here to negotiate the terms of his newest commission- a request to rid one of the ruins of Old Sevenshard of monsters that had infested it, sent by some minor aristocratic family.

It was half past two in the afternoon. The commissioner was late.

Contact stones were what the people of Sevenshard used to contact each other. They were generic-looking glowing stones that could repeat the audio of messages sent to it. No visual interface was used- these were manipulated by the aura. As Amitt reached for his, a voice spoke behind him.

"Hi."

Amitt whirled around, his dungeoneering instincts kicking in, having been honed for years while he crept around the dingy corners of monster-infested sites. Multiple thoughts flew through his mind, each question being pinned down in a matter of seconds, courtesy of his gold-rank soul attribute. The first thing that came to mind: monsters that spoke the languages of intelligent species were often humanoid. In one swift motion, his knife hand drew a gleaming silver knife (**WEAPON: [Sacrificial Dagger]- see item index Amitt Castell**) and positioned it approximately where such a monster's throat would be.

He turned to see a young K'arvan woman standing behind him, wearing subdued but elaborate adventurer gear. Her silver-blue hair dropped around her shoulders like a waterfall, sparkling with small threads of yarns hanging from pins. Her eyes shined with light amusement as if she were still replaying a joke she had heard several hours ago. She wasn't particularly buff but athletic enough for the usual adventurer commissions.

"Whoa, whoa!" the woman said. "Slow down. I'm your commissioner!"

Amitt lowered his knife, looking disdainfully at her.

"It's not of etiquette to sneak up on a veteran adventurer, Persia Cinderbreathe."

"I dunno man," Persia replied slyly. "We do that all the time where I come from. Well, I do, at least."

Ignoring her, Amitt withdrew a document from his dimensional bag.

"You sent this commission, yes?"

"Yup. That's me."

"You listed the area as a maze-like underground complex infested by gold-rank monsters. I thought around four-hundred thirty-five Shardcoin would cover it, plus the general price of any loot you want to take. Anything you'd like to add?"

"Uh, yeah actually. There just haven't been many training opportunities to go by these days. *I should've scripted this,*" she muttered. "The monsters have largely stopped attacking the fort cities. There aren't any state enemies to hunt down. For a humble silver ranker like me, everything's too easy or hard to kill nowadays. How about you take me with you."

Amitt frowned. "Are you sure? Silver to gold is quite a difficult jump. It won't go as fast if I have a low ranker tagging along."

"Oh, it'll be fine," Persia drawled. "I'll pull through."

"Hmmm... All right. You can come. I'll give you any loot you find free of charge as long as you work for it."

She pumped her fist, grinning.

"Here," she said, handing Amitt a bag of coins. Amitt gave her the contract.

"We'll be off then," he said, striding off to the warp square. Persia trailed behind, softly grinning.

They reached the Sixth District warp square to find it walled off with wooden barriers. Infinigate's royal guard was standing around the entrances to the warp square. Amitt walked up to one of them.

"Excuse me, sir, what's this about?"

"The city's on lockdown for the day," the guard said gruffly.

"Why?"

"They don't tell us chumps anything, they just put us here," he replied, glaring at Amitt.

Amitt left the guard to his duties.

"They've put the city on lockdown," he informed Persia. "We'll have to clear the ruin tomorrow."

"That's fine," Persia replied, shrugging. "I've got a place here, but I gotta say- Infinigate is a little too regal for my tastes. I'm looking forward to getting out of here. At least it's not Khrovan. That place was an absolute trash heap."

"You went to Khrovan?"

"Well... Khrovan's a Khrovan, you know? I've got no idea what that means, but you gotta visit the Khrovan."

Amitt shook his head. "Alright. I'll see you at the warp square tomorrow."



The next day, Amitt arrived at Hub District's warp square. Persia was already there, leaning against the wall. Several guards were giving her the death stare. As soon as she saw Amitt, she shouted, "OI! AMITT!"

"Hells, Persia. Quiet."

"It's not of etiquette to sneak up on a veteran adventurer."

"Where'd you learn etiquette then?"

"The Twelfth Hell."

"Ah, yes. That happened. Of course."

[UNFINISHED SCENE- please move on]

They walked up to the thirteenth port and Persia inserted a key to get her destination to show up on the list.

"Faelhaven!" Persia whisper-shouted towards the monolith. The runes flashed soft purple and a burst of light ripped the two of them through the fabric of reality to emerge at the bottom of a cliffside path, next to another brick monolith. The stones led up and through a small thicket of evergreen trees, through which Amitt could barely see the slanted roof of the Cinderbreathes' estate.

"Over here," Persia said, pointing towards a rough path leading into a tunnel carved through the cliff face. Wooden beam supports lined the walls, spaced out every three quarters of a metre. At the apex of each wooden arch hung a lantern on a silver chain.

The two of them continued along the path for a ways, treading through rough pebbles and the occasional patch of mud. Persia's five foot frame fit easily through the tunnel, but Amitt

kept bumping his head on the lanterns. The excessively long staff strapped to his back didn't help.

"How exactly did you find the ruins?" Amitt asked.

"We were making renovations for a tunnel into the house from the warp port," Persia replied. "It rarely rains here, but if it does, it's always a massive storm, so Father wanted some way to get to the house without getting drenched. The excavators ended up digging straight into a cave and found a bunch of weird pillars in there. They didn't go any further before some monster scared them off, though."

"Huh."

"So tell me a bit about yourself. Are the Castells part of the aristocracy?"

"Not anymore."

"Anymore?"

"We resigned after my parents got themselves killed taking errands for the higher aristocratic houses. The houses pushed too hard, made us take risks we shouldn't have."

"Ah. House Cinderbreathe had similar issues before, but now we're one of the more prestigious houses. Besides, my father's our current patriarch and he'll never let us resign. I swear, the only thing that man cares about is the 'Cinderbreathe legacy.'"

"Sounds like a terrible guy."

"I know right?"

"But he's the patriarch, so we all have to defer to him and it's just very, *very*, annoying."

"I see."

[CONTINUE HERE]

They continued further down the tunnel, eventually arriving at a pair of wooden doors.

"You ready?" Amitt asked.

Persia grinned her devilish grin. "Always ready, Castell."



Fireballs hurled through the air (ABILITY: [Haelfire Condemn]- See ability index, Amitt Castell), knocking a dozen giant scorpions into the ruined complex's walls. They fell to the ground, dissolving into dust. With a final slash of a dagger, sand spilled out of the last scorpion as it flailed mid-jump, its leap turning into an uncontrolled drop. It fell to the ground and dissolved like the rest.

Amitt held his staff (WEAPON: [Soulmage Edifice]- see item index Amitt Castell) and dagger at the ready. Persia casually sheathed her dual longswords, collecting the scorpion dust. It was a powerful ritual reagent and sold for quite a lot. Amitt kept watch.

They stood in front of a weathered double door carved from solid stone, the entrance to one of the only intact rooms in the ruins. As Persia collected the last pile of scorpion dust, Amitt pushed one of the doors open. Behind it, they could see thousands of floating crystal clusters surrounding a floating orb of crystalline glass.

"All right," Amitt said. "You focus the orb. It's probably the damage source, and you're the tank. I'll snipe down the clusters- they're probably external buffs."

Persia ran toward the orb, longsword held in a backward two-handed grip over her head. As she neared the sphere, she threw the blade. It dug in, causing the orb's surface to fluctuate as crystal spikes escaped the glassy shell. Each cluster of crystals sent out a beam of blinding light, sweeping the room as the orb swirled.

Ghostly mist escaped the smaller clusters as Amitt pointed his staff at them (ABILITY: [Mana Taint]- see ability index Amitt Castell). The haze contorted and slipped back into the crystals, causing them to fall to the ground.

Persia continued stabbing the orb. It kept spewing crystals, which fell to the ground and assembled into a humanoid shape, each holding a dagger. Batches of ghostly mist entered them from Amitt's staff, causing them to shatter before they could reach Persia. The silver-ranker held her own against the relatively weak gold-rank crystal constructs that slipped through, systematically dismantling them with her longswords. Amitt's staff began emitting a blue-grey glow, a monochrome humming filling the unnaturally silent room- the only sound was the humming of the staff and the shattering of crystals.

The orb's light beams swept over Persia. Each one should have crippled her if Amitt wasn't firing gold-rank healing beams (ABILITY: [Bolstering Beam]- see ability index Amitt Castell) to go with the ghostly mist.

As the last crystal turned to mist, Amitt moved in on the orb. The staff withdrew more haze and twisted it into grotesque shapes, wrapping the sphere in paper-thin streams.

The mist streams constricted, slicing through glass and crystal as the orb fell to the ground, shattering into thousands of tiny pieces.

You have defeated [Beacon Crystal Monolith]

Amitt strode over and touched one of the shards.

You have looted [Beacon Crystal Monolith]

WEAPON: [Ornate Crystal Cutlass] (Cutlass) has been added to your storage space. (See item index Persia Cinderbreathe)

MATERIAL: 560x [Beacon Crystal Fragment] has been added to your storage space. (See item index Amitt Castell)

CONSUMABLE: [Elixir of Defiance] (Elixir) has been added to your storage space. (See item index Amitt Castell)

(ABILITY: [Spoils of Death]- see ability index Amitt Castell)

They received many more items from the Monolith, themed around the beacon crystal constructing the orb.

Amitt retrieved a warp port from his dimensional bag, a stone monolith the size of a coffee table- it looked almost comical as he pulled it out of the tiny bag. He also took out a warp scroll, slotting it into the empty slot on the front of the port. The scroll flashed bright purple and disappeared- the monolith was active and would now transport them to whatever destination Amitt had put on the scroll. They stepped through and arrived at a guard outpost next to Infinigate's north wall.

Persia squinted. "This doesn't look like the warp square."

"No, it's the guard outpost," Amitt replied. He walked to one of the guards at the reception booth.

"Amitt Castell and Persia Cinderbreathe reentering Infinigate," he said.

"Infinigate's on lockdown," the guard replied tiredly. "Don't ask me why. I can't tell you. Find somewhere to stay."

"Uhh--"

"Find somewhere else. I've had reentries and tourists yelling at me all day. Get out."

Amitt left, Persia tailing him.

"So," she said. "How was that?"

"What do you mean 'how was that'?"

"How did I do? In combat. That's fighting. Against enemies. Without dying. Preferably."

"I daresay I know the Aetheiopeian language much better than you do, Cinderbreathe."

"Ehhhh... Questionable."

"You did quite well for your rank, but you'll need to step it up for gold rank."

"Uh-huh."

"You'll also want to be a little more conservative with your abilities. You tend to throw too many of them out at once. Mana conservation is a skill that people do take seriously. As a blitz attacker, you should get a set of items to get more out of your bombardment or elongate that blitz. That's the main problem. There's also the underutilization of some of your minor abilities. Every good adventurer must make use of all their powers..."

CHAPTER II

I DON'T EAT DEATH WORMS. YOU KNOW THIS.

Let the Six Immortals bring the worlds to peace and glory once more. Even if the great Void falls again to meddling mortal scum, there will be no permanence to this state. Let the great light of revelation burn away those who stand in stubbornness against it.

Just before noon, Amitt and Persia travelled through border security and into Infinigate. Persia left for her apartment- she would return to the Cinderbreathe Estate in Edenwood as soon as possible. Amitt was off to the Heart of Infinigate, or the Hub District. There was some manner of announcement at noon, live in the plaza of the Palace of Sevenshard and broadcast over the Warp Network, which was what the people of Sevenshard used for widespread communication.

As Amitt strode through the Hub District, he admired the fantastical architecture. It wasn't like the intimidating feel of the Twelfth District. There were no intricate mosaics, painstakingly carved pillars, or gruesome statues of history. Each building was an amalgamation of glass, crystal, and stone, shaped fantastically into towers that scraped the sky and elliptical stadiums containing the lushest of greenery. Lanterns drifted through the air unsupported, shedding beautiful light over the crystal pillars.

Amitt arrived at the Palace of Infinigate, dodging the crowds to get to the plaza. Surprisingly, the royals had not set up a temporary stage as usual. Amitt milled around for a bit before, right at noon, a presence swept over the plaza. The aura wasn't malevolent but exuded a domineering force that all noticed. Heads turned toward the plaza's centre, where the people

had left a wide berth around King Lardune Sivarios and Aurora, the matriarch of the Arorua Dynasty.

The King wore a blood-red and gold cloak fastened to a purple shirt. A bandolier of badges and memorabilia hung next to a chain holding a small flask of swirling white liquid and two crystals. He wore black pants and tall, spiked boots. His hair was chestnut brown, draped over his head. He was dark-skinned, with sharp features and a goatee to complete his regal expression.

Aurora wore a black and purple combat robe with bony protrusions lining the sides. The robe had small, armoured plates, each a purple-grey metal with an almost invisible blue sheen. Two sheaths hung from her belt next to pouches where an impossible number of bottles barely managed to stay inside. The pommel of a longsword stuck out of each scabbard, embedded with priceless gems. A crossbow hung from her back next to a quiver filled with razor-sharp harpoons rather than arrows. Her skin was almost pure white, a trademark of the Arorua dynasty. Black hair curled down her shoulders, void-black with tiny silver specks like stars.

The King stepped forward.

"This year, the Kingdom of Sevenshard will revive an old tradition."

He turned and gazed at the crowd.

"Some of our older citizens may remember the dangerous but rewarding Tournament of Relics."

The crowds murmured, contemplative, curious, and hostile. Many glared at the King, clearly opposed to even the thought of what he was implying.

"This year, the senate and the dynastic ambassadors have decided that the Tournament of Relics may be allowed to continue. This is a competition where the people of Sevenshard can set up teams to take on a monster-infested complex. One million Shardcoin will be awarded to the first team to fulfill an unspecified task. There will be secondary prizes announced when the Tournament begins. The Arorua Dynasty- the hosts- will pay for any loot participants are willing to sell. Other parties not involved with the Tournament can't buy any such loot until a month after the end of the Tournament."

Aurora stepped forward.

"This year's Tournament will be held in a gold/diamond-rank area south of here, near the border of Nonexistence, called the Vault of Primal Forces. Prime parasites of ranks gold, diamond, and ralite inhabit the Vault, so you'll want cures for poisons, transformation, and decay effects. You may form teams or go solo, although we recommend teaming. If you choose to participate, the Arorua dynasty cannot be held responsible should you perish. No participant is allowed to fight another participant for any reason. You may share loot however you choose."

She glared at the crowd.

"If two parties contribute to a battle, the loot is split. The Tournament was cancelled because of these issues before. It will begin in approximately one month, depending on conditions in the area. All noticeboards throughout Sevenshard will have a list of the full rules. The Tournament will start at the Half-Noon Fort south of Etherwood."

Aurora and the King turned and left, the crowd clearing a path around them.

The people slowly drifted out of the square in their absence, a low chatter befalling the plaza as they contemplated the return of the most dangerous competition in the four kingdoms. Even in the savage kingdom of Khrovan, no government-endorsed activity had such a high fatality rate.

Amitt left immediately, already making plans for whom he would team with. As much as he liked operating solo, he knew that plunging into a gold-diamond area by himself was suicide. If he participated, he would need a reliable team.

He returned to his apartment and sat down at his desk. Paper covered the surface of it, destroying all evidence of the wooden tabletop underneath. A small bottle held pens, pencils, a pair of scissors, scribing tools, and a bundle of ritual-drawing utensils, boxes of general ritual components stacked up to the ceiling next to his desk.

A weapon rack hid in the closet, with a selection of sacrificial daggers, a single broadsword, and many staves and wands, all highly stylized. Amitt's couch sat next to a broadcast receiver and a bookshelf. A bathroom was off to the left, and a bedroom to the right.

A low hum came from the broadcast receiver.

Amitt lifted the lid.

"Hello?"

"Hoi! Is this Amitt Castell?" came the unmistakable humour of Persia's voice.

"Yes, Ms. Cinderbreathe. What do you want?"

"I want to form a Tournament team."

A pause.

"What?"

"Me. You. A few others. As a team. Participating in the Tournament. Of Relics."

"Why me?"

"You seem skilled."

"That's it?"

"Uh... yeah."

"I mean..." he trailed off. "I'm open to it. Who else are you with?"

"Sophie Arorua and Alexandrius Gandir Erlan."

"You are minor nobility. How in the Twelve Hells did they recruit you?"

"Correction: I recruited them."

"You are crazy."

"Thanks. That's my best trait."

"All right," Amitt sighed. "What's in it for me?"

"I don't know. Clout? You'll be with the children of two of the most prestigious dynasties of Sevenshard."

"I don't care about clout. I'm a good adventurer looking to make a decent living."

"An actual team for once instead of solo commissions. A capable one, rather than the greedy aristocrats looking for ninety percent discounts on adventuring."

"Whatever. I would've been looking for just about any capable team about now. I'll go along."

"Great! See if you can meet at the market square in District Four at noon."

"It's manageable."

"Okay. Bye."

Persia disconnected.

"Crazy woman," Amitt muttered.



Amitt wandered into District Four's market in full adventuring gear at noon. Persia was already there, casually chatting with a young woman with void-black, silver-specked hair and

pale white skin. Amitt immediately identified her as Sophie Arorua, the daughter of Aurora whom Persia had miraculously dragged onto her team.

Amitt squinted at the absurd scene as Persia, minor nobility, casually chatted with one of the most prestigious adventurers in Sevenshard, completely ignoring all decorum and flabbergasting Arorua.

"Greetings, Ms. Sophie Arorua," Amitt said as he approached.

"No insincere, ungrateful hello for me?" Persia drawled.

"Good morning, Ms. Persia."

"It's noon,"

"Good morning, Ms. Cinderbreathe."

"Fired."

"Goodbye, Ms. Cinderbreathe."

Persia laughed. Sophie starred at the stone-faced Amitt and Persia's perpetual half-smirk, unsure what to think.

"Uh, hello, Mr. Castell," she interjected.

"I apologize for my lack of decorum. Your friend has inflicted external influence. I hope you are different in this regard."

"Of course. I am of the Aroruan Dynasty, after all. Alexandrius Gandir Erlan has yet to show up, so I was thinking-"

"Sandwiches, anyone?" Persia interrupted, holding out a sack. Sandwiches spilled onto the ground, smothering the weeds peering through the market square's bricks.

Amitt glared at her, then turned back to Sophie.

"You were saying?"

"I thought we should-"

The crash of a wagon rolling through crates reverberated through the market square. Horses neighed in savage and undirected fury as they led the carriage forward. Inscribed on each of the wheels was the name Erlan.

The wagon stopped next to them, and the reckless driver stepped out. He wore a wide-brimmed top hat made of paper lashed together by chains. His jacket wasn't much different but made of leather instead. He wore tan shorts and boots with razors on the sides.

The driver fell off the wagon and seemingly manipulated gravity to fall on his feet. He swaggered up to them almost drunkenly and saluted.

Persia stepped forward.

"Heeyyyy, Alex. How many drunken death worms did you eat today?"

"I don't eat death worms. You know this."

"Uhhh yeah, sure. Alex, this is Sophie Arorua. And the other one is just Another Adventurer."

"What?" Amitt said.

"All right, everyone's here. Mr. Adventurer, you said we're going to the eastern Cinder Forest for the first camp?"

"Yes..." Amitt replied hesitantly.

"Well, I'll be off then. See you all there? No? Bye!"



The team spent the next few weeks clearing out the local monster population. They ended up with a massive loot haul from looting monsters- adventuring was a lucrative business, especially with an expert adventurer like Amitt.

Generally, monsters weren't just ugly predatory creatures, rather they were a special type of infestation that many worlds faced. Every so often, the barrier between the physical reality and whatever void was on the outside, weakened, allowing unknown outside forces to seep in and form these mysterious beings out of nowhere. Most universes knew more about these forces, some even travelling amongst them through the metaphysical void between worlds, but this was the extent of Aetheiopeia's knowledge.

The team was hunting such a monster in a pleasant meadow. Tall, frosted grass sprouted from the ground and streams flowed in shallow channels. They snuck through the overgrowth, carefully trailing the monster. It was a marshailer, a large, bear-like beast with large tusks that could conjure frozen mud shards to attack with. These sorts of blatant magical abilities were common to monsters, thoroughly separating them from even regular predators.

The team tracked the marshailer until it reached a stream and crouched down to drink. As it did so, they sprang up from their hiding place in the grass.

Persia went in with the opening move, a dozen buff spells cast upon her from Amitt and Sophie. The longsword slammed against the marshailer's hide, unable to pierce it but effectively stunning it with surprise. A camouflaged Alexandrius sprang up from behind the beast, a heavy battle-axe slamming down and into the monster's back.

If not for its gold-rank vitality, it would have died then and there. However, it was a common pattern that the higher you went in rank, the more fundamental rules of reality became more like vague guidelines. The beast, despite having a massive gash in its back, was still alive.

Twelve daggers flew up from the ground, shrouded in purple-grey flames (ABILITY: [Ghost Blades]- see ability index Amitt Castell). Amitt and Sophie stepped out from the bushes with them, Amitt directing the knives to repeatedly slash the marshailer's vulnerable underside as Sophie raised a stick covered with bluish tentacles wrapping around it. The staff cast out rays of blinding light, peppering the monster. The little points of light simultaneously exploded, pockmarking it with little burning holes of flesh.

After the team's initial barrage, the momentum of the battle slowed. The monster, having overcome its shock, began conjuring its signature ice shards, sending them hurling towards Sophie, somehow recognising her to be the healer. Alex kept it distracted from the front, battle-axe swiftly hacking at the berserk beast, slowly leading it backwards.

Persia's combat style was more agile than Alexandrius's, being more mobile nuisance than immovable object. She dashed around the marshailer, leaping and striking it with her dual longswords, quick to deflect its tusks that were now bizarrely extending towards her like springs.

Amitt was next to Sophie, fending off the marshailer's constant ice barrage with his multitude of abilities. Sophie ignored him, focusing on providing constant healing support for Persia and Alexandrius.

Against its efforts, the team defeated the marshailer in short order, a final blow from Alexandrius's battle-axe bringing it down. Amitt tapped a finger to the side of the body. It dissolved.

You have looted [Central Marshailer]

MATERIAL: 12x [Marshailer Hide] has been added to your storage space. (See item index Alexandrius Gandir Erlan)

MATERIAL: 2x [Marshailer Tusk] has been added to your storage space. (See item index Sophie Arorua)

MATERIAL: 12x [Marsh Chop] has been added to your storage space. (See item index Persia Cinderbreathe)

ACCESSORY: [Realm Ring] has been added to your storage space. (See item index Amitt Castell)

"Whew!" Persia said, wiping mud off her armour. "That was unnecessarily... hmm. I can't find a complaint to make this a theatrically appealing situation."

"What?" Sophie muttered inattentively.

"Y'know. Theatrics. Fun and entertainment for all!"

"C'mon people, let's go," Amitt interjected over Persia's aggressive "theatrics."



It was four in the morning, and Amitt was standing watch under a canopy next to the lower part of their camp's makeshift wall. He sat on a simple wicker chair, looking out into the misty forest. A strange, sickly smell drifted through the trees, carried on the soft breeze.

They had built a small camp with some improvised walls made from timber, connected to tall pine trees on the corners. Two white tents pitched into the rocky soil shimmered like ghosts in the rain. This glow came from the sense-disruption devices used to manipulate the magical senses of monsters to overlook the site.

Amitt scanned the tree line around their clearing. They had chosen the clearing on the hill for sightlines- monsters could often sense prey -or, in this case, hunters- for thousands of kilometres around. They needed to know if anything was coming after them.

The walls they had built were short, disguised as ruins. They were more intended to stall for time than keep anything out.

Suddenly, Amitt heard the sounds of leaves rustling, getting closer to the camp. He hefted his staff, primed for attack.

Most adventurers trained to identify what sort of creature was coming to them from the sound of their footsteps. Amitt could tell that whatever was coming was roughly humanoid.

Something cut through the air, and a spear flew past Amitt, lodging itself into the ground behind him. His mind raced, knowing that very few monsters used scavenged human weapons, and all were intelligent. At the higher ranks, the more intelligent a creature, the worse it would be to fight.

He rushed to the tents to wake the others. He didn't bother yelling- a sharp blast of aura woke them.

"Possibly an intelligent humanoid monster attacking. We've gotta move."

They acknowledged him by blearily getting up and gathering their gear.

The group headed outside to find a forest of spears on the ground. Another barrage of spears hurtled toward them, bouncing off a common bubble shield ability that Amitt had picked up (ABILITY: [Healing Sanctum]- see ability index Amitt Castell).

Persia moved forward.

"It isn't a monster. I'm sensing the auras of about twenty iron ranks. Probably bandits."

Amitt was the team's tactical director. He had many scouting abilities that let him feel out of the battlefield and communication abilities (ABILITY: [Communications Master]- see ability index Amitt Castell).

Amitt sent his aura, the strongest of the team's, being gold rank, while Persia, Sophie, and Alexandrius were still silver.

Amitt's aura pervaded the stretch of the forest the iron rankers had spread out over. He bellowed with the force of his aura behind him.

"Who's there?"

No response.

Amitt frowned.

"Persia, Alex. Go full berserker on them. Take them prisoner if you can, but don't take unnecessary risks."

At this, they heard rustling in the trees. A group of bandits jumped down from the canopy, wearing lots of lightly armoured cloth that obscured their faces. Persia and Alexandrius ignored them, going offensive and chasing down the rest Amitt was locating on his map.

The group that had landed in their midst was doomed before they hit the ground. Amitt was already chanting spells before they had left the canopy.

"Let the formlessness of the soul be known to all here to see it." (ABILITY: [Soul Exposure]- see ability index Amitt Castell)

Following the chant, his aura split into three, two of which turned into spiritual scythes that scarred the bandits to a level beyond physical pain, sending them all toppling to the ground, piling on each other. Soul Exposure was only practical to buy little moments, as it

inflicted no lasting damage. However, utilizing little moments was a skill that every decent adventurer possessed.

Only the one on the top got up and continued the attack before Sophie arrested them all with an expert manipulation of aura. The one who had just regained his balance split into two with a swing of Amitt's dagger. It was almost comical, a slash of the tiny knife sending the man peeling off into two pieces.

Amitt placed down a cage from his dimensional bag, trapping the other two before taking off into the woods, Sophie following close behind.

The two of them split up. They were both support roles and should've stayed in a group, but the iron-rank bandits were nothing to them. It wasn't just rank either. None of the amateurish bandits had the skills that Amitt and Sophie had refined over a decade.

As Amitt stealthily trekked through the forest, another bandit dropped from the canopy. He was a brute defender role and the only silver-ranker in the group. Amitt brought out his dagger and conjured twelve more floating behind him to stab holes through the bandit simultaneously.

Despite the barrage of gold-rank weaponry and the twelve holes through his torso, the silver-ranker survived with his superhuman silver-rank vitality. Amitt, as a support rather than a dedicated damage dealer, did not have the damage output to one-shot him despite being gold-rank.

There was a very brief pause as the silver-ranker chugged down a healing potion- a fatal mistake on his part- before Amitt capitalized on the interlude and struck with his dagger. The bandit raised a shield to block and sent it careening towards Amitt, who dodged easily with gold-rank reflexes and agility. It returned to the bandit's hand, quickly replaced with a broadsword from the bandit's own storage space- he seemed to have a dedicated ability for it. Amitt nimbly dodged the swings and got hits with his dagger whenever possible. Even though he didn't have a dedicated damage output, the inexpertly crafted broadsword paled to Amitt's sacrificial dagger in rank and potency.

Amitt wasn't dependent on the damage but on his dagger's various special effects and his own abilities. The bandit was already eating up instances of hydra venom, destroying his health faster than he could recover.

Soon, the bandit was on his last legs. He could neither run nor defeat Amitt but wasn't willing to surrender. In a last-ditch attempt to overpower his adversary, the bandit used his most powerful ability (ABILITY: [Fountain of Rejuvenation]- see ability index Bandits).

In turn, Amitt used his ability (ABILITY: Fountain of Deterioration- see ability index, Amitt Castell).

The bandit's ability turned against him, returning all his health, stamina, and mana as piercing damage, which ignored any protection he had. In the face of that much damage in one blow, the bandit fell to the ground dead.

By then, Persia, Sophie, and Alexandrius had already cleared out the rest of the bandits. Twelve of the twenty they had discovered got captured, the rest dead.

"Should we take these back to the city?" Alexandrius asked.

"Probably. We're planning to return tomorrow," Sophie said. "We should decamp and work our way back."

"I've got the warp scrolls. We can go today," Amitt interjected. "Best get them locked up quick. Don't want any more trouble out of them bandits."

CHAPTER III

PERSISTENCE AND IDIOCY

The seven aspirations of Equilibrium are the fundamental traits to advance in the higher order of the worlds. Let the champions of Equilibrium embody Calculation, Foresight, Ingenuity, Intellect, Control, Respect, and Resolve, for the seven aspirations shall reform the Immortal order in power. Let the cycle begin anew, starting with the Revaluation of all Light and Darkness, Life and Death.

Arrows and spears flew over Amitt's head as he battled another bandit leader, slightly less amateurish than the last. They had been attacking his team in larger and larger groups lately but still failed to damage them. However, they were getting better.

"Sheesh," Alex said, cutting through branches with his massive broadsword. "That was the most skilled attempt so far."

He shoved his prisoner onto the ground in front of him. "Still terrible in every respect."

"Yeah, no kidding," Sophie dragged five prisoners in her conjured aura cage. "They're probably trained at one of those fake institutes."

"Careful now," Amitt interjected. "They're starting to send more silver-rankers. Even if we could overturn twelve-to-one odds, if they send too many gold ranks..."

"Ehhhh, I guess," Sophie said. "That won't be for a while, nonetheless. Why do they care about us at all? They're not getting anything out of it."



The next night, Persia was outside, on watcher duty. They had been experiencing bandit attacks almost every night, and tonight was no different. Three in the morning, Persia sent an aura signal into the tent, waking the others up for their nightly serving of fresh bandit.

This time, it was an army of brute silver-rankers, still pitifully inept, but there were more than last time. All of them were the brawler type that ran out of mana quickly, except for a healer, a ranged spell mage and the four defenders around them. After scouting around with his aura and tactical map, Amitt sent orders to the rest of the team through his Communications Master ability.

“Focus-fire tactics. Let Alexandrius handle the defenders, and we move in on the healer and mage.”

They wasted no time enacting the orders. Alexandrius slashed in the air, creating what looked like a tear in the fabric of reality (ABILITY: [Dimensional Interference]- see ability index Alexandrius Gandir Erlan), which he used to teleport into the midst of the four defenders, throwing up a bubble shield to keep the brawlers out. Amitt used a mass teleport to bring all the brawlers to him before Sophie reset the ability cooldown (ABILITY: [Ability Exchange]- see ability index Sophie Arorua), and they teleported into Alex’s shield.

Sophie and Alexandrius were busy slaughtering the defenders as Amitt moved in on the mage and Persia on the healer. A barrage of aura attacks, damage abilities and weaponry quickly left the mage and healer unconscious on the ground. Amitt suppressed their auras, allowing him to splash a vial of ability suppression tonic over them before turning to the brawlers, who had almost exhausted the shield (ABILITY: [Bubble Shield]- see ability index Alexandrius Gandir Erlan). The only reason it had held was that Alexandrius's ability had advanced to gold rank, but he hadn't.

The brawlers gave up fairly quickly after the team brutally overkilled one of them. Amitt suppressed their abilities and transferred them to the wagon the team had pulled along for this reason. The wagon was an old wooden one they had bought off some retired farmer for cheap. Persia had taken to decorating the vehicle, scrawling the words “crime wagon” all over it in spiky red font.

“That was surprisingly easy,” Sophie said as they hauled the bandits into the crime wagon.

“Too easy,” Amitt replied, cautious as ever. “Their skill has gone down a level since the last attack.”

“Nah, we're fine,” Persia was scrawling yet another “crime wagon” on the wagon.

Alexandrius rushed over to them.

"Uh, we got gold-rankers on us."

"How many?" Amitt demanded.

"Five."

Amitt swore under his breath.

"How capable are they?" Persia asked, suddenly losing her usually fun demeanour.

"Terrible judging by the auras, but gold-rankers are still gold-rankers."

Just then, Amitt felt an aura bearing down on the tent.

"Sophie, pack all the important stuff and set up the warp port. The rest of us hold off the gold-rankers."

Alexandrius and Persia each rushed off to meet two of the gold rankers, and Amitt faced off against the other three.

Amitt's opponents were a healer, a brawler, and a swordsman. Beelining for the healer, Amitt dodged the brawler's giant battle-axe and the swordsman's silver katana. He swiped the healer's staff out of her hands before raking her with his dagger countless times. Even so, the damage was minuscule against the gold-rank enemy. Amitt backed off from the fight to send scathing beams of light across the expanse of forest. The axe-wielder and the swordsman barely dodged the projectiles, not as skilled at leveraging superhuman reflexes as Amitt. The beams hit their targets more often than not, sending bursts of damage that would have annihilated a silver or iron ranker but were barely a scratch for the golds. It was one of Amitt's few instant-damage spells.

Unfortunately for the gold rankers, the beams also introduced a dangerous mana and stamina drain effect, which Amitt leveraged by casting more mana-draining spells at the gold rankers. It wasn't terrible for the swordsman, but brawlers were known for exhausting their mana quickly, and the healer lost many of her big-ticket healing abilities. The mana drain pushed the brawler to attack, but he only wasted more mana trying to hit Amitt through his constant teleportation. The healer kept him from blacking out from lack of mana. Even so, the brawler was out of the fight when Amitt splashed him with his last bottle of ability-suppression tonic which he had finally found in the bowels of his dimensional storage pockets.

The swordsman had held off on attacking to set up a complex ritual he was now casting. Countless duplicates of his katana arose from the ground, shrouded in a burning white glow. They rushed at Amitt, who was able to block them all. On contact with his staff, they dissolved into dust. They reformed above the ritual circle seconds later, by which time the swordsman had lunged forward with his blade held overhead, narrowly missing Amitt. The swordsman continued to attack, his conjured blades following him.

Amitt put up countless shields in defence, backing away slowly. When he was within the range of the ritual circle, he quickly slashed the precise lines with his staff, sending the conjured swords dropping to the ground and dissolving. Immediately, he took advantage of the swordsman's brief pause to land several hits, each one applying a new instance of potent hydra venom. On the last strike, he used his staff, afflicting the swordsman with random debuffs (ABILITY: [Condition Master]). Even more mana drain now threatened even the swordsman's vast mana pool and relatively mana-efficient power set, along with slowness, exhaustion, an instance of "reality disparity" that had his body dying on any interaction with the world, accompanied by countless other effects.

The swordsman was now a bloody wreck, but a gold ranker had a vast amount of vitality, dwarfed only by the few higher ranks that the people of Aetheiopeia had achieved. He was still nowhere near dead.

Amitt gave up on his teleportation and spellcasting, which was much less effective to a quick, agile enemy rather than the heavily armoured brawler. He went in for a straight-up sword duel, accompanied by occasional blasts of light beams or debuffs. He had only one sword (WEAPON: [Hail-Bringer]- see item index Amitt Castell), preferring to use his dagger and staff. However, a knife could only be so effective against a katana.

The healer had finally recovered enough mana to start casting actual healing spells. When Amitt noticed this, he knew the fight was over. He couldn't beat three gold rankers without a capable gold-rank team, even if his opponents were trash. He got ready for a retreat.

Amitt opened a communication channel with Sophie and spoke telepathically.

"Have you got everything ready?"

"Yeah," Sophie replied.

Amitt opened the channel to the rest of the team.

"All right. I can't hold the gold rankers any longer. Retreat."

In one smooth motion, Amitt dodged the swordsman's swing and threw himself backwards, only to teleport to the warp port, where the rest of the team was waiting. Sophie had already left with the gear, and they all followed suit right before the gold-rankers busted into the tent, only to see the warp port powering down.

CHAPTER IV

RETALIATION RAIDING

The Third District's warp square was in chaos. Civilians ran off into the maze of buildings, lower rank adventurers standing their ground in futility. The five gold-rank bandits were battling the adventurers when higher-rank support arrived. A contingent of gold-rank Crown Guild members blasted into action, explosions rocketing around as their opening brawler immediately demolished one of the bandits. The Sentinel Crown sent the remaining bandits scattering off into the city and began searching for them. The guild was thorough in sweeping the city and had declared Infinigate clear of bandits. However, the bandits had decided to swipe some things in passing.

In the following weeks, increasingly powerful bandit attacks had rained on the city, to the point of city administration deeming them a serious threat when a diamond-ranker had led the latest raid. The bandits still hadn't gone past the walls and brought a relatively small number of troops compared to the overwhelming force of Infinigate's resident adventurers and the Crown Guild.

Infinigate may have been ruled by House Sivarios, but was actually administrated by the city council, an oligarchy consisting of prosperous individuals from the lower aristocratic houses, elected by the royal family. They and House Sivarios were separate entities, the council managing tactical and logistical affairs and the royal family acting as their public face.

It was decided that these bandit armies would need to be extricated entirely or at least scared into submission. The local bandit fortresses were to be assaulted by a combination force of guild members and independent adventurers. A contract was put out by the Crown Guild for adventurers wishing to join the raid.

Amitt and his tournament team had met up in the sixth district's market square to take another simple monster-hunting contract. This time it was to catch a feycrawler, an aggressive, foxlike creature. It had only one "magical" ability, able to turn its fur into sharp quills that it could launch at will, but it was also diamond rank, meaning it would be much more of a challenge for the team.

Monsters and adventurers of the same rank were generally equal in power, except for weaker pack monsters, who sacrificed individual power for numbers. The main point for adventurers was their intellect. Monsters manifested from whatever void lay outside of a physical reality were animalistic in nature, except for high-rank edge cases. Due to all of this, any decently trained adventurer should be able to defeat average monsters of their own rank.

Taking on a monster of higher rank than oneself varies in risk. The power gap between lower ranks is much smaller than that between higher ranks. Facing a diamond-rank monster at gold rank was orders of magnitude riskier than facing an iron rank monster at stone rank. At the higher ranks, rank-jumping was practically suicide. For the former of those examples, the average adventurer would need a skilled team around them to assist.

"Hey, come look at this," Sophie said from the bulletin board at the centre of the square. City authorities often posted notices here, along with organizations who paid for the use of the board.

"What is it?" Amitt asked, striding over.

"Looks like an adventuring job," Persia supplemented, joining Amitt in perusing the announcement Sophie had noticed.

Alexandrius grunted and walked over.

BANDIT RAID NOTICE

Addressing all eligible adventurers: A party is being assembled to raid nearby bandit fortresses. If you wish to join the raid, arrive at the Hub District's Aeseir Square by 1:00 PM. Only silver rank and above adventurers eligible. All participants will receive 3450 for their efforts.

The notice then rattled off on a bunch of technical conditions that most adventurers met-such as having citizenship documentation in Sevenshard.

"Huh," Alex said. "Should we go?"

"I think so," Persia said enthusiastically. "After being harassed on our expedition, I'm quite ready to get some payback."

Sophie shrugged. "I'll go if you are. Amitt?"

"We'll have to cancel the feycrawler job," Amitt said. "It'll be a pretty large-scale battle. Probably with diamond-rank forces, possibly even ralite."

"Stop waffling and give a straight answer for once," Persia said. "Are you coming or not?"

Amitt sighed. "Sure, I'll go."

"Alright!" Persia's enthusiasm was at its highest. "It's almost noon. Let's get going."



They arrived in the Aeseir Square just before 1:00. Nine diamond rank Crown Guild members stood on the raised middle portion of the square, while an assorted crowd of adventurers sat on the benches lining the square. There were only around a hundred people there, but that would be plenty enough to assault all three of the local fortresses. The group of diamond-rankers stepped onto the raised portion of the plaza. When the crowd doesn't react, a wave of aura crashed down, gently alerting the adventurers to stand at attention.

One of the diamond-rankers steps forward. His skin is dark-gray and mottled- a sign of old age that commonly identified high ranked K'arvans whose age did not affect their appearance otherwise. His clothes were simple and practical adventuring gear, blank military style tactical armour engraved with the Sentinel Crown's symbol of a trident and longsword crossed over an aethein.

"Good afternoon, adventurers of Infinigate," he said. He spoke softly, but the voice carried over the crowd regardless. "I am Vartan of the Sentinel Crown, and I will be your tactical commander for today. So this is how it's going to work- twelve teams will be assigned to each of the three nearby bandit fortresses, each with three diamond-rankers relegated to them. I will keep track of affairs in battle and send orders. I need you to all to do one thing- repeat after me: 'I will follow all orders.'"

The adventurers sullenly muttered the words, soft murmurs complaining.

Vartan knew exactly what he was doing. The man cracked a grin. "I can't hear you!"

"I will follow all orders," the adventurers said, slightly more enthusiastic this time.

Vartan sighed. "Good enough, I suppose. Anyway, back to the matter at hand. I want all teams on frontal assault while the diamond rankers challenge the enemy's high rankers. You're all going to spearhead right through their defences or Father Vartan's going to be mad. We're going to eradicate *all* the bandits, pillage the fortresses, and burn them to the ground. We're going to show these upstart fools that Sevenshard always reigns supreme!"

He paused, waiting for a cheer. One person's battle cry was quickly snuffed out by the number of heads immediately turning their way.

Vartan sighed again, looking disappointed. "Oh, come along then. Silva, Arace, divide them up."

Amitt's team had just been placed with one of the diamond rankers before another team joined them. The team leader- the whole team, in fact, was especially light-skinned for the region. Sevenshard was divided into four provinces- Altenheim, Lilvelle, Arathoras, and Jaquar. Infinigate resided in the province of Arathoras, the southernmost province, where most K'arvans were in the dark grey to black skin range. Other species such as fae or elf often didn't follow the same regional skin tones as K'arvans.

The new team must have come from one of the northern provinces of Altenheim and Lilvelle. The team leader- at least the one who seemed to be the leader- stepped forward and offered her hand to Amitt, flashing a rather unsettling grin.

"Afternoon, my friend," the woman said. "I'm Lady Cavalle." She pointed to the rest of her team members. "These are Kaala, Orlan, and Landon. We're team Flag-Catcher."

"Hello," Amitt said in a clipped tone, shaking her hand. "We don't have a team name. I'm Amitt Castell. They are-"

"G'night," Persia said rowdily, pushing Amitt out of the way and reaching for Cavalle's hand. "I'm Persia Cinderbreath and this is my team- Emit, Alex and Sophie."

Lady Cavalle laughed as Amitt glared. "Nice to meet you all. What about combat capability then?"

Amitt opened his mouth, but Persia was faster.

"Well, old grumpypants here is our healer and strategy man. Alex- classic defender power set, and Sophie's got a bunch of control abilities. I'm the star of the show of course- speedier than the Reaper dragging you to the twelfth hell. We'll best any bandit that comes for us."

One of the members of the other team snorted. His blonde hair swept sideways just above his eyes, which were a dull brown. The man swaggered forward to stand next to Lady Cavalle, but made no further comment, his tall, rickety frame dwarfing Cavalle.

A booming voice broke the tension.

"Alrighty, adventurers!" Vartan yelled at the top of his lungs. "Get moving!"



The diamond ranker Amitt's team was assigned to introduced himself as Larous and directed them to a temporary warp port setup, which would take them to the village of Nalahe, the closest the warp system could take them to their target bandit fortress. The party of adventurers then took off immediately for the fortress, only pausing when reaching the dense forest cover around the walls of a flat, bare-bones and militaristic camp. The temporary look of it was not to be trusted, however. Anyone with aura training could sense the massive layers of protection over the camp.

Defensive ritual arrays were emplaced throughout the area, with various effects to retaliate against intruders. Nobody missed the giant invisible bubble shield - a massive edifice of aura enclosing the entirety of the base. Larous the tactical commander and the other two diamond rankers stopped to give a pep talk.

"Vartan likes to make everything a joke," he said. "I'm not Vartan. You should know that you *must* follow our-" he swept his arm toward the other two diamond rankers - "orders. I want you all to go in with squadrons of three teams. We don't know how the enemy is organized, so we're going in with the most versatile setup. I'm going to entrust you to decide who to team with."

Amitt's team ended up once more with Lady Cavalle and her teammates, along with another team of what seemed to be mostly stealth types. The four squadrons and the group of diamond rankers waited for Larous's command to strike the shield all at once, hoping to break

through it. They'd done a good job of not letting the bandits notice them, after the diamond rankers had been able to conceal all of the auras radiating from the massive group of adventurers. The bandits only knew when Larous and the other diamond rankers began counting.

"Three! Two! One!"

The sound of shattering glass filled the air as the shield was simultaneously struck by upwards of fifty adventurers, breaking it instantly. Immediately, a diamond rank bandit followed by a few lower subordinates sprinted from the fort with superhuman speed, not pausing to take in the array of enemies before them, leaping straight into battle.

These bandits were far more skilled than the much smaller forces sent to assault Infinigate. Their lone diamond ranker was taken aside by the three high rank adventurers, who were much stronger, much faster, and far more skilled. That left the silver and gold rankers to battle. It was one of the largest scale adventurer expeditions of the decade, sparks flying and light flaring.

Defensive rituals set out around the base camp flared into being, mostly featuring powerful and cost effective gusts of wind, able to slam a silver ranker into a tree and critically unbalance the gold rankers. Despite this advantage, the bandits were outnumbered, outmatched, and soon to be out of time. Their lone diamond rank leader was quickly falling to the adventurers' three superior leaders- and once those diamond rankers were free of responsibility, they would unleash mass havoc across the bandit camp. All the adventurers had to do from there was stay out of their way.

Amitt coordinated with the other team leaders in the three-team squadron, who decided to simply jump straight in with no plan beforehand. Amitt would never have taken this approach had the bandits not been excessively out-skilled by practically every adventurer present. It was no longer a matter of which side would win- rather a matter of how many bandits would die before they surrendered.

Amitt left the group to deal with a pair of particularly troublesome bandits, who were stealthing around and trying to dose everyone with some manner of condition. It didn't seem to do anything immediately- but manifested abilities were always balanced. If they didn't have an effect now, their effects would only be worse later.

Amitt teleported right into their path, immediately regretting the decision after they dove into the shadows and vanished. His teleportation ability wouldn't be off cooldown for another few minutes, in which he would have to manually chase them down.

He called up a golden cloud and straddled it like a horse, before it rocketed off towards where the pair of condition-spreaders *thought* they were skillfully hiding their auras. He slowed down as he got closer, careful not to alert the pair of bandits of his proximity. His aura steadily retracted into nothing as the cloud silently disintegrated. He crept behind them and called down another pair of clouds that fell upon the pair before turning solid and encasing them.

He mentally marked down the spot to retrieve them later before returning to his team to assist, teleporting next to Persia.

"Where were you?" Persia yelled at him, half-laughing as she bent a bandit's leg the wrong way. The bandit promptly collapsed as Amitt called back.

"I chased down a pair of dreadfarers. They were causing too much trouble to be left untreated."

He and Persia shared a glance. They'd both seen what a dreadfarer could do. Blackened corpses, tainted blood and bodies so mangled as to be unrecognisable. Nobody deserved that kind of fate.

Once you manifested a few abilities, the rest of your team trended along the same theme as the first few, making your power set more specialized. Dreadfarer was a specialization that involved lots of condition trickery, using their abilities to slowly bleed, disintegrate, or rot you to death. They were rather frowned upon, though not illegal. It wouldn't be very fair if the only abilities you manifested were banned from use.

Amitt later relocated to a more central location where he could heal and assist his team, leaving Persia to her grisly work. All was going well. His team was carving through the unskilled bandits like Persia through his sanity. Lady Cavalle and their team were uniform in their work, forming a line where all the bandits were held up and disposed of. The other team- who had yet to introduce themselves- used assassination tactics, stealthing through the battlefield and picking off key enemies one by one. The other squadrons were likewise successful. These bandits might have passed for adventurers in a border city, but here in the heart of Sevenshard, they were nothing.

Amitt and his team were up against a disorganized contingent of about fifteen bandits- a mess of roles from healer to warrior, most of which were silver rank. The sheer inferiority of the bandits meant that a team was able to take on twenty to thirty of them at once. The main fault of the enemy was not to include a balance of roles. There were too many vulnerable healers and other back-line supports for the meagre number of defenders to protect.

Persia and Alexandrius held the line, Sophie alongside them to assist with crowd control and occasional hand-to-hand combat. Amitt stood at the back, strategically targeting the supports while occasionally weakening the front line. The battle progressed slowly, the adventurers slowly overpowering the bandits. It was around the halfway mark that the bandits finally made progress. Three swordsmen disengaged from the main fight to get to Amitt, shooting him out of his position floating in the sky.

They attempted to go for a quick kill but failed miserably. Even with three silver rankers hammering down on a gold, it only debilitated Amitt. Meanwhile, the decision to withdraw from the main battle had put the bandits' supports firmly on the back foot, being snuffed out one by one. Amitt himself quickly recovered, blasting the bandits backwards with a shockwave and proceeding to use his ghost blades to fight alongside him. His dagger may have been smaller than the swordsmen's longswords and spears, but he was far more skilled with it,

applying multitudes of magical effects with each slice. He didn't really go for defining hits-peripheral ones were enough to transmit any debuffs.

He fought with ferocity, not holding back as he unleashed every tool he had. In a matter of seconds, one of the attackers was pinned to a tree by the wrist with a pair of sharp throwing star. A barrage of glowing ghostly blades spun end over end towards the remaining two, followed by a storm of beams and haelfire. The two were soon incapacitated as Amitt turned towards the bandit pinned to a tree, calling down another blaze of haelfire. When he returned to his team, they'd cleared out the bandits in their area and proceeded to aid the rest of the squadron.

At the same time, the bandits' diamond ranker fell, and the adventurers' high rankers were able to intercede in the lower rank battles, effectively wiping the battleground free of bandits. This marked the end of the battle; however longer the enemy struggled, there was no escaping the unforgiving wrath of rank.



All was quiet in the city of Infinigate. The eventide heavens glimmered with the last little bit of sunset, clouds folding over a sky of deep cerulean. The gleaming metal and crystal rooftops of the Hub District were serene, the quaint suburban residences of the outer districts peaceful in bliss, the market streets emptying as the hand of time ponderously reached towards the apex of the clock.

It was all in ignorance of the army brewing outside the city- a mass of figures wearing dark robes and masks, each inscribed with a simple triangle overlapping a sideways exaggerated eye. They were not bandits- no earthly force, for when their auras unleashed from around the city, an echo of transcendence only felt in the Immortals was discharged across the capital.

The serenity in quaint streets and empty markets and sky-reaching towers was gone in an instant, mass panic routing through the streets. The static defenses of the city immediately activated, a spiritual aura shield vibrating into the visual spectrum as the power was cranked up to full drive. Cannons fired blasts of haelfire around the high reinforced metal walls, Crown Guild squadrons moving out in formation.

But it was all for nothing. A hooded figure rose from the crowd on metal wings, landing on top of the shield. A single punch shattered the entire bottom half of it, the top half hurriedly attempting to repair from what remained as the hooded forces swept through.



The last of the mop-up operation at the bandit fortress was just about finishing. The adventurer contingent had rather effortlessly conquered the fortress. Reports coming in from the other teams gave similar news. It was an all round victory- only a few bandits had escaped the massacre, and all teams were now heading back to the capital before another expedition would be sent out the next day to search the fortresses for anything valuable.

It wasn't long before Amitt and his team reached the village they had warped to from Infinigate. A line was formed as adventurers filed through the warp port and arrived in the Hub District. But immediately, they noticed something was wrong. The city's heat should have long dispersed by this time- it was almost ten o'clock- but just beyond the walls, it appeared the sky was bleeding fire. The remnants of the shattered aura shield hung in the air, desperately salvaging what energy was left in the system.

Immediately, the diamond rankers contacted the other teams and directed the adventurers to move in squads once more toward the walls, where a great battle raged. It was just as chaotic as the battle at the bandit fortresses but displayed far more skill and power. Higher rank powers clashed above the city, blinding flashes of fire and light streaking across the sky, lower rankers spilling through the streets. The enemy were wrapped in cloaks of dark fabric. Their frames seemed awkward, many appearing hunched over. Their hoods stopped any light from reaching their faces.

No adventurer hesitated to charge into battle, through burning streets and vacated buildings towards the fire-wielding cultists. Amitt, Persia, Alexandrius, and Sophie were no exception. Abilities fired, blades clashed, arrows flew, and guns boomed. Thousands of assorted arrows and bullets sped through the air, accompanied by the clouds of sparks from below.

Sophie and Alexandrius stood back to back between six cultists, barely managing to hold their own as each of the hooded figures whipped out exotic weaponry and abilities to bombard them. No side managed a hit until a sudden blast of fire from Sophie afforded Alexandrius time to slice upwards across one of the figures' faces. His hood fell, revealing a horrendous fusion of rat and man. His head was that of rat, with intelligent, piercing eyes. Long, gnarled fingers reached from its voluminous sleeves to toss the ruined hood off into the distance.

Another flurry of strikes from Alex had the rat-man's chest ensnared in bloody tendril-like gashes, but he fought on, the resilience of a silver ranker and the confidence of a diamond in those unsettling eyes.

After much more battle, Alex and Sophie managed to fell four of the cultists, which left the rat-man and his comrade. Suddenly, the hooded one spun out of the fight, grabbed Sophie, and teleported away. Alexandrius knew Sophie could not hold out against him on her own, being a control specialist without sufficient defense or offense, so he tried to follow. However, the slip from the routine of the battle allowed the rat-man to bash him into the ground and stab a knife into his throat. He had to repeat a few times to subdue the silver rank adventurer, whose resilience rivalled most gold ranked monsters.

After the job was done, the cultist donned a new hood from a hidden pocket and leapt off in search of another adversary.



Amitt was caught in a bad position. Alexandrius and Sophie had disappeared. Persia was nearby, fighting off a gold ranker. She wouldn't last long enough for Amitt to extricate himself from his own duel with a rather skilled silver rank cultist and intercede.

Amitt's adversary was a silver rank mage, who happened to have the uncommon trait of having to get up close to attack. Generally, mage abilities tended towards moderate defense and high ranged damage, but this opponent fell under the category of sharpshooter, with a trade off- extremely low defense for penetrating damage, which simply ignored any defensive capabilities of your opponent. The main problem with choosing this specialization was that you could only focus on one enemy at the time, and paired with the need for melee hits, it was high-skill and high-risk.

The sharpshooter was a flitting shadow, dancing through the scarce trees in the small nature park in the Fifth District. The figure's fingers shot various projectiles and it cast spells through the muttering of unintelligible sounds. Amitt forwent his usual teleportation, knowing it wouldn't compare to the speed of his opponent. He stood in place, occasionally lifting his staff to block attacks and fire high speed beams at the silver ranker. They didn't do that much damage but were one of the few abilities that could catch his adversary.

Amitt was effectively entrapped within the small clearing they fought in. The silver ranker was weak in defense but dealt too much damage to be ignored. If Amitt broke away from the fight, he'd be debilitated instantly. But every second he was occupied, Persia was being outmatched. He could keep her alive through the occasional healing spell, but that couldn't last. Amitt's gold rank mana reserves were extensive, but they'd run out eventually, with no time to drink a mana potion and risk being hit. Any silver rank damage would have been negligible, if not for the sheer amount of it flying from the sharpshooter's fingertips.

But as he watched Persia slowly losing control of the fight, he decided he had to take a risk. She and her opponent were matched in skill, but the cultist was a rank higher than her- and that was a massive gap at these ranks.

Using a last ditch move, Amitt sent burning spires of haelfire in every direction around him, stopping at around a radius of a metre and a half- the action drained a quarter of his mana reserves. The sharpshooter was caught out only for a second. But that precious second was all Amitt needed.

Twelve ghostly throwing daggers speared into the sharpshooter's left arm, one after the other. Apparently the cultist hadn't gotten over their natural revulsion against gore (an instinct that most adventurers learned to ignore), because they stopped for just a few more seconds to pluck out one of daggers before a massive ghostly spear hit them in the chest. For any other

specialization, even that gold rank damage wouldn't have been too bad, but for the sharpshooter, it was debilitating, forcing the cultist to retreat. This gave Amitt the chance to teleport out of his skirmish and right on top of the gold ranker Persia was fighting.

The gold ranker, unprepared for Amitt's assault, was momentarily distracted, allowing Persia to fire off one of her big ticket attacks- a powerful boost to the power of her sword, past gold rank and into the early reaches of diamond. A flurry of strikes created a field of deep gashes across the gold ranker's skin, followed by Amitt's barrage of beam projectiles, each one draining mana. The two of them were able to overpower the mana starved gold ranker, knocking him out and ripping off his hood, to discover another of the rat creatures.

The battle continued on well into the dawn hours, but the adventurers were able to fight off the cultists, but not without significant casualties and battle damage to the city. Miraculously, not a single civilian was harmed during the attack. The evacuation into each district's bunkers had gone smoothly, despite the procedure having only happened once- and that was a century ago. The cultists had also managed a smooth retreat, having caught themselves early before the adventurers could've done any considerable damage.

Amitt and Persia had come through the battle relatively unscathed, but Alexandrius and come through pretty banged up, but alive. Sophie, however, would be in recovery for weeks.

[CHAPTERS IV THROUGH VII ARE CURRENTLY WIP]

CHAPTER V

THE VIOLENT STABBING

CHAPTER VI

ADVENTURING: A RISK AND MORE RISK SPORT

CHAPTER VII

G'MORNING! WE'RE THE FORCES FROM BEYOND REALITY!

ITEM AND ABILITY INDEX

TERMINOLOGY

ABILITIES

ABILITY: [*Ability name. These may vary from person to person- info on these screens are devised from each individual's own soul/aura]

Cost: *Mana or stamina. Mana is the natural magic that flows through any wood rank or higher individual's body. It's measured in Mana Units and is consumed when activating abilities or using magical items.

Cooldown: *All abilities except for a select few cannot be used in quick succession as too much mana travelling through the body can cause strain.

Effects: *What the ability does.

GEAR

*Gear type- weapon, accessory, armour: [*Name. These may vary from person to person unless it has been expressly named by its owner] (*weapon type- i.e. katana, longsword, etc.)

Rarity: [*Average rarity of the materials the weapon is composed off]

Rank: [*Magical rank]

Materials:

[*List of materials used to create weapon]

*What stats the weapon adds to

*Description- may be defined by the owner or an analysis of the weapon if a description is not defined

SOULBOUND: [*Some gear may be bound to a person, making them the sole entity who can use it]

LEVELABLE

{Rank Up Requirements}:

*Some weapons may be able to rank up- this should be a list of materials required

SPECIAL ABILITY: [*Special ability name, follows same rules as gear name]

***Effect of special ability-** some gear may have magical abilities forged into them upon being created, these abilities are boosted unlike abilities infused after creation. Only one special ability can be infused

ABILITY: *Name

***Extra abilities may be added on after the original creation of the gear. One piece of equipment may have multiple abilities**

CONDITIONS

CONDITION: [*Condition name]

{*condition tags}

***Effects of condition.** A condition is an effect applied by an external force. They can do many things, and most can have multiple instances, stacking the effects.

ALEXANDRIUS GANDIR ERLAN BUBBLE SHIELD

ABILITY: [Bubble Shield]

Cost: 85 mana

Cooldown: 2m

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Create a small bubble shield that can take the equivalent of two wood-rank hits.

Stone Rank:

Protection increases to stone rank.

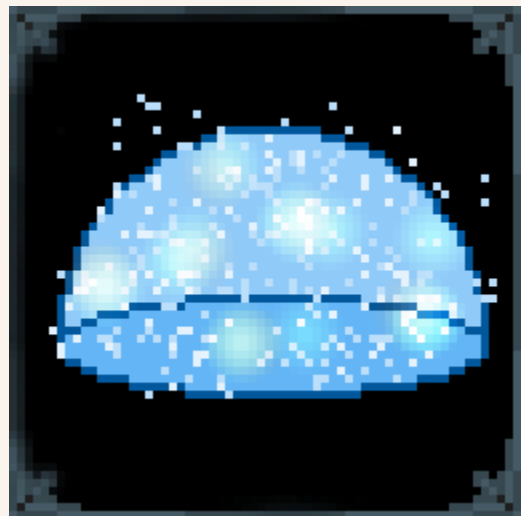
Iron Rank:

Protection increases to iron rank.

Silver Rank:

Protection increases to silver rank. Shield can now reflect attacks somewhat accurately.

Gold Rank:



Protection increases to gold rank.

DIMENSIONAL INTERFERENCE

ABILITY: [Dimensional Interference]

{teleport, illusion}

Cost: 20 mana

Cooldown: 30s

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Create a dimensional tear and suppress all nearby auras of up to one rank above yours. Recovery time depends on aura strength.

Stone Rank:

Siphon mana through dimensional tears. Absorb the resulting reaction to gain a random minor buff.

Stone Rank:

Add 30 to the mana cost to create twin dimensional tears and teleport between freely. This effect costs 1/sec mana to maintain. Add 50 to the mana cost to send other objects/beings through dimensional tears.

Silver Rank:

Add 80 to the mana cost to send objects/beings one rank higher than ability through.

MARSHAILER HIDE

MATERIAL: [Marshailer Hide]

Rarity: Uncommon



Rank: Gold

The hide of a central marshailer. Can provide protection against water damage when used in craft.

AMITT CASTELL

BEACON CRYSTAL FRAGMENT

MATERIAL: [Beacon Crystal Fragment]

Rarity: [Legendary]

Rank: [Gold]



Stolen from the beacons of old, imbued with the power of the Revaluation.

BOLSTERING BEAM

ABILITY: [Bolstering Beam]

{heal, beam, regenerate}

Cost: 120 mana

Cooldown: 5 mins.

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Fire a healing beam that instantaneously restores 150 health.

Iron Rank:

Fire a healing beam that restores 450 health over 30 seconds. The previous healing beam now heals 450 instantly.

Silver Rank:

Fire a damage beam that instantaneously deals 450 health.



Gold Rank:

Fire a damage beam that deals 600 health over 30 seconds. The previous damage beam now deals 600 instantly. The healings beams now heal 600.

Diamond Rank:

Fire bursts of high-damage beams that deal 1500 health each. Maintaining this effect requires an ongoing mana cost of 60/sec. All previous beams now deal/heal 800 health.

COMMUNICATIONS MASTER

ABILITY: [Communications Master]

{tactics, scouting, communications}

Cost: None

Cooldown: None

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Open a communications channel with a nearby ally. Range: 20km.

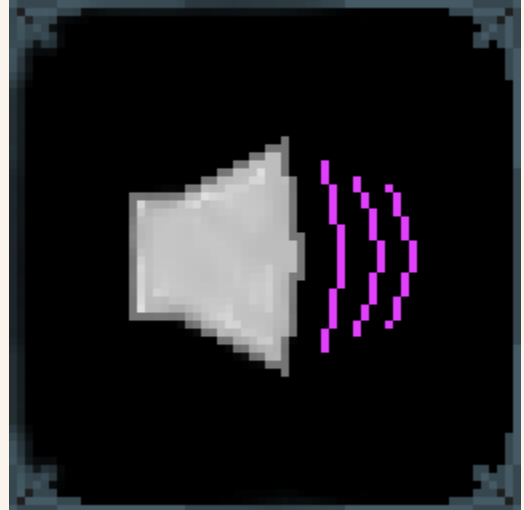
Silver Rank:

You can open multiple communications channels- a maximum of five. Each channel can have at most ten people. Telepathically communicate with other people connected to this ability. This ability has a range of 300km.

Gold Rank:

You gain improved aura sensitivity. Open a small tactical minimap in the corner of your vision- red dots are enemies, green are allies, and blue is neutral/unidentified. The map shows basic outlines that unveil as you explore. It can also expand to display a world map where you can focus on any explored location. Anywhere outside the range of 300km will not show dots representing living beings.

ELIXIR OF DEFIANCE



Potable: [Elixir of Defiance] (Elixir)

Rarity: [Legendary]

Rank: [Unranked]

Materials:

[Crystal Manifest, Beacon Crystal, Summoner's Reagent, Sand-Creeper Scorpion Dust]

This elixir can revive what has seemingly passed.

ABILITY: [Revaluation of the Soul] (One-Use)

Revive a recently deceased body.

FOUNTAIN OF DETERIORATION

ABILITY: [Fountain of Deterioration]

{Death, deterioration, conjuration}

Cost: 450 mana

Cooldown: 5 hours

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Conjure a fountain that slowly drains 1 HP/3s from the target.

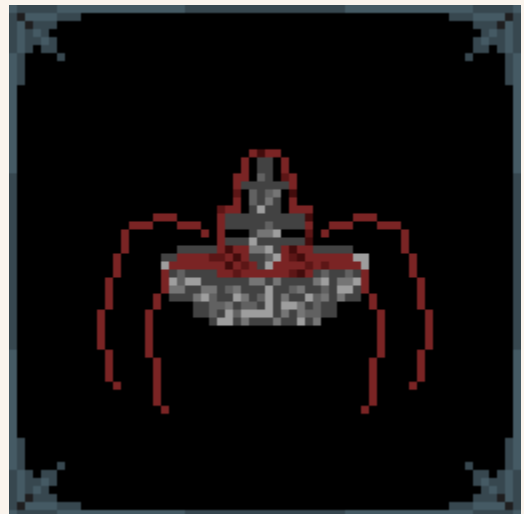
Iron Rank:

Inflict condition "Decay."

Silver Rank:

Conjure a fountain that creates water which will inflict the condition "Decay" on touch.

Gold Rank:



Negate the next healing ability the target uses and deal piercing damage relative to the amount healed on a 1:1 basis.

CONDITION: [Decay]

{condemn, decay, deterioration}

Slowly rot away the target's body. Instances stack to make the deterioration faster but stop at 50% decay.

GHOST BLADES

ABILITY: [Ghost Blades]

{conjuration, blade, spell}

Cost: 300 mana

Cooldown: 15 mins.

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Conjure up to six floating blades of any type and direct them however you like.

Iron Rank:

Conjure up to eight floating blades. Blades are shrouded in haelfire.

Silver Rank:

Conjure up to ten floating blades. Blades inflict condition "Authority of the Ratseer."

Gold Rank:

Conjure up to twelve floating blades. You may dispatch up to four of these conjured blades for others to wield.



CONDITION: [Authority of the Ratseer]

[power, control]

Per each instance of condition “Ratseer Condemnation” on the target, inflict four points of piercing damage and suppress aura slightly per instance.

HAELFIRE CONDEMN

ABILITY: [Haelfire Condemn]

{flame, spell}

Cost: 120 mana

Cooldown: 5 mins.

Effects:

Wood Rank:



Set haelfire to an entity. Haelfire deals 25/sec damage.

Iron Rank:

Gather haelfire into spheres and launch at enemies. Spheres are short range and deal 100 damage on impact. Adds 20 mana to cost.

Silver Rank:

Create simple constructs from haelfire that can perform basic physical actions as well as fight targets. Adds 65 mana to cost.

Gold Rank:

Haelfire inflicts condition “Ratseer Condemnation” and deals 50/sec damage.

CONDITION: [Ratseer Condemnation]

[condemn, flame, sin]

Each instance adds a 30 second wait until a burst of instantaneous damage that increases by 60 per instance. Stacks up to 25 instances.

HAIL-BRINGER

WEAPON: [Hail-Bringer] (Longsword)

Rarity: [Epic]

Rank: [Gold]

Materials:

[Hail Affinity Stone, Infused Corundum, Infused Ruby, Sun Gold]



Damage: {+6000}

Strength: {+450}

This weapon, amalgamated from infused gems of the highest quality and the coldest precipitation, was not born in the fire but in the hellish depths of icy caverns.

SOULBOUND: [Amitt Castell]

LEVELABLE

{Rank Up Requirements}:

100x Hail Affinity Gem

100x Diamond Rank Manifest

100x Diamond Rank Catalyst

10x Unbound Soul

SPECIAL ABILITY: [Cold as Ice]

Freeze all enemies within eight metres. Inflicts condition "Icy Thorns."

CONDITION: [Icy Thorns]

{ice, reactive}

Inflicts ongoing ice damage when moving. Drops off when near heat sources. Afflicts condition "Decay" for five seconds after dropping off.

ABILITY: Thaw

Deal +200% damage to frozen enemies.

ABILITY: Ice Affinity

Resistance to ice-based weapon warping effects increased. Deal +1000% damage to fire, lightning, ash, and death energy-based enemies.

ABILITY: Bloodbound

If the wielder's blood spills, the wielder gains five random ice-based recovery effects.

HEALING SANCTUM

ABILITY: [Healing Sanctum]

{vitality, sanctuary, shield, buff}

Cost: Varies

Cooldown: 1m 45s

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Conjure a green shield that heals the target 1 HP/5s. Physical substances may not enter the barrier without permission from the target that lasts for 10 secs. Mana cost: 40.

Stone Rank:



Shield now heals 2 HP/3s.

Conjure a second shield on enemies. Shield imparts the condition "Decay."

CONDITION: [Decay]

{debuff, vitality, disturbance}

One instance of this condition negates two of healing. Healing effects higher rank than the user take longer to stop.

Iron Rank:

Shield now heals 10 HP/1s.

Shields conjured on enemies deal 7 HP/3s of damage.

You can conjure shields of any shape desired.

Silver Rank:

Shield now heals 20 HP/0.5s

Expend 20 extra mana to make it last 20s longer.

Gold Rank:

Shield now heals 40 HP/0.5s

Expend 160 extra mana to briefly conjure a shield that completely absorbs one damage source a rank higher than the conjurer, or an equivalent of lower/higher rank.

MANA TAINT

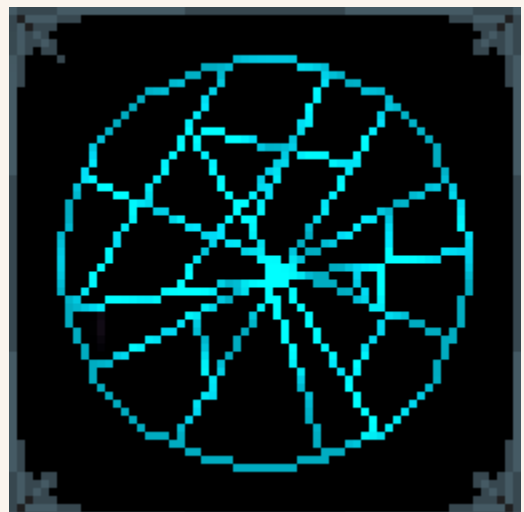
ABILITY: [Mana Taint]

{mana, infect, taint}

Cost: 250 mana

Cooldown: 2.5 mins.

Effects:



Wood Rank:

Extract mana from an enemy at a rate of 10/sec.

Iron Rank:

You now gain all extracted mana. Your mana may exceed normal limit by 20%.

Silver Rank:

Return half of extracted mana to target and inflict condition "Mana Taint." This adds 20 to the mana cost.

Gold Rank:

For each instance of condition "Mana Taint" on the target, extract 1% extra mana. Form streams of extracted mana to wrap around enemies like rope for 200 extra mana cost. Tighten the streams to constrict target. Constriction damage increases by 25 for each instance of "Mana Taint" on the target.

CONDITION: [Mana Taint]

[mana, infect, taint]

Consume one instance to turn one mana point to -1 health. After stacking up to 560 instances, convert excess instances into condition "Mana Instability."

CONDITION: [Mana Instability]

{mana, regulation}

Mana Instability increases the cost of abilities by a random amount between 20 and 150. Stacks of this condition drop off while standing still. Stacks up to 45 instances.

CONDITION MASTER

ABILITY: [Condition Master]

{condition, debuff}

Cost: 100 mana

Cooldown: 15 mins.

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Apply condition "Wounding."

Iron Rank:

Stop the target from using conditions for three minute. Add 75 to mana cost.

Silver Rank:

Negate any conditions currently on you applied by the target. This effect ignores all negation suppression. Add 75 to the mana cost.

Gold Rank:

Inflict ten random conditions out of a pool of one hundred randomly chosen for each use of the ability. Add 120 to mana cost.

CONDITION: [Wounding]

[bleed, continual]

Consume one instance to for -45 health. After stacking up to 1040 instances deal 50% health.

REALM RING

ACESSORY: [Realm Ring] (Ring)

Rarity: [Rare]

Rank: [Gold]

[Realmstone, Gold]

While in mortal reality:

Vitality {+1250}

The unattuned realmstone provides power when in the mortal plane.

SACRIFICIAL DAGGER

WEAPON: [Sacrificial Dagger] (Dagger)

Rarity: [Epic]

Rank: [Gold]

Materials:



[Soul Affinity Stone, Silver Glass Alloy]

Damage {+1500}

Strength {+150}

Vitality {+150}

The finest stones of many Primordial Shrines construct this dagger.

SET ITEM: Soulmage Edifice

When used with this item, increase damage by 15% and strengthen wielder's aura.

SOULBOUND: [Amitt Castell]

LEVELABLE

{Rank Up Requirements}:

100x Soul Affinity Gem

100x Crystal Glass Alloy (Aetherian Standard Ingot)

100x Diamond Rank Manifest

100x Diamond Rank Catalyst

10x Unbound Soul

ABILITY: [Sacrifice]

Call down a beam of transcendent power when the enemy is under 12% health.

ABILITY: Execute (Active Ability)

In a single hit, for every 1% of max health missing from an enemy, deal 2% max health.

ABILITY: Venom Touch

Inflict Hydra Venom on all nearby enemies. Slowly escalates and deescalates damage based on the user's health remaining.

SOUL EXPOSURE

ABILITY: [Soul Exposure]

{soul, condemn, spell, disarm}

Cost: 80 mana

Cooldown: 1m

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Incapacitate your enemy's aura for five seconds. Effective on enemies up to one rank above yours. Mana cost: 80.

Stone Rank:

Extend the spell and expend 30 extra mana to cast on up to five targets. Inflicts the condition "Ineffectual."

CONDITION: {Ineffectual}

{sanction, disable}

Add fifty extra mana and stamina costs to the target's next ability per instance of this condition. When the target has accumulated twenty or more stacks of this condition, consume all of this effect, and the target cannot attack you or your allies for the next two minutes.

Iron Rank:

Use your aura to scrape the soul. Temporarily incapacitate the target. The period of incapacitation depends on the inherent soul strength of the target.

Silver Rank:

Siphon the target's mana. For every five points of mana siphoned, increase the potency of magic-based attacks on the target by 0.5%.

Gold Rank:

Inflict the condition "Soul Spring."

CONDITION: [Soul Spring]

{siphon, mana, aura, steal}

Siphons 1 mana/1s out of the target to nearby allies.

SOULMAGE EDIFICE

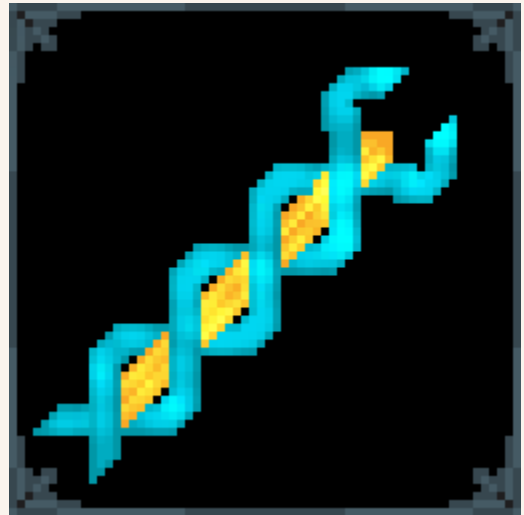
WEAPON: [Soulmage Edifice] (Staff)

Rarity: [Epic]

Rank: [Gold]

Materials:

[Soul Affinity Stone, Sun-Steel Alloy]



Soul {+150}

Agility {+150}

Primordial flames rise in sight of this staff.

SET ITEM: Sacrificial Dagger

When used with this item, increase damage by 15% and strengthen wielder's aura.

SOULBOUND: [Amitt Castell]

LEVELABLE

{Rank Up Requirements}:

100x Soul Affinity Gem

100x Sun-Steel Alloy (Aetherian Standard Ingot)

100x Diamond Rank Manifest

100x Diamond Rank Catalyst

10x Unbound Soul

ABILITY: [Haelfire Hellfire]

Call down a rain of haelfire in a large area. Haelfire deals 50/sec damage.

ABILITY: Execute (Active Ability)

In a single hit, for every 1% of max health missing from an enemy, deal 1.1% max health.

ABILITY: Smite

Deal 15% extra damage to undead targets.

SPOILS OF DEATH

ABILITY: [Spoils of Death]

{death, loot}

Cost: 20 stamina

Cooldown: 2.5 mins.

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Loot deceased creatures into component parts by touching them. Excess matter is converted into magical items.

Silver Rank:

If the body is recently deceased, siphon lingering stamina and mana.

WARPSKIN DIMENSIONAL BAG

ITEM: [Warpskin Dimensional Bag]

Rarity: [Uncommon]

Rank: [Gold]

[Warpskin, Dimension Confluence Gem]

Can hold massive amounts of items in a dimensional space attached to it. Items larger than the bag's opening can be touched to it to store. Extract items by reaching in and requesting something mentally.

AURORA ARORUA

BANDITS

FOUNTAIN OF REJUVENATION

ABILITY: [Fountain of Rejuvenation]

{revival, rejuvenation, buff}

Cost: none

Cooldown: 24 hours

Effects:

All Ranks:

Recover all missing health, stamina, mana, and all other stats lost over the day. Boost all stats by 20% for two minutes. Maximum stat cap increases by 50% for ten minutes.

GREGOR BORGHUM

CONFLUENCE OF SOULS

ARTIFACT: [Confluence of Souls] (Confluence Gem)

Rarity: [Epic]



Rank: Ralite [(8/34)]

Materials:

[Soulsteel, Karmic Paste, Confluence Gem]

Life does not end at the death of the body, but at the death of the soul.

LEVELABLE

{Rank Up Requirements}:

1000x Soulsteel Ingot (Standard Aetheiopeian)

100 litres Karmic Paste

1x Swaltein Rank Confluence Gem

ABILITY: [Immortal Contact]

Paired with a trained High Priest, the confluence allows access to Transcendent Power.

PERSIA CINDERBREATHE

OCEAN CRYSTAL CUTLASS

WEAPON: [Ornate Crystal Cutlass] (Cutlass)

Rarity: [Epic]

Rank: [Silver]

Materials:

[Hyper Catalyst, Crystal Manifest, Ocean Affinity Gem]

Damage {+4500}

Strength {+600}



A naturally manifested cutlass. The ocean waves refined its crystal blade until the land-dwellers stole it from the sea.

ABILITY: [Blessing of the Waves]

Summon an ethereal tidal wave that solidifies as it comes into contact with living matter, dealing 3500 damage.

ABILITY: Swarm's Bane

Deal +650% damage to swarm/hive mind creatures. Inflict "Soul Toxin" upon non-swarm enemies caught in the swarm.

CONDITION: [Soul Toxin]

{soul, aura, poison}

Continually diminish aura strength. Cannot gain multiple instances.

ABILITY: Ocean Affinity

Resistance to water-based weapon warping effects increased. Deal +1000% damage to fire, lightning, ash, and artillery-based enemies.

ABILITY: One For All (Inactive)

Negate all other ABILITYs on this weapon and increase damage by 1500%

{ACTIVATION REQUIREMENTS}:

Unbound Soul x1

Ocean Affinity Gem x30

Gold Rank Magic Manifest x100

Gold Rank Catalyst x40

MARSH CHOP

MATERIAL: [Marsh Chop]

Rarity: Uncommon

Rank: Gold

The meat of a central marshailer. Quite tasty, but do not eat raw.

SOPHIE ARORUA

ABILITY EXCHANGE

ABILITY: [Ability Exchange]

Cost: 20 mana

Cooldown: 5m 45s

Effects:

Wood Rank:

Extend the cooldown of an enemy's ability (Max: 2m). The mana cost increases by 2 for every 5 seconds of extended cooldown.

Stone Rank:

Decrease the cooldown of an ally's ability (Max: 2m). Mana Cost increases by 2 for every 5 seconds of decreased cooldown.

Iron Rank:

Add 90 to the mana cost to swap the cooldowns of two abilities (Can affect yourself, your allies, and enemies. Add 40 to the mana cost to inflict the condition "Mana Instability."

CONDITION: [Mana Instability]

{mana, regulation}

Mana Instability increases the cost of abilities by a random amount between 20 and 150. Stacks of this condition drop off while standing still. Stacks up to 45 instances.

Silver Rank:

Temporarily stop an enemy ability from activating for that ability's mana cost.

MARSHAILER TUSK

MATERIAL: [Marshailer Tusk]

Rarity: Uncommon

Rank: Gold

The tusk of a central marshailer. If repaired and enchanted correctly, can animate nearby ice.

SOIRAVIS SIVARIOS

CROWN OF A THOUSAND DEEDS

ACCESSORY: [Crown of a Thousand Deeds] (Crown)

Rarity: unavailable

Rank: Transcendent

Materials:

[Veilcrystal, Transcendancy Incarnate]



Strength {+unavailable}

Vitality {+unavailable}

Agility {+unavailable}

Soul {+unavailable}

ABILITY: [Ruler of Sevenshard]

Reshape reality within the borders of Sevenshard.

Cost:

[75 Mana, 75 Stamina]/action