

****30 DMG****

****1 DMG****

Dust blocked John's view and the cacophony deafened him as he pulled away from the crash site. Aeolia landed next to him, his eyes flicking from the damage report to the slowly settling cloud.

"Think I pinned it?" she asked, passing John's uniform shirt back to him, its improvised use completed.

"Let's hope it is," he answered, taking the shirt and stowing it. "We've only done thirty damage, so I doubt it's suffered a crippling injury."

Mechanical groaning drew their attention to the rubble and the pile shifted as the drone climbed atop. Its left arm hung limply at its side, its shield looked as if it had taken the brunt of the impact and was heavily dented.

"It blocked all that," Aeolia exclaimed incredulously, fingers tightening around her glaive. "Just what's that thing made off?"

"**Hex** didn't work on it, so I'm guessing zilhavrum," John answered. "Or at least it's got some of that stuff protecting its power source. And it looks like you did break its arm."

"The one with the weapon is the one I'm worried about," Aeolia remarked as the drone proceeded to walk across the uneven rubble towards them. "And now that its defences are down, I don't think I want to give it a chance to use it."

Wind gathered on her blade and she fired off a verdant crescent with a downward swing. The attack flew towards the drone, which made no move to avoid the attack. Instead, it countered the flying strike with a horizontal one, the tip of its blade meeting Aeolia's wind.

The moment of contact caused the green arc to explode, the condensed currents of wind breaking apart with a dull pop.

****1 DMG****

The fading gusts blew around the drone as it lowered its sword arm and began to descend to the road, unblinking lenses locked on them. Aeolia's wings flared behind her as she grit her teeth in frustration.

"Looks like we'll have to settle this up close and personal," she spat and launched herself at the construct. She banked upwards then dove at the drone, swinging her glaive down upon the machine.

****1 DMG****

‘Why did I just get a damage notification?’ John thought as the drone brought its blade up to parry, sparks flying as Aeolia pushed against it for a moment before breaking off her attack and soaring back up. *‘That’s the third time it’s happened. I thought the first one may have been just a secondary hit from some debris, but that doesn’t fit with the other times.’*

The gleam of the embedded ****Blaze Shard**** caught John’s eye as the drone maneuvered to parry a diving swoop from Aeolia.

‘Lingering damage,’ John realized, *‘the shard’s putting out heat that keeps ticking over.’*

He looked to the crystal still in his hand, ideas racing in his head.

‘I can keep peppering it with shards,’ John planned, watching the duel between the drone and Aeolia. *‘A well-timed hit might give Aeolia the opening to really damage it. Try to disable or screw up its sword arm. And maybe using fire mana will increase the ****Evocation’s**** damage. Let’s see if over half will work.’*

He tightened his grip around the Fire Crystal and began to feed mana into it. His mana bar dipped by a point and a half before it began to fill with a vibrant red, slightly brighter than the color of his health bar. He continued the process, spending a total of twelve mana to generate eight fire mana. The elemental mana added to his reserve felt separate in some way from his naturally generated mana and a slight warmth flowed through his body.

He took that eight mana, and seven of his normal supply and cast ****Blaze Shard****, moving into range as Aeolia flew away from the drone. He expected another shard to be fired, one he hoped was inherently stronger. Instead, the mana was spent and the shard lodged in the drone’s armor exploded.

****45 DMG****

The sudden blast tore open the drone’s chest, exposing its internal workings which looked thoroughly singed. The machine’s movements became erratic, almost like it was just about to fall backwards. Aeolia shot John a surprised look from above before she capitalized on the construct’s unbalanced state and dove in to attack, thrusting her wind coated blade into the exposed internal workings.

****37 DMG****

****190(10) EXP****

Aeolia pulled back quickly, wrenching her blade free before the drone vanished away, flying back to John.

“Well, that was an explosive finish,” she joked as she landed. “How’d you do it?”

John showed her the crystal and smiled sheepishly. “I used some fire mana for the **Evocation**. I didn’t expect the shard I fired earlier to blow up. Hang on, let me pull up the info.”

!{Shard}(<https://i.imgur.com/HrPuMIA.png>)

Like before with **Hex** and **Observe**, John tapped the new addition to **Blaze Shard’s** sheet.

Fire: Detonate any lingering shards within range. If no shards are present, instead launch an explosive shard at a target, with cost reduced by 20%.

“Modular,” John muttered as he read over the effect. “At least I don’t *have* to use the standard **Evocation** if I want a stronger attack, especially since it’ll be cheaper. Still, between the initial hit, lingering damage then an explosion. So many options.”

He shook his head, banishing those thoughts. “I can think about that stuff once we get back to base camp. Should let Vivian know we’re okay and on the way back.”

John moved to collect the slab and tapped the center of the array, signalling to their missing companion they were alright and heading back. A second later, the center lit up in response. Message sent and received, John passed the slab to Aeolia and went over to retrieve the loot. He frowned slightly when he saw only one modest bundle of cash resting atop a silvery sword.

“Well, at least I got the sword,” he sighed, collecting the drops. “Let’s hurry back. Hopefully, there’ll be no more robots roaming around.”

“Want to fly back?” Aeolia offered.

John glanced at her mana bar and shook his head. “No need to waste mana like that. We’re not that far and I’d rather we keep as much mana as possible over quick travel.”

“In that case,” Aeolia said, pushing the array slab into John’s hands before letting herself shrink back to her natural size and landing on his shoulder. “This should be fine, yeah?”

John smirked as he began the trek back to their base. “Yeah, perfectly fine.”

“Thank goodness you’re alright,” Vivian exclaimed as John and Aeolia walked into their base, an anxious hand playing with a strand of hair. “I saw the explosion and thought something horrible had happened.”

“The explosion was from me,” John said, placing the array down on a table they had found. “Sorry. Turns out if I use fire mana with the Fire Crystal’s **Evocation**, I can detonate the shards the normal one produces.”

Vivian relaxed slightly, though she still toyed with a few strands of hair. “That’s good. I thought there were more of those spider ones or that all of these machines can detonate. Did the debris plan pan out?”

“For the first one it did,” Aeolia remarked. “Knocked it right on its belly. Didn’t kill it outright, but left it pinned so we could deliver the killing blow. The second one was a pain though.”

“How so?” Vivian asked.

“It kept itself outside of **Shadow Snare’s** range,” John explained. “Even when I tried to move closer, feigning an attack, it backed up instead of blocking or trying to counter.”

Vivian mulled over that, her hand moving from her hair to tap her chin pensively. “I sent the signal as soon as I saw it. It was only a few minutes after you sent the ‘target acquired’ signal. I suppose it could have been lurking in one of the buildings nearby and watched you.”

“It’s worrying that the stronger one just watched its subordinate die to get intel on us,” John said. “We don’t know how many more enemies there are. What if there are enough of them left that sacrificing a few isn’t a loss for them?”

The question hung in the air for a moment before Aeolia spoke up, “We’re not gonna get any answers sitting around here. I say it’s time to storm their HQ and end this run.”

“We still need to plan,” John interjected, pulling out his newest acquisition, “and I want to look over the new items. See if they add anything.”

He waited for the girls to nod before casting **Observe** on the shiny sword.

![Sword](<https://i.imgur.com/vSTlhFz.png>)

“Okay, three Attributes again,” John reported with a grumble, “but let’s see what they do before looking the gift horse in the mouth.”

Arcane Edge: This weapon can cut through magic, disrupting a spell’s normal function.

“That’s what the robot did to my wind blast,” Aeolia commented.

“Explains why it blew up,” John added. “It didn’t negate your attack, just broke it apart. Useful, but trying to break apart the wrong spell could be dangerous. Anyways, I know what Well-Crafted does since Senka has it, and that leaves...”

****Greater Grip:** The leather-wrapped grip of this weapon fits well into its wielder’s hand, actively wicking away moisture to ensure a firm hold.

“So no accidentally throwing it away,” John muttered. “That’s good. Would be pretty embarrassing to have that happen.”

“Unless it bonks whoever you were fighting on the head,” Vivian said absentmindedly, flushing when she realised she voiced her thoughts.

John let out a good-natured chuckle and smiled at the flustered redhead. “That would be the best option in that case. Still, better to not have to roll that dice. Moving on to the

****Evocation**...**”

! [Advantage] (<https://i.imgur.com/N2UEtI9.png>)

“...It’s interesting,” John concluded after a moment of thought. “Really only helps with ****Arcane Edge****, but if I can put more Attributes on it, things could get crazy.”

He shifted his attention to the shield, calling up its info.

! [Shield] (<https://i.imgur.com/RYX9RNm.png>)

“Well-Crafted is well known by now,” John joked, “as for the others.”

****Stability Matrix:** Spells cast into this last 20% longer.

****Arcane Dampening:** Magic that impacts this material is weakened, losing 25% of their power.

! [Reflection] (<https://i.imgur.com/01y5FkK.png>)

“Nice set of defensive things,” John said.

Vivian leaned closer to read the screens, too focused on the display to notice how close her breasts were to John’s back. “I wonder if that reflected magic is taken from the total power of a spell or the twenty-five percent being negated?”

“Does it matter?” Aeolia asked, seemingly unbothered by the redhead’s closeness.

“Well,” Vivian began, her breath tickling John’s neck and causing him to stiffen in more ways than one, “if it takes from the portion of the spell that’s being cancelled out, it won’t until John’s skill reaches level seventeen which will put the reflected percentage above what’s being negated. But if it takes from the spell as a whole, then a quarter of it is negated and a portion is redirected.”

“Which means more of the spell’s power is not actually hitting,” John finished excitedly, the prospect of getting a full spell negator distracting from Vivian’s closeness. “Really hope it’s the second option. With a high enough ****Evocation**** level, I can make any spell not do any damage to the shield or me.”

John’s elated thoughts cooled as he shifted his left arm, still unused to the weight of the shield. He willed the greatsword to appear, holding it with only his right hand.

“Give me some room,” he said seriously. “Need to see if I can use this while keeping the shield on.”

Vivian walked back several paces and Aeolia flew to rest on her shoulder as John began to swing the heavy wooden blade. He kept his movements slow at first to grow accustomed to the weight, then let his swings gradually grow in speed. His arm burned as he maneuvered his sword, every increase in tempo making it harder to control. He stopped his experiment and stowed the greatsword, a frown marring his face.

“Don’t think I’m going to be comfortable trying to fight one-handed,” he reported. “I’d probably end up losing my grip and I don’t want to try the odds of accidentally hitting an enemy.”

“Then switch to the new sword,” Aeolia said plainly. “Should be no issue in using them together since you got them together.”

John’s face soured. “I know, but I just got the greatsword and it’s been a great weapon. I doubt what’s left around is going to be less of a pain to damage than those sentry drones.”

Aeolia mulled over his reasoning and nodded. “That makes sense. Hitting harder might be the best way to go.”

“On that point,” Vivian chimed in, “I think we need to figure out our next move.”

“It’s pretty obvious we need to head into their base,” Aeolia said, flying to the window facing the illusioned building. “At the very least, if there are any more baddies in there, we can force them to come out like the sentries did.”

“Sentries are supposed to keep guard,” Vivian added. “It isn’t too much of a leap to assume any more won’t exit the building on their own.”

Her countenance dropped slightly. “Don’t know how much use I’ll be if we have to go in. I can set traps outside, see if you can lure them out.”

“I’m not sure splitting up will work this time,” John said after a quick glance to Aeolia. “We’ve been ambushed too many times today and staying as a group means we can watch each other’s backs.”

Vivian looked uneasy at John’s suggestion. “I get the whole ‘strength in numbers’ idea, but I can’t fight like you guys can. I’ll just be a liability.”

“Thought you were aiming for something bigger,” Aeolia retorted, with a smug, challenging smirk.

The sharp comment from the winged woman caused Vivian to flinch, shoulders drooping as she bit her lip self-consciously. She opened her mouth to speak a few times as she tried to form a response before frowning, her face drawn in thought.

“You’re right,” she finally said, standing a bit taller as she took a breath. “I embarked on this journey when I could have just coasted along in the background, I can handle being in the thick of things.”

Aeolia smirked and flew over to her, growing to her full height and slung her arm over Vivian’s shoulders. “Now that’s what I like to hear! Let’s go smash some robots!”

“L-let’s not get too ahead of ourselves,” Vivian stammered out, flustered by Aeolia’s sudden physical contact. “We still should at least have some kind of plan.”

John smiled, glad the inter-party dynamics were good. An idea popped into his head and he pulled the shield off his arm, presenting it to Vivian.

“If you’re going in with us, I’d feel better if you had this,” he said.

Vivian blushed and blinked owlishly, but accepted the shield. “Hopefully I won’t really need it. But ‘better safe than sorry’, right? Actually, I was thinking that sketching arrays onto this would be useful, since it can increase their effectiveness. But I can think about that after we get a plan together.”

“So, how are we doing this?”

