

Tutorial 301

Chapter 301: Bullying Ashenwolf

A day has passed. Vega is progressing well with her skills, and we even found some low-level monsters for her to fight. Most of them are younglings being protected by their herds. So I've been taking care of the more troublesome members of the group and letting my pocket half-demon deal with the rest.

The fights are dangerous of course, even young monsters can be surprisingly strong in this environment. Maybe the weaker ones just tend to die quickly.

As for me, I'm loving it. I would like this place even more if I didn't have to take care of Vega and could lurk about on my own. It kind of reminds me of the 1st floor, where death could be waiting behind any of the trees, a forest full of deadly monsters. Yes, the 1st floor was the first place I really felt alive, being forced to fight for my life or die.

Now that I think about it, maybe I'm not all that normal either, maybe it's not just the rest of group 4. But then I remember Lily's happy smile as I suggested that she cut off her limbs and store them for sacrifice, and I quickly dismiss the thought. I am the normal one here.

I notice a presence sneaking closer and activate one of my anchors, sending a thermal burst through.

A small part of the forest explodes in sky-high flames, and even here I feel a bit of heat.

[You have defeated Battle Kobold - lvl 201]

[Lvl 221 > Lvl 222]

I turn my attention back to Vega, who is fighting a level thirty-one Kobold. The monster is multiple times taller than her, it looks like a bipedal lizard with dark brown scales.

The fight has been dragging on for a while already, and I think she could have ended it some time ago, but my disciple keeps trying to use kinetic energy during the fight. Her heart keeps beating, her [Kinetic Barrier] helping to absorb the recoil. As I keep my [Mana Domain] around her and am extremely careful to do so.

Unlike the monsters native to these parts, Vega isn't used to these high mana levels. Hell, even I have trouble functioning normally without using my skills to compensate. I don't want to see what it would do to her.

[Mana Domain - lvl 33 > Mana Domain - lvl 34]

Oh, nice, that's something.

Vega, frustrated at her inability to shoot the monster with kinetic energy, just uses it to push her body to the side before closing the distance with another burst. Her dagger flashes, stabbing multiple times into the monster's chest.

She lands on her feet, as the Kobold sends her flying with a well timed punch, her barrier absorbing most of the impact. She pushes herself up again, stabbing for the neck and using her left arm to fend off the monsters gnashing teeth.

The kobold tries to tear through the [Kinetic Barrier] covering her forearm, but the life disappears from his eyes before he can.

Knowing the mood my disciple is most likely in, I don't say anything and give her time to calm down.

More presences start closing in from all sides, and I send explosions through a few more anchors and grab Vega. Then, while the forest burns behind us, I push us into the air and quickly head for one of the smaller mountains.

Keeping our flight as short as possible, I land and then continue running on my feet, strengthening my body. But, just like before, even this is enough, and several flying monsters start circling the area, searching for us.

I hide our presence, and when I find an opening in the side of the mountain, I enter, and pushing through for a few seconds, I enter the cave. A thermal orb flies in the air, lighting the area, and the monster that seems extremely surprised to see us as it wakes.

[Ashenwolf - lvl 149]

The monstrous wolf isn't even that big; his eyes are at the level of mine. His fur is gray, and his eyes are light gray.

Somehow I find the monster pretty and cute. Just a poor fella, awoken from its nap by intruders.

I use [Redistribution] to hold its movement, while the wolf tries to radiate some fire-based attack, but I absorb the heat, storing it in the thermal orb I'm using to light the cave. Then I disrupt its attempts to use a reinforcement skill and thwart a few more of its attempts. I let Vega go, and she starts looking between me and the wolf.

Yup, that's me, the Bully. I'm totally bullying the poor guy and will continue to do so for a few more minutes, at least until the monster can catch its breath after its escape attempts. There doesn't seem to be much mana left in the wolf, and its eyes change. The monster has recognized the difference between us and expects death. Yet it stands proud.

The wolf reminds me of the Crimsonwolf Tess and I fought on the 1st floor. Back then, I felt something like respect for the white wolf that caused us so much trouble and inspired the creation of one of my first skills.

I take a few steps and stop an arm's reach away from the monster, continuing to hold its movement with my skill. His eyes meet mine, its growling fills the cave.

Then I pet him.

The wolf's fur is nice and soft, and his body radiates a comfortable heat, it probably has something to do with his fire skills. As I continue to caress his head, I feel renewed attempts to escape, but there is no way he will be able to. Using my position as victor, I step closer and continue. It feels nice, and the confused, yet angry wolf is still cute.

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Sure, it is almost a level 150 monster that would kill me given the opportunity. But now its life is in my hands, and I want to pet it. It might be because I miss Biscuit, but I even boop the wolf's snout a few times. It's nice and cold, but it just can't compare to Biscuit's, so I stop.

Wanna pet it, Vega? I ask my disciple. Yup, I lost our bet again. Losing concentration when we found ruins of a building, and I found weird inscriptions on it.

Im starting to think that maybe our bet wasn't such a good idea.

Vega doesn't even bother asking if it's safe nor does she hesitate. Nope, she just moves towards the wolf which stands there, frozen in place, and climbs on his back.

It's so soft and warm! she says happily, her mood improving. She moves closer to the wolf's head, which is almost as big as she is.

Yet the little half-demon isn't scared at all. She seems to trust me fully and taps the top of the majestic wolf's head, Can we keep him?

It would be annoying, just pet him if you want, and we will leave in ten minutes.

She is disappointed but then continues to snuggle the wolf for ten minutes. Then, as we are leaving, I release the monster, and he almost falls, his body not released from my skills. He doesn't even attempt to attack me, just stands there, his hackles rising, its deep growl filling the cave once more. I throw him a piece of deer meat I dried and exit.

Taking Vega into my arms, I jump off the mountain, boosting us only slightly to avoid colliding with the cliff. After ten seconds of freefall, I absorb our momentum, gently landing on a branch of one of the bigger trees.

A few dozen miles ahead of us lies the sleeping Calamity, and I wonder how much closer I can get to it safely. Weve already shortened the distance by a third, so theoretically, we could reach it in a few days if we wanted to. But something tells me that wouldn't be a good idea.

So I once again check the map I got from Darren, the one with information on the Mirror. Obviously, the map is terrible. The Valley it depicts is much smaller, and some of the mountains are missing, but I can use it as a rough estimation, and, going by that, the Mirror should be nearby.

It takes an entire day. Meanwhile, Vega levels up a few times, and her usage of kinetic energy has improved to what I think is an acceptable degree. We only have 5 days left, so I tell her to practice creating mana orbs and I start explaining the logic behind my tricolored orbs. She has a skill similar to [Focus], so she should be capable of doing something similar. Even if she can't do it right away, she can always fill them with kinetic energy instead.

That day, we also got attacked by a snake as thick as a car. The monster moves extremely quickly, spewing acid at all times, and even radiates a form of mana I can't fully block. It causes me to become lightheaded and makes it more difficult to keep up my external use of mana. It's unable to pierce my Mantle, but the slithering moving debuff of a monster is extremely annoying.

I run between the trees, as they topple behind us. Dodging to the side, a long patch of the forest in front of us gets covered in green acid which starts to melt the trees.

A dozen of my mana projectiles trash the forest behind us, but the snake avoids them all, and as it moves, more trees fall.

A few monsters attack from the sky only to be hit by the debuff, slowed down, and then either snatched from the air or melted in green acid.

I create a few layers of barriers, and acid lands on them, slowly corroding them, forcing me to use more mana and let the attack drip down.

The thermal orb floating near me shoots a laser-like concentrated thermal attack, cutting trees apart with a smooth burned cut. It slashes against the snake as well, causing deep burns and filling the area with a loud hiss.

I create anchors near the monster, but they get disconnected from me by the field the snake constantly generates.

Vega has already passed out and starts breathing heavily, even through the barriers I've wrapped her in.

Pushing us further away, three tricolored bombs explode next to the snake, but I only see its long body slithering like a blur away from the explosions.

[Redistribution] fails to grasp the monster, and it never gets close enough to enter the reach of my kinetic attacks, and it avoids my ranged ones, detecting them as they take flight. Yet another asshole picking on me and taking advantage of the fact that I can't fight properly with Vega in my arms. And yet another fella to add to my ever-growing list of beings that have pissed me off on this floor.

When my [Perception] locates the tunnels below us and a path heading there, I lure the monster further away, dodging the attacks.

Then I create hundreds of mana projectiles, each of them an orb the size of a golf ball. Thermal energy floods into each one of them, and I start my bombardment of the snake. They shoot off like rounds from a minigun, hundreds of them in just a few seconds, obliterating a big patch of the forest, some of them even manage to hit and burn the annoying snake.

The monster hisses, an even more concentrated acid attack shooting towards us, splashing against my barrier. I keep the barriers supplied with mana and even use [Infusion] to infuse them with [Resonance], and gradually the acid slides down, melting the earth, stones, and trees underneath.

Meanwhile, the snake leaves, and the annoying field it was generating goes with it.

I check on Vega, and she seems to be feverish, and the little half-demon is still unconscious. Carefully, I use my mana to push the barely noticeable remains of the snake's aura away, and her breathing calms down.

Then I spend a bit of time testing my skills on the green acid that was left behind. The effect it has on [Resonance], how it clashes with kinetic or thermal energy. The amount of mana I need to use for [Regalia] to resist it. All that good stuff.

But one good thing comes from the snake's attack.

Its acid melts a big chunk of the stone off of one of the hills, revealing the entrance to a crude tunnel that's been shielded by the material around it. That allows my senses to reach inside, and I send them through the tunnel, slowly creating a map in my mind.

Then I find something interesting deep inside the tunnel.

A massive circular iron door not unlike the ones back at the Sanctuary.

Checking the map in the mana stone and the area, I manage to conclude that we've located the resting place of the Mirror. Whatever it is.

Chapter 302: Thank you, minion

Only when I stop in front of the giant iron door do I realize how different it is from the ones that lead into the Sanctuary.

This one feels much more powerful if that is the right word to use. There are inscriptions meant to take any mana that touches the door and use it to strengthen their defenses. Even the material itself is different. The iron is shinier, without a single speck of rust or damage.

Given the information I have, I would say that while the Sanctuary is an old abandoned bunker from before the war, this one is newer. Built using newer technologies and more up to date knowledge. Even the stone around the door has been strengthened, laced with veins of inscribed iron.

This seems like it will take a while, so I leave for a moment to block the entrance that was melted by the acid attack, I try to shield it as it was before, and then return to the door.

I take a blanket, lay it out on the ground, and set Vega on top of it, placing multiple layers of defense around her. I even add a few more mana stones inscribed to protect against the mana radiation that is so ever-present in the Valley. Then I activate my trait and touch the door, only to immediately let go, my eyes closed and pain drumming inside my head.

Yeah, this will take a bit longer than expected.

One day later, I already feel like throwing an all-out attack against the door.

None of it makes sense! How the heck is a normal Hell difficulty enjoyer supposed to get inside? Is there another way? Knowing the system, there probably is. No, knowing the system, there 100% are different ways to get inside. And most of them are probably much simpler.

BUT.

That doesn't matter for shit. This is a clear challenge. A test of my skills, and there is no way I will stop now. 5th floor Nathaniel won't back out, otherwise 6th floor Nathaniel will remember it and laugh at such a weak show of determination.

Nope, I will open this goddamn door. It is not even powered by mana, so its defensive capabilities are dramatically reduced. For what I know, it's 50-90% easier to unlock it now compared to if it was supplied with mana. Thankfully, the core of the Bunker, either a mana crystal or mana stone, seems to have been drained. Yet, here I am, angry at the door.

Master, I leveled up my [Mana Manipulation]!

At least Vega seems to be happy. She woke up a few hours after we reached the door and after examining the area, she went to training.

Yes, I'm curious, but I won't forget my role as her master. There are 4 days remaining, so I spend half of my time with the door and the other half training Vega. We spar, I pressure her, she trains her heart.

Over and over again, she gets hurt by me, forcing her to train harder and more. At this point I'm surprised she doesn't hate me. I keep watching for that. A hint of growing hatred towards me, a desire for revenge. Yet there is none.

Vega, do you not hate me? I ask, taking a break from the door.

Hearing my serious tone, she takes her time to answer, No, she says simply.

That's it?

Yes. I do not hate master.

Such a silly minion.

I will be disrupting your mana. Do not even try to fight against it outside of your body. Try to keep the mana under your skin active to strengthen your body or send it to your heart, I tell her.

Yes!

Splitting my mind into two parts, I turn to the door while the other one trains Vega.

One more day passes when I finally decide to do what Ive been avoiding for a long time.

With a bit over three days remaining, I take a break from deciphering the door. I take two clean pieces of cloth from the bag along with a sweet fruity drink stored in a bottle with inscriptions meant to keep the contents cold. I also take out some sweets. All the things from the 4th floor.

Then I turn to Vega and ask, Will you eat with me, Vega?

A pure expression of shock appears on her face, and her heart palpates, beating weirdly. Revealing her surprise and shock. A big tear starts rolling down her cheek as I sit on the ground, the pieces of cloth marking our places, and I wait.

Master this do you know I, she blubbers, and I wait.

Of course, I know. This custom, this gesture seems to be reserved for people you either like, respect, or want to build a relationship with. Vega, up until now, hasnt had the opportunity to do this before the 5th floor, she probably only ever got to see other people doing this.

Then she tried it with me, and I still remember how happy she was that day. That day and every day after that. No matter how many times I accepted, she smiled just as happily as the first time.

But until now, its always come from her. Her show of goodwill, a desire for a relationship with her master. So it's no surprise that she might react this way if I were to return the gesture.

I don't remember my disciple being such a crybaby, I mutter.

She quickly blinks and wipes her eyes back and forth with her sleeve, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Vega then quickly sits down and, unlike many times before, she seems nervous as I take out food and drink for us. I take my time and carefully split the items between the two of us. Then we eat in silence, though I watch with amusement, as she nibbles on the sweets, and drinks the chilled fruit drink.

Even though she is so much smaller, she eats more than me and doesn't even seem to notice that I barely touch it, carefully sliding it towards her.

The less food remains, the more sour my mood becomes, and that weird feeling fills my chest. When all the food is gone, she looks towards me, flashing me a giant smile that makes me want to pull on her horns.

Vega, I start carefully, I will say a few words, can you repeat them after me?

She tilts her head, curious, but then she nods, Sure, master!

Pairing.

Pairing, she repeats.

My throat feels a bit dry, so I take a sip and take a deep breath.

Tutorial, I say.

Tutorial, she repeats.

5th floor.

5th floor, she repeats.

Floor quest.

Floor quest, she repeats.

I open my mouth and then close it, only to open it again, Hell difficulty tutorial, group 4, Noname, Savant, Beyond, Side quest, Train and protect disciple, shards, System shop.

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Hell difficulty tutorial, group 4, Noname, Savant, Beyond, side quest, train and protect disciple, shards, system shop, she repeats perfectly.

That's enough.

Master, are you Vega pauses and then shakes her head. Instead, she smiles, Did I do well?

Yes, you did. Thank you, Vega.

POV Lily Chen

"Master, you keep staring into the air. Are you checking the community?"

I look at my disciple and, seeing no reason to lie, I nod, "Yes. Nathaniel is there, talking with Savant." I notice that my disciple is displeased by that.

He is wearing the same clothes he wore when I met him for the first time. Even though he can't be more than 7 or 8 years old, his clothes remind me of a formal black suit, clean. He wears them proudly, and his bearing is the same.

It's adorable to see someone so young behave like that, but he takes it so seriously I can't laugh at him. Apparently, his father is a Champion candidate and will reach that rank in a few years, something Pallius, my disciple, is extremely proud of.

"You don't like that I'm talking with Nathaniel?" I tease him. It's fun because his reactions are cute. A kid pretending to be an adult.

From what you've told me master, the man called Nathaniel is unstable and unreliable. Master is wasting time on him. I will get my father to locate your planet and will find you after your tutorial ends. I promise to take care of you.

Finally, I laugh a bit, unable to hold back, "Pallius. Just tell me more about the Pairing, Tutorial, and the system, and I will think about it."

I'm not dumb, master, he shakes his head, I will do so only if you promise to become my Shadow. He mentions the title of some, probably, important position.

What would Nat do with such a stubborn kid?

I take a step closer, pinch his nose and shake it a bit.

Pallius seems extremely surprised, and at a loss for words, his eyes big as saucers. His face reddens, and his eyes change color from yellow to light blue, and his hair mimics that. Pallius isn't human. His eyes and hair confirm that, as do the small wings growing from his back.

But there is something to it, I think, as I let go of his nose and watch as he steps back. Nat might be onto something!

Still red, Pallius shouts, wings on his back moving erratically, Master! Dont do that!

Yes, yes. But Pallius, your fingers are still missing, cant you regenerate them quicker?

He fixes his suit, and his hair and eyes change to a more neutral orange color, Its not that easy. Not everyone is as much of a genius as you are. I swear, master, you are dumb, you dont realize how exceptional your healing skill is.

Dont worry, we will get you there as well.

I dont know if the system is cruel or kind, but Pallius and I are similar. Ever since he told me about how lonely he feels with his busy father or how much pressure weighs on him, I cant help but pity him a bit. But only a bit, he always gets ashamed and angry when I try to be nicer. So silly.

What do you think? Should we head to the Bastion or the Valley? I ask him.

We have only a few days before I return to my world, so maybe the Valley? After I come back, we can go on a longer expedition, master.

So reliable, I ruffle his hair as it returns to its pale blue shade.

Master! Stop that! My father is a Champion candidate, and Im not some kid to be subjected to this kind of childish and undignified treatment!

Sure, sure, Pallius.

He doesnt push my hand away and looks at me, Master, just become my Shadow. And stop thinking of that Nathaniel guy. He is weak, and he doesnt value you as much as I would. You even said he left you!

Dont worry, minion, I will deal with Nathaniel on the next floor.

M-minion?

Oh yes, Nathaniel said in the Community that he calls his disciple that. Apparently, his disciple likes it a lot. So I will be calling you minion as well.

T-that evil man!

I smile at him, and then, while we walk, I continue trying to use [Reconstruction] on the remains of the heart of the Fallen Hero. Even after a few weeks, it's still in pieces and Its extremely hard to work with, but I think I'm onto something.

Three days remain until Vega returns to the real world.

Real world.

A real disciple, from the real world. Not a fake, not a shadow of someone long dead. A real half-demon thats become my disciple.

I might have become softer, and I totally blame it on the [Focus] that blocks most of my violent tendencies, and other stuff. But I'm happy, I think. So for rewards, I push my disciple more, and slowly she becomes stronger and stronger.

I could go out and level her more, but that's not what I want. What I want is to create a great base for her that she can build on. Show her what's possible and the rest is up to her.

And then, when the tutorial is over, I will find her and her world. She will be around 10 years old by the time the tutorial ends for me. Maybe even older as I'm not sure how long it will take to find coordinates to her world or how difficult it will be to travel there.

But I will do it.

I have also decided to spend one more day trying to open the door. If I don't by then, we will leave with 2 days remaining, if something doesn't change. That should be enough time to deal with the annoying acid snake, get some revenge on the Bastion jerks, stomp the Veil Guardian into the ground, and maybe even check on the Sanctuary.

It's not that I'm worried about the people there; I'm just curious about what they decided. That's one of the reasons I left Darren, Nina, and others alive. I really wonder how these people will deal with the knowledge of what they were eating. I'm also curious what Irvin, the source of that meat, did. Did he kill Darren? Did he stay down there, or did he leave to meet his daughter?

While I'm thinking of that, something clicks.

In the deep silence of the underground, it sounds deafening, and then in the light of my thermal orb, I see the door shift slightly. Just a tiny bit, creating an opening just wide enough for a human to push through.

That makes me stop and once again examine what I was doing, and after a minute, I'm absolutely sure I didn't do anything that would cause it to unlock.

Should I close it?

I shake my head. Whatever. It could be the system unlocking them; it's set to unlock for participants on some schedule, or there is something inside that opened it.

Who the hell knows?

Vega, take your stuff; we are going in.

I can hear movement behind me and her small feet tap against the floor as she moves quickly and packs up everything. When it's done, we enter the bunker, me going first.

Foolishly, I try to open the door more, but it doesn't move. It doesn't move even as I use mana or as I strengthen my body. Not even the tiniest bit.

To be honest, it scares me a bit and also makes me want to take it with me to the 6th floor to examine what the heck is with them.

The tunnel we enter doesn't have any inscriptions on the walls, and it's perfectly shielded against my mana and senses. When I try to send my mana through the wall, it reflects back inside the tunnel.

After we've been walking for ten minutes, I start realizing how long the hallway is. All we can see is the same tunnel anywhere we look. There are no doors, no rooms, no markings. The only proof of us moving ahead is the shrinking door behind us.

Oh, and also two anchors, one near the door and another one outside. Plus, a few mana threads that will warn me the moment the door moves even the tiniest bit.

I also hold Vega's hand, so I can teleport us both. Her possibly getting hurt by the teleportation sounds like a better option than being locked here. Just in case.

Ten minutes later, the area finally changes. The tunnel widens, and we pass through a few more iron doors, which are open. Each of our steps echoes through this otherwise quiet and dark place, and dust flies into the air. The air becomes stale in this perfectly empty bunker, devoid of anything that hasn't been bolted down.

We pass by filtration plants, we pass by an enchanting facility. We pass by a forge as big as a two-story building.

There is a room full of shelves covered in dried-up plants that turn to dust when I touch them.

Another room is as big as a football stadium, filled with thousands of seats. The walls have been painted in a pale blue color and there's a podium with a few paintings, barely visible behind it.

We eventually reach the core, a circular room with stairs running along the sides and heading down. When I send my thermal orb down there, I realize that it is as deep as a skyscraper for sure.

A single crystal goes through the middle of this room. It brilliantly reflects the light, perfect and beautiful. The biggest mana crystal I've ever seen. The core of this place.

A few more rooms later, we finally reach a much smaller one. It's barely as big as the room I used to live in with my sister. In that room, stands a simple mirror. It has no frame and it's hovering in the air, just a bit over the floor.

I take a few steps and watch our reflections inside of it. Both of us are a bit dirty and our clothes are not in a good state. Then I read the information that appears.

The Mirror is an item.

Yup, an item with a higher rarity than epic has finally appeared.

Chapter 303: Remember what I taught you

Duplicating Mirror (Arcane) -This mirror can replicate any object up to its rarity, vanishing after a single use. Its power offers a unique opportunity for duplication, but with the caveat of its irreplaceable nature, making its selection a critical decision.

Okay, I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this.

Train for a bit, I give another mana stone to Vega and turn to the mirror.

So, the next level of rarity after epic is arcane, and this mirror can duplicate any item up to arcane rarity. The unfortunate thing is that I don't think there is anything of that rarity I could get my hands on on this floor.

Maybe I should try moving it and take it to the next floor with me. I bet some opportunities would arise there. The mirror itself is a bit taller than me and as wide as my unfurled arms, so it wouldn't be such a big problem.

I touch it carefully and then try to move it. It won't move. I use [Tether]. I use [Mana Domain]. I strengthen my body, I use mana arms. I try to push it with kinetic energy. Just like the door, the goddamn mirror won't budge.

With a sigh, I sit in front of it and think while looking at my reflection.

Should I duplicate the Voidsteel slicer? It's well within the higher grades of epic rarity, and I bet most people in Hell difficulty would kill for it. Yet, I still can't help but feel something akin to regret, feeling it would be a waste.

I examine the mirror a bit longer.

These are some of the most delicate and tiny inscriptions I've seen up until now. It's hard to even perceive them, and I have no fucking idea how they work or what they do. The mirror itself could be made from glass or from a thin piece of heavily polished metal. Heck, for all I know, maybe it's just a reflective turd from a Calamity rank monster.

Also, the mirror quest says this.

Side quest: Locate the mirror

Reward: ???

It most likely means that whatever I copy will be my reward, that could be the reason for the question marks.

I wonder if I could duplicate Biscuit if he was here. Just the thought of two future Absolutes by my side fills me with bliss. Or maybe I pause my thoughts here, the gears in my head spinning.

Maybe would that work?

Probably? Logically it could work, the description doesn't exclude it.

Oh my.

I quickly check the timer until Vega returns to her world, and it says almost three days.

Too little time.

Slightly annoyed, I return to examining the item in front of me.

When the timer reaches 3 days, I get a new pop up from the system.

Congratulations, you have protected your disciple and raised their level. In three days, you will be offered a choice. You can proceed to the next floor or remain on the 5th floor for another three weeks as the danger gradually increases.

If you choose to stay, in 3 days, your disciple will return to their world for a week. Subsequently, they'll return to the 5th floor for the two additional weeks.

While the master-disciple relationship is crucial, it isn't enforced by the system.

Your choice will be respected, free from penalties should you decide to proceed to the next floor.

After reading the message, I open the Community to curse at my group members for not letting me know. Any message with even the tiniest hint of these choices gets censored.

That probably explains why they haven't said anything, but it's still annoying, and while Biscuit shouts something about the food, I proceed to bully the others.

The timer slowly ticks down, and when our time is almost up, I put a stop to our training and let her rest. She also seems to realize our time together is coming to a close, so it's hard for her to focus.

I've already prepared a small bag for her. We worked together to make it look old and dirty-looking, the same with her clothes. We hid a few mana stones, and she refused to give up any of the items I've given her, carefully storing them in a hidden compartment within the bag.

There is still a chance that someone might notice any decent items she's carrying, and her low level might put a target on her back instead of helping her.

So, I won't give her any powerful items. I also refrain from leaving any inscriptions on her skin with paint, nor do I give her any mana stones containing warrior enhancements. I decided at the beginning of the 5th floor, that I'd be careful not to help her too much, that I'd let her grow on her own. I have decided to trust in the training I've given her and to have faith in her own abilities.

One moment I think I'm doing the right thing, and another, I want to buy her an epic item or give her piles of valuables. It's annoying, it's difficult, and I'm not used to these feelings.

The fact that the system is even giving me two options is interesting in its own way. It makes a certain kind of sense. You can send your disciple away for a week, back to the moment before their death. The disciple will either die or survive based on their training. Then the disciple can use what they learned in their world and return a week later to give feedback and learn more.

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Yes, the system said the relationship between master and disciple is important, and it was shown often by titles such as Champion's disciple or Absolute's disciple. But it's weirdly nice of the system to offer such an option.

It could just as easily end up being a disadvantage as anyone who chooses the first option will start on the 6th floor 3 weeks early. But it might equal the chance to spend 1 week on the 5th floor without disciple and examine it.

For me, it's perfect, more than perfect.

There is the mirror and my idea to use it. There is the Bastion, the Sanctuary, Veil Guardian, acidic danger noodle, and the sleeping giga-danger noodle.

I like that a lot and not just because I get to spend more time with this silly half-demon.

Damn it.

That's how they get you, they act all cute, innocent, and weak. They need protection, they imitate, and get close to you. Then before you know it, you are attached. Even disciples are dangerous here.

While looking at the way she nervously steps from foot to foot, I also think about how she compares to me from the 1st floor.

Her level is higher, her skill levels are higher, and she has a lot of knowledge I didn't, all specially prepared for her and her build.

She is strong, and I'm sure she could take on most of the members of group 4 from the 1st floor. Somehow, I still don't think I would lose if we fought. Vega is wild, and she is the type that will scratch and bite when pushed into a corner. She is a fighter. But Nat from the 1st floor was even wilder. Someone who would sacrifice his limbs, and his body without hesitation just to get a nice hit in.

Now that I think about it, I did something similar to my leg not long ago, so maybe that's not a good comparison. There is no way I'm as dumb as the me from a year ago, nope.

Master, Vega moves closer and then sticks her head out for me.

For a moment, I stand there confused, and then hesitantly, I grab her tiny black horn and shake her head.

She giggles, clearly enjoying it.

Then she opens her hand, and a nearly transparent mana orb floats out. I can sense the kinetic energy inside. The orb floats slowly and heads outside the room, where it receives a signal from Vega, and its surface shrinks, compressing the kinetic energy inside. Following that, the kinetic energy pushes against it, expands, and tears the orb apart in a small explosion.

Its damage is small, even smaller than if she had used her body. But it's a first step, and my disciple seems happy. Very happy.

"Good job," I say as I pull on her horn and gently shake her head.

I do realize how much our relationship has changed, and how our treatment of each other has evolved. Why is it so easy to let my guard down in front of someone like her?

I get down on my knees, carefully wrap my arms around her and pull her into a hug.

At first, she freezes, her small body barely moving, her heart beating like a scared little animal.

When I'm about to let her go, thinking I might have misunderstood, she puts her arms around me and hugs me back. She holds me with all the strength in her tiny arms, her head burrows into my neck and her pointy horns poke the bottom of my chin.

She refuses to let go for a long time, and when she does, she looks at the ground awkwardly.

Remember what I taught you, okay? Stay safe, and I will see you in a week.

Still refusing to meet my gaze, Will do, master, so wait for me,

Sure.

Will you really be here when I return?

Yes.

You won't leave me?

You should know me better after the last few weeks. As the time moves closer, I notice her becoming more and more nervous, but she will be fine. She is strong.

Finally, the countdown ends, and Vega looks towards a spot in the air. From the way her eyes move, the object she is looking at is as big as a door. It reminds me too much of Myrra, unable to see the entrance to the 5th floor. In the same way I can't see the portal leading to her world. Its surprisingly disturbing.

Minion, my punishment has ended, so I don't have to call you by your name anymore, I say as she takes a step.

She turns to me and after a moment of hesitation a smile appears on her face, Master is dumb, same as me. I'll be back, and you'll call me Vega again!

Without saying anything else, she passes through the invisible portal, and a new message pops up.

Congratulations on protecting your disciple. According to how your disciple does, you will receive ??? after leaving the Floor.

Would you like to continue to the 6th floor or stay on the 5th floor?

Warning! If you decide to stay on the 5th floor, you will have to wait a week until your disciple is summoned back. Then you will have to protect your disciple for another 2 weeks in harsher conditions! If your disciple dies you will fail your floor quest, and receive severe punishment.

Warning! If you decide to enter the 6th floor, your connection to your disciple will be severed. Your disciple can also choose to sever the connection between you. If the connection is cut, you will lose opportunities.

Choose wisely!

Why are you giving us options out of nowhere, I mumble and pick the 1st option. The more floors we pass, the more informative and nice you are.

The system doesn't answer, as always, and I just close the windows.

Overall, I like it. There is so much to do and so many quests to complete, and without Vega I weaken the hold [Focus] has on some of my emotions, and my mood changes.

Now that she is gone, it feels like that bit of warmth, the flame I had to protect, is gone too, and I can go back to my usual self.

While looking in the mirror, I take out conductive paint and start drawing on my forehead, around my eyes, and on every free spot on my head. It takes a while, but I try to do it as precisely as possible. After that, I paint even more across the rest of my body. That takes even longer.

When everything is ready, a small orb of mana forms nearby, quickly compressed, focused to a much smaller size turning to black mana. The familiar pressure threatens to take over my mana, but I just pull it into my hand, absorbing it into my body through the inscriptions as they disappear.

I take a part of that mana and use it to strengthen my body. The black mana flows through my circuits, and my healing passive activates as well. I generate even more heat and send it towards my head. Then I take another portion of black mana and use it to [Focus], and at the same time, I activate my trait while looking at the mirror.

The colors disappear, and the world slows down to a crawl. My thoughts spin wildly. My immensely strengthened [Focus] works in tandem with Mana Wavelength Iris, sorting and processing collected information.

I've wondered what my specialty is for a while now. Is it my Primordial energies? My mana projectiles? Multiple kinds of bombs? Disrupting opponents' mana? The redistribution of absorbed energies? There are plenty of powerful options in front of me, and my build certainly fits the phrase jack of all trades, master of none.

But there is something I was thinking of.

The world I see through my enhanced eyes is beautiful, so full of information and options. Here its even possible to get a peek at the arcane grade item in front of me. I see the inscriptions, and with this comes the tiniest bit of understanding.

My eyes are powerful, it's a really strong trait, and in combination with [Focus] to process the information and with black mana to power it all, this may allow me to become a master of many skills instead of settling for a partial understanding of them.

I won't give up on any of my skills to specialize in one, no, I will keep them all, and all of them will become powerful enough to be considered specializations. I will drag my body, bleeding, and broken, until I reach that goal.

The black mana is finally spent, leaving me with the after-effects. My vision blurs, my head spins, and I'm barely capable of controlling my mana well enough to generate thermal energy.

Huddled up in the corner of the room, I clench my fists, waiting for the aftereffects to fade.

I have seen it, and it seems that my plan will be possible. I may have found a really fun use for this mirror.

Let's see what the system has to say.

Chapter 304: Using the Mirror

It takes me almost an entire day, and I use the rest of the mana conductive paint, applying it to the mirror, floor, and my body. I even etch inscriptions into my skin. Lastly, I also melt down some of the metals Im carrying to add to it all. When it's all done, I sit there, eating some food and enjoying the rest of my chilled drink.

While Im waiting for my body to recover from my overuse of my eyes, I open the community.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -test test!

Sset (Hell, group 4) - you missed two days.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -I was busy. Is everyone ok?

Sset (Hell, group 4) -yes, but NotAarons disciple died and he was moved to the next floor.

Oh.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - his brother followed him, so hes not alone.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -that sucks.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - he was really shocked, I hope they will be ok.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) -it all was going so well, and then...

The rest of his message is censored, and I guess a few more after that.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -The other news is that Gareth and WhiteWing have finally entered the 5th floor as well. They lost two members at the end of the 4th floor, in the battle against the First One. One more died from one of the other groups.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -hey guys, yeah. The ant couldnt damage Gareth or the others around him, so he went after our ranged players. He was too quick for us to do anything. Fucking insect.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -its good to see that you guys are okay. Oh, Noname, Gareth wants you to speak with him sometime. But now I have to attend to my disciple, so later.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -later, take care.

My message feels awkward, even to me, but it is what it is. I was never good at this kind of thing.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -I will be a bit busy for the next few days, so dont be surprised if I dont join.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - be careful! Your passive sucks.

Lily seizes the opportunity to poke fun at my passive and demands that I remove it. We bicker for a while before I close the window and return my full attention to the mirror.

Its time.

My eyes activate, and black mana from the orb seeps into my body. I force it under my control and forcefully calm my quickly beating heart. Then I take a step towards the mirror and activate it in concert with the inscriptions Ive made.

I feel the arcane item react, its mana reaching out to me, as it attempts to find something to duplicate.

I cant change the way it works or its function, nor can I do anything too big. No, I still have a long way to go before I get to that point. Instead, I give it a slight poke. Just a tiny bit, I mess with the inscription and help it find the object I want it to duplicate.

That object is me.

The weirdest feeling flows through my body. It's as if someone is examining me so deeply that they must know every nook and corner of my being. The entirety of my body and mind are being scanned. And I allow it to happen.

Warning! The Duplicating Mirror is being utilized in an unintended manner. This use does not align with the tutorial's intended purpose. Small changes have been applied.

A chosen object for duplication will not be permanent, a time limit and restrictions have been applied.

The window disappears, and I take a step back, and my reflection takes a step forward at the same time.

A leg steps onto the floor, and as the mirror cracks and disintegrates into shining particles, another me enters the room, his clothes disappearing along with the items he had on him.

My eyes meet his. Ive thought of it often, and I expected to be able to read him, but I cant. I guess there is a difference between reading other people and myself.

Fuck, that's creepy, he says, stealing the words from my mouth, and proceeds to take some clothes from the floor. He is acting casually, but I know that he is thinking, and I even feel him circulating thermal and kinetic energy through his body.

Access to Community and system shop and floor quests? I ask.

Cut off.

Status, skills?

All the same. Fuck, this is creepy, he repeats again, I think I understand why people always want to punch your face in.

Our face your face or my face, whatever. And theyre just jealous, I say, try activating your trait for a moment.

Before he complains, I activate mine as well, and with a sigh, he does just that. I can still see his brown and gray eyes, but there is a golden circle around the pupils.

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Good, at least it is as cool-looking as I thought, he says what I'm thinking again.

When he is finally clothed, I ask him, So you dont think that you are original?

Obviously, I do not, he says, as his expression changes slightly.

I dont even have to ask what hes thinking. He is me, and I know what I would do, and he knows I know given that I was thinking about it before I used the mirror. So its still fresh in his memory.

Clonthaniel stretches, hes already deactivated his trait, but Primordial energies are still collecting inside his body. The way he moves his body is unnerving, and the way hes looking around is even more so.

Damn, I really want to punch you, I say.

Right? Its the same for me. Anyway, three weeks, right?

Yeah, I dont think the system will let you enter the 6th floor or even let you exist for too long. We already fucked up the mirror, and there are limitations in place.

Thats true. Im pretty sure I have 2-3 weeks at most. It's this feeling I have you to thank for that. He doesnt smile, taking a step closer instead, and I let him.

Both of us face each other.

Yes. He will help me, we will both improve our skills and train together. He will do it because its the only logical way to think. But at the same time, he hates me, because he is fake and he will disappear, while Im the real one.

In the time given to him, he will try everything he can to stay alive, even attempt to take over and replace me.

Clonthaniel takes some food from the bag, after taking a bite, he says, Best food I EVER ate.

Okay, that was a good one. Let's ignore the fact I already had this joke planned out during the preparations.

As if on cue, both of us sit on the ground, opposite each other.

I gesture at him, and he nods, creating an orb from black mana and making it float between us. Both of us activate [Mana Domain], reaching towards it while activating a few more skills and our eyes.

Two of us should be able to come up with a better way to handle the black mana, right? His incentive is the need to improve so he can trick the system or replace me. For the next few weeks, we have the same goal: to improve as much as possible and as quickly as possible. I could use the mirror for my stats, maybe even a trait or something else. But I believe that because of the rarity of the item, there would be a time limit.

This way I can learn a lot from our cooperation, something that will stay with me no matter what.

Let's just be careful not to get killed by him. That would be awkward.

We both use [Resonance] and we don't even need to match the frequencies of our mana. They are already the same. We are the same being.

Then, together we surround the black mana with our domains and try to dominate it.

Veil guardian is mine, I tell him.

Hell no, I'll kill that bitch.

Don't you have better things to do? Make a personality imprint or something?

As if I could replicate my mind perfectly within a few weeks. I won't be able to create an imprint that would 100% be me.

So what, you want to prolong your life and wait here in hopes Cockroachsandra will find you on this floor? Everyone got their own instance of the 5th floor.

Blah blah, you talk like I havent thought of that. And why are you so talkative, Clonthaniel asks.

I mean, there is no need to hide anything, you already know it all. Don't you agree that's weird? I ask.

Duh, you know what pisses me off? I still remember that it was my decision to use the mirror like this. I know what brought me there. I know the plan and what I expected from it. Part of me even thinks it was me who made the decision, so I can't be too angry. But the longer I'm my own being, the more I differ from you and the more I want to jump at your throat.

If you do and somehow succeed in killing me or get me killed by summoning Veil Guardians, or the sleeping danger noodle, you will probably disappear too.

Yes, but you know what? If I come to the conclusion that I will disappear no matter what I try, I will be taking you down with me, he says. As always, he says it calmly, and I can see his [Focus] working. His face is emotionless, yet this is what hes saying.

Up until now, I havent realized how disturbing it feels. I mean, I had some idea, but seeing it? Seeing him move, look around, talk? There is this uncanny valley kind of feeling, seeing my reflection in the mirror become its own being.

You just keep saying things I already thought before using the mirror, I shrug, anyway, why is your left arm pale? I ask.

Because I'm a perfect copy, isn't it simple? You should be asking why your left arm is still pale no matter how many times it gets hurt and you restore it. Theoretically, it should become normal again, right?

Do you think Lily did something to ensure it will remain pale forever? She marked us?

Would you be surprised? That girl is bonkers. Did you notice how little shes spoken to you in the Community lately? Before she was much more talkative and cheery. I bet shes pissed off that you left the group at the end of the 4th floor.

She must be busy with her disciple; that's why, I retort.

Even you don't believe that. Dude, if you meet her on the next floor, she will beat you up.

As if I'd let her. And why the fuck are you speaking like this? You made all these decisions too.

You are the original, asshole, as Biscuit would say. Damn, I hope I get to see that silly corgi. Anyway, it's kind of refreshing to talk about it. Group 4 is a bunch of weirdos, aren't they? I mean, even Isabella.

I shift on the ground to make myself more comfortable and lean against the wall, Who knows what will become of her as she grows up in the tutorial. Plus, she's got that ancient bloodline Noodle.

It's fine, Noodle is cute too, so I don't mind if he becomes the devourer of worlds or something. Clonthaniel shakes his head, Tess is scary too with her antimatter cannon sniping. Can you imagine her in a few years? She might be able to snipe people from orbit.

I snort, People? She will be obliterating small cities from there. But damn, I'm still jealous of Sophie's Manipulation.

Clonthaniel smiles slightly. Both of us have relaxed the control [Focus] has over our emotions as we make most of the skill to manage the preparations we're making to the inside of our bodies.

He continues, I know how hard you've tried to evolve your [Mana Manipulation] into [Manipulation]. Too bad you failed.

Yes, yes, you failed, we failed. Damn, this is annoying. Anyway, I'm almost done, and you?

The same. I will be going first.

Hell no, I say.

Then I won't be helping.

I look at him as he says that, and I don't even need to read him to confirm that. I know what I would have done, I want to punch you, I say instead.

That means you want to punch yourself. He stands up and moves closer.

He sits with his back to me, and I put my hands on his back and let my mana flow through his skin. His mantle and natural defenses are gone, he's lowered them, and our mana is the same, so it passes easily. It's almost disturbing how easily.

Well, it's time to make a new construct, and this one will be even more powerful than I wanted it to be. I wonder how far I can push it with two of me working in tandem.

This is going to be scary.

Chapter 305: No preparations, no surprise attacks

Clonthaniel is skilled, very much so. I watch the way he moves his mana through his body. He uses [Regalia] to create a core exactly in the middle of his chest behind the ribs.

Together we compress it, and it's easy. It's so damn easy. Having someone to spot for me makes it easier to prevent the orb from turning into a shining bomb, ready to explode, or into an orb of black mana, so we can push it further.

He notices this as well, and without saying anything, he scratches the initial plan, and we increase the size of the orb and compress it further.

The sheer amount of mana we manage to compress is enough to evaporate a city block or a small mountain, and we continue even beyond that. Giving our all to make it happen. He relies on me, and I rely on him, and both of us know that if we screw up we will disappear in an awesome and deadly explosion.

Then while I hold the orb stable, he starts working on pathways. He creates connections to his heart, redirects some circuits, and adds new ones. Our biggest inspirations for this construct are Mana Reservoir, the passive allowing me to store three times my mana, Mana Cycling, the technique I learned

from the cockroach-like Absolute, and lastly, my experience from creating my Thermokinetic Mana Heart.

So this new one better be juicy.

I let him know that I need help, and he takes a moment to stop inscribing the inside of his body and help me keep the orb under control. Instead, I extend my senses to examine the work he has done, then I continue where he left off, connecting pathways to the core, surrounding it with dozens of connections to his heart.

Then a new idea forms in my head and I create a tiny orb in his chest and inscribe the idea on that.

My intent comes through, and he looks at the plans inscribed on the tiny orb, before nodding.

I let the orb with plans dissolve and repurpose that mana to create another web around the orb. This one will do the work of the Mana Overload Absorption passive. In case the orb overloads, it will take some of the excess energy and disperse it through the body preventing it from exploding.

Carefully, we then connect it all to the Regulator. Then we spend almost ten hours going over it all, over and over again. We make some small changes, we add some twists.

We even manage to catch a small mistake that would have blown him away about a minute after activation, by our estimation.

Little things like that.

But what excites me most are all the possibilities. If this all works the way it should, it will open up so many options for the future, and this will be the next tiny step forward.

One mind isn't enough, so we work together to carefully awaken the construct, and when mana fills all the pathways, I can finally let go. It takes me a minute to calm down, just now realizing how much this took from me.

Clonthaniel then turns around, Everythings fine so far.

Description? I ask.

You will see when you get it.

What a dick.

Yup.

Fuck, I want to punch you, I tell him.

Yes, yes, he stands up and removes two pieces of clean cloth from our pack.

Don't tell me hes

He sets two pieces of cloth in front of us and some food off to the side.

So let's rest before starting on your construct. Will you eat with me, Nathaniel? Clonthaniel lowers his [Focus], and his face settles into a creepy smile.

I appreciate the lame joke, but somehow that makes me want to punch him even more than if he made the statement without emotion.

Another ten or so hours later, we finish creating my construct, and I let mana flow through until it activates.

A notification pops up.

Congratulations, you have created your fifth Construct. The name will be kept as such and will be shown in the status under active skills and over passive skills. Well done!

Vortex Core (construct)

The Vortex Core is useful for energy conservation, swirling Primordial Kinetic and Thermal energies within its confines. Ready to unleash these forces at the user's will. It remains dormant until needed, ensuring that the user has access to stored energies.

Is it any good? I ask Clonthaniel, who is already practicing his inscriptions. He is on a bit of a time limit, so he is extremely motivated.

Fucking good, he says simply and then ignores me.

Well, I should have expected something like that. I redirect part of my mana to my Thermokinetic heart and start generating thermal energy. Thermokinetic heart, using the heart as a medium, transforms my mana. Then I can easily store some of that energy in my Vortex Core.

Even now, I think Mana Reservoir is probably my strongest passive. So, what could be better than having something similar for Primordial energies?

The Vortex Core will store them, and the vortex will spin them inside me, compressing them somewhat. The spinning itself works like Mana Cycling allowing me to store more or keep it from leaking. With a few upgrades, it could be possible to make the vortex more prominent, allowing me to compress them more or combine the two.

Later, I may even be able to add a storage for mana. I could even do it now, but I rarely use all of my mana, so larger quantities of Primordial energy will be more useful. It also solves the issue of needing to sacrifice part of my [Focus] to keep the thermal or kinetic orb nearby.

The question is, how much energy is the core able to store? I don't expect it to be as strong as my epic passive and store something crazy like three times my mana. But damn, even half of that would be crazy good.

So there I sit, constantly sending thermal energy to the core. After some time, I change the setting on the regulator and set more of my mana to work on it. I also generate kinetic energy and mix that in as well. The kinetic and thermal energies spin together, but they do not mix. The golden color of thermal energy, distinct from the translucence of kinetic energy.

It stores the amount I would expect and I would be extremely happy with that alone. But then it continues. The orb we compressed, enlarged, and improved easily allowing it to do so.

When the failsafe we created activates and cuts off the energies flowing into the core, I examine the amount. Isn't that enough to blow away a few buildings with ease?

Should I maybe try hunting the sleeping noodle? With so much

Yeah, fighting the sleeping noodle is a bad idea, the clone says.

When I look at him, he continues, I thought of it the moment I saw the amount of energy I could store, and if you think about it, I'm currently 10 or so hours older when it comes to the new construct. So I have more experience. Maybe I should call you minion.

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Maybe I should call you an asshole.

Anyway, I thought of it, and the snake is probably somewhere between 330-400. So, its a bad idea. You just need to remember how the Guardian, with a level under 300 fucked you up.

Us.

You. I'm barely 1 day old. A minor. So, grandpa Nathaniel, you should help me. Ive thought about it. Creating a perfect personality imprint is impossible. Both of us know how difficult it is given that we could only leave that trash behind on the 4th floor. But maybe we could find something in this bunker. Later we can even try to check the Veil. But first, you should check the system shop to see if

It's there, I already checked.

And?

You will see when you get it, payback for refusing to give me the description of the construct.

He just looks at me without saying anything.

Fuck, the way you look at me creeps me out, I say.

Yes, yes, so?

There are arcane grade items and passives.

Prices?

100,000 shards for an arcane item, 200,000 shards for an arcane passive.

Well, fuck, that's like 25 times the price of epic stuff. Epic items and passives are 20 times more than rare. So what? Rarity after arcane will be 30 times more than arcane? 3 million shards for items and 6 million for passives?

Most likely, but can you imagine an arcane Mana Reservoir? I tell him.

Clonthaniel closes his mouth, and I can see his gears spinning.

Yes, just how much mana would a passive like that be able to store? It makes me wonder if there is a limit to my epic Reservoir. Logically thinking, it shouldn't be able to go on forever, right? Tripling my mana, even if I was a much higher level than I am, that shouldn't be possible for a passive that may be useless to me then.

Im going to deal with the Veil Guardian, and when I return, we can either examine this place or go to the Bastion.

Sure, he agrees, far too easily.

Like me, he remembers the Guardian, but the moment he became my duplicate, the moment he had a time limit before disappearing, his priorities changed. He currently wants different things than I do. I want to finish the quests, improve my skills, and deal with my enemies while working with him on some other stuff. His goals are to come up with a way to survive, and damn, I'm sure he hates me; I'm sure I would hate being in that situation.

Given the opportunity, if he could gain anything from it, I know he would kill me, and he will try the moment he decides he can't survive. I'm also sure he is already working on plans. But I'm the same.

As more time passes, the more different he will become from me. It's simple logic, really. Everyone changes according to their environment. But at the same time, it feels comfortable. I dont need to hide anything, he knows everything about me, and I know about him. Both of us can lower our [Focus], and it doesn't even feel unnerving. It's a fascinating experience.

I give him one last look, as he sits in the dark room working on inscriptions with a mana stone.

Then I take the Voidsteel slicer and, boosting my body, exit the bunker, hiding the entrance behind me. I boost myself into the air and burn the flying enemies waiting to attack me and fly out of the Valley.

The moment I pass through the mist-like barrier, the constant pressure on my mana disappears. It feels as if a weight has disappeared from my body, and my mana moves quickly again. It's extremely refreshing.

Pushing myself high into the air, I reach into my core and use kinetic energy to move myself toward the city where I fought the guardian. Without Vega, the flight is much quicker; the country under me nearly blurs.

Holding the Voidsteel slicer in my hand and all that mana and energies inside my body, I land on the road between multiple skyscraper-like buildings. Two javelins over my shoulders compress and grow heavier while I search for the monster.

It doesn't take long, barely an hour, and I locate the Veil Guardian. The monster is there, it hasn't noticed me yet. He moves like he's searching for something. His right arm is still missing, it hasn't been restored. His face is still messed up, blinded in one eye. Yet even with all these wounds, the monster moves with confidence. Each step is that of a hunter, a predator.

I let my [Focus] weaken even further and let all those emotions flow inside me.

My hand shakes holding the blade, and my breaths are quick and panicked. I feel fear.

I still remember the monster biting into my leg in an attempt to eat me alive like it did to the other humans from before. I remember the quiet hours as I lay there under the rubble, my body broken and bleeding out. Hoping the monster had left, but too scared to heal myself lest that bring it back.

All of that is there, but there is also an anger that surfaces as well. A pride and deep hatred of the monster that stepped on it. Even knowing that I should reactivate it, I keep [Focus] down. The longer I look at the monster, the more my plans change.

Then, something inside me snaps, and I launch the javelins. Not at the guardian, but to the opposite side. I let all the mana I've been collecting seep into the area, and I grab all of the kinetic and thermal energy my core holds, I grab and release it behind me.

The resulting shockwave tears chunks out of the road, and topples buildings, sending them flying as if caught in a hurricane. After that, all the stored thermal energy explodes as well, melting the structures and roads alike. Scorching the air and flickering as golden flames blaze through the surroundings.

The monster obviously notices and turns to me. It doesn't rush me like before, but the gaze in its single red eye is the same. Deep hatred and anger directed at me.

With my stored mana and energies gone, there is only one thing remaining.

I redirect a thin thread of kinetic energy toward my face and explode it in front of my eye, blinding it.

The monster takes a step towards me, and I take a step towards it.

Then I put the blade into my left hand and cut off my right arm at the shoulder. I watch the blood spurt as the severed limb falls to the ground. As it lies there in the middle of the road, I think it feels somehow funny.

A burst of kinetic energy explodes from me, vaporizing my severed arm.

My next step is much more confident and lighter. My face breaks into a smile.

It feels so right. No hiding behind my skill, no emotions being pushed away. Just me and all the fear I feel overwritten by other emotions instead of being pushed to the back. There is me and the monster. No preparations, no surprise attacks, no stored mana or energies.

The same amount of limbs, the same amount of eyes.

The Guardian opposite of me slows its steps, hesitation evident in its movement until it stops.

I charge first, blood dripping from my destroyed eye and the stump of my arm. No mana leaves my body. Voidsteel blades meet, and I absorb the kinetic energy of the impact and don't budge at all.

That energy flows into my body, strengthening me even further as I move to the guardians blind side. Its a small advantage because of all the senses it has besides sight, but even that little helps.

The guardian moves faster than me, our blades meet multiple times, and each time I'm barely able to block it.

There is fear, filling me each time the monster moves, and as I feel gravity increasing my weight, trying to push me down.

Each attack is easier to block than the last, even though I'm getting slower and the monster moves quicker. I read its movements, I sync with its rhythm, and I absorb all the impact.

The swings of the guardian make a terrifying noise that reverberates through the air while I move slower, accepting the strikes with the blade in my hand. There is blood seeping from my hand as I squeeze the raw metal where the handle should be.

As the fight drags on, I grow more accustomed to its attacks and better able to read the monsters moves. Using kinetic energy in bursts to make my body quicker becomes easier, and I'm finally able to disrupt the gravity magic attempting to slow me down.

I become quicker, I dodge attacks, and I start pushing the guardian.

And with that comes disappointment. The monster is clearly weakened from before. Its body is wounded, and slower, and even its skills are weaker. Its still a terrifying enemy, and yet its lacking.

A swing of my blade severs one of the monster's legs, and I step to the side as its swing destroys the building behind me.

I want to fight more, I want to feel this fear and all these feelings. This rage and excitement. But this weakened monster in front of me isn't capable of satisfying those emotions.

My passives resist the strain Im putting on my body, and I move quicker, and my next slash sends the guardian's head flying.

[You have defeated Veil Guardian - lvl 289]

[Lvl 222 > Lvl 224]

I disrupt the signal from the body to the Veil.

Not yet.

Then I look down at the corpse.

I expected satisfying revenge, yet I found what could only be a broken toy. But not all is lost. There is one enemy that will test me, that will get the best out of me before this floor ends. An opponent that I'm absolutely sure is much more terrifying than the one I just killed.

The one that is waiting for me by the bunker in the Valley.

After grabbing the monster's arm with the blade I lift off and finally let my passive heal my wounds as I fly. [Focus] snaps back into place, and my head clears off when I reach the Valley.

I pass through the wall of mist, and the immense pressure of mana welcomes me like before. Then I freeze.

The Gaiathra, the giant sleeping Calamity with a snake body and six legs, has moved. The calamity still sleeps, but now its body has shifted.

But most impressive is the miles upon miles of destroyed forest, obliterated, leveled to the ground without anything left standing. Even a few of the hills and mountains that stood nearby are gone.

Clonthaniel? What did you do while I was gone?

Chapter 306: I woke it up

I get into the bunker where I find the asshole in the room with the core as he examines the giant mana crystal pillar. As I enter, I feel his senses touch me, and he turns his attention to me.

Again he stares at my missing arm and my eye that is close to being healed, do you even realize how much we tend to lose limbs? It can't be normal at this point. Is it Bambi's curse?

What have you done?

Just try to think about it; you could build five of us with the limbs youve lost. Actually, do you think it could work? If Lily helped...

It's not that many. And maybe? What have you done?

It is a lot. We are the only reason Lilys been able to level up her healing skill so quickly; we boosted her. And I did nothing wrong.

The sleeping noodle moved, I say.

Yup. I woke it up.

He did what to the three-question-mark monster?

Damn, it is fun to tease you like that. I know how you will react, and most of the time I can even predict the exact words youre going to say, yet it's still funny. Like a game, trying to predict a coin flip."

I can't even say much, it really does sound fun, So, want to show off?

Oh, you know me well. He gestures at me and leads me to another room. I already toured the bunker, and it's mostly useless, as is to be expected. At this point, I bet its the system making things more difficult. All the data has been deleted, the facilities are destroyed and its beyond my abilities to make them work. At the moment it's just a cool place to store the mirror. Obviously youre free to check it out, you will surely find a lot to inspire you here along with a few tidbits of knowledge.

We enter the auditorium, and he boosts his body and sits on the podium, and I follow, taking a seat in the front row.

He explains, Do you remember that annoying acid serpent and the weird aura snake?

Oh my, he did not do that.

Yes, I did that!

Fuck.

Yup, fuck. Clonthaniel seems to be having fun, I was thinking, you know. This bunkers sole purpose was to store the mirror, so how can we learn what happened here? Surely not the Sanctuary and even the Bastion seems to be lacking. Then I remembered that there was a quest to avoid waking up the sleeping Calamity. Why? No one would go close to it anyway, right?

He swings his legs, as he uses a thermal orb floating between us to light the huge room and its rows upon rows of empty seats.

It's a bit of a stretch, but I wanted to find out if there was some kind of facility or bunker near the sleeping noodle, he adds with a dramatic pause, And there is! The problem is that I couldn't get inside. So, I found the acid snake asshole, left some marks on him, and imitated his mana. Then I used a few bombs mixed with his acid to attack the noodle. You probably saw the outside, but the big boy wasn't happy at all.

Damn, I would have loved to see that.

Clonthaniel nods, Cool as heck. Anyway, the asshole snake is gone. The danger noodle moved a bit, which allowed me to place a few anchors through a crack in the entrance hes been sleeping on. I already sent a few monsters through one of the anchors, and it hasnt woken him up, so we can go in a bit.

So, you are hoping something inside will help you?

Yup, the natives here created the Veil, so they will surely have some nice stuff in their databases. And that place seems to be one of the facilities they used to work on the Veil. Even Butler assumed there might be a facility like that in the Valley.

At first, I wanted to trash-talk him for taking such a risk, but then I took notice of my missing arm. Ehm, maybe let's stay quiet about that for a bit.

It also confirms that we are slowly becoming more and more different. His goals are different than mine, so hes thinking about different things, and practicing other skills.

It's fascinating to watch, and when I think about it now, most of the things he did make sense, and I totally can see myself doing the same in his situation.

By the way, healing with our passive is quicker when you use thermal energy from the Vortex Core, I tell him.

Sounds good. Will you give me one of the Voidsteel blades? he looks at the new one that I just got.

Without hesitation, I throw it to him, and he grabs it.

I know both of us are thinking of the same thing at that moment.

Let's practice controlling black mana. We can spend a day or two on it. I suggest. After that, we can go to the Bastion, get some mana conductive paint, and maybe a few more useful items. After we come back here, we can enter the bunker under the Calamity,

That much is reasonable. Also, I want you to help me with the core of this bunker for half a day. I think I found a few interesting things, and two sets of eyes might be better than one.

Okay.

Without any other words, we get to it.

A day passes, we do not sleep, and the black mana orb constantly hums in the air, fighting against us.

It just keeps being annoying, Clonthaniel complains. If we lose even a bit of concentration it starts pulling all our mana in.

I thought giving it a different shape would help, but right now it seems that the only thing that weakens the effect is absorbing it into our body.

It might be because of our passives, hell, maybe the Mantle is helping or maybe its our Mana Circuits.

Mana Circuit sounds more reasonable, maybe its our passives. Upgrading our Mana Circuits might help.

Well, it's not like were going to be upgrading our eyes; theyre hard enough to deal with already.

I nod, Do you still think there might be hidden grades to active skills and traits?

For sure, we already have confirmation when it comes to active skills given that there are skills like [Disintegration], and what did the guy from hard difficulty have? Water blast or some bullshit. If that doesn't confirm hidden grades for skills then nothing does.

I don't even remember his name, C something. Well, it would be cool if Mana Wavelength Iris was rare. Even though I still liked the Arcane Skeletal Framework. Could be an amazing trait.

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Yeah, Vortex Core was an attempt to copy it, but I bet the trait would be amazing.

Both of us stop at once and send the black mana orb to the corner of the room, where it will crumble on its own once we stop supplying it with mana.

As I stand up, I ask, So, what did you want to do with the core of this bunker?

I want to try activating it for a moment. The two of us should be able to if we use Mana Reservoir as well, he says, to my surprise, and he noticed it. You wouldn't believe how mana-hungry that thing is. How the heck did they even power it?

Champion? I ask while we walk there.

If I was a Champion, I would tell them to fuck off if they kept asking me to recharge their bunker.

True, I agree. Maybe they absorbed ambient mana and used that to power stuff. But I still think Champions could be the answer.

Why?

Money. Imagine being a Champion and every once in a while they come to your house. You fill some mana stone for them, and they use it to send mana to the core. You get paid a shitload of money, and you can spend your time doing Champion stuff. If there were a few dozen Champions that would probably make it less irritating to boot. Or imagine your Absolute ordering you to do it.

Yeah, but I bet the owners of this place wouldn't like that much. You know, engineers or enchanters would certainly try to automate this to save themselves the headache.

As we theorize, it feels natural, and the ideas we throw at each other sound reasonable. But I do remember that I'm just talking to myself, and to an extent I just find it funny. It's such a weird feeling to talk, and agree with myself.

As we reach the high ceilinged room with the large mana crystal, we reach the control panel.

Duplicaniel shows me where to place the anchor, and we do so. Then we prepare for a while, and when it's all ready, mana bursts forth from both of us.

Our body reserves, our Mana Reservoir, all of it rushes to the anchor placed on the mana crystal. In waves, our mana rushes inside, filling it, powering it, and the crystal, as wide as a car and tall as a skyscraper, starts glowing ever so slightly.

My role is to control our mana and make sure it flows to the right places, while Clonthaniel bridges inscriptions and collects information.

We push even harder, and a hum fills the room and the lights on the walls flicker on for a moment. Until Clonthaniel redirects that mana and cuts off the lighting to avoid wasting it.

His eyes glow with a golden circle around the pupil, his hand on the panel. And I do the same, even though it strains me, just in case, as I follow his lead and look through the information hes accessing.

He knows Im suspicious of him but he doesn't complain when I do.

It takes only a few minutes before our mana drops to a dangerous level, and once we stop finding anything new, we cut off the connection. My Mana Reservoir is nearly empty, and my body mana starts filling it back up.

As we shake off the aftereffects, we let our bodies heal.

I mean, theres some nice stuff for a future evil lairinscriptions, ideas, information on materials, all that stuffbut I want more, he complains.

It might be part of the system. It likes to feed us information slowly, so maybe this bunker only contained the mirror and information on the creation of the core and future base.

That could be it. Hopefully, there will be more under the danger noodle. Anyway, do your stuff, and I will do mine. We can try playing with black mana after weve had a bit of rest, and then head to the Bastion.

How long will your anchors last down there?

Three to four days.

I leave the room on my own afterward, I walk through the bunker. It's cold, it's dark, and my steps echo in the empty rooms. I examine them with curiosity. Theres weird architecture, and broken inscriptions all over the place. Along with a few pieces of furniture and some other items that got left behind.

In time I come to the massive forge, its amazing that something like this could rival the size of a small building. The inscriptions have been broken here as well, so I can't activate it without fixing some things. But I still take some time to look things over and examine it.

Sure, my crafting skills are far from optimal. Especially when it comes to creating something new. But I could just have someone else take care of it, and inscribe what they make. Or I will learn it when I get bored.

Observing and marking down as many details as possible using a mana stone, I go from room to room. I do the same thing in each of them.

I try to learn as much as possible and write it down.

After a few hours, Ive come to realize that my duplicate was right. Even though this place is fascinating, it is as empty as its interior. Instead, I spend time training my skills and examining my newest construct, Vortex Core.

So far, it's been an amazing addition, and I'm extremely happy with it. Im happy with the amount of thermal and kinetic energy it can hold and its certainly much more than I would be able to do on my own.

Status, I say.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 5 - Mentorship

Time left until forced return:4y 18d 10h 11m 36s

Traits (2/3): Mana Circuit 1/3, Mana Wavelength Iris 0/3

Lvl 224

Strength: 109

Dexterity: 107

Constitution: 263

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 874 + 874

Primary Class: Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class: [Initiate of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 46

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 46

Perception - Lvl 42

Redistribution - Lvl 43

Resonance - Lvl 42

Mana Domain - Lvl 33

Tether - Lvl 29

Regalia - Lvl 19

Infusion - Lvl 24

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Thermokinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Vortex Core (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

Phoenix Embrace (epic)

Mana Overload Absorption (epic)

Tokens:

Beyond Difficulty entrance token

Shards: 11,892

Not wanting to push things further, I stand up and head towards my duplicate. The guy is annoying as heck, but we can test things together that would otherwise tear my body apart. Even then, I'm sure he's already planning something, even though he won't share it.

I'm also extremely curious, so I let him cook. But the question is if I should let him cook.

Well, anyway, I still have this collar I took from Ir Ir, something guy. Cattle guy? Soylent green producer?

Null Collar (Epic): Actively disrupts the wearer's magical attempts and skills, using absorbed mana to diminish both magical potency and physical vitality.

There is a bit to learn from it that could improve our disruption of mana or even create a similar lasting effect without items. Using [Tether] to anchor that sort of disrupting stuff to someone could work. Hell, I already used [Tether] to glue a black mana dagger to the First One, and [Tether] seems to be a better skill than I initially thought. It even managed to ignore my black mana, at least partially.

Is it because it's a spatial skill? Probably? Who knows. Oh, and fuck the system.

Anyway, let's test some stuff and head out to the Bastion. I bet there will be some more interesting things and maybe we can get a few more honest answers.

Chapter 307: Attack on the Bastion

The Bastion in front of us feels different now, and I only need to activate my eyes for a split second to notice that.

These assholes, the Duplicaniel next to me complains.

I agree.

The field around the city has changed and it feels much more threatening. Still, I've decided to give them a chance, and, after gesturing to the copy of the handsome young man next to me, we teleport to the gate.

Getting closer, the detection field catches us and sends a signal and a barrier around the city activates. The guards quickly take positions on the walls. So, we stand there for a while, waiting for someone to appear.

The person who finally does is the Butler with his majestic mustache, I would like to apologize, Mister Gwyn... Gwyns... but you are no longer welcome here, he says suavely from the wall.

The reason? I ask, noticing him looking at my damaged arm.

He also keeps glancing between me and me. The Butler doesn't let his surprise show, probably because it would kill him to be so inelegant.

We have received more information from the Sanctuary and the city nearby. After going through it all, we have decided to restrict your access here. I hope you will understand and behave accordingly.

That's when Clonthaniel shoots a mana javelin right towards the Butler. It doesn't connect as one of the small hexagonal barrier segments activates.

Even then the Butler doesn't seem bothered, This time I will let it pass, but I would

I shoot a mana javelin, and it activates another segment.

Damn, am I so easily influenced by other people? That surely must be it.

Butler, as I said before, I have no reason to hurt anyone in the city. There are just some things I need and want to ask about, I tell him.

I apologize, the decision is final. Then, to keep his dignity, he leaves, and three more javelins from Clonthaniel light up the barrier.

What are you, a child? I ask him.

He turns his eyes to me and shrugs, I'm on a time limit here, and that guy isn't even real, so I'm going into the city. Are you staying behind? he asks, even though he knows my answer.

Then a ball of mana concentrates above the city, emitting what seems to be a highly concentrated shockwave.

We jump away, and the stones where we stood crumble.

A few quick attacks from the defense of the city follow in quick succession until we both teleport to anchors we left further away.

Damn, they are not even taking us seriously, using such a weak-ass attack, Duplicaniel is already forming an orb of black mana over his shoulder, and then he forces it to stretch into the shape of a javelin. I attack and defend, you get us in.

Yes, yes, I sigh, a hundred simple mana javelins forming behind me, and I use [Infusion] to fill each one of them with thermal energy from the Vortex core.

The duplicate attacks and the both of us watch with curiosity as the black mana javelin sails towards the barrier, with our trait active. It crashes into a segment and immediately devours it, and then a dozen more as they appear one after another.

The black mana devours it all and then stops, hovering over the city. While the guards panic, the automatic defenses activate more segments close by, trying to stop it, yet they feed it even more mana. The flashes of mana are quickly absorbed by the black mana and can be seen even from this distance.

It's amusing to watch.

Then I move a hundred javelins behind me, and each of them bursts into motion in the span of a few seconds. Like tracer ammunition from a minigun.

My attack crashes into the weakened barrier, Each of them hitting the same segment and slowly pushing through. They reach further and further inside the city until one of them passes through the barrier and flies right over the buildings, the last few following.

The anchor on the last shot javelin activates, and I put a hand on my duplicate and both of us appear in the air over the buildings.

Uglier me immediately forms an orb made of black mana and pushes it into the air, where it absorbs a dozen or so attacks targeting our position.

Sending my [Mana Domain] as far ahead as I can, I again put my hand on the duplicate, and we teleport again and then again. After each teleport, we leave a black orb in our wake where it devours any mana based attacks that were directed at us.

Finally appearing in front of the gate leading to the estate where we had dinner with the Housekeeper and the Butler, I touch the door and disrupt the mana within. After we enter, I even close the door behind us and start walking towards the buildings.

So far, so good, the duplicate says while both of us use [Regalia] and tank a few more attacks heading our way.

Did you notice the places where [Perception] can't enter? I ask.

He nods, Wanna bet they have another guy down there with boxes full of severed limbs?

I'm saying no. They mentioned Gardener before, so maybe theyre all vegans.

Oh.. that's true, the uglier me agrees.

Mister Gwyn Gwyns. Was this really necessary? Asks the Butler as he appears from a rift in the air.

He is still wearing the same fancy clothes, but there are a few brilliant mana stones on his person. One in the middle of his chest, one on his back, another on each of his shoulders, a bit over his knees. My duplicate and I activate our eyes at the same time, examining it all.

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

Some sort of armor and strengthening, I wonder.

Quite good mana batteries too, one of them may be upper epic grade, my duplicate adds.

See, Butler, that man isn't even taking this seriously, the Housekeeper states as exits the house. She is wearing a simple pale blue dress still, her black wavy hair falling over her shoulders. The only addition is a thin and deadly-looking blade in her hand.

The metal of that blade is something I recognize very well. Voidsteel, the same metal that makes up the blades of the Veil Guardian.

Housekeeper, just kill one of them, and we will take one for questioning. The Armourer will deal with those annoying black orbs. The man then turns to me, Let's kill this one.

Wow, that's rude. The more annoying thing is that I can almost see how much fun the duplicate is having.

They know their stuff, he teases me. The useless one will die. Not saying more, he disappears, teleporting close to the Butler, who disappears with my duplicate following him and dodging the beam-like attacks the Butler sends his way.

That leaves me alone with the Housekeeper, who takes a battle stance, ignoring the clothes she is wearing. There are no tattoos on her skin, no mana radiating from her body, and no armor or equipment other than the rapier in her hand.

Unable to avoid her at my normal speed, I teleport just in time to watch her attack pierce through where I stood.

Before she can charge me again, the anchor I left there explodes in golden flames only to be blocked by the purple mana seeping from her skin.

The Housekeeper charges me again, and the moment I teleport, she alters her path to avoid any anchors I've left behind.

Curious, I don't bother to dodge her next attack and opt to stack barriers in front of myself instead.

The black-haired woman destroys each of them easily with the weapon in her hand, before swinging it three more times, splitting the three javelins I've sent her way.

Observing her nimble movements, I float in the air and start shooting projectile after projectile at her. Mana javelins, orbs, and projectiles infused with thermal or kinetic energy.

Surprisingly, it doesn't seem to bother her at all; the rapier in her hand cuts through most of my attacks, and the moment it does, the attack loses its effect. It's probably some skill, I mean my attack should deal some damage even after being cut apart.

I had hoped you would be a bit more fun to fight. Instead, you just fight like every other boring mage, she shakes her head. She then proceeds to cut apart a few of the anchors I've been stealthily placing, something that surprised me a bit.

Does she think her taunting would work? Make me fight her up close?

I land on the ground.

Well, she is right.

She is an opponent I believe I can deal with, even in her preferred style of combat, and it's always fun to crush people like that.

The Housekeeper charges at me, only to be met with a flamethrower-like stream of golden flames that I've infused with [Resonance].

She slices away at them, but the constant flames ignore her weird skill, and she starts dodging, purple mana flickering over her skin to protect her from the heat. As she jumps around in an attempt to rush me, while my flames leave the air shuddering in their wake, melting the sidewalk and burning trees, in the process.

While the woman gets closer and closer, I narrow the flame, condensing it into a laser as thick as my finger by the end. As extraordinarily athletic as she is, she dodges it all and manages to reach me, at which point I strike at her with a burst of kinetic energy.

Purple mana flickers over her skin again, and she pushes through, her muscles contracting under her skin.

Her rapier slashes at my neck, only to be met with a Voidsteel slicer, barely so. I redirect more mana to strengthening my body and fend off her attacks while being pushed back. The armor forms around my body, and I make it grow bigger until it's twice my height.

Attacks slash against transparent limbs made of mana, yet now that it is connected to me and under my domain, it doesn't get affected by her skill, and it's her who starts avoiding me.

For the first time, I also use kinetic energy stored in my Vortex Core to power the movement of the mecha style armor. It speeds up my movements and makes manipulating it easier while lending more force to my attacks.

She does a backflip and before jumping back a few times, she stops, looking up at me surrounded by all my mana.

Are we going to take things a bit more seriously? I ask.

The woman in front of me is stronger than she lets on, stronger than the Butler, and the both of us are still holding back somewhat.

Why not, she smiles as her eyes become a darker shade of purple.

The Housekeeper charges me, seeming to appear in front of me, her weapon aimed at my chest.

In a split second, my armor shrinks becoming skin-tight, surrounding my body with all that extremely compressed mana.

The rapier stabs at my chest, unable to pierce further. Collecting all the energy of her attack, I barely manage to hold it before quickly releasing it in her direction.

She dodges, but a huge chunk of the area behind her explodes, the kinetic energy tearing the building and the garden apart.

Once again, she attacks, each of her steps cracking the ground under her feet, her black hair flowing behind her.

Two more attacks crash into my armor, and I absorb each one of them, immediately launching the absorbed kinetic energy at her, which she dodges. Then she stabs again, and this time it's different; that weird skill of hers won't allow me to collect kinetic energy, and instead part of my armor loses its mana, disappearing into particles.

I deflect her next attack with my own blade, to cover the missing section of armor, a clang sounding as two voidsteel blades clash.

Im observing the entire exchange with my Mana Wavelength eyes, yet I still can't figure out what her skill is doing. With a sigh, I give up and decide to stop holding back.

Mana and kinetic energy seep into my body, and my speed dramatically increases. The armor around me disappears, and I mirror the woman across from me, stopping my mana from leaking from my body, and face her with only a blade in my hand.

Our slashes tear up the ground and damage the buildings surrounding us. The vibrations resonate through the surroundings as our blades meet, reducing the closest objects to dust. And I keep speeding up.

The Housekeeper starts having a harder and harder time facing me, and I start placing anchors, using the fact that she has no time to destroy them to attack her from behind her back.

My technique is worse. No matter how much I've trained on Earth, I can't compare to someone with over 100 years of experience. But what I'm lacking, I make up for in speed, boosted by mana and kinetic energy.

Now that I've completed this test as well, I stop and, to her surprise, launch a burst of kinetic energy at her. Though instead of flying through the wall she perfectly deflects the attack, her purple mana absorbing most of the impact.

That's when my duplicate lands next to me and throws the Butler on the ground. Still alive and breathing, but with a wound on his head.

Stop playing with your food, he complains.

There is a lot to learn; she is really good at strengthening her body, and I like her skills, I reply.

The Housekeeper fixes her dress, not a scratch on her and she's seemingly unworried. Then she notices the Butler lying on the ground and, looking at his face, her surprise multiplies.

You didn't, she says, almost in shock.

I look where she is looking and notice that the left half of the majestic mustache is missing. Gone, reduced to atoms.

Both of us look at my duplicate, who shrugs his shoulders, I did not, he says.

A look of confusion appears on the Housekeeper's face.

I found him like that, the duplicate lies shamelessly.

Chapter 308: Power source

I think we might have a complicated situation on our hands, the Housekeeper moves a strand of hair off her face.

Does she have a body that tough? Is she strengthening it? Does she have healing? I dont think she will answer me if I ask, and what the heck is that weird skill of hers? It has some disruptive properties, but there is something else as well.

Should I get angry at my duplicate for ruining my learning opportunity?

There is nothing complicated about this, Clonthaniel answers, Me and my buddy over here kinda have you guys in the palms of our hands. I dont think you have anyone capable of facing us, and even your oh so amazing barrier proved useless. Us choosing not to nuke this city is proof enough of our good will, he says mirroring the Butlers words as we were leaving.

That only gets a laugh out of the woman. A loud, amused laugh. Like an adult dealing with a child. So, why dont we go out of the city and fight properly? It would be

I ignore her and turn to my duplicate, I have located it.

The duplicate lets go of the Butler, kicks him with the tip of his shoe, and puts his hand on my shoulder.

The Housekeeper charges us, but before she reaches us, we teleport toward the anchor I placed deep inside the Bastion.

What a clingy woman, the duplicate complains. Was her skill really that much fun?

Yup. She wasn't very versatile, she mostly strengthened her body, and she was really tough and quick, but she did it really really well. One of her skills seemed similar to [Disruption], but it worked against any attack I tried, mana-based or not. It also didn't seem to cost her that much mana, it was super efficient.

I take a step, and we start walking through a circular tunnel with a flat bottom, through which we sense a source of mana while leaving some nasty traps behind us.

That's it? Duplicaniel asks.

She also used some skill that allowed her to cut anything apart. Flames, mana, stone. Yes, yes, I know she has a Voidsteel blade, but it wasn't just that. Every attack she cut apart seemed to lose its effect.

Maybe I should fight her too.

We have a bit of time, I agree.

Exiting the tunnel, we find ourselves surrounded by vegetation. The room is a half sphere and it's big enough to take probably 20 percent of the Bastions base; it's just that big.

The walls are covered in terraces, filled with plants and trees bearing fruits and simple vegetables.

Even the floor is fully covered in grass and plants. Colorful, vibrant. The air smells nice, and there is even a soft wind blowing.

Did you know that if you grow a tree in a room, it tends to be weak and often falls under its weight? A short man with a shaved head and wearing simple clothes says making his presence known.

He continues, The reason is simple. There is no wind. The wind blowing against the tree forces it to struggle and grow its roots deeper and stronger. Trees grown inside don't have that. He smiles, it's almost a friendly smile. Almost.

You must be the Armorer guy, the duplicate says in an effort to poke fun at him.

Yes, Im the Armorer, he nods seriously.

I can see the confusion on Clonthaniels face.

Before he says anything, the man continues, Of course, Im not the Armorer, I am the Gardener, you dipshit. The man turns to me, Are you the more reasonable one here?

I really really want to throw in some lame joke, just to be included, but in the end, give up and nod.

Good, as I said, Im the Gardener, and I really have no interest in you kids fighting. So, will you please remove the traps you left in the tunnel before the Housekeeper triggers them all just to test them?

I do just that, and a moment later, the duplicate does as well.

Thank you, the Gardener bows his head slightly and gestures for us to follow.

I already feel another conversation coming on. Damn, I really miss Tess. She would be much better at this.

Reaching the small summer house, we sit there and wait. The feeling of the wind blowing is nice, and the crystal producing the light is amazing. It even seems to produce heat and without looking, I would find it hard to distinguish it from the sun.

While we wait, the small man starts sending his mana to a series of tiny low-quality mana stones. He uses them to trigger watering or to make them radiate heat for the plants. Some bigger stones even generate wind, as they sit on pillars riddled with dozens of holes for the generated wind to flow through.

And all of that is powered by something even deeper underneath us.

I notice that Duplicaniel is looking there as well, and so I wonder, what powers a place as big as the Bastion? I really want to find out.

Please, stay a bit longer, and I will try to explain everything I can, the Gardener takes his attention off well, gardening.

Five minutes, Clonthaniel says, mirroring my thoughts.

A minute later, the Housekeeper joins us along with the Butler who is already awake. The man is still missing half of his majestic mustache, and still doesn't show any reaction as he sits there, the picture of elegance. As if all of this were planned. The Housekeeper does the same.

The Gardener slaps his hands together, So, I like what you did a few days ago. We asked you three questions, and you asked us three questions. So why don't we continue that?

To slow us down so the Armorer can prepare countermeasures? I ask, somehow amused.

Yes. The Gardener nods.

Sounds good, I agree. Tell me about the Bastion, I ask. Thats my first question.

The Gardener looks at the Butler who straightens in his chair before starting, The Bastion is a Skyhold Bastion, category three, meaning we were allowed military-grade upgrades from the Enchanter Guild. It was privately owned by Lord Lothain and used as his summer house.

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

The Housekeeper already seems to be dozing off, but I can feel her sharp senses on me.

The Butler looks around and, after a dramatic pause, he continues, Me, the Housekeeper, the Gardener, and the Armorer used to be servants of Lord Lothain. The Gardener took care of food, the Armorer used to be a low ranking member of the Enchanters Guild and took care of our defenses. The Housekeeper

worked with the other servants, making sure the Bastion ran smoothly, while I was in charge of the guards.

Butler, shorter answers please, the Gardener says gently.

Savages, the Butler complains and reaches to touch his mustache, only for his hand to freeze mid-air, remembering he is missing half of it. He puts his hand down and continues, Simply, thanks to our tendency to fly in places where the Veil wasn't so dense, we were one of the last to fall. Before we got destroyed, the Veil turned its attention to monsters, and by extension to the forces of the planet Paired with us.

Not giving us a chance to react, the Housekeeper asks, Are you drifters, mercenaries, are you from another planet?

I shake my head, "I can say that we are not from the paired planet, nor are we mercenaries fighting in this war. Drifters would probably fit us the most.

What powers the Bastion? the duplicate asks.

I don't even mind as it's the question I would ask as well. So, while I wait for an answer, I fight against the pressure slowly closing in on me. And my duplicate. It's almost unnoticeable, preparations to face us. Most likely the work of the Armorer with the help of some built in defensive mechanisms. Its slowly trying to analyze us and stealthily disarm us.

I find it fascinating, so I let it happen.

Lord Lothain, the Housekeeper answers this time.

Oh boy, are all people of this planet like this?

I assume it's not voluntary, I ask.

It's not, the Housekeeper smiles.

This planet is full of weirdos. Instead of catching some animal and healing it to create food, they become cannibals. Then, instead of finding something else to power the city, they use their boss to do that. I mean, maybe he is a douchebag, and maybe he deserves it, but damn, you guys have a problem, the duplicate just says straight up.

The Gardener opens his mouth to ask something, but finally, by extending my domain in one direction, I pierce through defenses and place an anchor. I put my hand on my duplicate, and teleport us.

He looks around the dark room we appear in and sends a disrupting wave toward anchor-like things in the air that the Butler uses to create rifts.

The pressure from the defensive mechanism on us increases, and I know if we stayed just a bit longer, it would have become dangerous, even for the two of us. That's how much I think of their barrier.

As before, the pressure tries to locate us, but down here, its reach is weaker; the rooms are either shielded or excluded from the system of the base.

While my duplicate keeps disrupting the Butler's attempt to open a rift, we head toward the source of all this energy.

There are no doors at all, no entrance other than the Butler's rift or teleportation. I find that really amusing, and seeing how eagerly my duplicate disrupts rifts, I think he agrees.

Do we think the same? Checking the core of the Bastion, maybe a bit of fighting with the Housekeeper, testing how much we can handle the Armorer and the barrier, and then we bail after stealing some mana conductive paint and other materials?

I nod, Sounds about right. Would be nice if they stopped trying to kill us or kidnap us, but we cant have everything. And how can you trust the people that did this to their lord.

We enter the central room where the mana crystal, working as the core of the Bastion, its power source, is. There, tied to the crystal, is a man. He seems older but he is muscular, and his clothes and hair are well-kept. A sense of authority seems to radiate from his face, the dignity of a person used to ordering people around.

And he is dead, his body is missing beneath the ribs. Belly, hips, legs, everything is gone. The rest is tied to a crystal, with the spine which extends a bit further beneath the ribs, the white bone feeling unnatural.

Yet, still, the heart of the man beats slowly but powerfully, each beat sending a pulse of mana into the mana crystal which glows in sync.

What do you think, used to be level 300, maybe 350 at most? I ask.

Probably something like that, but there is no way chumps like them killed him.

Maybe there were more of them, and only they survived, or they killed him in his sleep?

Or he fell down the stairs.

Both of us move closer, and without even looking, I know that his eyes are active, our minds trying to collect that immense amount of information. To avoid aftereffects, we both turn them off right after.

Oi, I just thought of something, I start. I, we, have plenty of mana, right? Our hearts generate a lot of it, much more than someone at our level should. So

The duplicate understands where I'm going, Okay, let's hide it a bit better to not end up as some creepy mana battery.

Sneaky mode will help.

Sneaky mode is perfect for that.

True, I agree and look around. Did you find anything interesting?

Nothing we dont know about or arent working on already, but man, is the Butler angry. He keeps trying to teleport in.

It makes sense now, why they tried so hard to distract us from getting here, I step closer to examine what remains of the owner of this Skyhold Bastion when I feel a movement behind my back.

Armor forms around my body, and I throw a burst of kinetic energy behind me, only for it to be absorbed as the armor is disrupted.

For a short moment, something holds my movements, and in slow motion, I watch as my duplicate tries to put a silver collar around my neck.

Mana under my skin moves, tearing it from inside and forming into a spike that stabs into the duplicate's hand. Right after, I change the frequency of my kinetic energy, and a short concentrated burst sends him a few steps back as he is unable to absorb it quickly.

I send some thermal energy to the wound I created, and it starts healing.

Well, I had to try, he says shamelessly.

The null collar is still on me, I say.

Yup, I found this one here and hid it from you. Anyway, you can't really blame me.

Thats true, but I can fucking kill you for trying to do so.

You can try, he says, returning my gaze.

Later, I will deal with him later. There is too much to be gained from our cooperation, and it's not like I didn't expect this behavior.

So, what was the plan? I ask and start examining the Lord again, "Isn't it too soon for confrontation?"

That's why I gave it a try right now, and it turned out successful. It really caught you by surprise. The plan was to stop you from using mana, getting you under my control, and come up with a way to either inscribe myself into your mind, kill you, and take over your body. I didn't think of it that far.

I pause, That's a good idea, it is probably much easier to use my body and try to replace my mind, rather than creating an entire personality imprint from scratch.

Right? Anyway, that clingy woman, the Housekeeper, is digging a tunnel down there, and the Armorer seems to be trying something as well, so let's hurry. He passes by me and burrows his hand into the chest of the dead man in front of us and pulls out the still-beating heart which continues to do so even outside of the man's chest.

The amount of mana it generates seems equivalent to the entirety of mine with the Mana Reservoir included.

In my duplicate's place, I disrupt the Butler's attempts to create a rift. They become much more aggressive, and I can feel the desperation coming from him, the Housekeeper as she digs, and even from the Armorer.

I will keep the heart going and our defenses up. I should be able to do it for ten or fifteen minutes before the heart needs to go back into the chest. So you will have to do the talking.

Sounds good, let's get ourselves some nice stuff and more information. Something tells me they will be more willing to cooperate now.

Chapter 309: Together

Both of us reappear in the summer house. The Housekeeper and Butler are gone, and only the Gardener remains. His expression is anything but nice, and it sours even more as he notices the beating heart in my duplicate's hand. The one my duplicate is keeping beating with kinetic energy and careful manipulation of his mana.

This will be the third time Ive had to speak with you guys, so how about you call the other two and the Armorer here.

The Gardener is quick to understand, and its barely ten seconds before the Butler and the Housekeeper return.

Both of them seem ready to jump us, but they stop when the Gardener gestures for them to. Mister Gwyn, I really hope you realize what

I gesture to him with a finger over my lips, and he quickly shuts up.

That almost makes me want to smile, So, I have had enough of you guys acting like dicks. Sure, at least my friend over here deserved that, and I might sound like a hypocrite, but whatever, right?

The three of them remain quiet.

Oh boy, this is getting fun. They acted so high and mighty, so prideful, and now?

Anyway, we have around 15 minutes during which my buddy will keep the heart beating. So after the Armorer joins us, I will ask a few questions, and you guys will answer. If you lie or hide anything, the heart goes boom; if you take too long, the heart goes boom; if you attack us I gesture to them.

...The heart goes boom, The Butler answers.

Thats my guy. Anyway, Housekeeper. I like your sword, will you gift it to me? I look at her.

She stares at me for a short moment, and then on her face, a smile blossoms, Sure, Mister Gwyn, she says and takes a few steps closer and carefully hands me her rapier, like a knight offering the rapier to his lord.

Quickly, I examine the weapon.

Voidsteel Rapier (Epic): Echoing the qualities of the Voidsteel Slicer, this rapier is crafted from the vibration-absorbing Voidsteel, ensuring extreme sharpness and precision. The durability and cutting capability of the Voidsteel make the Rapier nearly indestructible, allowing it to effortlessly penetrate almost any defense.

The weapon is beautiful, made of the same metal mine as those my duplicate and I wield, yet unlike our rough blades which lack handles, the rapier has been delicately made, entirely from Voidsteel, right down to the handle and guard.

Thanks, I fix the rapier to my belt while the Housekeeper smiles even more and quietly sits back in her spot. "Butler, my friend, why don't you go to the city and bring me as much mana conductive paint and metals as you can? You can add some mana stones too. Nothing too unreasonable, but don't be cheap."

Without a word, the Butler disappears through his rift, and everyone is quiet until the Armorer appears. An extremely thin, yet tall man with messy hair. I sense from him multiple items that seem to be connected to the defensive mechanism of the Bastion, even now they are working.

Before you start, I hate to tell you that the amount of mana within the defensive system is still enough to kill both of you a dozen times over, he says. His voice is quiet, almost a whisper.

Wouldnt that destroy the heart?

Its probably more durable than the two of you, the Armorer says in his quiet voice.

Why dont you try?

...

I thought so. Anyway, we have what, twelve minutes? I turn to the duplicate, and he nods. So lets start. I dont care who tells me, but what is the cause of the high mana levels in the Valley? And please, don't lie to me this time, I ask after reading one of the Side quests.

The Armorer answers in his whispering voice, Its the location of one of the facilities that kickstarted the Veil. A high-ranking member of the Enchanters Guild used to own it. The mana levels are being caused by the broken core radiating mana.

Even after over 100 years? I ask, unable to help but feel shocked.

Yes, the thin tall man nods. The Veil required exceptional amounts of mana to start. Three most important facilities were powered by our Absolute, while some of our Champions powered the less important ones.

The notification pops up.

Congratulations. You have completed a side quest. You can now pick one from the offered mid-epic grade items!

Are your Absolute and Champions dead? I ask.

Our Absolute is surely dead. There might be some Champions somewhere, but we dont know.

That's when the Butler returns with a bag full of the items I required. With a nod, I take it from him, unable to take my eyes off the missing section of his mustache.

How about the enemy? Their Absolute and Champions? I ask.

I do not know, and neither do the others.

I turn to my duplicate, What do you think?

He is not lying.

I agree, I nod and turn back to them. What is the Gaiathra doing in the Valley?

We do not know.

What do you know about the tutorial?

The moment I ask that question, their faces become blank. Even more surprisingly, it seems to affect my duplicate slightly. It's just the shortest moment, but I notice him blank out before returning to normal and watching the frozen group in front of us.

Interesting. So asking about the Pairing is fine, but the tutorial is still taboo.

What did you ask? the Gardener questions, slightly confused.

Nothing, anyway, so what happened to this world, I ask a question for the quest that would give me 5 thousand shards, what happened to the Veil?

Three of them turn to the Gardener, who shakes his head. Even the Lord didn't know much. We were in one of his retreats, celebrating the start of the Veil when our connection was cut off. Since then, we haven't received any messages from the court or guilds. The areas we tried to move to were too dangerous constant explosions, immense mana radiation, etc.

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His eyes cloud over, a memory flashing behind them. Then the Veil Guardians, Veilshriekers, and even stronger monsters started hunting every human they could. One after another, Skyhold Bastions and the cities within the Lords territory fell, and people hid in the Sanctuaries we had built long ago. We were attacked as well, and found ourselves fighting a group of Veil Guardians, our Bastion crashed to the ground. We've stayed here ever since. Thankfully, the Veil has turned its attention elsewhere.

Ask him what happened to their boss, my duplicate jumps into the conversation before focusing back on keeping the heart beating.

Someone killed him, the Butler says simply. The day before that happened, the Lord wanted to evict most people from the Bastion as the core was getting weaker and wasn't able to support everyone.

He could supply the mana on his own, couldn't he? I ask.

Our Lord did that for a week and then said it was too annoying a chore and that we should send people away instead. The Housekeeper snorts.

What a guy.

Housekeeper, please avoid talking about the Lord in such a tone, the Butler warns her.

He asked me if it was possible to use people to power the core so he could make the Bastion float again. He said he missed the view. The Armorer adds.

He told me to stop planting plants that made food for everyone and instead asked to turn the garden into a forest where he could read there once in a while. Says the Gardener piling on.

Oh boy, So who killed him? I ask.

We do not know, the Butler says as he shakes his head, but it was probably one of us, Mister Gwyn. He then pauses and adds, He also asked me to reduce the amount of people in the city so he could use the extra water for fountains.

We should go, I tell the clone.

He probably hears my tone and immediately throws the heart at the Housekeeper, and both of us teleport upwards. The defensive mechanism that was about to tear us apart misses, and we appear on top of the city.

Immediately, the barrier starts shrinking, the pressure increasing, and barriers forming around us. My eyes activate, and [Resonance] as well, but when I try to teleport or move, I'm unable to.

Armor forms around my body, and short sharp pulses of mana crash against my barrier while I try to get away.

I slash with the Voidsteel rapier against it, but it passes through, the pressure increasing even more.

Who could know that the systems still had so much energy?

A mana projectile buries itself in my side, piercing through the barrier I've made, and even though it breaks in the process, the remaining piece still pierces me.

Flames flare up around me, filled with disrupting mana, melting the grip their skills had on me while healing me, and for a moment, I pierce through with my domain. I make a short teleport towards my duplicate, and then I once more find myself under their restrictions.

Heh, maybe we were too cocky. It's good we left, fighting four of them while under this much pressure could be dangerous, the duplicate reads my thoughts.

Dangerous, but possible. You could've taken the heart with you. We could learn a thing or two, I complain as our mana flows around us.

It would've died soon, and then it would just be a piece of flesh. That's something for Lily, not us, he snorts.

Our mana surrounds us, working in tandem, our skills working together. [Resonance] activates, powered by both of us this time, and our Mana Wavelength Iris has been activated. Our combined effort tears apart the restrictions that have been placed on us and pushes against the Bastions defenses. My duplicate maintains the opening, while I place an anchor far away.

[Tether] activates, and I teleport us away.

[Tether - lvl 29 > Tether - lvl 30]

[Resonance - lvl 42 > Resonance - lvl 43]

We repeat the process a few more times and stop only when we are far away from the Bastion and there is no one to be seen.

Then, while we are healing our bodies, I empty my Vortex core throwing the store of kinetic energy at my duplicate.

The energy tears a huge chunk out of the forest. I hear the system notify me of the deaths of several monsters that happened to be in the area, stones as big as cars are flung into the distance, trees break under the pressure, and the earth is rent, leaving us standing on the edge of a crater.

Even through all of that, my duplicate is merely pushed back by a few steps. Deep wounds cover his body, blood flows, and a smile appears in the corners of his mouth. His eyes are activated and putting a strain on him. But he endures it all through the skills both of us share.

Then, while looking at me, he asks, For the attempt with the collar?

For the attempt with the collar, I confirm.

Before this floor ends, we will talk, he smiles, the effect of his [Focus] lowering for a moment.

Yes, I confirm.

I can't wait.

POV Aaron Dalton

When I reach Dennis, he is sitting on a stone, an empty expression on his face.

"Dennis," I call to him, and he doesn't answer.

Hes cut off our [Connection], and I can't feel his mind. I can't feel our connection.

"Dennis," I try to say as gently as I can and put my hand on his shoulder. My brother, who is usually so brave and cheerful, looks up at me with tears in his eyes.

"She is dead, Aaron, she died just like that. It's all my fault, I shouldn't..."

I don't let him finish and just hug him, "It will be ok, I'm here."

"It's all my fault," he repeats between sobs, "I'm fucking useless. Trash. I..."

"It's ok," I repeat.

It breaks my heart to see him like this, but I have no choice but to let it happen. Still, I have to keep an eye on our surroundings. Just from reading the floor quest, the 6th floor seems to be dangerous.

"Aaron. You left your disciple. You shouldn't have, you shouldn't"

To that, I grab his shoulder and force him to look at me. "Did you forget our promise?"

"I..."

"Did you?!" I raise my voice.

"I did not," he shakes his head.

"Then tell me, who is the most important?"

"I don't have to say that."

"Tell me!" I scream. My disciple returned to his world, and even though everyone from our group decided to stay behind and wait for our disciples to return, I couldn't. I don't like it, but it was an easy decision.

"You and I are more important, Aaron."

At that, I hug him again. "Yes, you and me, brother. No one else matters as much. Not Kim, not Tess, Maya, or Isabella. You and I are all that matters and we'll take care of each other. Like we always did, it doesn't matter if we're on Earth or in the tutorial."

"You and I."

"Yes, you and I. Together. Now allow me to connect to you before I punch you."

It feels weird seeing him so down, but when we finally connect, I tear through his weak mental defenses and connect to him. His emotions and flashes of his memories flow to me, restoring the connection we've grown so accustomed to.

I feel tears roll from my eyes as I feel what he felt when his disciple died, but I refuse to shy away and I will help him shoulder the burden. I share his feelings, and between us, his pain lessens.

(Together,) I squeeze his shoulder.

(Together,) he repeats, returning to a more normal state as I share in his emotions.

Chapter 310: So much to loot

I stare at the spot where a mana crystal wide as a bus and tall as a skyscraper used to stand and turn to my duplicate. So it disappeared.

Yup, he answers.

It just disappeared while leaving behind traces as if someone had used the skill called [Tether].

Yup, he repeats.

Well, it looks like someone is cooking. Be it for our confrontation or something else. But it's not like I haven't been doing the same, so I can't really complain. On the contrary, I'm curious. Our thought process is very nearly the same, but as our environment affects us, we come up with different methods and think of different skills. Him being on a tight time limit has changed him in ways that are hard for me to imagine.

Well, anyway, I want to resume our attempts to power [Focus] with black mana with our trait active. It could help you too. I say.

We can do that for today. Tomorrow we should go to the bunker under the Sleeping Noodle. My anchor is already weakening.

Yes. I need to deal with some stuff but in one hour?

Okay. He teleports, and I'm left alone looking at the empty spot.

With a snort, I teleport as well, appearing in one of the rooms that seems to have housed someone in a high position. The furniture is gone, and there is nothing of real interest, but I like the colors and the way ornaments light the room when I run mana through them.

I want to pick my reward for the side quest, I say.

Congratulations on completing the side quest! You can now pick one mid-epic item from the offered options.

Silentstep Tunic (Epic):

Crafted from the silk of a mythical spider, the tunic is as durable as it is light. It can easily be concealed under everyday clothing and offers protection against both physical and magical attacks. The tunic's unique fabric absorbs sound, making the wearer's movements silent and hard to detect.

Amulet of Whispering Winds (Epic):

This amulet holds a fragment of the eternal wind within its core. It allows the wearer to communicate with others across vast distances. By whispering into the amulet, the message is carried on the wind, reaching its intended recipient with a whisper only they can hear.

Mirage Bead (Epic):

This bead can be activated to cast an intricate illusion around the user, making them appear as someone else for a few hours. The illusion is complete with visual, auditory, and even tactile elements, making it incredibly difficult to see through, though it is possible with enough skill. After use, the bead turns to sand.

Starfall Pebble (Epic):

A small, unassuming stone that holds a fragment of a fallen star's core. When thrown against a hard surface, it unleashes a devastating explosion of kinetic energy. The pebble is consumed in the process, making it a powerful single-use weapon.

Heart of the Phoenix Emblem (Epic):

Worn directly over the heart, this emblem can be used to bring the wearer back from the brink of death, engulfing them in flames that heal but do not burn. This power can be called upon three times, after which the emblem fades.

Titan's Backbone (Epic):

Inscribed along the spine, this tattoo grants the wearer the indomitable endurance of a titan, enabling them to withstand any attack without faltering. This titanic resilience is available three times.

There are some really nice options. I like the tunic, and it could increase my defenses, but who needs more defenses when I can kill my opponent quicker?

Amulet of Whispering Winds? Why would I want to talk to people?

Mirage Bead is single-use, so the effect is probably capable of deceiving people of an even higher level than me. The twins will probably be capable of that in the future.

Pebble? I can make my own. Probably not as strong, but that's ok.

Then we get to the emblem and tattoo, and I like them both. Having the failsafe of the emblem to bring me back from the brink of death would be reassuring. It could probably restore even my worst wounds and restore limbs.

But!

I like Titan's Backbone a bit more. It's simple. When activated, it should allow me to do whatever I want with black mana. Well, probably up to a limit. I still remember how the black mana orb cracked a high tier epic weapon on the 4th floor. But even that might be fine, even though the tattoo is mid-epic, its uses are limited, so these uses might be stronger than the performance of an upper epic item.

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Its tier could be due to the limited number of uses. Logically, right?

I pick Titan's Backbone.

Then I wait while I feel the burning sensation on my back. As always, when the system does something, I try to observe, but as usual, I'm not capable of doing so. I can't feel any presence doing it. I can't sense where the mana doing it is coming from. It just happens. It's disturbing as always.

The timer says I have four days left until Vega comes back, and so far, she seems to be alive. There have been no notifications saying otherwise.

Stretching a bit and trying to examine the tattoo on my back, I stand up and head towards my duplicate. Mana compressed by [Focus] won't master itself and training with the Duplicate helps me to save weeks, if not months.

There are lines painted on mine and Clonthaniel's foreheads. A few more on our arms. We even made something we call a Focus crown.

It's more akin to wreaths, and one of each sits on our heads. The lovingly named Focus Crown is made of thin, wire-like threads of conductive metals we melted and covered in mana stones.

Being as ugly as it is, we don't mention it too often, but we've put a lot of effort into the inscriptions, each one designed to lessen the aftereffects of using black mana to power our [Focus]. Unfortunately, the "crowns" are upper rare at most, we are still unable to create epic items from scratch.

Our mana is topped up, our Vortex Cores are full. The thermokinetic heart is strong and ready. I have a voidsteel slicer on my waist as well as the voidsteel rapier the Housekeeper gifted to me. Meanwhile, Clonthaniel only has a voidsteel slicer, such a loser.

Neither of us is wearing any armor. I still haven't gotten used to wearing armor even after I've had opportunities to try good armor. I just don't like the feeling of restriction it gives me, and it doesn't feel as versatile as my skills. That might be the reason I get hurt so often, but that's something to think about another day.

No words are needed, and once my duplicate puts his hand on my shoulder, I let his [Tether] take us to the anchor while leaving multiple anchors behind.

We appear in darkness, but neither of us creates light. Instead defensive skills activate, and [Perception] scans the area.

There is no imminent danger, so both of us form a thermal orb that starts letting out gentle golden light and floats higher, illuminating the cave we find ourselves in.

Drawing our weapons, we follow the only available path, a tunnel leading downward. As things tend to be in these places, it is extremely quiet, and the only thing we hear is the sound of our own steps. The air is stale, and the walls are wet, with drops of water falling to the floor.

We do not rush, maintaining a normal walking speed, while enjoying the tension in the air.

As we go deeper, we pass through an iron door. Of the same type as the one leading to the bunker, we are currently staying in. The door that was impossible for me to move or open. Yet there they are, mangled, crumpled, and torn apart in places. Thermal orbs light them, creating shadows that make them look even more ominous.

The tunnels we pass through slowly become wider, the rock replaced by walls made of smooth stone and iron. But even these are damaged. Craters cover the walls, melted debris is scattered about, and there are gaping holes in places with extremely smooth edges. There's all sorts of damage all over the place.

I change the setting on my Regulator and devote more of my mana to strengthening my body through Reinforcement.

Soon, the mana density starts increasing. The Valley is already full of extremely dense mana that were constantly having to defend against. Less powerful individuals even die there just from that. Even so, it increases even more and forces me to strengthen my Mantle and give more of my attention to the [Resonance] I'm using to deal with it.

The further we go, the more damaged the tunnels are. Fallen pieces of ceiling, torn off in uneven chunks. An entire side of the wall melted into a heap of cooled slag.

And the pressure increases even further.

Then we find the first corpse. It's extremely well-preserved. Either it's fresh or more likely it was someone with a body powerful enough to look like that even after being dead for a hundred or so years.

We spend a bit of time examining it. We look at broken equipment, search pockets, and try to find a wound. But we cant find anything. The man died just like that, without any outward or internal signs we could find as to why.

In the end, I touch it and send it back to the bunker through [Tether].

A minute later, we find more corpses grouped together. This time they all show signs of the passage of time, but their clothes seem new. Each of the men and women is wearing beautiful robes covered in dozens of mana stones. Some of the mana stones are as small as my pinkie nail, woven into clothes, creating a series of defensive fields. Others are larger, set in necklaces, bracelets, and earrings.

Each one is densely inscribed and has some function, some of which I cant quite understand.

One of the corpses, a woman, is wearing a bracelet with a big mana stone that seems to be something like a key. After a short discussion, we cut off the arm with the bracelet just in case the key needs DNA to activate, like when the orbit base on the 4th floor would only respond to Myrra. Then we send all the corpses and items away through [Tether].

As the pressure keeps increasing, we are forced to combine our forces to create a field around us. We walk close to each other, Mana Wavelength Iris activating once in a while just for a fraction of a second. The ever-present mana makes our abuse of our eyes extremely painful even with our preparations.

The world I see with my trait is packed to the brim with mana that hangs like mist flowing in waves all around us, resonating with each other and reflecting off the walls. Tiny particles permeate the air, falling like snow and swirling in places as if they were caught in a vortex.

Finally, more rooms start appearing, each of them has a door and most of them seem to have been labeled with markings that likely describe their use. Some of them even have panels that seem to be security interfaces. We examine a few of them, and it takes us a while to figure out how to use the key bracelet with the arm we cut off. The woman seems to have been pretty high up given her level of access.

Even after a hundred years or more, the doors still move smoothly and quietly, barely making a hiss as air equalizes between the rooms.

There are facilities, but most of them seem to be in a perfectly operational state. For example, there's an enchanting facility better than anything I've seen up till now. Full of tools and materials. Conductive metals like arcanadium, ingots of endurium, compressed pieces of voidsteel, and many more I can't even identify a purpose for.

The enchanting facility is also full of half-finished items. Swords imbued with mana stones waiting to be inscribed. Spears made of endurium waiting to be sharpened through some mysterious process. Robes on tables with tens of mana stones ready to be conjoined in a working web of inscriptions. A crown made of a mysterious metal waiting for mana stones to be placed in its settings.

Dozens of items, most of them of upper rare rarity even in their unfinished state.

The system shop is willing to pay more for items we craft by ourselves. When you buy an item from the system shop and sell it back, you get 50%. If you get an item from the floor and sell it to the system, you get 10-20% of its value. But if you craft an item from materials you gathered on that floor, you get 50% of the item's value.

Looking at the sheer amount of items and materials, some of them have the potential to be made into epic-grade items, I can only imagine how many shards I should be capable of hoarding after using all of this. And this is only the start. The first good facility we've found and there are probably quite a few more, judging by the sheer size of the place.

So this is one of the Enchanters Guilds bunkers, one of the places they used to instate the Veil, and with a core that could only have been recharged by one of the Champions, it seems even they were willing to work for the Enchanter Guild.

We send some items and materials back to the bunker we came from and then place multiple anchors within.

Even in the short time we've spent here, I can feel my body's reserves dwindling, and I have already dipped into my mana reservoir. It's shocking how much I need to use to hold off the pressure and how much mana it costs even with my stats.

We have to return as soon as possible, my duplicate says.

And I can't help but agree as we teleport away to recharge our mana before we come back.

There is so much to explore and loot.