

Tutorial 311

Chapter 311: Do you think he is alive?

Back in our bunker, Clonthaniel immediately takes some of the inscribed mana stones and starts examining them. The pressure here is much lower than it was in the bunker we left, and it feels like a ton of weight was lifted from our shoulders; only now do I realize how taxing it was.

I take a moment to check the anchor I left behind there, and it seems to be holding up, though it is dissolving quicker than the usual anchors. Even then, we have plenty of time before it will disappear.

"We have about three days before Vega returns; after that, its going to be more difficult to go back," I say to my duplicate.

"Speak for yourself. I like Vega and all, but I currently have more urgent issues to attend to, so I will continue to explore the place. You can babysit our cute minion."

"Too bad you won't get that deep without both of us working together. You won't even be able to reach the enchanting facility."

That makes him pause. "I will inscribe some mana stones to help with that."

"Sure."

"Fuck. Okay, we have three days, so let's hurry. We don't have to sleep for a few days, and it should be plenty of time to explore the place. We can also send anything useful back here and continue."

"Sounds good," I reply before opening the Beyond community while I examine one of the mysterious ingots we recovered.

Noname - Gareth, you wanted to speak to me.

It only takes about thirty minutes for him to notice my message. Like the others from Hell difficulty hes grown accustomed to checking as often as possible, for one second at a time.

Gareth -Thanks for finding time for me, my friend. I should have a few minutes before my disciple runs into danger again. You probably heard about the deaths of two of our members.

Noname - Yes. Did you change your mind regarding your approach?

Gareth -I know you and I are of different minds when it comes to things like this, but I respect your opinion and even Savant's. And no, I haven't changed my mind, and neither has anyone else from WhiteWing. What happened was unfortunate, but every one of us did our best.

Noname -So what did you want to talk about?

This time it takes a minute for him to answer.

Gareth - You would probably prefer that I be direct, so I will. I hope for your cooperation during the tournament. I tried to say more, but the system blocked the messages.

Noname - can't promise anything without knowing more.

Gareth -I understand that, my friend. I just want you to think about it. In the end, it's not just the tutorial we have to deal with. We also need to think about what comes after, and some things are better dealt with as soon as possible.

Noname - I usually let Sset deal with that stuff, you can talk to her.

Nice try, evil man pretending to be a paragon of justice. Trying to get me to deal with people more than absolutely necessary? Not today.

Grumpy -Noname! My disciple loves being called a minion.

Noname -

Grumpy - Will do! By the way, why does number 1 in Beyond never talk? >_

Noname -Probably going for the mysterious stranger aesthetic. Anyway, I'm going to check other Communities, so later.

I disconnect and check on my duplicate. As before, he sits nearby and continues to examine the mana stones in the robe. I also notice that he pokes some of the corpses with a sword made of mana, probably trying to find out how much power remains in their bodies.

"Hows it coming?" I ask, out of curiosity, as I rise.

He looks at me, then back to the man with the perfectly preserved body. "This guy is something else. I can barely pierce his skin, and the sword gets stuck in his muscles."

I watch as Duplicaniel uses [Resonance] to strengthen the blade of mana. Then, in a show of force, he stabs it into the leg of the corpse. The blade pierces the skin and then stops as if he had hit a rock.

Oh my, isn't that interesting?

"I don't think the guy was a Champion, so maybe hes somewhere in the ballpark of a danger noodle?"

"That's what I would like to know. It could be someone with a level around 300, with a significant investment in constitution. That or he had some kind of defensive trait," he answers, taking another stab at the corpse.

"Tried voidsteel?"

"Same result," he says. "How the hell did someone like that die?"

"Food allergy?"

"Or he bit his tongue. Unfortunately, the dude doesn't have anything that would help us identify him. No mana stones, no keys matching the others we found. Even the items are all broken, to the point its hard to say what they even were. Yet his body isn't damaged at all."

"I don't think someone like that would die from the mana pressure down there."

"I agree. It just pisses me off not knowing."

The duplicate complains and annoys me for the same reason. I'm just that curious. Who was this man, what level was he, and what happened to him? I find all these questions to be fascinating.

I let my uglier self play and open the Community once more.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Channeler?

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Asshole!

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Hello to you, buddy!

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

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Asshole!

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Sorry, I miss you too!

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

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Oh, you mean the Sanctuary? Yeah, I hope you didn't eat anything.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Good boy! I got some deer jerky to share with you when I get back!

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Food.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) - The hell, Noname, what are you doing to our chat and how can you understand anything Biscuit says?

Maria (Easy, AFK) - I don't mind! Biscuit is cute! I totally want to see him in the tournament. I just hope the others will go easy on him. I don't want him to get hurt.

I remember the purple mana bomb I saw Biscuit create when they fought the Fallen Hero.

Sure, let's worry about our future Absolute.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -How is your mana, Channeler?

Out of the Easy difficulty, he seems to be the only reasonable one.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) -It's difficult! The techniques you told me about are way too hard, Noname!

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Just keep trying.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) - I will, but what the hell is wrong with you? It's impossible to keep this up all the time.

Sami (Easy, AFK) -You don't have to listen to that guy. I bet he lies to look stronger. He said most of his skills are over level 30, but that's impossible. He must be bullshitting.

I check my skills.

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 46

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 46

Perception - Lvl 41

Redistribution - Lvl 43

Resonance - Lvl 43

Mana Domain - Lvl 34

Tether - Lvl 30

Regalia - Lvl 19

Infusion - Lvl 25

I just make sure to remember the guy's name. I think he said something like that before. Then, after giving a few pieces of advice to my guinea pig Channeler, I close the window.

My duplicate is looking at the corpse of the man we were unable to damage.

He seems to be thinking the same thing as me, "Do you think he is alive or can be brought back?" he asks.

That suspicion has only grown in me since we brought him here, and its been on my mind while Ive been chatting with the others. Is it possible for someone of that level to pull that off? Turning off his heart while relying on the strength of his body to keep him alive without rotting away? Perhaps theres something were missing.

I think it is, and that's what worries me.

"Let's send him away," I recommend.

My duplicate is already heading towards the body and puts his hand on the man. I can feel him activating [Tether].

The body doesn't move.

"Well fuck," the duplicate uses more mana, and when I reach him, I resonate with his skill and supply it with more power.

The body doesn't move.

"Well fuck," I say, and a barely noticeable heartbeat emanates from the man, as his bodys natural barrier reasserts itself making it surprisingly difficult to teleport him.

Both of us get the same idea and quickly get null collars. The one I got from the man under the Sanctuary and the one my duplicate found in the Bastion.

"Just in case?" I ask.

The duplicate nods, and we place both of the collars around the man's neck.

His heart beats again, and I see inscriptions power up, the effect of the collar activates. Then a text flickers into existence over his head.

[Forged Fury - lvl ???]

The small wounds we caused while trying to damage him close in a blink, and through kinetic energy, I can feel the powerful beats of his heart.

Two silver collars around his neck light up even more, allowing him to keep his constitution while lowering his other attributes, and then the man opens his eyes.

He moves his brown hair from his face, and his strikingly blue eyes calmly look at me and then at my duplicate, and then he turns back to me. I immediately realize that he somehow identified that my duplicate is well, a duplicate.

Without saying a word, he stands up in a single smooth movement and dusts off his eyes. The collars around his neck shine even more, but the man doesn't seem to be bothered at all. He stretches slightly and calmly looks around, ignoring my duplicate and me holding our weapons, our mana ready.

"Take it off," he asks simply, pointing to the collars, his voice dismissing the idea that we might refuse.

Is he bluffing? Seeing his level, he should be between 300 to 450, so he's not a Champion and he's far from being an Absolute. The collars are only epic grade, so I would be surprised if they could hold him much longer than a few hours.

If he is level 300, it could be possible for me to fight him if I surprise him, hell, maybe even a bit higher if I work with my duplicate.

But then there is that thought in the back of my mind. The man is wearing clothes unlike the luxurious robes of the others we found. His clothes are made of durable materials but they're simple and focused on functionality. Craftsman's clothes. There were no weapons among the damaged equipment he did hold.

And then there is his class name.

Without further hesitation, I take a step and, touching the Null Collars, I unlock them one after the other. The entire time the slightly taller man stares at me with his pale blue eyes.

When the collars are gone, his fist moves, and he punches my face. Even though I'm expecting the attack, I'm incapable of dodging it. The blow doesn't seem to have been very strong, and I only need to take a half step back.

"That's for the collars," the man says. "The next time"

Mana rushes through my body, entirely focused on strengthening it, and then I punch the man in return.

He also staggers backward, a flash of surprise appearing on his confident face.

As he opens his mouth to say something, I punch him again, and he staggers a half step back.

My mana radiates from my body, and I'm ready to fight or disappear at any moment, yet the man doesn't seem to be threatening us. Our eyes meet, and he just nods shortly. Then he turns around, passes by my duplicate, and heads deeper into the bunker.

Me and Notnathaniel exchange glances and follow the man.

He walks confidently even without light and without hesitation finds the control room where he approaches the central panel.

As I have many times before, he sends a bit of his mana into it and looks at it for a moment. To my surprise, he does something, and a pillar as thick as my arm slides out from the floor next to his leg. On top of that pillar sets a perfectly round mana crystal. The Forged Fury touches it and sends just a bit of mana into it before it slides back onto the floor, and he returns to the control panel.

Right after, the room lights up in a way I and my duplicate were unable to pull off no matter how much mana we ran through the core. Well, before the duplicate stole it or something.

Nearby one of the walls cracks, a crack forms into the perfect shape of a door. The cracked section of stone topples, likely weighing a ton or more.

And the man heads inside as if he owns the place.

Chapter 312: Veil Ignition Station

As it turns out, the hidden section contains a massive number of shelves, packed full of items. There are dozens, no, hundreds of mana stones. There are big crates full of food. A massive tank containing water. There are rooms with beds and utility rooms.

Clothes, weapons, armor, the supplies here would make it possible to survive for years without ever needing to leave. But these rooms are empty, everything perfectly preserved and untouched.

Then there is another panel and a mana crystal two times my height, which is likely a reserve core.

The man once again channels his mana through it, and I observe as he does. His reserves do not seem to be that big. He is moving it skillfully too, but it feels different from the way I do it. It's hard to describe.

"So 99 years have passed," he mumbles and then turns back to us, "You, how old are you?"

"Were from after the war, 22," Clonthaniel answers instead.

The man glances at him. "I asked the original, not the duplicate," he says simply and turns his gaze to me, "What even went through your mind to use one of the duplicating items that way? They were never intended for use on living beings."

He doesn't even wait for the answer and continues examining the core that seems to have some information stored in it.

"So that's how it is..."

After a few minutes, he takes a step away from the crystal, and it loses its light, "I need to know what you found in the Veil Ignition Station number five where I was."

The way he asks sounds like he is expecting an answer, like someone accustomed to authority.

"Nope," both me and my duplicate say at once.

"I see." Not saying more, he walks towards us, then instead of attacking, he passes by and, after taking a few steps, exits the hidden room.

He fires off a strange form of scan, and then he heads towards the room we used to store the items we got from the bunker he referred to as The Veil Ignition station.

Like two kids, we follow and observe what he does while questions run through my mind.

The man takes a few ingots of metal and other stuff we got from the bunker and heads to a different room. He doesn't seem to mind us following him and ignores us as he finds the facility that we identified as a forge. There is a house-sized forge with multiple openings. It looks too simple, though I did learn some time ago that its more of a shell for the more complex components inside.

Blowers, openings for fuel, leads for molten metal, and much more.

The man sends his senses through it again and activates one of the crystals, before throwing it into one of the openings, and with that done, manipulates the panel. It's broken, and the man examines and then ignores it.

Rolling his sleeves up to his elbows, he touches some sort of emblem on the inside of his forearms, and the heat starts radiating from him in waves. It crashes into the room, melting the surface of the tables, and when it reaches us, we absorb it as thermal energy which we store in our Vortex Core.

Right after, he redirects all of the heat he's generated through an opening in the forge and concentrates it within. As the massive forge heats up, inscriptions light up across its surface, surprisingly some of the blowers even seem to be working as they distribute the heat along the underside of the apparatus.

With our eyes, we can watch as the heat is concentrated even further, and the man positions a table in the area and does something to keep it from melting. Then he throws some metals on the surface where they melt almost immediately.

Without worry, he steps closer, his powerful body ignoring the heat, and begins to shape the metal with his mana while adding components to create some sort of alloy.

Do you remember that movie where they kidnapped the dude and kept him in a cave, while he built an iron suit and escaped while fighting off his kidnappers? the duplicate asks. Do you think that's his plan? Are we going to let him?

Do you want to stop him?

Not really, the stuff he's doing is cool as heck, especially the way he uses his mana. It seems to work better than using those clunky arms .

I tried my best back then, okay? And they still ended up being rare. So, blacksmith?

Probably? Maybe he just has a powerful body and a non-combat class. Maybe that's why he hasn't attacked us.

Activating our trait once in a while, we watch and learn from the man. It takes a few hours that we could've used to train, but neither of us bothers to leave. The things we're seeing now are fascinating and should be useful in the future.

When it's done, the man touches emblems on his forearms again, and the heat dies off. What fascinates me is that the emblems used his mana and something else to create heat. But the man's mana reserves aren't that big, and he shouldn't be capable of keeping them up for so long.

Taking a few steps, he stops in front of me and offers me red-hot items hes holding in his hands without care.

In exchange for your help and answers, he says simply.

Mana Radiation Absorption Rods (epic): Long, slender rods that can be placed around areas of high mana radiation to absorb and contain it. They reduce overall levels and make the area safer for short-term exposure.

Quickly, I take the three rods from his hands, absorbing the heat so they do not burn me. Ask away.

The same question as before.

We wanted to have a look at the place you called The Veil Ignition Station, all we knew was that it was one of the stations they used to create the Veil. There we found a number of corpses, some of them were wearing robes covered in dozens of inscriptions and mana stones. We found you as well. At first, we thought you were dead, so we brought you here to examine. Then you woke up, I answer.

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How does it look out there?

From what we found, the second Pairing happened and you guys fought the other planet for twenty years. Then, around a hundred years ago, the Enchanters Guild created a Veil that was supposed to encompass the entire planet and defend the cities. It was supposed to defend against invaders. Something went wrong, the Veil turned against you and killed the majority of humans, then before it finished, it started fighting the invaders. Your Absolute is probably dead as are the Champions unless they happen to be hiding somewhere. People outside rarely seem to reach level 200, probably because The Veils defensive mechanism seems to hunt them. Most of the survivors live in bunkers from before the war or in remnants like the Bastions. Most of them know very little regarding the war.

I pause after a long answer and then look at him, That's what you get for the rods.

Quite expensive.

I nod in agreement.

You can ask me something. He gestures.

Oh. I like it.

What are the emblems on your forearms?

For the first time, he smiles ever so slightly. What a thing to ask out of so many possible questions. They are emblems created and gifted to me by our Absolute. What is the Enchanter Guild doing?

We have no information on that. What I just told you is most of what we know.

So the Veil Ignition Station still has a broken core and mana radiation makes it difficult to reach the central components? He asks.

Yes, we were only able to stay there for so long. Is it dangerous even to you? Don't you have a powerful body?

"As if something like that would help against radiation caused by that grade of broken core. Champion Niall spent weeks filling it with her dynamic mana."

How did you survive? I ask my question.

A single-use defensive emblem from the Absolute, he says.

How many emblems did you even get from that Absolute? the duplicate asks.

A few, the man answers. Bring me the null collars you used before, I will smelt them into items to help with the mana radiation, then we can head back to the station. Not even waiting for an answer he heads away.

It was always our plan to return, but when he says it that way I kind of want to refuse just to piss him off, the duplicate sighs.

But the man doesn't hear him, already activating the emblems he was gifted by his Absolute and heating up the forge.

The decision wasn't that difficult, and we handed over both of the null collars. In exchange, he created three simple epic pendants meant to take in some of the ambient mana radiation and redirect it.

What's interesting is that the man rarely uses inscriptions, he doesn't bother unless he has to. Most of the effects of the items he creates are a product of the combination of materials in his alloys.

Is it possible that he isn't that good of an enchanter? Enchanting requires a specialized set of skills, so it's possible that he is not. As for me, I'm quite lucky that most of the ways that I go about controlling mana also allow me to create inscriptions.

In preparation for our return to the Veil Ignition Station, the man collects a few more of the items we recovered. He takes what he needs, and seeing the corpses in beautiful robes we brought back, he turns to us, waiting.

My duplicate and I exchange a look, having the same thought. We could leave him here and go by ourselves. We have rods, pendants, and even our skills. But at the same time, the man seems useful, even though he's not very talkative and seems to expect obedience and respect.

I make a final decision, and he reduces his natural defenses, as I place my hand on his shoulder and teleport us to the station. The duplicate follows, reappearing between us.

The man looks at us and then at the severed arm and the bracelet I'm holding. His expression betrays that the arm belonged to someone he used to know. Yet he doesn't show much in the way of emotion

and takes a few steps, stabbing two of the epic rods in the direction of the source of the mana radiation and a third on the opposite side.

Almost immediately, the mana radiation lessens, and his weird senses reach out into the area.

The radiation is even worse than I thought, he says simply. Then he takes a few pieces of metal and ingots and heads towards the corner of the room and the small forge.

Emblems on his forearms activate, and he starts working again. Looking at the way he works, hes probably making more rods to absorb the Mana Radiation.

My duplicate is already at work as well, grabbing some of the more valuable mana stones and doing whatever he does lately.

I, meanwhile, grab a few upper-rare spears made of white metal. The spears are complete, beautifully crafted, sharpened, and ready for use. The only thing missing is the empty mana stones imbued near the blades. All of the weapons are ready for inscriptions. There are even circuits made of conductive metals leading from the mana stone through the weapon.

Surrounding one of the spears with my [Mana Domain], I activate [Infusion] and then use [Mana Manipulation] and [Resonance], all while under the influence of [Focus].

I work on creating the best item possible for me given that I lack the skill to do this kind of thing on my own, but what I can do is create inscriptions, enchantments, or whatever the official term happens to be. I'm good at that, and a lot of my skills help me with that.

I could use my eyes for a better result, but not here. It would be too much surrounded by all this mana radiation.

So, I get to work, and time starts passing while I work. Nearly immediately, I lose two of the weapons to my mistakes, and then three more. But I do not stop and do not hesitate. If someone saw me using upper rare weapons as fodder, they would be mad, but they are just things to me. Useful items, yes, but never worth more than my life or too important to be sacrificed.

The items can be separated from me, they can be destroyed, they can be stolen. My personal power, and the knowledge I gain, will stay with me no matter what.

So, I waste even more of them, even getting a look from the man, but I ignore him and continue in my experiment. And then, after hours, my effort is rewarded, and I create the first epic item.

It's not entirely my creation, but I can say that I did a part of the work. A big part.

That makes me happy, even if it is only low epic.

Kinetic Pulse Spear (epic):A spear that accumulates kinetic energy and magnifies the force behind each strike. Movements and thrusts charge the spear, allowing the wielder to release highly concentrated kinetic blasts.

I want to sell it, I say immediately.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 1900 shards?

Kinetic Pulse Spear (epic)

Yes/No

I confirm and then check my shards.

Shards:13,792

Two some odd days until Vega comes back, and then two weeks until the end of the floor. I wonder how much I will make.

Chapter 313: A Newcomer's Welcome

You spend half a day ruining a dozen perfectly prepared items and you crafted that? the weird three-question mark man says, looking over my shoulder, several rods in his arms.

It came out pretty good, I say in my defense.

The look he gives me tells me he probably doesn't agree, and then he asks, Did you send the weapon away through your skill? It felt different this time.

I just shrug. There is no sense in explaining; the system will censor it all and make the man go blank.

So what is your plan? I ask him.

Seeing that I don't intend to answer, he doesn't push. First, we proceed to my workshop where I can make some better items. Then we will head towards the control room.

Not to the core? I ask.

Not unless you have a death wish.

Then, before I can answer, he places three more rods and turns to me once the mana radiation lessens further. He hands me one of the unused spears near me, Do it again.

I decide to play along and do just that. My skills activate, and I start over again.

Then I feel a slap on the back of my head. My body is strengthened, my mana regulator turning a big part of my mana pool into reinforcement, yet it still makes me flinch.

Before I punch the man, he says, Try it again, and don't be in such a rush to change the item. Examine the pre-prepared pathways and feel the intent of the person that created that spear.

He just snorts as he watches me glare at him, You can try to punch me later if you want to. So?

Instead of fighting, I send my senses through the item and get to examining it.

The item you hold is something someone spent hours to create. They spent their mana to do so. They thought about how they wanted this item to look. The materials, rare or not, were carefully picked and smelted in an effort to realize their fullest potential. For all of that to happen, they had to study lifetimes of research authored by our predecessors and distributed by our teachers, a lot of people had to search for the materials, and a place had to be created to make it all happen. He continues to observe my attempts. So the least you can do is to pay a little bit of respect to the item in your hands, no matter how minuscule it might look to you.

I dont agree, I say, pausing my work on the item.

Explain, he asks me with interest.

Items arent important. It doesnt matter if theyre epic, rare, arcane, or something higher. Sure, its fine to use them, to hold them, or even be in awe of them. Maybe theyre useful, or maybe you learn something from them, but thats it. You cant rely on them too much or theyll slow your growth. You cant tiptoe around them, worried about damaging them because someone put effort into creating them.

Thats a very cynical way to look at it, but it also says a lot about you.

Sure. I send my senses through the unfinished spear and examine it. You told me to think about the intent of the creator of this weapon. But all I can see are useless pathways. The spear is pre-prepared so it constantly pulls bits of the users mana to sharpen the blade. Sending more should cause it to extend and become even sharper.

My skills activate, and I scratch some of the prepared pathways, change others, and straight up block some more. Like this, the finished item would become low epic at most and prioritize ease of use and reducing wear.

The pathways I inscribe are much uglier, harsher, and more direct. They use more mana and require more from the user.

I turn to the man, It's an item prepared to be pampered. A spear used by someone who prefers ease of use and looks over functionality. Someone who rarely bothers with combat. It's a toy, not a weapon.

The inscriptions I create are more taxing to use but they allow more mana through. They allow the item to take damage over time. It's like removing fail-safes, even at the cost of the weapons lifespan.

I don't do it this way to improve the items rarity and price in a shop. No, I would do it this way even if I intended to use it or to give it to someone else.

Weapons are tools.

I pause for a while and turn to the man again. He returns my gaze and then nods. It's not in agreement but in understanding. Then he turns back, and I continue what I'm doing.

Multiple hours later when the weapon is ready, I sell it, gaining 2,200 more shards. Right after, my duplicate and I send a few more items to the bunker and wait for the man to finish his work before moving deeper into the station.

Meanwhile, our round of the tutorial has gained a new Beyond explorer.

Beyond 6/10 > Beyond 7/10

Gareth - woah, a new one has joined us, hello friend!

Tacita -(:-_-)

Great, another troll.

Gareth - hello, Tacita, I'm Gareth, and I hope we get along!

Tacita -()

Grumpy - () !!!

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Tacita -()

Grumpy -

Tacita - ()

After that, the messages end, and Im left wondering what the hell just happened.

The used-to-be-dead man finally finishes his work and puts a chestplate on. The metal is still red-hot, but he ignores the heat, and it doesn't even touch his clothes. Once again, I notice a distinct lack of enchantments.

Then he hands us a few more rods, and we grab the ones we placed and head deeper into the bunker, following the man.

Maybe we should at least ask him for his name, I tell my duplicate.

We can call him Bob.

That's what we called the arcane archer from the 4th floor. Maybe Dave?

Dave sounds good. Are your anchors still on his skin?

I nod, Two of them. I don't think I would be able to teleport him, but I could slow him down, and we could run. Other than his high constitution, he doesn't seem that strong. Maybe he is just the Absolute's personal blacksmith or something.

Duplicate agrees, At least two emblems from the Absolute, and the way he talks. Dave probably used to be an important person. He kind of reminds me of Cael.

I think all craftsmen are like that. I cut off when Dave stops and places the iron rods in the hallway and one on the opposite side.

Then he turns to one of the doors and channels his mana into a mana stone set just over the frame.

Nothing happens, so he repeats it again and again.

He seems surprised, so he examines them and then, with a sigh, turns to me. Please give me my wife's arm and bracelet, he says.

It takes a moment for me to realize what he means by that, and I look at the severed arm we were using for unlocking the door and then at the man.

He shows no emotion, and when I hand him the arm, he takes it, and a moment later, the door opens.

He returns the arm without me asking, and enters the room, places the rods, then while my duplicate and I examine his workshop, he heads to a mana crystal in the corner of the room.

The room is massive, even bigger than the enchanting facility we came from. But this workshop is an unorganized mess. There are tons of materials scattered about, dried-up trees, suits of armor three times my size, chunks of stone as big as cars, and mana crystals.

There is no system, that I understand, to it, but at the same time, it feels cozier than the organized layout of the other facility.

You two, come here, he gestures to us, and after exchanging looks, both of us head to him.

He points at the pillar made of mana crystal, Can you activate it? It should be connected to the core. The core is leaking and thats whats causing the current mana levels, but this crystal should still be getting some mana.

I don't bother asking him why he doesn't do it himself and only slightly examine it, but I don't find anything. So while my duplicate keeps watch, I delve deeper, using my skills to examine it and finally recognize the problem.

It's physically cut off from the core and the system of this station. Probably some kind of manually initiated failsafe or something, I explain.

He sighs as if he had expected but hoped to avoid, and then examines the rods we are using, We have an hour or two before these rods become useless, and then a similar amount of time before the amulets fail. You can grab whatever you want, and I will point out some things I need you to move to the place you call the bunker.

Isn't that your workshop? Why would you give us these things? the duplicate asks.

Just do what I said. The man weve decided to call Dave then ignores us and starts creating a pile of items he wants to bring with him.

As if planned, we step out of his workshop towards the rods he placed. As he said, they seem to be weakening, and a quick examination reveals some sort of corrosion on them.

Our [Mana Domain] activates, along with [Resonance] as we use [Infusion] to make the process even more seamless.

Then we take a step and pass by the rods.

Immediately, the pressure assaults us. It feels as if the mana crashes against us in a series of rhythmic waves, attempting to pass through our domain and Mantle.

It's incredible.

Even after a hundred years, the core of this Veil Ignition Station is still releasing so much mana. A core filled by Champion Niall, as Dave said.

Leaving anchors behind the rods, we take a few more steps, making sure the amulets the man gave us don't interfere, all in order to test our skills.

It all feels a bit like [Dawn], the skill Champion Tristan, used while being manipulated by the Mind Mage emperor, at the end of the second floor. A skill powered by The Sword of Aeons, the greatest mana battery in that world. And with that, he alone wiped out nearly all of humanity on his planet.

[Mana Domain - lvl 34 > Mana Domain - lvl 35]

[Infusion - lvl 24 > Infusion - lvl 25]

Then, after giving our all for a moment we find ourselves pushed back behind the rods.

Returning back to the workshop, he welcomes us, and his weird senses examine our activated skills.

So, you even have a Domain-class skill, he notes and then points at the pile. With the help of this, I can prepare something better so we can head deeper.

What is a Domain-class skill? I ask, ignoring his items. When he gives me the look, I add, We will move your things if you answer.

Dave almost seems like he wants to ask something but decides against it, I keep forgetting how little you know. Within the many classes of skills, there are domain-type skills. If mastered properly, they can be some of the most terrifying. For learning more, find yourselves a disciple, candidate, or Champion. Now move these.

He doesn't say anything else and looks in the direction of the core of the station.

After that, we take our time, we examine the place, and move items until our mana takes a big hit. We also head back and examine some of the rooms that are further from the core. There, we find more corpses, even corpses of the monsters my Duplicate sent through to find out if the Gaiathra would notice them. The monsters are as dead as the humans we find.

The man seems to recognize some of human and when he kneels down in front of the corpse of a little girl, we leave him alone.

Soon, we feel heat fill the tunnels as he activates his emblems, and when he rejoins us, nothing remains of the bodies.

We return to the bastion, and I hand him the severed arm and bracelet.

He stares at it for a moment. I just wait patiently until he grabs it. After taking off the bracelet, he heads to the pile where we put other corpses, ready to examine them.

My clone and I leave to do our stuff, and soon flames light the tunnels of the Bunker as well.

Chapter 314: The Minion's Return

Just a bit over two days have passed, and I am sitting in the branches of one of the bigger trees surrounding the bunker.

At this point the monsters almost seem to avoid me, the place seems to have been recognized as my territory after my short expeditions to level up. I have to go further and further to hunt now, but I make the effort every once in a while.

Over the past two days, I've been working with a few of the higher tier unfinished items, converting them into epics. Leaving me 5,600 shards richer after selling them to the shop. Then I sold piles of materials, mana stones, and some of the weird robes. Anything I had in excess or lacked a use for.

That alone has gained me another 3,800 shards. And that's us going through the Veil Ignition Station twice given that we haven't gone back since we returned, supposedly Dave is still preparing some important stuff.

My current number of shards is 25,392. The cheapest arcane items start at 100,000 and the cheapest arcane passives aren't available for less than 200,000, it seems so expensive. Gaining either of them on this floor seems like it will be impossible.

So what am I doing out here?

Waiting for my minion, obviously.

Why outside?

I want to get to her before my Duplicate can turn her against me. We can't have that, and I'm sure he would try.

I escaped while he was watching Dave like a hawk. My duplicate doesn't have the benefit of a counter, he doesn't have access to the quest interface, system shop, or any other system functions. So he can only estimate when she will return, and I did my best to confuse him. I even left an orb in the Bunker to imitate my mana signature while I escaped in secret.

Congratulations! Your disciple will now return to the 5th floor! Bear in mind that you have to keep your disciple alive for two weeks longer. The environment on the 5th floor will become much more dangerous during that time!

And here she is.

Vega carefully emerges from an invisible portal. There she is, just beneath the tree I'm sitting in.

Just then, her senses pulse into the area like sonar, and her heartbeat accelerates as her skills activate. She envelopes her dagger in pale blue mana and lowers her stance. I don't even bother trying to hide as her senses touch me. She lifts her face, and her ruby-like eyes meet mine from below.

A giant smile blooms on her face, Master! she shouts.

You have stopped scanning your area. That's a day of me calling you minion, and you can't complain.

It's hard to describe the relief I feel. And seeing someone be so happy just to see me is still weird. I land beside only for my tiny minion to immediately hug me.

It's fine! Master can call me minion! she embraces me with the full force her small frame can manage.

I lift her into my arms where she rests against my chest, listening to my heart.

Im glad to see you well, Vega, I say, pulling her closer, and she nods with a smile.

Then I feel the orb down in the bunker disappear and someone trying to reconnect to the anchor I used to get here. But that person finds themselves unable to do so as I expected that and removed the connection with black mana.

Okay, minion, now listen, this is serious, I say. setting her on the ground and kneeling in front of her, There is a guy that looks like me and acts like me. But that person cannot be trusted no matter what!

Looks like master? Vega asks.

In the distance, I feel an explosion of kinetic energy, and a figure lifts high into the air. Quickly followed by waves of mana scanning the area for us, but my pre-prepared barrier activates, and I hide us for a bit longer.

Yes, but you have only one master, right? You wouldn't turn against me?

I would not!

Good disciple, I caress her hair and poke her cute pointy horn. He probably isn't a bad guy and won't hurt you, but don't get tricked, okay? It's a test.

A test from master, her eyes wide., Ill do my best!

Right after that, my duplicate descends on us, absorbing the kinetic energy of his landing without causing any shockwaves. You asshole! You are trying to turn my precious Vega against me! he immediately complains.

My minion, wary, starts flicking her eyes between me and him. T-two of them, she mumbles.

Vega, come to your master. I want a hug! the creep says, but surprisingly, Vega seems to hesitate, her eyes rapidly flicking between us.

Wow, does she really want to be called Vega so badly?

I can't! she says finally and moves behind me.

You lost, loser, I put my hand on Vegas head and turn to him. You are scaring MY disciple, so calm down.

Oh come on, that's straight-up evil. I just want to poke those tiny pointy horns. Im not asking for much. I'm stressed too, you know!

Go and hug Dave or something.

Does Dave look like master too? Vega asks innocently from behind me.

Stolen content warning: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

You are confusing our poor minion you asshole original, just look. The duplicate moves close and leans to look at Vega behind my back, who returns his gaze with her curious ruby eyes.

Is this part of Bambis curse? she asks.

As if, it's him being a smartass. Come on, one hug, he turns to me.

Aren't you too well, weird? I ask.

You can take it easy. Im going to disappear in a week or two, so I need my ESM.

ESM?

Emotional Support Minion! When we upgrade our Mantle, you can go first, and Ill help you create a stronger epic item so you can get more shards.

Sure, deal. Vega, you can call this man Uncle Nathaniel but never call him master, okay? I then let go of her, and before she can complain, my duplicate grabs her and hugs her.

S-stop. Let me go! My minion squeaks while trying to push him away, but she cant really do anything.

Somehow it reminds me of that time I petted poor Ashenwolf after waking him up in his cave. I wonder how that guy is doing.

So, how is the progress? I ask.

Almost done, but we will have to decide what to do with the minion before heading to the station again. And did you ask her yet? he pinches her nose, pulls her horn, and when he finally lets her go, my minion rushes to me.

She grabs my clothes and kicks me in the shin before hiding behind my back, Traitor!

Anyway, minion, did you try to ask the questions I told you to ask? I ask.

After fixing her hair and clothes a bit and while pouting, she looks up at me, Yes, I did! But the people I asked didnt know much.

Oh, how did you end up asking them? The Duplicate creates a chair from mana and sits down.

Seeing that, Vega gulps. I will answer if you create one for me as well! she tries somewhat sneakily.

Knowing she would answer even without it, the Duplicate still creates one, and then we watch as Vega plops down and tries to sit in a similar lazy manner as my duplicate.

So cute.

I made them talk after She lifts her fists and swings them a few times, clearly gesturing at what she did to the guys.

Oh my. That's my disciple.

I did what master told me, I found someone who had hurt me and put on the mask master bought. Then I hid my mana as much as possible and changed the way I moved. The mask changed my voice, and then I kept asking!

The mask she mentioned is the only valuable item I sent with her. A rare mask that has some sort of confusion against weak minded individuals and changes the voice.

But master. I remember that man hitting me every time I passed by his inn, but he was really weak now. I think I'm the strongest one in our village too!

You can beat everyone when you become even stronger. Right now, they could hire someone to kill you, so be patient.

Right! So I asked the question, but he didnt know anything about the tutorial. He only said something about our predecessors, long long ago, going through the tutorial. Only the chosen ones entered and gained great power. He called them First Generation.

Huh, that makes sense. But isnt that interesting? the Duplicate mumbles. Did he tell you if the tutorial repeated again?

I didnt ask, Im sorry uncle!

Its fine, I answer instead and turn to the duplicate. So the system takes a bunch of people from a planet and puts them through the tutorial. The survivors return and become the so-called First Generation?

He speaks in turn, expanding on the thought, After that, more people from the planet join the system, but without the advantages of people who went through the tutorial?

Or could it be that only descendants of people who went through the tutorial get the ability to interact with the system?

That doesnt make any sense. We saw a lot of people with levels on the floors. There wasnt anyone without a class.

They may have gone through the tutorial tens of thousands of years ago, perhaps the descendants of the first generation replaced those who couldnt access the system.

He ponders, That feels off, I like the theory that people from the tutorial return to Earth, and then slowly other people from Earth start awakening and joining the system. Maybe it is all even caused by mana leaking from the people who return to Earth.

I turn to Vega and ask, Did he know anything else about the First Generation?

Nothing!

The duplicate sighs, So if we are right, there are 10 rounds of the tutorial. We are in the 5th round. Every round of the tutorial contains four difficulties, and each difficulty has 10 groups. 2000 people to split into ten groups in easy, a thousand in normal, 500 for hard, and 250 for hell. Overall thats, he counts, 3750 people for each round. If we are right and there will be 10 rounds, thats 37,500 people in the tutorial.

I continue, Out of them, how many will survive? 20,000 people in Easy difficulty so maybe 10-15 thousand of them? Out of 10,000 in Normal, probably around 6 to 8 thousand, out of 5,000 in Hard, probably two thousand? and out of 2,500 in Hell what? Somewhere between 100 and 500, maybe 100 of them enter Beyond, and what, maybe 10-20 survive?

The tutorial does become harder as floors pass and plenty of people might decide to stay on one of the nicer floors. Someone from Hard difficulty who gets to a higher floor might become stronger than someone from hell who decided to stay on the 4th floor.

Thats true. Minion, any info on your Absolute or Champions?

They knew nothing! I even bent the hand he used to hit me just like you showed me, master, but he said nothing.

Pairing?

Nothing!

System shop outside of the tutorial?

They didnt know about it! They said there is no such thing.

At what levels do primary class upgrades happen?

He was only level 40, he got only the 1st one and didnt know.

The duplicate looks at her, Wow, our cute Vega beat up someone 10 levels higher. Is that how proud parents feel?

Both of us ignore him, and I continue to ask a few more questions, but Vega doesn't have any answers. But that is to be expected, looking at the small village where she lives.

Good job, minion, you did well.

Thank you, master!

After turning to my duplicate, I lift one of my eyebrows, and he sighs, As promised, you get the Mantle upgrade first, and I will help you create a better epic item.

The chair made with [Regalia] disappears as he stands in a smooth motion and turns to Vega, I'm glad you made it back safely, disciple, he says.

To that, Vega thinks for a moment, then smiles, giving him a nod.

Observing him carefully, I notice a hint of relief in his eyes. Even though he hasn't shown it very much, he is happy to even get that much. Our minion is just that precious a little thing.

As we head back to the bunker, both of us notice that the Mana Radiation has started to become worse, and monsters from all parts of the Valley are fighting and moving erratically.

And the Veil becomes just a bit more visible hanging in the air, just a tiny bit, but almost enough to be able to see it with the naked eye.

The system didn't joke, and as it said, the difficulty will gradually increase.

Chapter 315: Screw you

Dave looks at me; it's still disturbing how easily he can recognize who the duplicate is. Then he looks at my duplicate and then at Vega, who looks up at him with interest. Having two of us by her side, she doesn't seem to be worried at all.

Master, how should I address this man? she asks.

I look at the man we even now call Dave, and he doesn't even bother answering and just turns around, heading back to his provisional workshop.

Indeed, what to call him? The duplicate is uncle already, Maybe mister? I offer.

Sure! Is this man another of master's minions, like uncle?

My duplicate interrupts, Vega, I'm not a minion and will never be. Actually, I'm currently stronger than him, you can hear my heart, right?

Yes I can, but it doesn't feel stronger!

I let them talk and follow Dave, pushing through the heat being released by his emblems, absorbing most of it with [Redistribution] and turning it into kinetic energy which I use to strengthen my body. It's better than releasing it, and my core is already full.

Sometimes I think everything is a game for you, Dave says while the metal in front of him swirls, mixing and separating while forming into difficult shapes as he wills it into form.

It's probably one of my skills, allowing me to filter out my emotions, I answer and jump onto the table nearby, examining the process. He doesn't seem to mind anymore than the times before, and I could even swear he likes having someone who shows so much interest in his craft.

That makes sense. Concentration class skills tend to be like that, he moves his hand, releasing more heat, melting an ingot of heat resistant metal, even more so than endurium.

I know because I tried to melt it too. It also sold for a nice chunk to the system shop.

Are concentration type skills that bad? I ask curiously.

They are useful, and the people who use them tend to be amazing in whatever they do. On the other hand, they often feel less human compared to others, the metal in front of him forms a sphere and then starts to swirl, mixing everything together.

He continues, At a higher level of the skill, their users feel inhuman.

Separating a bit of molten metal, he throws it to me where I release my mana and make it semi-metalize, keeping the molten metal in the air like he does. To prevent the metal from cooling off, I reach into my Vortex core and release the heat of my golden thermal energy.

We've already tried it a few times before, so this time I take care not to release too much heat and even let my eyes activate in combination with [Focus], while I try to limit their effect on my mana and the molten metal it surrounds.

Sometimes I think it's unfair that someone like you has Primordial thermal energy, he says to my surprise.

Why? I ask, moving the heat around the molten metal and using my mana to try to form it.

Jealousy, I would say. The flames from his emblem try to push against my thermal energy.

Without compressing my thermal energy further, his flames seem to blaze hotter and more confidently. Yet, there is some beauty to my golden thermal energy as it swirls around, devouring his flames the moment he loses any degree of concentration around the edges.

In the future, do not show anyone your Primordial energy if you don't have to. The same goes for your eyes.

Even my eyes? I push bits of his flames away and absorb the heat to boost my thermal energy. The metal ball in front of me elongates as I try to form it into the shape of a dagger. An ugly-ass dagger at that.

Wavelength-type eye traits are very rare. There were once entire noble families who only maintained their position in court because one of their predecessors had a powerful Wavelength eye. They were marrying away their daughters into other families hoping to re-awaken this trait.

Dont humans only get 3 traits?

Yes, but those youre born with don't count against that number.

The dagger I was trying to create melts when I use too much heat, and I start over.

Taking advantage of the mans good mood, I ask, Can you tell me about the First Generation?

When he looks, I think that I may have pushed too far, and annoyed him with my questions, but after examining the molten metal I'm working on, he sighs.

Then a blank expression overtakes his face, and it reverts back.

After returning to his senses the man seems surprised and almost ruins his project, but he quickly takes over and continues to work.

It seems like the system is still censoring the information about the First Generation, and I have no hope of learning more from the natives currently. Maybe on higher floors? Or I can try to get information from newcomers to the tutorial, like Vega.

Why do you want to reach the stations core so badly? I finally ask the question Ive been pondering for so long.

My name is Nevan.

Thanks for telling me, my name is Nathaniel.

He nods in acknowledgment. I don't know what else to do. His voice lacks emotion. This is the look of a man who's woken up after a hundred years only to find his wife and daughter dead and his world in tatters.

It's hard to imagine what he is going through.

Why do you want to get to the core? Nevan asks me in exchange.

For a moment, I ponder my response. I want to learn what happened. I want to see the place where it all went down. I hope to improve my skills in the process and find a useful item or two.

He snorts, At least you're honest.

But I meant it. More than a desire for trinkets, mana stones, and useful metals, I want to learn. As I put my motives into words, he turns his head to me, while the metal, now in the shape of a helmet, hangs in the air.

I continue, I'm curious. I want to know more about the Veil. How did they create it, and how does it work? I want to know how they screwed up and what happened 100 years ago. I want to know why so many people talk about the Enchanter Guild as if they were deities. I want to know all these answers and I want to see the wonders you guys created so long ago.

Apparently, nothing good. You know what's the worst thing about it? We were winning. He stops and the heat around him disappears. We were goddamn winning. Our Absolute was so powerful, he alone was enough to take out most of the enemy forces. Then there were Champions directly under his command. We would have survived this pairing and won.

This tale has been unlawfully lifted without the author's consent. Report any appearances on Amazon.

Nevan grabs the helmet he's created and flicks it with the tip of his finger.

A single crisp tone fills the room, hanging in the air, for what feels like an eternity.

But that wasn't enough. The Enchanter Guild seized the opportunity to push the Veil Ignition ahead of schedule. They worried that the Pairing might end and the people's support would go with it. Think of our children, they said. He flicks the helmet again and then gestures for me to continue.

I move my thermal energy and continue molding the melted alloy he created.

And we went along with it all. Drunk on our own power and confidence and amazed by the miracles they had created, we allowed this to happen and this is our reward." He stops, "Even out your thermal energy. There is no need to push so quickly, move slower, and let the dagger cool off a bit before you continue.

The dagger I'm shaping with mana now is better than any of my previous attempts. I absorb the heat at the places he indicates, allowing the alloy to cool while evening things out on the whole.

The combination of [Mana Domain] with [Redistribution] allows me to make detailed manipulations. While [Infusion] makes it easier to heat the more solid components. Sometimes I even infuse the piece with threads of mana for more delicate control.

When my trait finally deactivates and my concentration weakens, I finish the process.

The result is still ugly, the blade is dull, but one part still excites me. The mana-conductive metal that was part of the alloy is perfectly spread throughout the weapon mimicking basic inscriptions. It's lacking, but it's a first step.

I'm jealous of people like you, Nevan repeats his earlier statement. But I can't bring myself to hate you.

I wonder what expression I'm making for him to say that.

The moment I leave the room, Vega rushes to me, followed by my duplicate who even now is etching inscriptions into a mana stone. Something he does practically nonstop.

Master! Uncle isn't that bad, he asked me to eat with him and gave me tasty food!

Before I answer, the duplicate pokes, Maybe I can become your master instead. I know more about inscriptions than this weirdo, and I promise to only ever call you Vega.

No! Vega immediately answers and then passes by me approaching Nevans workstation.

Before she can move any further, I grab her with [Redistribution], It's dangerous in there.

It would be dangerous for someone with such a low level to get too close to that level of heat. Nevans emblems release that much.

"Ok!" She replies when I let go. "Master, I want to train more. I want to become much stronger. When I return, I will go to a bigger village. Or I might even try to hunt some gray lizards to see if they really are all that tasty."

"No worries, we have two weeks, so well make sure to help you level up a bit and work on your skills too."

"Mana chair too?"

"No mana chair."

"Oh"

"More explosive kinetic orbs and better body strengthening."

"Yes! Oh, and master, the uncle said you lost another limb, has the curse gotten worse?"

As an answer, I grab one of her pointy horns and shake her head while turning to Duplicaniel, "You are ruining my minion."

"Vega is not a minion." They say, almost in unison.

"This attempt is so cheap," I tell him.

"Hey, if it works, it works. Anyway, I need your help with some mana inscriptions. I want to test something."

"Any good progress?"

"Only shitty progress, I've spent the past week in almost constant attempts to create a personality imprint, but I'm not even close damnit. It feels like I haven't even started. I knew Lissandra was a monster, but this is too much."

"Is Lissandra a minion too?" Vega asks curiously.

"Maybe one day," I say.

"Ha!" The duplicate just stretches. "If the personality imprint plan fails, as it most likely will, I can do something like what we did for Myrra. I'm not sure it worked, but hey, I might as well try."

"But there is a problem with that," I point out while caressing Vega's head.

Huh, maybe he was really onto something with Vega being an ESM; I really do feel my stress dissipating.

"Yes," he agrees. "The system has already reacted to my status as a duplicate, so the rules will probably be a bit more strict. There is also a chance that because every attendee has their own instance, it will work differently. And even if it worked with Myrra, it may have countermeasures in place this time."

"How about trying to make yourself a tutorial attendee?"

"I used the fingers you so graciously gave me, and tried to work on something, but I just don't know. Lissandra has partial status as a tutorial attendee because she regrew from Hadwin and I'm entirely your

duplicate, yet the system hasn't reacted. I tried to think of a way you could help, but I just can't come up with anything."

"What about returning to Vegas world with her?"

At that, Vega's red eyes grow even larger, shining from under her light brown hair.

"While I was eating with her, I tried to look into it, but I have no connection to her. The problem also has to do with my lifespan. Just moving away from the tutorial wouldn't fix it."

"Now that you mention it, I think it may have been a dick move to duplicate myself." I ponder.

"Only now?" he snorts. "What's annoying is that I can't be mad at you since I made the decision. But hey, let's strengthen the Mantle and try inscribing a mana stone."

"Sure."

It's hours later, and we sit opposite each other. Nevan is still working, and Vega is sleeping, her head resting on my leg.

The improvements to The Mantle were a success.

Mana Sovereignty Mantle: A protective mantle seamlessly integrated with the user's mana heart and body. Solely designed to prevent external influences from disrupting or hijacking the user's mana flow.

The name and description haven't changed at all as I've made no attempt to change the effect. Instead of trying to be fancy, I just wanted to strengthen one simple thing. To prevent someone from keeping me from using mana. Well, at least inside my body. And even though the description hasn't changed, I can easily notice that it's improved.

While we rest, and eat some food while Vega is sleeping, the duplicate keeps looking at me.

"So?" I ask.

"You havent stopped watching out for Vega, not even for a second ever since shes returned."

I decide to stay quiet.

"The entire time she was with me, you kept watching her, keeping the anchor you placed on her skin active and ready. Even as you worked with Nevan."

"Just say it."

With his emotionless face, he continues, "Ever since you duplicated yourself, you were worried about Vegas return. Doesn't that say a lot about you?"

He looks at Vega, who is peacefully sleeping, "You still think there might be a chance you would use Vega to stay alive if you were in my shoes. You aren't sure, but you think you might use her or even sacrifice her just to stay alive. From sheer desperation and as the last possible option and because you still remember how you behaved on the 1st Floor."

In the silence, broken, only by the soft breathing of my disciple, I caress her head gently. At that, she snuggles closer to me.

The duplicate leans and rests against the wall, as always his mana is constantly moving, "You aren't sure what you would do if you were in my situation, but I am. I already know the answer to that question. But I won't tell you. Screw you, and figure it out on your own."

"I really want to punch you sometimes."

"You and I are the same."

"Yes."

Chapter 316: The first one in thousands of years

Each of us gets another pendant. We put on the chest plates made of silvery metal streaked with copper. Nevan even threw something together for Vega, and she's been much nicer to him since. My minion might be easily influenced by gifts and shows of goodwill.

I watch as she spins around, looking at her reflection in one of the steel panels lining the walls of the facility.

Even Nevan has a soft smile on his face, watching the little half-demon girl being happy.

At least she accepted only after asking him multiple times if it was for free and he didn't want anything in exchange.

I'm going outside for a moment, something destroyed one of my anchors, the duplicate says and disappears at the same moment.

A few seconds later, he returns. Two Veil Guardians sniffing around, he says simply.

So that's it? Is a normal Hell difficulty person supposed to be hiding now, or should they be capable of taking on the Veil Guardians? Or were we expected to join a group like the Bastion in an effort to survive the remaining two weeks with disciples?

We could fight them together, I offer.

Probably, but we've already prepared for a trip to the station. Wanna bet something would go wrong if we went to fight?

That's true. Well, let's follow the plan. I wave at Nevan, Ready?

Yes.

Take as much as you can; we might not be able to return.

After taking a moment to look at me, he nods and quickly does just that.

Vega, I say, you will stay by my side the entire time, and by that I mean the entire time, okay?

Yes, master! the little half-demon agrees without complaint.

But just in case, I give her my pendant. Then I take a few rods and some of the other things our personal blacksmith, alloyist, whatever he is, prepared for us.

When we reappear in the station, the mana pressure immediately increases, and I observe Vega. Thankfully, she doesn't seem to notice the pressure, and can only feel the difference through her scanning. Even now, she is curiously observing it, her red eyes wide open.

Nevan, who is fully armored, even going so far as to wear a helmet, heads in first, and we quickly pass his workshop, stopping only so he can grab a few small items. I also quickly sell a few more items, getting a quick 680 shards.

The hallway stretches farther than I had expected, and it gradually becomes clear that the pressure is emanating from somewhere on the right where the core must be.

At a crossroads, Nevan turns left and leaves three rods between us and the core. Alleviating the pressure somewhat.

The next stop is yet another facility. This one is in disarray, the damage is as extensive here as it was at the entrance. Deep scratches dominate the metal walls, sections of the floor have been melted, and the ceiling has partially collapsed. mana stones have been strewn about the room. Most of them have been destroyed, though some are still whole. There are dozens, in all colors and sizes, and none of them have been inscribed.

One of my friends used to study mana crystals here, and he was using them to make mana stones in his spare time. Nevan enters the room and touches one of the walls, and a signal pulses out from the point of contact, and a crack appears there, revealing the entrance to a smaller room.

There, in what seems to have been a panic room, lies the unrecognizable corpse of a man. But for Nevan, just a look at his bracelet is confirmation enough.

The mans corpse is surrounded by empty bottles, and food packaging, and seems to have created a makeshift bed in the corner.

But the most interesting part is the mana crystals littering the room, some of which have clearly been converted into mana stones. The man, unwilling or unable to exit the room, spent his final days and weeks working. He did something he enjoyed up until the end either to take his mind off his situation or maintain his grip on reality.

I look at Nevan who is still looking at the corpse.

Oh, Orryn, I can only hope that you did not suffer. Stepping inside, he cradles what remains of the man and lies him on the bed in the corner. He takes a few mana stones from the ground and hands them to me, They will be more useful to you than to me.

I examine them, noting that, like those in the previous room, they havent been inscribed. They are, for the most part, just beautiful mana stones ready for inscription, with the exception of the few that are epic grade. Meanwhile, the ones in the prior room were rare at best.

The duplicate also takes a share, as does Vega.

At the same time as me, the duplicate takes one and starts turning it into storage he starts filling with Primordial energies, something akin to what I did on the 4th floor to attack the Colony.

Are you fine? I ask Vega.

I think I am, but I feel dizzy when examining the area around me.

You can stop using your senses for a while.

She does just that, and I set one of my anchors on her skin, just in case. I [Tether] it to her body, I'm much higher level than her, so its not hard.

Room by room, we pass through the station. We find more corpses and more damaged facilities, and I start to wonder if Nevan doesn't have a skill like [Focus]. The man keeps recognizing colleagues or friends all over the place, yet he continues ahead with the determination of a man with nothing to lose.

A case of content theft: this narrative is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

As the hallway widens, Nevan places a few more rods and throws some fist-sized iron cubes on the floor, and we enter the big circular room.

Control room, he says simply.

Out of every place we passed by, this one has suffered the most damage, and its the nature of the damage that surprises me. Its like someone just evaporated everything in a big sphere, leaving behind smooth edges. And this repeats over and over.

The tables are gone, control panels too, and pieces of the wall as well. On the ground, we find pieces of gray bodies filled with blue veins and even pieces of voidsteel slicers.

It looks like our friends, Veil Guardians or a higher grade of them, visited this place long ago.

Vega and I both collect pieces of voidsteel either to keep for ourselves or to sell later. Even while doing so, she practices moving mana in the way I told her, and she keeps a kinetic orb floating near her.

Nevan is examining what remains, trying to get a panel to pop up from the floor and attempting to locate hidden rooms, while my duplicate goes about examining the rooms nearby.

Do you have any idea what couldve caused this? I ask him.

Some of the attacks were the work of the head guard, and I recognize a few as the work of some of the Lords that were staying here. As for the one that destroyed the panels, I have my suspicions, but I'm not sure. But either by coincidence or intent, they destroyed the controls.

Any backup?

He nods, But they're closer to the core.

Let me examine the rooms around for a bit, and we can head there. Anything interesting?

Nevan gestures, This way, you can find the dining room; your duplicate went there. There you will find a Guard station that probably has some armor or weapons left in stock. Nearby, through a hallway, is a research center that will probably interest you the most. They were exploring methods of inscribing fabrics, creating highly conductive mana threads, and experimenting with the smallest possible mana stones for inscriptions.

Thanks, fifteen minutes?

That much shouldn't be a problem for our equipment.

Minion, let's go.

To the dining room?

I grab and pull her horn while she tries to kick me, and then we head towards the research center.

POV Duplicate of Nathaniel Gwyn

I'm sitting in a chair while I wait. As I do, I prod the leg of one of the corpses with my foot.

It's a long-dead woman, some of her hair has fallen out, and her shriveled face is frozen in an expression of sheer pain. As many did, she clearly died from mana radiation that must have been even stronger 100 years ago.

While waiting, I strengthen the field around me, making sure its blocking all the sounds and mana other than mine. Not like I think that is required, but just to be safe. The original douchebag can be perceptive sometimes, but right now, hes too busy, enamored by all these mysteries to check on me. Hell, I wouldve liked to do the same.

Finally, the corpses eyes move, theyre still lifeless and disgusting, but they turn to me nonetheless.

Even though they shouldn't be making any sounds, the mouth moves and its words fill the room, I see you haven't forgotten me, unfortunate one.

Yes, yes. A week ago you told me you would tell me about a way to survive when Vega came back, so?

So direct. You don't have to hurry. Weve got ourselves some time to discuss.

Well, I wouldn't normally cooperate with an extremely suspicious being I met a few times in Beyond and once on the 4th floor when it took over Arcane Archer Bob. But it's not like I have many options.

If you want to talk so much, tell me why would you help me.

The mouth of the corpse moves as if to make a smile and it makes her look even more creepy.

To pass time, it says.

So mysterious and cool. What is this method of survival you mentioned?

It's not all that difficult, unfortunate one. You just need to kill your originals disciple. Once she dies, I can move her 'status' to you, and you will be returned to her world instead. With her status and a little bit of influence from my side, your status as a temporary duplicate will disappear.

I see. No.

Are you sure? the voice sounds playful, If you are worried about your conscience, you don't have to kill her. But you just don't have to help either. You left your mark on the sleeping Gaiathra, right? What if you just happened to activate it by mistake and weren't here when the monster attacked? Accidents happen.

When I don't answer, the being seems even more amused, the mouth of the corpse moving into a smile much too wide for its anatomy.

The old skin of the corner of its lips tears, and the jaw moves lower in a creepy gesture.

You might think you won't now, but are you sure you won't change your mind when you've only got a day left? Don't you want to survive? What is some little girl you've only known for a few weeks in comparison to that?

Even though it can't use its powers, the air in the dining room starts feeling colder.

Just a small accident, after that you would be sent to explore her world. You can try to become its Absolute if you wish. You can fight and train as much as you want. A whole new planet for you to explore. As a bonus, your original would be punished for failing his Floor quest. Isn't that beautiful?

You are a really stupid motherfucker, aren't you? I said no.

The corpse moves and as it stands up, its limbs let out a cracking noise until the long-dead woman's head stops just in front of my face, You already refused my help once, do not repeat that mistake. Without me, you will perish.

Even if I die, I won't regret it, as I say this, I feel confident in this conviction.

The dumb original might not realize it yet, he is bad at dealing with his feelings, but hes the same. Neither of us would be able to hurt Vega like that. Never. It would mean betraying our friend and in that moment, we would be no better than the person we hate the most in the world.

I think the subclass of Pride really fits you. It's perfect for delusional people like you, the being giggles, and finally, the woman's jaw falls off. At that, it only tilts its head and then steps back, I will ask you the same question a day before you disappear. I'm already excited to hear your answer.

So he is not the Ruler of Pride.

Well, let's try to get more info at least, Why are you even here? There must be hundreds or thousands of tutorials going on, why this one? Because of Lissandra and her escape from the second floor?

The corpse crumbles, but the words continue, amusement dripping from every single one, Absolutes going rogue once in a while isn't that rare. Even though what Eladore's Absolute Lissandra is doing is extremely interesting, it is not enough to catch my interest. No, you, Absolute Lissandra, and the other attendees of this instance are only a way I amuse myself.

The next words only sound in my head, the corpse unmoving, (What brought me to this tutorial is someone else. It's the man who started the tutorial in Beyond. The first one in thousands of years.)

Chapter 317: The cracked core

1,050 shards, that's how much Ive gotten from selling the stuff from the research center. Obviously, I keep the best items and data. Even then, that leaves me with just over 27 thousand shards. At that point, I decided to buy another epic passive.

Sure, I could save my shards and advance my plan to build a repertoire of rare passives, and try to learn a thing or two, but with what's happening around me, that might not be such a good idea.

The Veil Guardians have been sniffing around, the Veil itself is acting weird, and my duplicate has been cooking something up. I mean, I have [Tether] too, but how the heck did he teleport a giant mana crystal from like that the bunker, and where did he send it?

Master, another one! Vega rushes closer and hands me a few small mana stones. After examining them, if they aren't useful, I sell them as well, getting a few more shards.

Good job, minion, did you keep any for yourself?

I've done exactly as master said. I've already started practicing.

Good, keep doing that. You can push yourself harder, I will step in if you lose control.

It's hard with all of the items the mister gave me and all this mana floating around, but I will try.

As she goes back to her training, I open the system shop and look at the passive I've been eyeing.

Cognitive Fortress (Epic) - Bestows upon the user a remarkable capacity for sustained mental engagement. This passive bolsters the user's cognitive stamina to extraordinary levels, helping them endure prolonged periods of intense cognitive activity.

It's a bit expensive, just over 15 thousand shards. With epic passives starting at 8 thousand, this is probably one of the better ones. If there are hidden low, mid, and upper ratings like I think there are, then this one is probably in the upper tier, maybe high mid.

My current passives are as follows:

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

Phoenix Embrace (epic)

Mana Overload Absorption (epic)

The rare passive isn't even worth speaking of at this point. Mana Reservoir is my current favorite.

Arcane Resilience says it reduces the physical toll of casting. Through testing, I've learned that it refers to my tendency to overload my brain and eyes, though not so much as it protects my body from my ever-growing stat imbalance.

Then there is the beautiful passive skill known as Phoenix Embrace, granted this will surely lead to a lot of trash-talk from Lily and she'll likely demand that I sell it.

I won't, I love it.

Mana Overload Absorption is like Arcane Resilience, though it works differently.

So, Cognitive Fortress should help me deal with the strain my eyes subject me to. My new trait is powerful and difficult to handle, even now. And that's good. The more dangerous it is to me, the more dangerous it should be to others.

Or something like that.

It should also help with my attempts to power [Focus] and my other skills with the black mana, even if it doesn't do as much as the other two.

Okay, let's buy it.

I sell Mana-Fortified Resilience and confirm, and watch with a touch of sadness as over 15 thousand shards disappear.

For the next few minutes, I focus on resisting the burning sensation that courses through me. It feels like someone has set my head ablaze from the inside, but I refuse to let it show as I continue observing Vegas training.

Then, as we are leaving, I even sell some tables that are basically enchanting tables. It doesn't get me that many shards, but after spending so much on my new passive, I intend to sell anything that isn't nailed down. Even if it is, I mean to remove it and sell it. I don't care if it's only worth 1 shard. Hell, I would sell the entire station if I could.

So, Minion, how was the week back in your village? I ask while waiting for the pain to abate.

It takes her a moment to refocus from the mana stone she was observing and look up at me with her ruby-like eyes.

I appeared at the same place I disappeared from. I then tracked and killed the monster that was hunting me before! Master, it was so weak I can't believe I was so scared back then, I even cried while running.

It's fine to be scared, minion. It helps us survive.

But master isn't scared. You even block your fear, she tilts her head.

Only a little and less of late. Sometimes I enjoy the feeling of fear, minion. It makes the fights more fun.

Master is weird.

Yup.

So I killed the monster and then returned to the village. I spent the first few days much as I did before, I didn't let anything slip and kept hiding and observing different peoples strengths. A few times I went to hunt in the forest too. Then a few days before returning, I masked myself and started asking questions.

I'm trying to imagine my silly minion beating a bunch of old men and find the thought amusing. Even she is smiling at the memory. Vega swings her arms, acting out the way she dealt with the men, and describes how she made them talk and where she kicked them.

She thanks me for teaching her the kick and describes how scared some of the men were while adding things they did to her before she became my disciple.

As amused as I am by her antics, I'm also angry. I can't help but think that if I were there, those people would have ended up much worse.

Hurting someone like me is fine, but hurting a kid? Trying to inflict so much trauma on someone as curious and cheerful as Vega here?

I'm glad I became her master. I'm glad I showed her a way out so she can stay as beautiful as she is.

I also remember the conversation I had with my duplicate and as I listen to Vega tell me her story, I come to the answer.

There is no way I would be able to hurt Vega like that. Yes, I will push her to become stronger and it might even hurt, but every time it will be for her good, and I will be sure she's ready. But I will never hurt her the way others did.

My duplicate realized it before me and seems to have had some fun teasing me like that. Such an asshole. Biscuit truly is the greatest to realize it so quickly and keep calling me, us, out like that.

Vega, one day I will introduce you to Biscuit. I think you would like each other.

Is Biscuit also one of your minions?

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

Not everyone is my minion, you silly disciple. I pinch her horn and shake her head. You guys probably won't meet in the tutorial, but after I get out I will find your planet. It will take some years so be patient, okay? Until then become as powerful as you can so I don't have to be ashamed in front of Biscuit.

I might be even stronger than master after that much time, she says with a cheeky smile. And then you will be my minion!

Look at her.

If you do, that's fine. I'll even call you Master Vega and ask you to teach me, I say and watch as her eyes become dreamy and I lean closer, continuing in a whisper. Just imagine that. Master Vega and her lowly minion Nathaniel. Your heart even more powerful than mine and then it would be me following you around, begging you to teach me.

Her eyes widen even more, and I can see how much she would like that.

In the end, I stand up, the pain of acquiring the passive nearly gone. So give it your best, but be careful, okay?

Will do, master!

I look through a few more rooms, and I'm once again amazed by how much work has been put into this station. The walls have all been shielded, and optimized for extreme durability yet they still have a decent aesthetic to them. There are drains set into the floor in some facilities in case of toxic spillage or flooding.

Air filtration devices are all over the place and some of the things they've done with inscriptions remain a mystery to me even now. I can imagine myself spending months down here, trying to learn as much as possible.

Well, I might have better opportunities on higher floors. So I just examine the most interesting things and keep the best items while selling the rest and then head back into the destroyed control room where Duplicaniel and Nevan are already waiting.

Out of curiosity, I jumped to the bunker we were using, my duplicate says. It's already been overrun by monsters and the doors are wide open so we'll have to change our base.

So, plan B.

So it seems. I brought back a few items from the bunker, and you can do as you like with them. Consider it a show of my goodwill, he teases.

I had hoped that we could stay here. I don't think they can pass by Gaiathra that easily, but there is the issue with the mana radiation.

While I grab some items from the pile and sell them, my duplicate continues, We have a few hours, maybe six at most with all the stuff we have and maybe half of that if we move closer to the core. Am I right? he turns to Nevan.

Longer. I've still got items that I haven't used yet, the man answers. Keep the girl close; we're heading deeper.

Then he leads the way, wearing a full set of items he made of a mix of metals. He grabs rods as well; his mana seeps his chestplate. There are no inscriptions; it's just the alloy reacting to his mana by vibrating at an extremely weird frequency, and that greatly strengthens the effect.

Step after step, we trail behind him as the mana around us increases.

Even with all the protections we have, I feel pressure and channel more mana into the barrier I've placed around Vega and myself. To reduce my expenditure, I pick her into my arms where she nestles her ear against my chest and listens to my heart.

As we pass through the next zone, the sheer amount of mana seems to be causing effects beyond the pressure. Some colors seem to have altered their vibrancy. Red, blue, and yellow grow much more vibrant, while others grow flat.

We notice the iron walls curve, looking more like waves frozen mid-movement rather than straight sheets of metal.

For a short time, all sound disappears, replaced by the impossibly loud beating of our hearts. I'm even able to differentiate whose heart is which.

Then it stops, and as we continue, the air starts to look misty.

All of the epic rods crack and wear off, only to be thrown away, and Nevan uses even more of his mana to strengthen the effect of his chestplate, reinforcing the barrier around us. At this point, I'm sure the piece he made is a mere step away from arcane. The most he could do in the time given to him.

We pass through holes that have been torn in the walls and melted doors, and eventually enter a large circular room. Yellow and purple colors become much more vibrant and a pillar radiates light in the otherwise dark room.

It's much simpler than expected and much smaller.

The bunker we left did have a mana crystal to hold mana, and that crystal was as tall as a smaller skyscraper. This room is the size of a small apartment, and as expected, there is a mana stone in the center.

It is a clear white color, and inside of it, yellow and purple mana swirls lazily, and just the sheer pressure makes my disciple pass out, and I strengthen the barrier around her even more, reaching into my reservoir to do so.

Looking at the mana stone, I'm once again reminded that it has been leaking mana for a hundred years already. It's hard to imagine the sheer force it had to have in the beginning. The mana stone itself looks like a transparent crystalline pillar with mana swirling inside. It is only as tall as me, yet even someone with my level of experience can see how amazing it is.

The mana crystal from the bunker, even though hundreds of times bigger, can't compare to this. Not even close.

But there is a problem with it.

Lodged inside the core is an ax, leaving a crack, through which, that immense mana can seep.

Holding the ax, there is a burned corpse, a skeleton with a bits of flesh hanging off of it. Half of the head is missing, the place where the heart would be is nothing but a big hole. Someone made sure the attacker was dead though they were too late, the damage had already been done.

A chuckle erupts out of nowhere, and I look at Nevan, who unbelievably stares at the corpse.

Finally, more emotion appears on his face. The pain of finding the world in this state, the pain from seeing his dead wife and daughter. All of it surfaces as he weakens his concentration type skill.

The ax that destroyed the core was made by Champion Niall and I, he says as mana radiates from him, bits of metal floating into the air from his bags. And this man is my father, one of our youngest Champions. He was the only one on this planet with a body strong enough to endure the destruction of a core of this grade. Having even this little left shows how strong his body used to be, he smiles deprecatingly.

Then he points to burned marks on the floor, This is where the cores explosion burned Champion Nialls first disciple. I can feel alloy melted into the floor from the armor I made for her. He points at another spot, Champion candidate Igred, I made a bracelet for him, another spot, Champion candidate Norret, I made a brooch for her, she gave me a design to follow, made by her 5-year-old daughter, another spot, vice guild master of Black Hand Jeal asked me for a dagger and I still remember how drunk he got while celebrating and constantly thanking me. He points out more and more spots.

The emblems on his forearms activate and even in such intense mana radiation, he starts melting the pieces of metal floating around him, creating yet another alloy.

Then the armor on his chest also disconnects and starts melting under his emblem, the mana radiation immediately attacking the man.

At that moment, his face becomes clear. I had hoped that my father would be alive as you said there might be some Champions left. I hoped for something. But this? He gestures around. I have nothing left. Im tired after 20 years of losing my friends. I never wanted to hold my wifes or my daughters dead body. I never wanted to see my father like that, it doesnt matter if he was a traitor or if he tried to stop the ignition.

Half of the alloy he creates moves towards the crystal where it surrounds the crack, causing the ax to fall out and crumble alongside the body of his father.

Nevans body shows damage everywhere I look, even with as durable as he is. I wish you had never brought me out of here and allowed me to wake up, Nathaniel.

His metal surrounds the crack fully and the mana radiation weakens and continues to weaken even more. Though too late for Nevan.

But dont pity me; Ive been dying ever since I awoke. You just found out what happened, learn from our mistakes, and never repeat them. A big chunk of the alloy he made moves towards me and lands at my feet. And take this, its an alloy Ive created after my entire life of research.

You know you could just leave. You could join other survivors, I say to the dying man.

I could, but I have decided otherwise.

I can do nothing in the face of his determination. I will respect your decision then, Nevan. Can I do anything for you before you die?

Please burn my body with the Primordial energy you possess. You dont need to do anything else.

I will.

He smiles gratefully, and after a minute, he dies. Just a short moment without his equipment was enough. That and hundreds of years of lying down here in this radiation.

Maybe he could be saved; there are two healers on this floor, and even though they are of much lower level, they could help.

Yet, it was all his decision. To throw away his concentration type skill and allow his feelings to overtake him. The man was unwilling to live on alone.

I wish I could say I understand, but I do not.

In his place, I would hold on to my life and kill every single person who dared to hurt my dear ones before I would die. And I would not stop until their bodies lay at my feet.

My eyes activate and even though there is still so much mana in the air, the pressure remains manageable. I watch as the mana that until now continued to leak through the crack only seeps out slightly, the ring of multicolored mass blocking the crack caused by the axe.

Then there is the chunk of molten metal alloy he left to me along with the heavily damaged great ax that cracked the core. They're both pretty high grade, yet it all feels a bit sour.

Chapter 318: Plan B

Arcanite Alloy (Arcane) Arcanite Alloy is a meticulously engineered blend of a dozen metals, each chosen for its unique resonance with arcane energies. This alloy was designed to amplify magical powers. Despite the complexity of its creation, items forged from Arcanite Alloy will be durable and capable of channeling immense magical forces.

Flamebearer (Arcane, Damaged) Flamebearer held dominion over fire, with a mere swing capable of igniting the horizon. This ax's blaze once burned with immense fury. Despite the damage and its weakened flames, moments of intense heat surge through its blade, offering a glimpse into its fiery past.

Both the alloy and the ax are great items. The alloy is a chunk of metal that I might be able to smelt in the future. But for that, I will need more experience, much more. Either that or I need to find someone to do it for me. If I tried now, it could just end up wasting it and leaving me with a mere rare grade weapon, and I may wind up ruining the careful mix of metals in the process.

Then there is the ax. It's half my height with a single blade, made from black metal covered in a web of red glowing inscriptions.

Its performance seems to be comparable to an epic weapon at the moment, and the damage is very much visible. Perhaps it can be fixed and restored to its former arcane status.

It doesn't seem quite as strong as Peacemaker, the duplicate states while holding it and swinging it. Do you think the Peacemaker was a grade higher than arcane?

Most likely. How long do you think Nevans patch job will last?

If we are lucky, then it could last until the end of the floor. But we know the system so it will probably be a week at most just to mess with us. The alloy he used seems to be a bit different from that chunk he left to you.

I nod, already putting it away. I'll have to be careful not to let him steal it.

Duplicaniel knows what I'm thinking but doesn't seem to mind. Instead, he holds the ax, and I allow him to keep it.

Then while he's examining the remains of the youngest Champion this planet had to offer, Nevans father, I look towards the burned patch of the floor where the man's body used to be.

Master? Vega says, awakening me from brooding as she slowly regains consciousness.

Just take it slowly, I tell her.

Just in case, I gave her the remaining pendants, but so far the mana levels seem much more bearable. It will probably take months until they return to normal, but that is to be expected after 100 years of irradiation.

Where is mister Nevan?

For a moment, I think of lying but then decide against it. Rather than my protection, Vega needs to learn about the kind of world we live in.

He died, I tell her.

Did master kill him?

I did not.

Was mister hurt, is that why?

You could say that. But it wasn't just a physical wound. He had a skill like ours. But in the end, he decided to stop using it and didnt think he had anything left to live for.

You didnt stop him, master? she asks curiously.

I didnt; it was his decision.

Even if it was dumb? her head tilts in confusion.

Im sure he didnt do it without thinking. He must have been considering it ever since he woke up.

But that doesnt make it a good decision, she declares. Master should have stopped him.

It was his decision, minion, and I didnt know him, and

She interrupts me, But master, you dont get to know people if they die. And not everyone is as smart as us, master. People are weak. Vega nods confidently.

Doing that would step on his pride, minion, I defend myself He was old enough to decide, and he did have his reasons.

Weak people should just listen to me or master, she declares.

At that, I pinch her horn. Such a cheeky little thing.

So I ask her, His family died, and he saw their corpses. So, minion, what would you do if you found me dead?

I think I would be sad, she answers.

At this point my duplicate joins us, And what would you do after that, Vega?

The little half-demon looks between me and him. I would find who did that and kill them. Her red eyes seem threatening now. I would tear them limb from limb and hold their beating heart in my hand. I would wait until they fully understood how weak they were by comparison. Only after that I would kill them.

I look at the duplicate, You can't put this one on me. I didnt raise her like that.

Still in shock, the duplicate nods, She is half demon, isn't she?

Yes, I am! Vega says happily jumping on her feet and goes to examine the core.

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Part of me wants her to stop being like that but part of me thinks it will be better for her survival, I inform my duplicate.

He seems to agree and while looking at Vega, he says, You were right before. I think we can use [Tether] to bridge this core with the Bastion to power it.

I told you, it makes sense and that skill is surprisingly good. Better than I expected when I got it.

Sure, sure, Mr. Perfect. The question is, will we be able to get those four assholes to help us?

I shrug, We will use force if they dont. I glance at Vega whos tapping on the core with her fingers, The Valley will become too dangerous for us to stay here, and with the help of those four assholes, we may be able to make the Bastion fly again. Plus, with as much mana as this core contains, the defenses should be much stronger.

You don't have to persuade me. The sleeping noodle above us is troublesome enough and we don't know how it will react to the patched core. We may have another problem if we cant bridge the cores.

I had already thought of that, We don't have to keep it up the entire time. We can fill the core of the Bastion as much as it allows us. That should be easy with [Resonance] and a few other skills.

The duplicate's senses keep examining the damaged ax in his hand, and I can see the gears spinning, It's a shame we can't move the core. But with the sheer amount of mana its holding its impossible.

Did you think of using the black orb? I ask him.

Are you dumb? he complains. Weve already established that it would be a terrible, terrible, terrible idea to use the black orb in all this mana radiation.

No, no, I shake my head, I meant after we move enough mana to the Bastion's core. What if we cooperate a bit and remove the patch Nevan left? It would mean more of his fancy alloy, and we could leave the black orb behind. It could be enough to deal with the sleeping noodle.

You say that, but you have no idea whats going to happen. Wanna bet it just pisses him off and gives him a reason to hunt us? he snorts and stands up. Ill look around a bit more. Take a peek at what remains of Nevans father. The dude must have been durable as heck when he was alive. I bet most of his traits were geared towards that.

As he leaves, I can only think about how it only makes me want to create the black orb even more. What terrifying thing would it turn into after absorbing so much mana from the core?

Would it be even capable of doing that? Maybe? Theoretically, it shouldn't be able to, as the orb wont use nearly as much mana as the core contains, so the sheer amount should overwhelm it.

But there is also a chance that the black orb is just the start and absorbing more mana would gradually strengthen it instead of crumbling it.

Damn, I really want to try.

I stop in front of the remains of Nevans father. He became a champion not long before death, yet he still had the strongest body out of all the natives of this planet.

Nevan said that he had probably been a traitor, judging by the amount of damage he caused, but I have to wonder, is that really it? What he was a good man, trying to prevent the Veils activation at all costs, even at the cost of the lives of his family and friends in the station?

Isn't it sad for a man like Nevan to die with those thoughts? He was so talented, a blacksmith, gifted for his ability to create alloys. An amazing variety of alloys for any situation that functioned by virtue of carefully crafted combinations of metals, without needing inscriptions. I think Nevan was a genius in his field, capable as he was of creating low and mid grade arcane weapons even with Champion Nialls help.

Yes, he was human in the end. Valued as he was by the Absolute of this planet. Despite the fact that he had a concentration skill he couldnt handle his own emotions. But was he really as weak as Vega said, or is it just hard for me to imagine fighting for tens of years and losing friends one after another? Creating weapons for them, only so they can leave, never to return.

However, I don't think I will end up like that.

No, I'm confident I will never end up like that.

Cutting off my thoughts there, I lean lower to look at the charred body, its head, and heart purposefully destroyed. Denying the man any chance to heal.

At my level of skill, I can't understand properly what made his body so powerful, and what the traits did.

Looking at the charred place where, with a concerted effort, we burned Nevan's body, I sigh. Even after death and with the diffusion mana, and his body weakened stat, this will be extremely difficult.

Sorry, Nevan, I say, and after spending a big chunk of my mana to send through the blade, I slice away at the thin pieces of charred flesh remaining on his right hand. The hand that held the ax and the one that bears the most damage.

Spending more mana than I would like given our current situation, I'm able to get finger bone from pointing finger and store it. I also notice that the pinkie is missing, likely taken by my duplicate.

POV Isabella Martinez

Seneca, don't get too far away from me! Sophie, Tess, and Nathaniel keep telling me to be careful during the last two weeks. Do you know how annoying it is? I complain to my cute disciple.

Seneca looks up to me. As she should, my disciple is shorter than me, but I'm still jealous of her hair. Its short and blue and floats in the air, like flames. I want mine to look like that too.

Master, don't worry, I will protect you if anything happens!

Thats dumb! Is she dumber than Soph?

Even Nathaniel said it would be dangerous! If he said that, it must be true. And no, I will protect you, as always. You are too young and dumb.

I'm as old as you, master! And Noodles the one who saved our lives twice already!

I want to be angry at her, but I just can't. Shes too cute, and her floating hair is so pretty. Do I need a trait to get something like that?

Sensing emotion from Noodle whos currently twined around my arm, I look at him.

Why are you getting so cocky, Noodle!

Another emotion.

Yes, you did once or twice, but I also protected you and Seneca.

He swirls, and his green eyes keep looking at me. Noodle is very smart, and he is also getting too cocky.

I'm the master here!

Noodle, I will tell Biscuit, I tell him.

Immediately he swirls erratically and snuggles closer to me. His face moves closer, and I can feel his tongue flicking close to my cheek. It tickles, and I laugh.

He always acts like that when I threaten him with Biscuit.

Then I turn to Seneca, And you! I will keep calling you minion if you don't listen! I add.

To prevent Seneca from saying something dumb, I issue an order to my party, Let's hurry, the Veil Guardian isn't that far behind, and we have to get to the Bastion! The Housekeeper will let us in, even if the silly Butler complains! And Noodle, eat all our mana so they can't track us, okay?

Through my [Empathy], I feel his agreement, and then we hurry towards the Bastion.

Chapter 319: It's free

Sset (Hell, group 4) -most of us are already holed up in the Bastion.

Tess tries to say more but most of it gets filtered. The system doesn't let the message pass. Nothing about it being safe for the last two weeks, in fact, we can't even say anything about the extra two weeks.

We can't even tell WhiteWing about the extended duration of the floor should they decide to stay. But they should be able to figure it out. They can estimate when we left the 4th floor and then realize that we've already exceeded the original 3 weeks.

Probably.

They just need to be a bit smart about it.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - I'm there.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - I'm close.

Soph (Hell, group 4) -Izzy, be careful, please.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - don't be dumb, Soph.

Knight (Hell, group 4) -yeah, don't be dumb, Soph!

Maya piles on, and I watch for a moment as they bicker.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - food!

Noname (Hell, group 4) -

Sset (Hell, group 4) - The Guild and IDK groups have also entered the 5th floor. It seems like they haven't lost anyone.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -so The Guild has 6 members and IDK has 4?

BenDover (Hell, IDK) -you bet! The 4th floor was quite easy. Did you guys kill Lorven to get his epic dagger as well?

Bard (Hell, IDK) - are you sure you want to reveal your equipment?

BenDover (Hell, IDK) -it's fine. By the way, Noname, I was able to evolve my skill. You wouldn't believe how easy it was to kill the lynthari matriarch with it.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - you will have to show me during the tournament.

BenDover (Hell, IDK) - I will. Trust me, I will show you, heh. It doesn't matter how much mana you have.

Lovable as always.

Knight (Hell, group 4) - BenDover, I think you are full of it. I bet you waited until Lorven betrayed her to kill the matriarch. Or maybe you were working with him and killed him when you had no more use for him?

BenDover (Hell, IDK) - Think about it on your own.

I turn off the Community and focus on the results of my efforts and the contributions of my duplicate.

We spent a day mapping the pathways the core uses to distribute mana through the Veil Ignition Station. Most of them have been damaged and mana barely passes through. Some failsafe mechanisms are probably sending the bare minimum of mana to keep the systems running while keeping most of it in storage. But Clonthaniel and I found one pathway in a fairly good state and worked together to create our strongest [Tether] yet. I even gained a level in the skill.

Also resting, the duplicate turns to me, "It's amazing how well we can use [Resonance] to combine our powers, must be because we share the same base."

"What, do you want us to combine our minds too?"

He playfully shoots a wave of kinetic energy strong enough to blow the head off someone at level 150. I redirect it just as playfully, sending my own cone of kinetic energy at him.

"You know very well I would never do that and neither would you. Combining the two of us would be like both of us dying, only to be replaced with a third. Or one of us devouring the other," he says as he absorbs my attack. "Just dying would be better."

I check on Vega before asking, "Are you really considering that?"

For a moment, he looks at me, and nods, "Yup. I mean it was the most expected result even before I decided to use the mirror, so it's fine, somewhat. I mean I hate it and I really want to punch you, but I know my goal when using the mirror was to strengthen you as much as possible and to learn new things."

As always, there is a mana stone in his hands that he keeps trying to inscribe and create a perfect imprint, but the task is too much.

"I even got contacted by that douchebag from Beyond's first and second trials. We also met his intent on the 4th floor. He told me to kill Vega so he could transfer her status, that's what he called it, to me. Would you believe that?"

After learning this new information, I give myself a moment to take it all in. But I don't have to think much longer. The duplicate surely issued a polite refusal, knowing him.

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"Damn, I expected a bit of anger or for you to threaten me in an attempt to protect Vega," he complains after seeing my lack of reaction.

"You wouldn't hurt her."

"Just a few days ago, you weren't sure, weirdo." He snoots another blast of kinetic energy at me, "Anyway, I think that intent was placed here by one of the Rulers. If we are right, Rulers are even more powerful than Absolutes, and there are 14 of them. One for each Radiance and Blight."

"That sounds logical, there should only be a single Ruler for each Blight and Radiance. Having more wouldn't feel right. So the intent isn't the Ruler of Greed as he already told us that it's the Ruler of Greed running the tutorial, either that or they've taken a huge degree of interest in it."

He nods, "From what I can tell, it seems like Rulers have some amount of control over the system or at least the tutorial. The intent from Beyond can't influence the tutorial too much, either because it just can't or because it's intent only. But it can surely see and hear what's happening in here. Oh, by the way, fuck you bitch, I know you are listening," My duplicate says and gestures to the air.

A friendly gesture meant for the nosy intent.

The duplicate continues, "I also asked why it cares so much about our round of the tutorial. Earth should have been through multiple rounds as should the other planets. Hundreds or thousands of tutorials all going on at once, yet it's watching this one."

"Maybe that Ruler is powerful enough to leave dozens of intents to watch a lot of tutorials. Plus, there is an escaped Absolute here."

The mana stone in his hands glows as more of his mana rushes in, creating inscriptions, "That's true, that's what I thought and I asked about that. Apparently, Absolutes going wild is rare but not it's not that rare. What caught that fuckers interest the most is our number one Beyond explorer."

Oho?

I straighten up, giving full attention to our conversation. This is getting more interesting.

"It looks like the man in question started off in the Beyond like we did in Hell. The first person to do so in millennia. And it seems like that asshole finds that rather interesting. I wouldn't be surprised if more intents of Rulers appear all over the place. Watching that Beyond dude and messing with poor us in their spare time while he sleeps or whatever. All so they are not bored."

So very interesting.

It piques my interest even more. Of course, I've always been curious about our 1st Beyond explorer. Someone who had entered even before second place, Savant, and third place, me. And of course, I did have a theory that maybe, just maybe, that person started in Beyond.

But having it confirmed?

"So he started in 3 Beyond trials? Or he skipped trials and went to Beyond whatever it is? Or he started in a trial and then went to Hell floor and continued the trial 4 months later?"

"Hell if I know." My duplicate seems to be curious as well, I can see it on him. "I would say he either started in Beyond or had different trials from us."

"I'm inclined to agree, but damn."

"Yeah, damn."

"Another guy to beat up. It's nice that the list keeps getting longer." I'm not even that worried, just curious. Just what kind of man is that person, to catch the interest of intent of someone so powerful?

I really want to see and I really want to meet him. Just how much would I be able to learn from fighting someone like that?

Having sold anything not nailed down and taking anything of interest like metals, weapons, and armor I want to inscribe and sell, that's a lot of things to carry around.

I mean, really a lot.

Instead of pulling them, I just transport them through my anchors, though each teleport does cost quite a lot, to the point where I have to ask My duplicate to help so I don't have to use Mana Reservoir. In exchange, as his reward, he gets to carry Vega.

I'm not jealous at all. I'm happy. I sold 16 thousand shards worth of items. The sheer amount is staggering given that the system shop only pays 10-20% of the item's value if I haven't actively worked on it.

So, the value of the mana stones, enchanting tables, metals, robes, and crafting materials were 5-10 times more than what I sold them for. And I still have a lot of the best things on me.

Something tells me that maybe I wasn't supposed to reach, and loot, the Veil Ignition Station.

What I regret is being unable to find out more about the place given the decimation of the main and auxiliary control rooms. There were no records to be found, as usual.

Is it doing this on purpose? Is the system an extrovert? Is it trying to force me to talk to people to learn what happened and finish the side quests?

Killing a few monsters and avoiding two Veil Guardians with the combined efforts of my duplicate and myself, we reach the Bastion.

It takes longer than it should, but when the view opens, I notice that some of the walls have been damaged and even the barrier surrounding the palace feels weaker. It's getting darker, and I can see that even lights that once served to light the streets are now activated sparingly. All in an effort to save as much energy as possible.

Killing more monsters on our way, we reach the place only to be welcomed by the Butler. The man has shaved the remaining half of his mustache, and his clothes are different now. They are not as elegant and serve a more functional purpose, and I can sense multiple items on him.

"Mister Gwyn, another Mister Gwyn, and Miss Vega, can I ask you to leave?" he says in the same tone. It seems that his ways can't be changed, even by their current situation.

"Ehm, no?" I start off.

He sighs, "Did you not cause enough trouble? You got what you wanted, so please show just a grain of restraint and leave."

"Butler!" Vega shouts cheerily, and the man turns to her, "You look better without the mustache!"

The man looks at her, at me, and then back at her, "Thank you, Miss Vega."

The little half-demon only nods and puts her head back on the chest of my duplicate, her social batteries most likely already empty.

"See, you should thank me for getting rid of your mustache. I did it to help you," My duplicate can't help but poke.

"That's why I let Tess deal with people, you are a disgrace," I tell him.

He doesn't even seem to disagree but continues to talk to the Butler, "We know about a way to power the Bastion. Lots of mana."

"We are not interested, Mister Gwyn. I thank you for your offer, but we already..." he freezes mid-word and looks back towards the Bastion. An expression of sheer surprise appears on his face, the elegant mask cracking to be replaced by anger, "What have you done?" he asks.

"I left an anchor on the heart of your good ol' Lord when I was keeping it alive. To be honest, Butler, I'm disappointed none of you noticed even though I tried really hard to hide it. Anyway, I just sent a wad of energy through and exploded it."

The duplicate seems proud even with our usual expression and the Butler seems like he is about to jump down and choke him to death.

Unbothered, Duplicaniel continues, "So, about our offer to power your Bastion with a lot of mana. Sounds good, right? It's free, I promise."

Chapter 320: Magnificent mind

Unsurprisingly, they let us in.

Unsurprisingly, they seem to be pissed off.

Unsurprisingly, my duplicate doesn't care.

I watch with amusement as he bathes in the glares of the Butler, and Housekeeper who has joined our party.

Both of us are escorted through the Bastion, on the shortest route to the room where we met them for the first time. Getting there, we find that it still lies in ruins, a testament to the short clash between the Housekeeper and I.

The tall and thin Armorer is already awaiting our arrival, alongside the Gardener.

"We have only half a day until the barrier runs out of mana, along with the rest of the systems," the Armorer says in his quiet, whispering voice.

With Vega in his arms, my duplicate just shrugs, and even I find myself wanting to punch him in the face for some reason. My minion seems to be enjoying the show as well. She is half-demon, isn't she? Such a show of arrogance and power would be something she would appreciate.

Indeed, I'm the most normal one here.

"There is no way it's that easy to transfer so much mana, it would tear you apart," the Armorer complains after he hears Plan B.

"It's fine, we have some decent skills, and we'll be working together with that lazy asshole over there," my duplicate responds.

So rude.

"Even then, it will take hours and hours of preparation to make it all work. You have no idea how many settings need to be changed. I will also need a sample of mana from the core you mentioned."

"Sure," the duplicate reaches into the anchor we have placed on one of the least damaged circuits.

Unable to contain it fully for a short moment, a wave-like mass of mana explodes from him, even pushing the Armorer a few steps back.

I reach out and resonate with him, and together we close the anchor.

Cursing under his breath, the Armorer gestures to the Butler, and both of them disappear through a rift to make their preparations.

Left behind with the two remaining members of their small group, I find the Housekeeper standing in front of me. She is smiling, but her eyes are dangerous. Even now, she is still wearing the same light dress with the same skirt ending just over her knees, her shoulders bared.

"I like the rapier you have; will you give it to me?" she asks shamelessly.

"It's a gift from someone very precious to me. I don't know if I can just..." I start before she cuts me off. She just reaches out and takes it off my belt.

For some reason, I can't help but find this amusing, especially as she starts checking the weapon for any sort of damage and before cleaning it.

The Butler appears again, and my duplicate follows him, alongside Vega, to whom I gesture my assent, as the Gardener brings up the rear.

Once they've left me alone with the Housekeeper we spend the next two hours in silence. I can feel her gaze on me, but I just continue my training.

When I feel a sharp pulse of mana wash over the Bastion we stand up and head back towards the city walls. Neither of us is talking, even as we come to a lookout at the top of one of the higher walls. There, in the distance, stands two Veil Guardians, looking towards the Bastion.

"They must have followed you," the Housekeeper blames me.

"Probably," I agree.

"I can call the Butler for support, and we can..."

"They're already connected to the Veil."

"That's not very good."

"I agree." I leave a tiny orb and anchor near her, "If they move any closer, just destroy the orb, and I will be back."

After that, I teleport a few times after locating my duplicate and the Armorer. I find them gathered in the core chamber alongside Vega and the Butler.

When I enter and reach the core, the Lord's body is already gone, now useless. Instead, my duplicate is discussing with the Armorer.

"It won't work, the core of this Skyhold Bastion is heavily standardized, and we've only ever made slight adjustments to meet our needs over time. The amount of mana it can contain is measured in..." the Armorer says in his calm, whispering voice.

"It will be fine, I'm good with inscriptions."

“Your inscriptions are far from adequate. I can already point out five twists and three wasteful lines on the ones you’ve already inscribed.”

“Hey, if it works, it works.”

While they discuss, Vega moves closer to me, keeping her distance from the others. “Master, they like us even less than before,” she says somewhat happily.

“How does it make you feel?” I ask her with some curiosity.

“They hate master and uncle, but they’re still willing to cooperate despite being scared. Because master is stronger than them.”

“Is being stronger that important?”

“Yes. It's the best!”

My disciple indeed. “Good job, minion!”

“What did I do?” she asks confused, but I'm already standing next to the Armorer and the duplicate.

“We have two Veil Guardians outside of the Bastion, and they are already connected to the Veil,” I tell them.

The Armorer turns to me, “Standard procedure. They were once powerful humans twisted into their current forms by the Veil. The Veil Guardians' main objective is to locate places like Skyhold Bastion or find strong survivors and then pass that information along.”

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“So, not good?”

“Yes, Mister Gwyn, not good.”

“Hey, original weirdo, help me over here with inscriptions. That scrawny man is too scared to do anything.”

Immediately the Armorer complains, “I have to say it again, but the way you are using inscriptions is extremely primitive, it’s taxing on the materials and the user.”

“Hey, if it works, it works,” I say to him and join Vega's uncle.

It takes a few seconds, but it's enough for me to grasp his intent, and ignoring the rest of the room, I join in. My mana resonates with his, and we etch and paint inscriptions on the core itself and the floor around it. Together we create an anchor and use [Tether] to gradually connect it with the one we left in the Ignition Station.

At this point, I activate Mana Wavelength Iris and take over, my new passive allowing me to handle more strain than my duplicate.

This time he uses [Resonance] to connect to me, and we combine our [Mana Domains], using [Infusion] and [Mana Manipulation] to handle it all.

Lastly, I put our beloved creation, the single use, ugly Focus crown on my head, and create a black orb of highly compressed mana, both of us working to keep it under control.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Go for it.”

[Focus] activates, and I take the black mana into my body, using it to power the skill.

The world around me slows as my brain processes all of the information my eyes are feeding me, and that's when I activate [Tether] and [Redistribution]. The inscriptions glow radiantly. The ones we've painted, and the ones we've etched, as a trickle of mana flows from the Ignition Station's core to be filtered through my skills. And I, slowly, increase the openings size, allowing more and more mana to pass through.

Quickly, the amount blossoms into a powerful stream that I struggle to keep under control. My duplicate is helping me by activating inscriptions and quickly adjusting our mistakes, and even the Armorer and the Butler seem to be helping us in the background.

And like that the core of the Bastion lights up, more and more mana filling it, the audible hum sounding in the room.

It's easy.

It's so damn easy with all of our preparations, and My duplicate's assistance, so in excitement, I widen the opening, and like a wave, much more mana flows through.

The process speeds up even more. Yet still, it's not difficult.

I'm using so many skills, I'm handling black mana, I'm handling my eyes. I'm even making sure Vega is out of danger. Even then, it's possible with black mana powering my [Focus].

The world feels slow, I have plenty of time to react every time something breaks or cracks. And my inexperience is supported by my ability to improvise and handle it all while we work.

Should I let even more mana flow through?

"Enough!"

Should I open the pathway wide open and let the entirety of the core fill up? It could be fun.

“Stop!”

I bet I could handle it. The Bastion might break, and its core might be damaged. But I could do it. I can endure that amount of mana flowing through.

“That's enough,” my duplicate disrupts my skills and forcibly pulls me away from the core, and only then do I come back to my senses. All the sounds my skill allowed me to ignore come rushing in and with them, useless information like the state of my body, pain, and other useless things.

The black mana disappears, and my passive activates, fed by the Vortex Core, and taking a few steps, I plop down on one of the tables. My body hurts, my head hurts, and I realize I can't see. But my mind is fine. Either thanks to my new passive or the results of our training.

“Close your eyelids; your eyes have been burned out. You don't want Vega to see you like this,” My duplicate says, and then I can sense him moving towards Vega and pulling her somewhere else.

I do as he told me and use more thermal energy from the Vortex Core. Then I examine the damage.

Damn.

Well, it could be worse.

“How can you be capable of channeling so much mana? You should be dead, reduced to a mass of burned pathways inside a charred body,” the Armorer says.

I can hear the curiosity in his voice, maybe even bordering on fascination.

He continues, “You bear a magnificent mind to handle it all effortlessly. Your body is extremely conductive too, and your eyes... it's been so long since I've seen such a powerful trait. Has it already been strengthened? Once, twice?”

Sensing his presence with [Perception], I release a bit of kinetic energy and push him further away from me.

“So, how is the core?” I ask.

“Full to the brim,” he doesn't seem to mind but I can still feel his gaze on me. “I already started the sequence to take off, and the Butler went to use communication systems to warn the citizens.”

“Flying already?”

“Yes, in the past few days, the Veil has become much more active in this area, and two Veil Guardians outside are bad news. We have to leave. But I want to show you something first. Can you transport both of us to the Housekeeper?”

Feeling thermal energy healing my wounds and making sure Vega is safe with my duplicate, I push myself off the table and onto my feet.

I almost stagger but I'm able to control my battered body and keep myself standing.

My duplicate seems to be in a similar, if a bit better state, so there is no way I will be acting all hurt where that weirdo can see.

Pushing through, I put my hand on the Armorer and teleport us to the anchor I left on the wall. Appearing on the other side, a sharp pain flashes through my head, and with my eyes still closed, I turn towards the direction where the Housekeeper is standing.

“Fuck, you look like shit. I like that,” she says immediately.

“Housekeeper, please, your language,” the Armorer says in a quiet voice.

“Fuck you too. We are at full attention, and there will be a lot of fighting fairly soon. You know what that means. I'm taking over.”

"All of us know the rules, Housekeeper."

"Good, do we have enough juice to deal with these two jerks?"

"More than enough."

I'm still unable to see. It seems that because of my trait, my eyes are taking longer to heal than they would've if I didn't have my Mana Wavelength Iris. But I can use my other senses, and at that moment, I feel an immense wave of mana rush into the barrier and the walls.

It spins, it twists, it hums, and I feel multiple segments of the barrier grouping up and creating a delicate shape that collects and directs all of that mana. That mana spins there, bounces, and clashes multiple threads against each other. All of that concentrates it even further, and the spinning circle gains even more speed.

At this point, the noise of it reminds me of a sling spinning at terrifying speed.

Suddenly, the Butler appears from a rift to stand at my side.

"Focus on the one to the left," the Housekeeper barks at the Armorer who has taken control of the barrier. "Butler, I want you to grab the voidsteel blades afterward."

There is no hesitation in her voice, and it seems to be well placed. The rays being emitted from the segments of the barrier roar through the air as if they were tearing it apart. In a fraction of a second, the rays hit their target.

The Butler disappears, and a second later, he reappears, and I can sense two red-hot, and undamaged voidsteel blades on his person.

"The second one has escaped," the Armorer says.

“We expected as much. Continue our preparations for lift off. We will head to the Sanctuary and then move further south,” the Housekeeper orders.

Well, it looks like I will get to see what happened to Darren and Nina after all.

However, and more importantly, let's see how this thing flies.