

Tutorial 321

Chapter 321: Not bad

I notice a presence coming closer, and take my eyes off the chunk of molten metal hovering in front of me and look towards the door.

"What?" I ask, annoyed; it just started getting interesting!

The butler returns my gaze and, after looking around the room, he sighs, "Mister Gwyn, I would like to ask you, once again, to please minimize damage to the rooms."

What is he even talking about? I've only melted a few bricks and metal plates with my thermal energy. Isn't it their fault for having such faulty protections on their facilities?

"The Armorer keeps complaining about the increased heat signature triggering alarms and that he has to turn off."

"Good, it will keep him sharp. I think he's been getting lazy over the last three days. So, what is it? Are we approaching the Sanctuary already?"

"It is as you say, Mister Gwyn. The Housekeeper has told me to invite you to join us on the walls. You might be inclined to agree to help us push against the Veil forces on the ground. She said she doesn't want to waste the mana in the core, but I suspect you know her true motivations."

"Sure, I will be there soon."

After that, he leaves, and I look at the chunk of metal floating there. It's one of my experiments with one of the many metals I got from the Veil Ignition Station. I had decided to devote the past few days to experimentation, and I've only left when something broke in this Bastion that hadn't flown in almost a hundred years.

I still remember everything so vibrantly, when we lifted off. I even took Vega, and we watched the Skyhold Bastion from afar, to get a better view, as it slowly rose into the air. Shaking, and crumbling in

places, as people screamed, and waves of mana flooded through the inscriptions prepared by the Enchanter Guild so long ago.

Just the sight of such a huge city rising into the air, hundreds of buildings, towers even, along with the surrounding walls was a truly amazing experience. I thought I knew what to expect, but when that huge mass just floated, I couldn't help but be amazed.

Yup, I will totally try to replicate this sometime in the future. Maybe I can bully some of the people from Hard difficulty into working for me and helping with the construction. I should be able to handle a few of them.

After the Bastion lifted off, my duplicate connected to the anchor in the Ignition Station to feed a trickle of mana to the Bastion's core, refilling what we've spent. Even that much isn't strictly necessary as the sheer amount of mana in the core should last through weeks of flying, even while using the barrier and weapons, but we did, just in case.

Storing the metal away, I extend my domain, place an anchor at the edge of it, and teleport. I repeat this until I reach the section of the wall where the others have gathered.

As I arrive, I look over the edge, and observe the vast forest below and the mountains in the distance, noting that we're floating well above their peaks. Even the clouds seem to be so close, just a bit higher and I might be able to touch them. And I love it.

What I don't love so much is the way the Veil has become even more visible in the sky. It's already gotten to the point where I can see it without my mana sense or my trait, and soon enough, even people without good mana sensitivity will be able to see it as well.

The Veil is made up of hundreds, and thousands of lines encompassing the entire planet. Like pathways and inscriptions hanging in the air. And even after spending the last few weeks here, I have no fucking idea how they did it. It annoys me.

"One Veil Guardian nearby and a few hundred veilshriekers," the Housekeeper states, breaking the silence.

"We will take care of the Veil Guardian," my duplicate says, appearing nearby.

"Shouldn't you be working on your plan to keep yourself alive?" I ask.

"It's almost done. Now I just need granny healer or soylent healer."

"That's such a terrible name for the guy."

"I know, I just couldn't come up with anything better."

Even as he says that I can tell that his mood has improved. "Are your preparations going well?"

He nods, taking a few steps and looking over the wall, "It's not perfect, but it should work. I just need a tiny bit of help from the annoying big guy. He's looking for something entertaining to do while he stalks the first Beyonder, so I'm going to try something."

"Sounds good. For now, let's bully the Veil Guardian."

Not even waiting for the Housekeeper, he jumps off the wall and I follow, the barrier lets us pass thanks to the identification bracelets on our wrists.

The Housekeeper jumps right behind us, and when we stop our fall and float in the air, she continues to fall, in fact, she does something to increase the speed of her fall.

She crashes into the ground like a meteor, her purple mana exploding into the surroundings, and she emerges from the small crater, undamaged. The monsters that survived her crash immediately attack her.

That's when the Veil Guardian that's been keeping an eye on the Bastion and communicating with the Veil decides to attack. My duplicate appears in his way, armor surrounding his body. Their voidsteel blades collide, producing a clear ring. They connect dozens of times before the Guardian's jump ends and he lands on the ground.

The two of us approach him, wearing the same armor and wielding the same weapons.

The Veil Guardian increases the gravity in the area, as he growls and charges at me, only to be shot in the back of the head with a thin, concentrated cone of kinetic energy. The monster turns midstep, and that's when I do the same, releasing a thin stream of kinetic energy from my Vortex core, throwing the monster into the air.

At that point, the Guardian increases its own weight and quickly lands, before lowering its posture and swinging the blades on the end of its arms.

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The forest falls apart around us, trees falling to the ground cleanly cut, as we jump over and dodge a series of attacks we track with our senses.

My duplicate's heart beats, and he uses kinetic energy to power his armor, effortlessly pushing through the enhanced gravity and closing the distance.

Another exchange later, the Guardian staggers back bearing a gash across its chest, and my concentrated stream of golden flames crashes into the blade it's using to protect itself. More mana flows into the voidsteel blade, and the monster swings its arm, cutting through the attack, only to be hit by a compressed javelin filled with kinetic energy.

The monster staggers again, and more javelins slam into it one after the other. Some are filled with thermal energy, others with kinetic, and some are merely highly compressed mana.

For the next ten minutes, we test our skills against the monster, looking for weaknesses and learning what kinds of attacks it has trouble with. The guardian tries to fight back, but every time it pushes one of us, the other takes advantage, so in the end, it's not even a challenge.

"It could be an enjoyable 1v1, but after learning its skills and how it fights, it's not that fun anymore. It isn't really that smart either," My duplicate says, finally taking the opportunity to bring out Flame Bearer, the heavily damaged arcane grade ax.

Together we use [Redistribution], and the monster becomes unable to move at all with our combined effort. Well, more of my effort as I activate my trait to pierce through its protective field.

The black ax lights up with glowing red inscriptions, thermal energy dancing across the blade. The weapon seems to strengthen the flames, and even this far away, I can feel the heat radiating from the ax. and Trees burst into flame in a circle around us, scorching the air.

"As expected, even damaged, this weapon still qualifies as an upper epic," as my duplicate swings the ax, and in front of him, a huge patch of trees gets washed away by the flames, crumbling to ash in moments.

"The ax is doing most of the heavy lifting, and I only need to feed it thermal energy. It seems to work with mana as well, after converting it into fire, but it's more efficient with thermal energy, and the effect is stronger," he says taking a step towards the Veil Guardian.

At that moment, all the heat disappears from the area, pulled into the blade of the ax as its color shifts. There is no heat for me to sense, and even the blade itself feels ice cold. Then my duplicate swings, burying the ax in the monster's flesh.

The Veil Guardian's body erupts in a short burst of flames, reducing it to a charred husk in a single attack.

[You have defeated Veil Guardian - lvl 291]

[Lvl 227 > Lvl 228]

"That took most of the thermal energy in my Vortex Core, but the resulting damage seems to have been highly concentrated," my duplicate states while examining the weapon. After that, he disappears to help the Housekeeper finish off the veilshriekers.

I, on the other hand, return to the Bastion seeking Vega. I have noticed a few lower-level veilshriekers; it's time for her to level up.

Vega dodges to the side with a graceful leap and leaps into the air, higher than normal, boosted by her kinetic energy. At this point, the hiding veilshrieker she failed to detect crashes into her, trying to tear her apart.

I watch as the monster's attacks fail to pierce Vega's [Kinetic Barrier] and she siphons off bits of the attack's kinetic force to fuel her passive.

Crashing to the ground with the monster, she coats her weapon with mana, extending the blade, and stabs it into the monster's side. She then pulls her legs to her chest and kicks the monster off her. Acting quickly, she throws the dagger, giving it a boost with kinetic energy, lodging it deep inside the monster's head.

This time, she senses the presence behind her and ducks under the swing, a dagger made of mana forms in her hand, and she uses it to stab the monster repeatedly, as she absorbs its attacks with her barrier.

Not bad, if I do say so myself.

Vega fights while keeping the stronger monsters out of her path. We don't have much time, and in the past few days, it's been hard to find weaker monsters, so we need to make the best of this opportunity. There is no need for much feedback either. Unlike me, who likes to switch between ranged and close-range attacks, Vega prefers fighting at close range.

She relies on her barrier and her kinetic energy to give her short bursts of power. Using her heart and passive to generate and store kinetic energy, it doesn't seem like all that bad an idea.

Seeing that she is at the last monster, she forms a small orb of mana, and I feel her transfer kinetic energy into it. She ducks, jumps backward, and slings the orb in between the last two veilshriekers, where it explodes, tearing a sizable chunk out of both monsters.

With one last push from her remaining kinetic energy, she boosts herself at the monsters with the dagger in hand.

"Your handling of kinetic energy is good, but your mana control is lacking, minion," I say as she hobbles over to me, her senses scanning the area.

"I know, but master's the one who's weird; mana isn't that easy to control."

"That's just because you use your kinetic energy too much, minion. When we return to the Bastion, I want you to stop training kinetic energy for a week and focus on mana. You can't even create a proper barrier, and your mana weapons are a disgrace."

"I don't need a mana barrier, master! I can use [Kinetic Barrier]!"

"What about mana-based attacks? What if someone uses fire or lightning?"

"I..."

"Yes? You?"

"I will train with mana more."

"Good, I will show you some basic inscriptions and give you some mana stones with relevant information. When you return to your world, you can try inscribing weapons and make a lot of money."

That seems to catch her interest now, "A lot of money?"

"A shitload of money Minion."

"Shitload of money!" she shouts happily.

"Language. You are ruining the girl," the Housekeeper joins in, followed by my duplicate. Neither of them appears to have been wounded.

Immediately, Vega's expression changes, and her face becomes even less readable, like she does any time anyone else is around. My cute minion still has issues with trusting others.

"I got a message from The Butler; someone called Nina has contacted us on the open channel. It seems like they are under attack." the Housekeeper says.

The moment she says that a side quest pops up.

Side quest: Help the survivors in the Sanctuary.

Reward: 1000 shards.

Some time ago, I would have been happy, but now, when I have almost 30 thousand shards, it doesn't seem that much.

"I need the granny and that healer guy," my duplicate says, turning to face me.

Knowing my duplicate, he will repay me if I help, and that's not so bad. I have a few ideas that won't work without him, and he might refuse otherwise or ask for something in return.

"Minion," I say reaching out to her, and she lifts her arms so I can carry her against my chest.

Once there, she nestles in like a little animal, and the familiar sensation of her pointy horns poking my chin makes itself known.

"The three of us will take the lead, you guys can follow us," I tell the Housekeeper, as we lift off.

Chapter 322: What an insane bastard

POV Nina

One after another, our lines break down. Hundreds of veilshriekers are pushing through, even at the cost of their lives. Every time one dies, two more climb over its body, and shriek with a hatred that makes the guards shudder.

It reaches the point where we finally have to stop in the clearing in front of the iron door to the Sanctuary.

(Housekeeper, how long are you going to be? We're in trouble here! The moment the first veilshrieker sees the door to the Sanctuary, he's going to send a signal to the Veil and summon the Guardians.)

It doesn't take long to get an answer, but even then, it feels like forever. After long hours of fighting, my mana and stamina are starting to flag.

(They should be there any moment. Got to go, we have company as well, just hold on!)

The connection cuts off, and I fight the desire to smash the device in my hand.

And then, just when I'm about to swap out with a tired squad mate, two figures appear in the air. There is no mana radiating from their forms, no wings, no other energy I could sense. They just float there as if they were standing on solid ground and letting everything else move around them. There is no jerking, no movement from side to side.

Just two figures floating in the air, unaffected by any outside force.

He is holding a little girl in his arm, his disciple, and I can't help but be relieved to see the calm expression that never seems to leave his face.

Without any buildup or movement of mana, a stream of golden flames erupts from him as well, flooding the pathways between rocks and melting stones along with the monsters within.

The heat doesn't touch me or any of the men standing near him, all of it devoted to destroying monsters that die so easily that it makes our prior struggle seem pointless.

"No monster can see the entrance to the Sanctuary, they will summon the Veil Guardians otherwise," I warn him as I allow myself to relax.

"Huh? Really?" his flames disappear, and his eyes examine me. A spark of interest dancing within.

Then he says something to his disciple and sets her down. Right after, he disappears, and when he appears again, he holds a veilshrieker by its neck, the monster struggling and trying to attack. Nathaniel then lifts the monster up and forces it to look at the door leading to the Sanctuary.

Immediately the monster freezes and lets out a screech that I had yet to hear from them. A pulse of mana washes over us, and Nathaniel does nothing to stop it. The next moment, the monster's head disappears in a burst of golden flames, and its dead body falls to the ground.

"What have you done," I can only ask with horror.

Another man appears out of thin air, an exact copy of the man that has doomed us all.

"I noticed the signal; you let it pass on purpose?" the newcomer asks.

"Yes, it seems like the veilshriekers are programmed to send the signal to the Veil the moment they locate the bunker. It should summon the Veil Guardian."

"Only one? Two would be better."

What the fuck are they talking about?!

"If it's two, I will move the minion back to the Bastion, and we can split them. If it's one, you will stay and keep her safe."

"Sure," the second Nathaniel says and turns to me. "Hey Nina, where is the healer guy? I have stuff I want to talk with him about."

“You... you!”

The growl deeper than any I have heard before fills the area, and a monster lands in the middle of the clearing. Just the pressure of the monster’s mana nearly forces me to my knees, and the look in its eyes is something I’m sure I will take to my grave.

Before I can even scream, a barrier stronger than any I’ve ever felt surrounds us, and one of the Nathaniels appears in front of the monster.

He leaves a crater in the ground as he strikes the monster, sending it flying through the air, causing it to disappear in the blink of an eye, as its powerful body crashes through solid stone.

Then armor forms around his body, simple and functional, though there is a regal kind of beauty to it.

He walks towards the monsters with a complete lack of urgency, cloaked in mana, like a king in his mantle.

I’m really thankful to Nina for telling me. I almost killed all of the veilshriekers before I even learned they could summon a Veil Guardian.

The creature’s attack crashes into me, and I can feel the air escaping from my lungs as I bulldoze through tons upon tons of rock.

Damn, I barely saw that one.

I strengthen my armor even more, just in time to absorb another attack which still sends me flying through the air.

Lately, I’ve had a hard time trying to level [Regalia], so I’m not infusing it with kinetic energy to absorb the damage, nor am I using a voidsteel blade. The only things I intend to use in this fight are weapons and armor I can make with my own mana.

Just [Focus], [Regalia], [Mana Manipulation], and [Mana Domain] condensed until it hugs my body and armor. Oh, and I did use [Redistribution] and [Infusion] to pack as much mana into my armor and weapons as possible.

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Okay, maybe it isn't the only skill I'm using, but it's the main one, and I'm only really using the others to supplement its effects.

My armor is a darker shade of blue this time and streaks of purple and light blue flow across the surface, and my weapon is no different. I don't push further, instead, I focus on improving the mana density and weight.

[Regalia - lvl 21 > Regalia - lvl 22]

I form a shield around my left forearm and block the next attack, though the Veil Guardian's voidsteel still manages to cut through and bite into my flesh.

I dodge another swing, and repair my shield, reducing the size, and condensing the mana within.

The result is the same, the blade cuts off a piece of the shield, and another swing cuts my sword apart. The Veil Guardian kicks out, sending me flying, and as I sail through the air, I dissolve my shield while flying through the air from the kick of the Veil Guardian and reform the sword in my hand into a long spear that I point in front of me.

The Veil Guardian closes the distance in an instant, one blade arm cutting the spear apart and the other one burrowing into the stone near my head. The armor surrounding my knee extends into a spike, and I jam it into the monster's flesh, immediately the gravity around me increases.

I deactivate a few of my skills and resonate my mana, getting rid of the slowing effect, dodging another attack, and shrugging off its attempts at disrupting my mana.

Running to the side, the monster dodges a barrage of compressed mana javelins that I left in the air, waiting to be triggered. Each of my attacks pierces deep into the ground.

Close-range fighting seems to be counterproductive. My [Regalia] just isn't at a level to handle voidsteel weapons. Instead, I put distance between us and more javelins form around me, each boosted by kinetic energy from my Vortex Core.

Their speed is just enough to catch the monster, and they do manage to pierce through its skin, wounding it in the process.

I disrupt the Guardian's signal to the Veil.

My duplicate was right. Knowing what to look for and mainly being able to deal with the monster's jamming ability and its gravity field makes the fight almost easy. I just need to avoid its quick attacks, but even that's a simple matter with [Tether], even as the monster tries to get rid of it.

In the interest of advancing my plan, I fire off a barrage of mana projectiles, destroying larger and larger chunks of the landscape in the process. It takes a bit longer and I almost get cut apart multiple times, but I do gradually manage to kill the monster.

The reward is two level ups and another level in [Regalia]. Not bad at all.

After salvaging the voidsteel slicers, epic weapons in their own right, from the corpse, I sell them to the system shop. Each one lands me just over 700 shards, leaving me with more than 30 thousand shards in total. It could've been 45 thousand if I hadn't bought my newest epic passive, but hey, with the way it allows my mind to handle the strain of my trait, it's more than worth it. Now I need something similar for my weak body.

Nope, no stats in constitution. That's for weaklings. Real mana enjoyers have their bodies broken after the simplest uses of their mana and then complain. Or they wind up coughing up blood because their bodies can't handle the strain, before saying something along the lines of, "Good job, you made me use 10% of my mana."

Okay, maybe that doesn't sound as cool as I thought.

Also, my good mood seems to be showing. It seems like soloing the Veil Guardian was just that satisfying. I'm level 230, and he was just over 290, so that's good, I think.

When I teleport back after placing a few anchors, I find Nina in conversation with my duplicate, and when she sees me, it almost looks like her eyes are going to fall out.

Good, finally some appreciation.

"Master! Good job! That monster was scary."

Oh, minion as well, is this my lucky day?

"Thanks, Vega," in a good mood, I decide to call her by the name I gave her, and the reward is the smile she gives me, her good ol' master.

"So, how does it look?" I ask my duplicate.

"Granny and her father Irvin are both alive and in the Sanctuary. Everyone seems to be prepared to evacuate, so we just need the Armorer to land somewhere close and get people in while we do some fighting."

"Having both healers alive seems like it would be better for your plan," I mention, and he nods. Then I turn to Nina, "Where is Darren?"

I know her answer from her expression, but then she says, "He was killed along with a few of his weaker men. As punishment. The stronger ones are used for dangerous missions."

It's hard to read the exact emotion on her face, but she does seem to hate me, at least a little.

"For feeding human meat to people?" I ask. "Why are you alive then?" I do not try to be sensitive about it.

“Ask our new leaders,” her eyes meet mine, and I decide to return her gaze.

I ask her, “Do you hate me?”

“That’s a dumb fucking question.”

“Did your father curse me in the end?”

“The most fucked-up thing is that he didn’t. Even as they executed him, he just let it all happen. My father did it all for the people and took their sins on himself. He understood their, and your decision.”

“He was always too dumb and caring. He should have just let these people die.” Granny says as she exits the Sanctuary, pausing to spit on the ground.

[Vitalist - lvl 103]

That doesn't seem to make Nina happy. “I would fucking beat your ass if I could,” she says.

“Sure you would,” the old woman giggles and then spots me and my duplicate, her eyes ticking between us.

She even takes a few steps closer and examines us with her mana.

At which point she sighs, “What an insane bastard you are.” That's all she says.

So very charming.

Meanwhile, more people flood out of the Sanctuary, each one carrying as many things as they can, scared and looking around with big eyes. They pass by us on either side, gathering in individual groups in

the clearing after getting the all clear from the scouts and their new leaders. Within the group, there's at least one man I know.

[Lifebloom Weaver - lvl 216]

He is even 10 levels higher than the last time I met him. Irvin, the guy they kept locked in the tunnels under the Sanctuary to serve as a food supply. Willingly at first, and in the end against his will. But he seems much better now.

His beard and hair have been well groomed, and he is wearing clean clothes, but the biggest change lies in his expression. It's not quite as crazed as it was before, even though some trauma remains. But now, he seems more reliable, even happy. If that's the right word to use.

My duplicate seems to be even more happy to see him. He puts on our “friendly” expression and reaches into our very small reservoir of social energy.

Amused, I watch as he greets the man and granny, as he subtly compliments them though it's still somewhat awkward, and then just says it, probably too annoyed to wait longer, “So, I need your guys' help. I want to transfer one of my eyes into my cute disciple over there. I just need a bit of healing and some other stuff. Of course, I will help you in exchange, with anything else you might need. Even that weirdo over there,” he points at me, “is willing to help out.”

Indeed, even though his chances for survival are low, my duplicate is not going to take it lying down. No, he is cooking.

And I'm too fascinated to stop him.

Chapter 323: A week remains

The plan my duplicate came up with is to give Vega one of his eyes, which will most likely give her a weaker version of our Mana Wavelength Iris. Of course, that's not the entire plan.

The duplicate has more experience with inscriptions than me and he's come to the conclusion that placing an inscription in his eye and giving it to Vega might be the best course of action. It might work better than trying to inscribe some random mana stone or other material, and we do have a lot of experience with creating constructs.

Of course, the problem is that he can't create a personality imprint. Even after weeks of practice, he's not even close. That's how difficult it is.

So his plan is to have the asshole from Beyond, the bored intent, help him with that.

Giving his eye to Vega is also part of the plan as she will leave the tutorial fairly soon. Outside of the tutorial, it should be safer for him than inside where he would be constantly worried about getting deleted while crossing the floors.

It's an interesting plan, and I don't fully understand how the heck this could be the best idea he could come up with. But he has spent a lot of time thinking and theorizing, so there must be something to it.

He is a smart guy, even if he is slightly mad.

However, one last piece of the puzzle remains, getting that asshole intent to help store his personality imprint in the eye that he wants to give Vega. When I questioned him, my duplicate would only say that he knew where to push. The intent seems to be bored, so we might be able to broker some kind of bet or deal.

I won't try to stop him, I've already determined that it won't put Vega in danger. Worst case, My duplicate fails, and Vega gets a weaker version of my trait. I'm certain that she can inherit my trait the same way Min-Jae did with the eye we got on the 4th floor.

In the distance, a burst of mana explodes, marking the Housekeeper's battle against a big group of veilshriekers. Meanwhile, my duplicate is fighting a group of veilbinders in the air, a flying variation of those monsters. Even though they are human-like they have a pair of creepy wings instead of arms accompanied by another pair on their back, and their legs are fused into a single tail, limb, thing with a spike at the end.

I, on the other hand, have a dozen or so highly compressed projectiles floating beside me, and shoot them when needed. Sometimes I infuse them with kinetic energy, sometimes with thermal, or I just compress them further, making them extremely durable so that I can launch them at mach speed. It's something I'm quickly getting better at.

Under my barrage, no monsters manage to reach the people boarding the Bastion, and I even level up once.

Lvl 231

Strength: 111

Dexterity: 109

Constitution: 266

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 897 + 897

When everyone is aboard with everything they could take, I watch as a pulse of mana is sent through the Bastion's barrier and rushes to the bottom. A shockwave erupts from the flying island's underside, and the massive inscriptions covering the bottom light up.

With a dull humming noise, the Bastion floats into the air, and I watch as it rises.

I don't think this will ever get old, watching this huge mass just float there. How the hell would something like this ever get old? Just imagine an island the size of a small city floating into the air. Imagine the sheer weight of it all. And then watch it float there as if it were light as a balloon.

Having dealt with all the monsters I wanted to fight, I fly over to the Housekeeper, and float above her position, before releasing a compressed jet of flame as thick as my finger, piercing the monsters ahead of me, cutting them apart, and leaving behind a series of burnt, even chunks. I sweep it across the area, putting an end to the remaining monsters before landing beside her.

She lowers her defenses, allowing me to touch her shoulder, and teleport us back to the anchor I left on the Bastion, my duplicate appearing at our side at the same time.

The Housekeeper brushes her hair from her face, she has the same smile on her face that she always does anytime she fights. But even now, the Housekeeper doesn't seem like she's been pushed to her limit and gotten to fight all out.

When she leaves, I turn to my duplicate, and we resonate our mana around us, creating a barrier that makes it impossible for anyone to eavesdrop on our conversation.

"The Bastion's Barrier has changed slightly again," I tell him.

"The Armorer just doesn't want to give up," my duplicate says while looking around.

"Well, let's continue acting like we haven't noticed. That guy thinks he's sneaky and he just doesn't like us, and if he is onto it, the others probably are."

"The Housekeeper doesn't seem like it, but the Butler and the Gardener could join him just to fuck us over."

"That's likely," I agree. "Well, in the worst case, we will kill him. I don't like how creepily he looks at me."

"He's been that way ever since you burned your eyes out transferring mana to the core. 'Magnificent mind,' is that what he said? Maybe he wants to dissect you."

"He is free to try. If he does, I'll get rid of him, and we'll take over the Bastion. But it's nice to have him to drive it around and fend off attacks so we can do our thing."

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"It's not very long until the end of the floor, so let's hold off," my duplicate says seeming to agree with me. "I'm going to meet up with the granny and Irvin. They seemed like they would be inclined to help, but I will ask for more details and continue my work on the eye."

"When do you mean to contact the intent?"

"It said it would talk to me one day before I disappear to offer me the option to kill Vega again, so I'm going to ask then. Anyway, I'm going to keep practicing. I'll help you inscribe another weapon at night in exchange for some help later."

"Sure," I say, and the moment I do, my duplicate disappears, and I detect him joining Vega, who approaches him as well.

For a while, I stand on the wall and watch the constant barrage of attacks assaulting the barrier as the Bastion floats through the air. The attacks in question originate from a horde of flying monsters between level 100 and two hundred.

None of the attacks damage the barrier at all, and their only reward is a rebuke from a series of sharp beams that proceeds to tear through the monsters with ease. Even the Veil Guardian I see watching us from a distance doesn't bother to attack as it continues to trail us.

The fully powered, floating Bastion is formidable enough to deal with these monsters. Even after a hundred years have passed, leaving some of its functions broken and mechanisms damaged.

That makes me wonder what could have been able to take it down at its prime with its Lord, a man over level 300, defending it.

A few days have passed, and my handling of black mana is getting better and better, and I'm increasingly satisfied with the purchase of my new epic passive.

I am also going through the upper rare items I took from the Veil Ignition Station and finishing their inscriptions, turning them into epic weapons which I then proceed to sell.

By working with my duplicate, we've even managed to make a few mid bordering on upper epic grade items out of them.

Back on the 4th floor, I turned two epic items into an upper epic, but that was with the help of that floor's Craft Guild. A lot of help. It seems like I'm still a ways off from being able to make epic items all on my own, but I will get there.

Just looking at the damaged arcane ax that belonged to Nevan's father humbles me a lot. The weapon, no matter how damaged, is something that I can't help but admire, and it shows how much there is left to learn. And arcane weapons probably aren't even the peak.

Rather than demoralizing me; it awakens my competitive spirit.

Even on Earth, I used to excel at anything I put my mind to. It didn't matter if other kids were more talented or had better opportunities. I have always put more thought into it, always been more deliberate, and I've always trained more aggressively. I possess a hunger that more talented people often lack.

And if I meet someone with talent at the level of genius and hunger equal to mine?

Well, in that case, I will push even more. I will risk my life. I will sacrifice my limbs. I will hurt, and I will bleed. People may call me crazy. But I will push even further.

Savant? That weirdo who started in Beyond? Who cares?

It will be me coming out on top.

A week remains, and I have sold everything I can sell. Metal ingots, lower-quality alloys, any mana stones I can't use, and much more. I sold any items I couldn't inscribe and inscribed all I could. I went through the Bastion and sneakily sold a lot of items from their storages.

All of this has gained me enough shards to get to 49,725.

My duplicate and I also hunted a few more Veil Guardians, and I sold a few of my voidsteel blades.

As we've been returning to the Bastion after our hunts, I've noticed the way the Butler and the Housekeeper look at us change. Their behavior has changed as well.

The Housekeeper seems more interested, and I notice her keeping a hand close to her weapon every time I pass by.

The Butler keeps one rift open at all times so he can activate it quickly.

The Gardener spends most of his time in his garden, where he has plenty of defensive mechanisms.

The Armorer seems to be more and more interested day by day. I feel his gaze on my back. I feel his senses within the floating island as he keeps observing me. The little bit of cooperation we did have seems like a house of cards, each side ready to collapse. Them against me, the duplicate, and Vega.

Caught In between us, are Granny the Vitalist, her father Irvin, and Nina.

Nina seems to hate me, but she doesn't dare do anything. I think it is part of knowing she wouldn't be able to do anything and partially she also realizes that it was largely her father's fault.

The granny and Irvin spend a lot of time with Vega and the duplicate. They theorize, discuss, and plan.

Vega seems to be excited at the thought of getting a new eye, but that eye could disappear the moment my duplicate disappears as well. It just sounds like something the system would do.

So in the end, it relies a lot on the intent and whether or not my duplicate can amuse it enough to broker a deal. The logic is that even the intent probably can't save my duplicate without giving him some more permanent "status," and on this floor, that means me or Vega.

I won't agree. No matter how much I might consider it to be a bit of my fault or even if I pitied him or regretted it. I won't do it.

As for Vega, the duplicate won't do it.

In the end, the plan is simple. The eye being a body part makes the duplicate hope it will be less susceptible to erasure than a mana stone. He also said he found it easier to work with. It is a piece of his body with mana circuits and bearing his passives and mana.

I don't understand it fully, but he's spent more time thinking about it, so I can't argue. Something tells me that he hopes that even if he fails, he might be able to get the intent to ensure that Vega can keep his eye. One last gift to our disciple.

Just in case, we will also keep Vega's original eye. It would be unfortunate if the duplicate failed and Vega ended up without an eye.

That's where the two healers will help. They also seem to be planning to weaken the eye further so it will awaken gradually. Mana Wavelength Iris is a powerful trait, and we don't want our minion to melt her brain by using it too soon.

Overall, things go well. I progress with black mana, and my handling of my eyes improves. I made a lot of shards. And Vega is getting stronger by the day.

But it all feels off, and I don't think this floor will end well for my duplicate. No matter how much he plans, trains, and hopes. He was put in a shitty situation, and the only way out seems to be killing me or Vega and striking a deal with someone he can't even trust.

I have gained a lot thanks to our cooperation, and I thought I knew what I would feel if it came to this, but... this is a shitty way to feel.

That's when I also decide to never do anything like this again.

And I'm sorry.

I won't say it out loud, and I don't think I need to. I'm sure he knows.

Chapter 324: Truth about the Veil

"Master?"

“Yes, Vega?”

“Now we’re even more alike!” my minion says, with a smile. Her left eye has been replaced with my duplicate's, and he now sits nearby, his eyes, making use of his passive to regenerate it and heal the wound.

Meanwhile, both of Vega's eyes are still red. Even after the duplicate gave her his gray eye, it briefly retained its color, before being overtaken by Vega's beautiful red. There is only a hint of a golden circle around the pupil.

I wonder if it's because of her demon heritage or because it came from my duplicate. Either way, after examining it, it seems to be working. Vega now possesses a weakened version of Mana Wavelength Iris.

Even if it's not as strong as mine, it should be of use to her in the future, and if their plan works, it should carry the duplicate out of the tutorial.

For now, my duplicate is maintaining a connection to the eye with [Tether], the eye itself is heavily inscribed. Even though the personality imprint is imperfect, it should serve as a base in the case that the sliver of intent decides to complete it.

His best hope is to go to Vega's world and then, one day when she becomes stronger, find someone who could restore his body from the eye. He's also carrying a high-quality mana stone with my best attempt at creating a personality imprint. A slightly improved version of the one I left with Myrra on the 4th Floor.

We don't know if it will work and, if so, how this floor will react to having multiple instances, one for each attendee. But it doesn't hurt to try.

Creating a big barrier around our group, I turn to Irvin, the man who was used as livestock, “I wanted to ask before, but what exactly happened with the Veil?”

“Why do you think I would know or be willing to tell someone as crazy as you or your duplicate? Do you even realize how big a risk you took with that little girl?”

Vega doesn't seem to like his question, so I answer before she can, "I had hoped the Armorer would know more, but it seems like he was little more than a small fry, so he doesn't know much. You, on the other hand, are quite high-level for a healer, and I have learned that healers are very, very sought after."

Even though he seems to be doing better than he was when I freed him, he still seems to have a bit of a wild streak. He even twitches every time he sees a sharp blade or anything that reminds him of a collar.

"Does it all even matter? Just curse the people responsible; they do not deserve more."

Rather than responding, I look at him and wait.

At some point, his daughter, who still looks older than him, starts cursing at me and telling me to leave him alone, at which point he gives her a soft, loving look. The expression of a father watching his young daughter do something cute.

"It's fine, thanks for worrying, my dear," he says shortly and caresses her gray hair.

When he turns to me, his expression grows serious, "All of us thought the Enchanter's Guild had created the Veil on their own. They had done similar things before, some were even capable of defending an entire city, but an entire planet? It was something else."

Even his posture is the same, his feet up on the chair with his knees pulled to his chest, just like when I found him.

In contrast, his voice is calm, as he remembers, "I used to work in the main headquarters of the Enchanter's Guild. You might think I was in a position of authority, but even at my level, I was little more than low level personnel. They were just that powerful. It didn't matter what it was, but they always had to have the best, so obviously, they often collaborated with the leader of the Healers Guild." He laughs shortly.

"I saw her perform a healing for one of the high ranking members once. She just entered the room, and their entire family immediately grew ten to twenty years younger. That one second paid for her new Skyhold Bastion. Can you imagine that?"

Taking a short pause, he continues, "She died, one of the first. The Veil went after healers, leaders, and anyone with access to our defensive systems. At first, we thought the enemy had infiltrated the Veil and used it against us. Then we thought it was a traitor, a rogue Champion seizing an opportunity. Some blamed our Absolute, but if he wished to, he could have taken over the planet even without the Veil."

"Are Absolutes that powerful in comparison to others?" I ask.

"They are called Absolutes; how could they not be powerful?"

"Okay, so what caused the Veil to go rogue", my duplicate interrupts, "and how the hell did the Absolute die if he was so powerful?"

Irvin glances at him and then at his own hands, "The Veil was never the creation of the Enchanter's Guild. I still remember Champion Niall screaming at the remaining leaders of the Enchanter's Guild before she evaporated them into nothingness. The Enchanter's Guild either bought or found an egg of a powerful divine beast. It was passed through the guild for decades, and then when it hatched, they took care of it and experimented on it. The beast possessed a domain type skill they had never seen before and an extraordinarily powerful mind."

From this point, it's not hard to guess what happened, but I still listen to him and everyone else does as well. His daughter, Vega, my duplicate, and even Nina, who somehow ended up here with us.

In a solemn voice, Irvin recounts what happened, "They experimented on the beast. They made it stronger and used its skills. I don't know the details, but you can imagine that it wasn't so simple. In the end, only the brain and heart of the beast remained, kept in the biggest Skyhold Bastion that ever existed. Surrounded by enchantments powerful enough to slow down an Absolute. Surrounded by the most powerful members of the Enchanter's Guild. They even hired a Champion to work for them alone along with multiple Champion candidates. There they combined enchantments, metals, and mana stones, with the beast's flesh to create an abomination that shouldn't have existed. And they used it as the core of the Veil."

"Did your Absolute not notice this?" the duplicate asks.

"I don't know. He either did not notice, did not care, or he was working with them before it got out of control. Any of these options can be seen as a failure on his part."

Irvin continues, "Champion Niall said that the beast had contacted the planet that was pairing with us. Desperate to be freed even in such a state, and the other planet losing the fight, incapable of dealing with our Absolute, cooperated. Both sides struck at once, and on that day, our Absolute fell. Before he died he took down the Skyhold Bastion where they held the beast. He died, but he also mortally wounded their Absolute, damaged the Veil, and destroyed an entire continent up north, which became a wasteland. There, his body lies."

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Congratulations, you have completed a side quest.

Reward:5000 shards

After listening to Irvin's words, I can only feel awe, thinking of the man who stood as this planet's Absolute. He might have failed to contain the Veil for some reason, but even then, he didn't take it lying down. Destroying a continent? Damaging the Veil? Mortally wounding the enemy Absolute? All of it after being surprised and betrayed?

What a terrifying being.

I wonder how he compares to Lissandra in her full power. Or to the Saint who had been dead for thousands of years on the 3rd Floor, yet even her body was enough to spread a form of Decay that wiped out most of the life on the planet.

"What was your Absolute's name?" I ask.

"Tassian. He didn't belong to any noble family nor was he the disciple of any Champion. He took the rank of Champion by his own power and then went even further," Irvin says, the admiration evident in his voice.

"Our previous Absolute gave up his title and passed it to Tassian without even trying to defend it. That's how powerful Tassian was even as a Champion."

“Can't there be two Absolutes at once?” I wonder about that. A long time ago, on the second floor, I had heard that there were two Absolutes before Lissandra killed one.

“Each planet can only have only one Absolute; that's a fact,” Irvin says confidently.

Was I wrong? Did Lissandra kill an invading Absolute, or is Irvin missing something? Perhaps what I heard was referring to an Absolute candidate trying to take her seat.

Deciding to try system censorship, I ask, “How does one become an Absolute, what does it mean, and are there any advantages or changes?”

As expected, then I watch as blank expressions appear on the faces of every native, and Vega looks at them, confused. I gesture for her to ignore it for now.

Then I change the frequency of the resonating field that I keep around me to counter the Armorer's attempts at spying and something more sinister. It's getting more and more annoying, and at this point, he must have realized that I know.

But I still hold myself back; I'd rather spend my remaining days on this floor training Vega and practicing rather than flying the Bastion. And even now, this place is safer than the outside world.

A few days remain, and my duplicate, Vega, and I have convened in a simple room.

Keeping a black orb floating near me, I observe as Vega once again tells the duplicate how powerful her heart will become. After inheriting his eye, bound; to awaken slowly with time, she has been much more friendly towards him. Him sharing my appearance probably helps as well.

I can't not notice that the duplicate seems happy about it. My little minion is just that lovable. She is smug, she is bratty at times, and she is getting more rebellious as she spends more time with us. But in the end, she's still my minion.

Minion is cold to other people, she always keeps an eye on the exits of the room and keeps up her senses looking for any attack, and her barrier is always poised for activation. She won't let anyone, other than my duplicate or I touch her either.

And her curious and cheery personality only shines through every once in a while, only others to catch a glimpse.

I purposely avoid listening to their conversation. I use my skills to filter that out and focus on maintaining the barrier around us.

It's already been a few days since we last saw the Armorer and the Butler.

The shield around the Bastion is under constant barrage, and Veil Guardians appear multiple times a day and have to be dealt with by either me or my duplicate. The core also starts losing more and more mana. At this rate, it won't last much longer.

Leaving for a few hours at a time, me and the duplicate made all the preparations needed. I've gained all I can from this floor, and I don't want to be too greedy anyway. Keeping Vega alive is my priority.

I watch as Vega hugs my duplicate with tears in her eyes. She says something while crying and my duplicate smiles at her.

It's extremely weird to see myself smiling that way, and unlike other people, it's hard for me to read. Is it a happy smile? A sad smile? Is it fake?

My duplicate says something in return, and Vega squeezes him harder, right after giving him a little peck on the cheek, and his next expression is easy to read. Sheer surprise, though pleasant.

He ruffles her hair and pinches her tiny nose, then he looks at me.

When I nod, he extremely carefully teleports Vega outside of the Bastion, and I resonate with his mana, allowing him to pass through the Bastion's barrier. He disappears to hide Vega in the safe place we have prepared.

Then I activate my trait, and keeping the black orb near me, I teleport to the room where the Armorer is hiding.

Immediately, dozens of powerful attacks assault me, the pressure from the Bastion, shockwaves, mana attacks, physical attacks, all of it enough to kill a Veil Guardian.

The black orb absorbs all the mana attacks thrown at me, and I block the physical ones with the multi-layered spherical barriers I prepared. Then, before the attacks can continue, I send out a wave of mana, much stronger with my eyes reading the frequencies, disrupting the mana in the room.

The extremely thin Armorer sits near the core, with multiple tubes connecting his body to the core and inscriptions covering his skin.

"I just needed a few more minutes and I would get you," he hisses at me in his quiet voice.

"I know."

After that, I use a voidsteel slicer and cut off his head, the blade strengthened by my skill cutting through his attempts at defense.

The notification about the kill rings, and satisfied with that, I teleport outside of the room where the Housekeeper stands leaning against the wall.

We just exchange a glance, there are no words said, but the understanding comes through.

For the last time, I observe Irvin, who is there with his daughter, the two of them finding joy in each other's company. I observe Nina, who probably hates me more than anyone else in the world, training even as the Bastion faces more and more attacks while trying to escape to the north where it will be safer.

The Butler in his room detects my probing and shields against it. Yet, I still notice that he was standing in front of the mirror observing his growing mustache. Even then, his clothes are in a rough state as the man barely has any time to rest, helping anyone he can. He is a kind man.

And the Gardener, deep in his garden, taking over the Bastion's defenses now open to me, no threat at all.

Such a weird bunch of people I have met on this floor.

I teleport outside and fly for a while at my top speed. It takes a bit, but in the end, I stop and land on top of the first skyscraper I visited in the ruined city, with a poisoned Vega in tow, looking for a healer. There we found the old granny, who is now with her father.

There my duplicate is waiting for me, his mana surrounding his body in waves and crashing against me.

No words are needed between us. He has his own plan, but I will give him the opportunity to defeat me and rewrite my mind.

I owe him that much.

So let's fight and give it our best.

He activates orbs he's placed all over the city, and dozens of buildings immediately start crashing down in deafening explosions, at the same time, he reaches to absorb the kinetic energy of all that falling material.

I reach towards the Veil and touch it. The Veil is more visible than ever, even without mana. Upon detecting my touch, ten presences appear almost immediately. Ten Veil Guardians reacting to my touch and rushing towards us.

The duplicate attacks me, our mana clashes in the air and reverberates.

Chapter 325: What an opponent to face

I activate my Titan's Backbone tattoo, and one out of the epic item's three uses disappears. My eyes activate as well, and it's with these preparations that I finally absorb the black orb of mana.

Immediately afterward the world slows down, my thoughts accelerating. Even with all the information I'm taking, I can barely feel the added strain.

I activate traps that I placed days ago, and a dozen extremely compressed javelins erupt from every direction, speeding towards my duplicate, each one creating a sonic boom.

The air around the duplicate vibrates as he uses all the collected kinetic energy to tear the weapons apart.

At the same time, two thin streams of extremely compressed thermal energy burst from him, sweeping across the city, cutting skyscrapers apart, and stopping just an arm's reach away from me.

I absorb their heat and redirect it at the Veil Guardian that's been sneaking up on me, incinerating half of its body, yet the monster continues to press the attack.

Three Veil Guardians have ganged up on my duplicate, and he throws them away with a strong blast of kinetic energy.

At the same time, golden flames surround me and the duplicate, roaring through the air like a giant snake coiling around the two of us. Anything the golden flame touches gets melted or incinerated as my duplicate and I fight for control, power pouring from our Vortex Cores.

The air shudders from the heat, stone, and metal melting and dripping onto the street below as the flames burn hotter and hotter as we combine them.

The duplicate lifts the damaged arcane ax into the air and channels his thermal energy through it, further strengthening his golden flames, and a giant wave crashes against me.

I don't even blink, as my eyes read everything, and I absorb all of this information, the knowledge strengthened by my own experience manipulating thermal primordial energy.

Redirecting the flames, I spin them around me, adding even more of my own power. I reach into my reservoir and send more mana through my heart, generating even greater flames, and straining my mind to keep it all under control.

Like a tornado of golden fire, the flames spin with us in the center, expanding and setting the ruined city ablaze.

The ever-present vegetation turns to ash, the stone glows, and the last remaining pieces of glass crack.

More Veil Guardians die just from getting too close, they're not even a distraction anymore, faced with the combined flames of my duplicate and I.

And we're still fighting for control, and the flames wash over us in turns, only to be redirected each time.

When the last Veil Guardian dies, and the signal is sent to the Veil, we barely take notice and relinquish control of the flames, allowing them to seep into the city, turning it into a burning hell.

I activate another one of my traps, firing more compressed javelins at my duplicate, from the other side of the ruined city.

He redirects them with a forearm coated in an extremely dense variation of barrier. He also takes the opportunity to activate a few of the traps he's placed, and an immense amount of mana seeps into the air, flowing through inscriptions in the stones nearby, hitting me with a strong jamming attack, a clear attempt to disrupt my mana.

It's the strongest jamming attack I've ever felt, each of the sources emits a different frequency with a staggering amount of mana to back it up. At that moment, the duplicate closes the distance, swinging down with his ax.

I quickly learn that I won't be able to absorb heat from the ax, so I try to push my body aside with kinetic energy, but he absorbs it, nearly matching my reaction speed.

Yet I'm still just a little bit quicker, and I strengthen my body with the full force of my mana and dash to the side, through the molten ground and debris surrounding us.

Then the duplicate's signature disappears, and the only thing that remains where he stood is a small black orb, absorbing the mana hanging in the air, preventing me from tracking him. I sense a strong burst of mana from elsewhere in the city and before another erupts high above me.

There he floats, a calm expression on his face. Around him, six tricolored orbs float, and he launches them all at me, the orbs becoming a blur of mana, screaming as they pass through the air.

One of six orbs bursts far too soon, revealing its real state. Instead of a tricolored orb, its inside is filled with disrupting mana. When it bursts, I find myself unable to teleport and my external senses quickly become as unreliable as my eyes in this storm.

Countering it, my mind goes into overdrive and to fight against the five remaining orbs, I push my mana into a single one, concentrating it even further, turning that single orb black and launching it at the deadly projectiles.

My duplicate appears behind me, I don't have any idea how. I sensed nothing.

Our eyes meet, we're both using Mana Wavelength Iris and we grasp each other with a burst of [Redistribution], altering the frequency each preventing the other from moving.

To counter my enhanced processing speed my duplicate radiates more and more mana, depleting dozens of mana batteries in the process. Then, while looking at me, he also touches the Veil, much more intensely than I did before.

I watch him smile as a huge section of the Veil over us changes, mana enveloping the city. The Veil reforms, a long purple tear splits the sky, and an arm pushes through, followed by three more.

The monster plummets through, crashing to the ground and even though it is only three times taller than me, it leaves a massive crater.

[Veil Weaver - lvl ???]

The duplicate disappears as the monster pounces, landing where he stood and attacks me. As the monster attacks, My duplicate launches a compressed mana javelin, and it crashes into the ground next to me, exploding into golden flames.

Realizing that I won't get another option, I use Titan's Backbone tattoo again, feeling the first use start to run out, and I absorb more black mana, strengthening my [Focus].

In slow motion, I watch as the monster's fist swings toward me and golden flames burst forth from the javelin.

The entirety of my Vortex Core explodes, concentrated into a reverberating cone of compressed kinetic energy, damaging one of the monster's four.

Golden flames burn my body, but at the same time, they activate my passive slowly healing the burns. Even then, the flames are stronger than my passive so damage starts to accumulate before I can absorb their heat.

My anchors get disrupted, so instead, I form a barrier in front of me, layering multiple times, and mana rushes through my body, strengthening it even further.

Even so, I get thrown again, sending my blood spurting into the air and my body rolling across the ground before I absorb the inertia of my movement.

Before I can do anything else, the monster reaches towards me, still standing so far away. Even though my natural barrier and construct should stop it, I feel my body pulled towards it, the strongest feat of telekinesis I've ever felt.

I fly through the air right towards it and barely identify the effect on me with my trait and disrupt it, stopping halfway.

The Veil Weaver moves two of its hands and the buildings to my sides crumble and fall, moving with all the speed of a bullet train and heading straight for me.

Locating my duplicate, I shoot a tricolored orb at him and push through the disrupting effect, creating an anchor far away and teleporting to it.

I watch the place where I stood get crushed, compressed, and totally obliterated. Huge chunks of stone and metal creating a giant ball of compressed material. The Veil Weaver tries to do the same to me and I feel pressure attempting to squeeze my body. To counter this I constantly radiate disrupting mana, stopping the attack by sacrificing a large chunk of my mana reserves.

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The monster is strong, stronger than a Veil Guardian.

The Veil Weaver, unable to grasp me through my constantly resonating field, decides to track my duplicate.

It tears free another huge chunk of the city, toppling buildings as if a giant stepped on them. Through all that debris, a tricolored bomb hurdles at the monster, only to stop an arm's reach away as it gets torn apart by its telekinesis.

I sense movement above me and monsters pour from the rift in the Veil. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of veilshriekers passing through and falling to the ground.

The shrieks of an immense number of monsters mix with the sound of destruction caused by the extreme telekinesis. The Veil Weaver doesn't seem to care, and its attacks kill hundreds of veilshriekers as it tries to catch my duplicate.

[Focus - lvl 47 > Focus - lvl 48]

[Perception - lvl 42 > Perception - lvl 43]

[Tether - lvl 34 > Tether - lvl 35]

I've finally managed to analyze the way my duplicate has been creating such sneaky anchors, and my domain expands as I place multiple of them. Even then some get destroyed by telekinesis, but others do manage to reach my duplicate.

Then, when my duplicate gets thrown away by a blast of force from the monster, I teleport behind him and grab the ax, cutting off his hand and teleporting away with the weapon.

"You're such a dick," he complains, looking at me standing on one of the buildings. Thermal energy already rushes through his body, slowly regenerating his hand.

"I wonder who summoned that asshole here to get me distracted."

Without a speck of regret, he shrugs, "You did it first with Guardians."

Both of us have a smile on our faces. I can hear the loud beating of our Thermokinetic hearts, fueling them with any mana not held by Mana Cycling, we've tapped into our Mana Reservoirs, we're finally using all the inscriptions we've made, and leveraging all our preparations, making us stronger than ever before.

We teleport multiple times, the Veil Weaver swings its four arms, each swing tears buildings apart, compressing them, and throwing huge chunks at us. All while tens of thousands of veilshriekers scream, attacking us with deep hatred.

Large parts of the city are gone, the others are burning.

It may as well be hell.

With no need for words, my duplicate and I join forces, our Mana Reservoirs nearly emptying, all our mana rushing to our hearts, transmuting it into kinetic energy. The sheer amount feels impossible to control even with all our preparations, and yet there are two of us.

He slips; I cover him, I slip; he takes over.

We gather more and more kinetic energy, and then we start changing its frequency. A high pitch visibly reverberates through the air, and the two of us stand in the epicenter, as the waves of kinetic energy start crashing into the area.

Everything they touch vibrates and dissolves into dust.

We receive thousands of notifications informing us of the dying veilshriekers.

Our kinetic energy crashes into the impossible amount of debris being thrown by the monster. The huge chunks are impossibly condensed into extremely dense projectiles. The Veil Weaver lifts up an entire small city's worth of material high into the air blocking out the sky and sending it at us like meteors, some of which even manage to break the sound barrier.

Yet waves of our kinetic energy continue to reverberate into the area, clearing bigger and bigger parts of the city around us, leaving a smooth surface, leaving behind material reduced to fine sand.

The monster is strong, pushing us, forcing us to use everything and our skills level up. The notifications ring.

It's fun.

A single mistake and I'm dead, we are dead. Just him or me stumbling will cause it, neither of us having a chance to keep it up alone. But right now, together, we are stronger than the monster.

Our combined effort reaches the Veil Weaver, for a moment stopped by its telekinetic barrier as the monster puts four arms in front of it, its palms facing us. Two invisible forces clash against each other, sending shockwaves into the ruined city that damages it even further.

I take over, the eyes activating to a higher degree and frequency changing dozens of times in quick succession until one of the arms explodes.

Then another one.

The monster stumbles, losing control for a moment and its body gets torn apart immediately, with barely anything left behind.

[You have defeated Veil Weaver- lvl 329]

[Lvl 234 > Lvl 237]

I lift the ax in my hand, and it absorbs a laser-like stream of thermal energy shot by the duplicate. Teleporting towards him, I swing the ax, releasing that energy and melting the ground under his feet as he dodges.

When I try to teleport again, he disrupts my attempt, and multiple of his projectiles crash against me and the barrier I create.

He opens his mouth, and I immediately tilt my head to the side; an orb I was unable to sense shoots from it, creating a deep, bloody gash on my temple.

His voidsteel slicer and the ax I hold crash against each other, our primordial energies swirling around, waiting for opportunities.

I also open my mouth, and a mana orb I was compressing there buries into his forearm he lifts to protect his chest.

A mana stone somewhere on him activates, and I disrupt most of the attack, the invisible slash with mana still cutting into my side.

There isn't a single veilshrieker left alive. Third of the big city turned to ruins, and the material the buildings were made of mostly turned to dust or burning.

I shoot kinetic energy from my feet, sending a bit of that dust towards him, covering the view. At the same time, I create a fake mana signature to my right, inspired by the twins. When I reach him and slash against him, my weapon passes through the air, him having done the same, and the fake signature disappears.

Armor forms on my back, slowing down the voidsteel slicer just enough so I block it with my own before it cuts into my flesh.

Up close, both of us create dozens of mana projectiles, barely an arm's reach from each other. The projectiles shoot, all boosted even further by kinetic energy, and keep crashing against our bodies. They get either disrupted or blocked by small pieces of barrier that we barely activate just for a split of a second.

As I feel my tattoo and black mana slowly wear off, I push ahead, letting him stab my thigh with his weapon, and in exchange, I swing the ax with both hands, letting go of my voidsteel slicer.

He tries to teleport, but I disrupt it, and with the full force of my body, the ax crashes against his blade, which is held by a single hand only because of the other one I cut off.

The ax buries into his shoulder as I redirect it at the last possible moment.

Breathless, both of us stand there facing each other, even now our mana crashing and disrupting each other's, and primordial energies exploding through the air and being absorbed.

I know if either of us pushes just a bit more, it will be a fight to the death, but I won't step back. He will either give up, or one of us dies.

That's it.

The tattoo's effect disappears, and the black mana as well, the aftereffects hitting me even though the tattoo alleviated most of it. My mind feels sluggish, the world feels empty, and even mana feels less vibrant than before.

More and more of my thermal energy pushes through, heating up the ax stabbed in his shoulder, pushing through his attempts to absorb the thermal energy that keeps healing him while also burning him.

"Fuck, you are dumb," in the end, he curses and takes a step back, letting go of the voidsteel slicer stabbed in my leg, and the ax I hold pulls out of his wound.

I do not stop him when he starts using thermal energy to heal his wounds.

Slowly, both of us start using a bigger part of [Focus] to block some of our emotions again instead of keeping up the skills. The world regains more of its colors and the sounds that the skill blocked come rushing in.

The air is heated, moved by wind, dust that used to be buildings flies through the air, and fires rage in the distance, but I take a deep breath.

Then I breathe out slowly.

I live.

"Good luck," I tell my duplicate.

He stands there, wounds all over his body, cuts, burns. Inscriptions used, mana stones cracked, and batteries emptied. His eyesight blurry because of overuse of his trait. His hand is missing, and his leg seems to be broken. Yet, he stands proudly, and even now, he feels more dangerous than the monster we killed together. What an opponent.

"I will see you when you come to Vega's planet," he says simply, and then he leaves to attempt his other plan.

With barely any mana remaining, I move towards where Vega is, on my way avoiding all the monsters while my mana slowly replenishes.

On a few spots, I get mana batteries I hid there just in case our fight got so far. I absorb my mana stored inside and repeat the same with a few more filled with kinetic or thermal energy. I have placed plenty of them, and by the time I reach the place, my reserves are in a much better state.

Getting into the range of my anchor, I connect to it and teleport to where Vega is, appearing in the darkness.

The place is one of the old bunkers we have found while moving around. The bunker is similar to the Sanctuary, just much smaller, and every entrance to it is destroyed and covered by tones of rock and stone. The only way inside is through a teleportation skill, and to place the anchors, we had to extend [Mana Domain] to the limit in a single direction.

Vega lifts her eyes up from the mana stone in her hands and smiles at me. It's a mix between a happy and sad smile.

"Will he be okay, master?" she asks quietly.

To that, I decide to stay quiet.

Chapter 326: I lied

While down in the closed-off bunker, I walk from room to room, controlling air filtration systems powered by my mana through the anchors I've placed near them.

Making them work wasn't all that difficult, just a bit annoying given that the bunker's core is broken and the room containing it has been buried under several tons of stone.

Yet, even though this place has been cut off from the outside, I've set thermal orbs all throughout the compound, producing a bright yet gentle light. The filtration system hums gently in the background, but otherwise, it's eerily quiet.

The only other sound comes from my minion and I, searching the various rooms whenever we get bored. That and our race to pack in as much training as we can.

I have decided to spend the remaining few days here, rather than going outside, where who knows what is happening. I'm also taking the opportunity to acquaint myself with the skills that leveled up during the fight with my duplicate. I've got a lot of work to do on that front.

Maybe I could be raising my level, or focus on leveling up my skills. I could be fighting any number of powerful opponents, yet every time I look at Vega, I hesitate. She is strong, but she's returning to her world soon, and I won't be able to help her anymore. So I need to hold back and train her.

I'm not used to this sort of selfless thinking, and I'm reminded of how attached I've grown to this smug little half-demon. This silly minion of mine.

"Master! [Mana Manipulation] leveled up again!" Vega shouts as she comes rushing from somewhere behind me.

"Good job, minion," I answer, and she smiles, happy to receive even this small praise, and returns her focus to the mana stone in her hand.

It all helps her to take her mind off my duplicate. They got close in the days we spent together.

Looking at her, I probe her mana with my senses, and she allows my senses to pierce through her natural barrier, something else she's gotten used to.

I observe her left eye, the one she received from the duplicate, and I can still sense his anchor connected to it, even now making small changes as he continues to improve his inscriptions.

For a while, I examine the web of delicate pathways, they represent something he's only been able to do as a result of his collaboration and experiments with the healers from the Sanctuary. He's spent most of his time working on this, but I've spent mine polishing different skills, so I still don't fully understand it. And yet, even I can tell that this won't be enough.

I head back to the room where I've stored most of my things. Looted items from the bunkers, station, and bastion. Items I've had since the 4th floor and the auction. There's plenty here.

Then there is also a small tube that holds Vega's original eye. Something we have kept in case the duplicate fails and the eye he gave to Vega disappears. Irvin also put a mark on the eye. Waiting for the slightest bit of mana to activate it. At that point, the mark will release a dose of healing mana to help reconnect the eye.

I wonder when Lily will reach that level.

One day remains when others start sending messages in the Community.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -Stay safe, Noname, I'll see you on the next floor.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) -I learned a lot, and I can't wait to show you, Noname!

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -I hope you didn't forget the promise we made!

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -food!

Izzy (Hell, group 4) -I will see you soon, dumb Noname!

I pick up a few messages, and then they disappear, and group 4 enters the 6th floor.

They got to the 5th floor a day earlier than me, so it's not really all that surprising. Now, they've left to join the twins, one of which sacrificed his chance at some extra time with his disciple to follow his brother, who lost his.

So that's it. The floor is ending soon, after that, we won't have much time on the 6th floor before the tournament starts.

What I don't like is that I won't be able to do the 3rd Beyond trial before the tournament; the timing just won't allow for with the time left on my cooldown.

That could be interesting, I think Savant should be able to fit the 3rd trial in. It could also cause Savant to miss the tournament. The 1st trial took one day, and the 2nd trial took one week.

So there is a high chance that Savant postpones the 3rd trial until the end of the tournament rather than risk missing it. That's what I would do.

Keeping my mind busy, I find Vega and sit with her, watching her train and observing her eye.

POV Duplicate of Nathaniel Gwyn

Well, that's it, I guess. I did as much as I could, and the personality imprint I've been trying to make is impossible as of now. The work I've done up until now is so terrible I would rather wipe it than let it stay in my minion's eye.

Over the past few days, more plans have failed, and my last ray of hope lies in imperfect personality imprints, something more like the signatures my original created. There are five of them, one on me, one is with the original, and three more have been scattered across the 5th floor.

So it's time for the last resort.

I poke the head at my feet with my shoe, "Come on, I know you are lurking around."

A quiet laugh sounds from the cut-off head of the veil shrieker, and eyes open up, "So did you decide to accept my proposal, oh, unfortunate one?"

"You know very well I did not."

"I might or might not know. The tutorial does grant its attendees some degree of privacy," the mouth moves, but it is not at all in sync with the words. It doesn't even need to move its mouth to speak.

"Hurting Vega is out of the question."

"I understand, so, what would you like?" Its tone of voice speaks to the cruel pleasure it takes in my current situation.

"Help me to inscribe my personality into the eye of my original's disciple."

"It's amusing how much tamer you are now, unfortunate one," the mouth moves in a soundless laugh.
"What's in it for me?"

"After getting my body back, I would be..."

"No."

"No?"

"Yes, no. You are not worth the investment. Outside of the tutorial, I already have multiple Vessels and beings that serve me; you can't hope to touch any of them."

"I see, in such a case, how about a bet?"

The mouth of the head closes, and eyes turn right at me, nearly radiating amusement, "Tell me more, unfortunate one."

"I will kill Gaiathra on my own. I know you don't give a fuck about me, but my success would be amusing enough, right? Might be a nice way to kill time before you return to your stalking."

"Gaiathra is level 367, meanwhile, you are over 130 levels lower. Do you even realize the sheer difference in your status?"

"Won't that make it more interesting?" I know I don't have much time remaining; I already feel my body starting to weaken. As the system said before, the mirror wasn't meant to be used like this, and my body is only temporary.

So even if I fail, why not end it with a bang?

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

“You have made preparations,” the Ruler’s intent muses, he’s probably checking now.

“A few, but that shouldn’t change much, right?”

“Why not, I always love watching bugs like you realize where they belong. Entertain me then, and I will help you.” After that, the head stops moving and the intent is gone, yet I’m sure I’m being watched.

I kick the head, sending it flying, and then straighten up.

This asshole might be lying, but that doesn’t change much. I don’t think I can kill my original, and I don’t want to merge with him. I’m my own being. I won’t be reduced to mere memories, leaving my personality in shreds.

Deep breath in and out.

I can do this.

Taking a few steps, I pass through the barrier into the Valley where not a single presence can be felt as if the monsters had been wiped from existence.

Only a single one remains, standing tall and looking at me.

[Gaiathra- lvl ???]

At its feet, is a big hole, revealing the ruins of the Veil Ignition Station.

I guess the big danger noodle didn't like us stopping the mana radiation it was sleeping over.

But now the core has been revealed, Nevan's alloy patch is gone now and the core is radiating more mana than ever before. All to the giant monster's liking.

The big yellow eyes turn to me as the snake whips around on its six nimble legs.

I only have one chance, and I'll need to go all out. A single series of attacks with as much power as I can muster. Prolonged combat won't favor me.

My eyes activate, the inscriptions I etched into my skin shine, and black mana seeps into my body in greater amounts than ever before. The amount is sufficient to destroy this body beyond any possibility of repair, yet I refuse to hesitate.

I launch a javelin into the air over Gaiathra with an anchor tied to it. Then I connect to the anchor inscribed into a mana stone I left near the core. Its mana signature either too low, or weak for the monster to care.

Yet the monster notices me when I appear near the core. Simultaneously, the mana radiation from the core crashes against me in waves and almost instantly destroys the epic pendant Nevan crafted for us.

But even that short moment is enough, and a black mana orb forms near me, growing stronger until it's consumed half of the mana in my body.

I activate the anchor on the javelin as it passes over the monster's head and appear in the air above the six-legged snake.

The monster ignores me, curiously staring at the black mana orb that is rapidly devouring the with an immense quantity of mana leaking from the core.

A massive tongue flickers as Gaiathra tastes the mana leaking from the core and seeping into the black orb that continues to maintain its size, even now. The orb devours and dominates the mana around it, strengthening itself further before pulling on the mana radiating from the monster itself.

Oh, and Gaiathra doesn't like it.

Its yellow eyes shine, and corroding mana seeps through the earth and surrounds the orb.

To the monster's surprise, that gets absorbed as well, devoured, taken over, and pulled inside of the orb that has begun to feel increasingly terrifying.

A staggering amount of mana surrounds one of the monster's six legs, creating a barrier around it. The monster swings it, hitting the orb and sending it flying away, even out of the Valley.

Then, the monster turns its head towards me with a speed that feels unnatural for something as big.

But I'm already all set with my preparations. The orb plan has failed, so it's time for plan C.

I lift my left arm towards the air and towards the anchor I can still feel high up there. Then I use a skill my original will never be able to use. He doesn't have the right state of mind to understand, I've grown used to the thought of dying over the past few weeks.

He may never even consider trying to learn the skill, hell, he might never be in the same situation as me.

But I can do it. I haven't tried it before, but I know I can.

"[Sacrifice]," I call.

My left arm disappears in its entirety.

I need to follow the traditions, don't I?

Notifications arrive as the skill levels up, and I use it again, my left leg disappearing as well, and the crazy amount of mana flows through me.

The barrier I create blocks the monster's "playful" attack, nearly draining me of everything I just gained and then some.

The mana batteries I had on me are empty, and I reach through my domain and place an anchor right over the six-legged snake, and then use [Tether], connecting two anchors. One on a physical object high up, and the other is positioned just over the Gaiathra.

Then, as iron pulled to a magnet, the object I've held floating high in the air gets pulled downward at a speed that continues to increase as I feed the skill with more mana.

Gaiathra senses it but still sees me as an annoyance at most, it just shoots another attack at me, this time a bit stronger.

[Sacrifice] activates, and my hair disappears, my right leg as well, along with a few fingers from my right hand, my last remaining limb. Even then I barely block the attack.

The third attack Gaiathra throws at me is much more serious, and keeping [Tether] on, I do something even Lily was unwilling to do.

I sacrifice my memories.

The first ten years of my life disappear, and the barrier that blocks the attack still cracks, and all over my body, corrosive wounds start appearing, eating away my flesh.

At the same time, it's finally here. The skyscraper-sized mana crystal that I took from the bunker. Later, after examining the Bastion's levitation, I placed it high in the air, and currently, it's falling at a high speed to the spot right over the snake.

Best of all, it's filled to the brim with a terrifying blend of my mana, thermal, and kinetic energy. Like a meteor, streaks through the air, shining with golden thermal energy, transparent kinetic, and pale blue mana swirling inside.

The Gaiathra tries to move, and 11 more years of my memories disappear.

[Redistribution] activates, allowing me, for a split second, to grasp this powerful monster.

When the skyscraper-sized crystal crashes into Gaiathra, I use the last dregs of my mana to teleport to an anchor far outside of the Valley.

And then I teleport again, sacrificing some of my useless organs to do so.

Without any limbs and with black mana and life seeping out of me, I appear on top of one of the cliffs, leaning against the stone at my back.

I watch as far in the distance beautiful lights fill the sky, shining against the bottom of the clouds.

Between my attack, the shattered core of the Veil Ignition Station, and the sheer pressure from the explosion the clouds part, blown away by the force. I can feel the shockwave even from this distance, followed by a burst of wind and thunder.

A few more seconds pass before the notification I've been waiting for finally goes off after a few more seconds, and a chuckle escapes my mouth.

Thermal energy flows through my body, and I examine my mind, looking at what remains. The things that I subconsciously didn't sacrifice.

My mom and sister are there, something I wouldn't be able to sacrifice. But more faces pop up to my surprise. A girl with red eyes, a cute corgi, a silly blonde, an occasionally terrifying black haired girl, a troubled young boy looking up to me, and more.

People I barely know, yet somehow they are still here, my subconscious mind not wanting to give up on them.

(Not in a million years would I expect someone like you to be able to awaken a skill like [Sacrifice],) the voice of the intent sounds in my mind.

I blink a few times, barely able to keep myself awake, my heart beating slower and slower, as my life seeps out of me.

“Our deal,” I say.

(You showed me something really fun, so consider me entertained, oh unfortunate one.)

I use [Sacrifice] again, and one of my eyes disappears, just to keep my heart beating for a bit longer.

(But I lied,) the intent says.

The voice continues to sound in my head, (I wouldn’t be even able to give you the status of your original’s disciple. I just wanted to see you kill her,) the voice sounds coldly amused.

(You have rejected me, and for that, you will die.) The voice says.

Well, I guess that’s it. I gave it my all, I defeated an extremely powerful enemy and learned a thing or two about myself. It’s not such a bad way to go.

This past year in the tutorial was fun even though it was sad at times.

“Fuck you.” I manage to say.

(So fun. This is what I will do next. In a day, the little girl you call Vega will return to her world, and I will ensure that someone is waiting for her. I can't touch the original yet, but the disciple should be fine. I can't wait to see how he reacts when he finds out.)

I think I may have only felt the rage I feel now, once in my entire life.

My heart beats strongly, and I'm about to stand up before I realize I have no limbs.

"Do not fucking dare," I hiss through clenched teeth, feeling blood fill my mouth.

(Oh, but I will, so...)

(You will not,) another voice sounds. This one I can't grasp, unable to identify if it's a man or woman, hell I can't even guess its age. Yet, at the same time, it sounds powerful.

Very powerful.

(Greed!) the intent hisses.

(He will not touch disciple Vega, nor will he interfere on her planet.) These words are directed at me, ignoring the intent.

Hearing them, I feel myself calm down, and as I do so, my heart finally skips a beat, and the world drains of its color.

The intent says something to the Ruler of Greed, but it feels like a tiny dog barking at a wolf. And I know, at that moment, that he won't be able to do anything to Vega.

I feel a smile appear on my lips, and before everything turns dark, I hear that voice again, (Keeping you alive would be against the rules, but I can let her keep your eye.)

My mind wanders off as the last whisper fills my ears.

(You've been strong, you can let go now.)

Chapter 327: I'm back

I observe as all of the inscriptions inside Vega's eye disappear one after another. All the work the duplicate put into it is gone, along with his [Tether].

Surprisingly, his eye stays. For a moment, a golden circle appears around her pupil before it disappears, leaving her eye bloody red again. Yet, I can sense that it's the same eye that once belonged to my duplicate, the one containing our weakened trait.

The little half-demon senses the change as well, and for a moment, it looks like she's going to cry, but she holds it back and just comes to sit beside me. Without asking, she leans against me, and I put my arm around her.

"He asked me not to cry if he failed," she says quietly.

"Did he?"

"Yes. He told me to grow strong and kick your ass sometime in the future."

"That sounds like him. Do you feel like crying?" I ask her.

She nods, "But I promised I wouldn't. He wouldn't want that."

"Bullshit," I say, and she looks up to me. I continue, "I know for a fact, that he would be happy knowing someone had cried for him."

I put my hand on her head and gently stroke her hair.

When she burrows her face into my chest and her body starts shaking, I continue to hold her.

An hour remains until the end of the floor when my minion asks, "Master, you still owe me for losing our bet."

"Yes, I do. What would you like?"

"I want to know why you named me Vega. You said there was a meaning to it."

"Who is Vega? I know only minion."

At that, she smiles but only slightly, her mood still not back to her usual self. She pokes me, looking up at me with her big eyes.

"There are tens of constellations in the night sky where I'm from, and one of them is the northern constellation of Lyra. It's one of the smaller ones. The brightest star in that constellation is called Vega." I grab her horn, but do not shake her head; I just prod the point with the tip of my finger.

"The tutorial is a small place, in the end, one of many. Just like the innumerable constellations, there are a number of tutorials. But in this small place, this small patch of sky, I found you," I say, despite my embarrassment.

In my head, it never sounded so... cheesy. Still, I can't regret telling her. To me, Vega shines brightly with her curious and cheery personality, despite her flaws. But saying it out loud just doesn't feel right to me.

"I hope you're happy because I'm not going to repeat myself, minion." I need to assert my dominance to preserve my sense of masculinity.

In response, her smile widens a bit, she doesn't even poke any fun at me.

Our remaining hours on this floor pass just like that. My silly disciple has decided to cling to me, and I can feel the warmth of her small body against mine. Her heart is beating strongly. I hold her hand, and I paint a series of simple, single use, inscriptions on her forearm, they'll be there to help her improve her mana weapons when she needs them.

This time around I'll give her a few extra items, but nothing higher than a rare grade. Epic items seem to be exceedingly valuable even though I tend to find so many of them. Over the course of this floor and after having visited the Hard difficulty community, I have learned that out of all of them, barely anyone has access to epic grade items.

Giving one to Vega at her level could bring too much attention to her. I also think she'll be better off if she learns how to survive without relying on items. She already has a weakened version of my trait, waiting to awaken as she grows stronger. Hopefully.

I listen as she tells me about her plans, and how she's a little worried about having to rely on herself again. She tells me how much she will miss me and forces me to promise, for the tenth time, that I will find her when I get out of the tutorial.

Lastly, I give her a small piece of weird metal that reacts weirdly to kinetic energy. It's something I got from the auction on the 4th floor, and now it feels like so long ago.

Vega has decided to rely mainly on her kinetic energy, so she might have a better use for it. It will also force her to continuously examine it and search for anyone who might know something about it.

I figured I'd give her something like a quest since she seems to be lost at the moment.

Finally, I notice her glancing at something I can't see, and I know the portal to her world is there.

As I stand up, she lets go of me somewhat reluctantly and quickly collects the few things she is taking with her.

"Will you miss me, master?"

"I will."

"You really will?"

“Yes.”

A few short steps and she hugs me again, “I don’t think you’re quite the asshole you like to say you are. Master is really kind, but he’s also really hurting,” the last words she nearly whispers.

Looking up at me with her red eyes glowing, she gestures to me to lean lower and when I do so, she gives me a quick peck on my cheek.

“When we meet next time, I’ll just call you Vega. So try to stay alive until then, okay?” I call to her as she takes steps toward the portal.

She gives me one last short glance, “I always liked it when master called me minion.” She says, with one last cheeky smile, and then she disappears.

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the 5th floor's main quest in the fifth round of the tutorial for Hell difficulty. An entrance to the 6th floor has been created.

I place an anchor near the portal to the 6th floor and extend my [Mana Domain], placing another outside where I emerge.

Right away, I sense strong mana radiation everywhere, and the Veil seems to be burning in the sky with veil monsters all over the place. Killing the ones that get too close, I lift off and head towards the Valley.

Then, I notice a mana signature hanging in the air, and change direction, heading towards a cliff with a good view of the area.

There, at the top, I find what remains of my duplicate.

Inside his body near the chest, I detect a hint of his mana. Pushing my emotions away, I pull a tiny mana stone out of his remains. When I probe it with my senses, I find that it’s a collection of simple notes. What few sentences my duplicate could manage to inscribe in his last moments.

Intent is bigger fucker than thought. Never trust. Wanted to kill Vega. Liar.

Ruler of Greed helped. Saved Vega. Payback?

Black mana scarier than thought.

I could kill you back then. I was stronger.

Apologize to mom. Hug Victoria for me. Be nicer to others. Fucking call them friends, at least in your head. Boop Biscuit's nose.

Remember me once in a while.

Thermal energy flows from my core, and the golden flames slowly envelop him, burning off what remains. Then I destroy the small mana stone after making sure I remember every single word.

Flying once again towards the Valley, I sense a black mana orb nearby. It's much stronger and filled with much more mana than ever before. It continuously devours any mana that comes by, and it might be only me, but it feels like it's slowly, very very slowly, starting to pull in the ambient mana around it. I don't even have to think about what could have caused it to grow like that. Only the core of the Ignition Station would have been enough.

Finally, in the Valley, or what remains of it, I find a giant crater. Its immense size and the damaged area are hard to comprehend. Whatever my duplicate did, the explosion of the core and Gaiathra combined caused all of this. For a moment, I imagine the consequences on Earth if anyone capable of something like this arrived with proper preparations.

Unlawfully taken from Royal Road, this story should be reported if seen on Amazon.

Otherwise, there doesn't seem to be anything too useful. The Gaiathra's Bones are scattered everywhere, but since I already have a Champion's bone, these don't appeal to me at all.

So, I head back, and when I teleport back inside the hiding place, I collect everything I want. Then, I accept the reward for one of the previous quests, and a lot of food and water appear in front of me, which I also take.

With all these items, I pass through the entrance without any more hesitation.

Congratulations! You have cleared the 5th floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial. Welcome to the 6th floor: Astral Prison.

You have acquired:

Skill combination token

Skill upgrade token

5000 Shards

100 stat points

Trait strengthening token

I invest 100 stat points into mana and check my status

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 6 - Astral Prison

Time left until forced return: 4y 0d 13h 22m 51s

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

Lvl 237

Strength: 113

Dexterity: 110

Constitution: 268

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1015 + 1015

Primary Class:Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class:[Initiate of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 48

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 47

Perception - Lvl 43

Redistribution - Lvl 45

Resonance - Lvl 45

Mana Domain - Lvl 36

Tether - Lvl 35

Regalia - Lvl 23

Infusion - Lvl 28

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Thermokinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Vortex Core (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

Phoenix Embrace (epic)

Mana Overload Absorption (epic)

Cognitive Fortress (epic)

Titan's Backbone (epic) 1/3

Tokens:

Beyond Difficulty entrance token

Shards: 59,725

Well, it seems like the system rewarded me with a skill combination token for that Floor's main quest, the reward that used to be ???.

"I want to sell skill upgrade token."

Do you really want to sell the following item for 5000 shards?

Skill upgrade token

Yes/No

I confirm and my shards increase to 64,725.

It's a nice thing to have, for sure.

Then I take a better look at the place I've ended up, the floor known as the Astral Prison.

It's dark, the only light coming from the surprisingly bright stars. It is also totally barren. There are no trees, no vegetation, no signs of water. Just dark, rocky terrain with a lot of pointy mountains scattered about the place. In comparison to the post-apocalyptic world overgrown by vibrant vegetation, this place feels almost depressing.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I'm here.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - That's good. I will have Izzy launch a bunch of bright orbs every few minutes. Try to track us. Other than the twins, we are all here.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Will do.

I close the community and check the floor quest.

Floor quest:

Escape Astral Prison

Rewards:

???

Epic-grade passive skill

5000 Shards

Increased daily Community limit

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

Send a single item to your disciple (up to a rare grade)

Once again the floor quest has turned out to be the last thing I would have expected, as have the rewards. It seems like the system is slowly limiting the amount of shards we can receive as a reward. It's either that or the last two are expensive. There are no more stat increases anymore and once again there is a question mark in place of a reward.

Is it so the system can make them more personalized? That could be it. But given the mood I'm in right now the last two rewards are what interest me the most. Fuck, the end of a floor always leaves me like this.

I sit down on the rocky ground and sigh, looking at the starry sky. Even this barren area has some beauty to it, and never in my life have I seen such big stars, much less so clearly. In one part of the sky, I can even see what appears to be a purple nebula. This night sky is beautiful.

"Use trait strengthening token on Mana Circuit," I say, and I allow the pain that follows to take my mind off these useless thoughts. Filled with this burning sensation, I stare at the night sky.

I could have strengthened my Mana Wavelength Iris, but I haven't even mastered them properly yet, and strengthening them could be a bad idea, stripping me of all the effort I put into being able to use them as much as I do. I'm also hoping that strengthening my Mana Circuits will help me deal with my other traits and my ever-increasing Mana. So that I can continue to ignore constitution.

Who needs to worry about the attribute imbalance at this point? For sure not me, that's for future Nathaniel to deal with.

Regardless, with my body still burning, I push myself up to my feet and then lift myself into the air, looking for Isabella's orbs. There are no monsters, no wind, and no signs of civilization as far as I can see. Though the air does feel chilly, surprisingly chilly.

Sending thermal energy through my body, I hold myself in that spot for a moment, turning around, before changing my position a few times. I move in a spiral, slowly getting further from my point of origin, looking for that signal.

When I finally notice it, I start moving, pulling my items with me. It's not as much as when I entered the 5th Floor, but there are a few rather large bags.

As I approach, I trigger a web of extremely delicate mana and it sends a signal somewhere. That trigger causes a swarm of some kind of mana constructs to fly toward me in a threatening manner. They're basically a number of small orbs with inscriptions in them, bearing an obvious connection to their owner.

Well, it seems like Sophie may have learned a thing or two.

As my altitude drops, I finally manage to spot group 4, they're all sitting in a circle around a bright blue flame orb, which radiates a soft blue light and heat.

Tess is already standing, with a long spear in her hand and a smile on her face. I'm sure she saw me long before the others could. Her blonde hair is shorter than it was before, but she somehow looks even more confident.

Min-Jae is at her side, looking around, searching for me. He seems... older now, it's hard to describe. He just straight-up looks more mature.

Maya, who has remained seated, yawns and says something to Sophie, who just shakes her head, in spite of her smile. Both of the girls, even in this situation, are ready for anything, but they trust the others to keep watch.

Everyone seems to be happy, to be with people who've shared their experiences, to finally have the chance to share it all.

I feel Izzy trying to connect to me with [Empathy] and I let her, curious to learn what kind of feelings she'll pick up from me.

(Food!) I hear Biscuit shout and even with [Focus] active, I feel a smile climb onto my lips.

When I land, Lily charges me with a few surprisingly quick steps and stops an arm's reach away from me. For a moment, I expect a slap or hug, but instead, she stands there as if waiting for me to say something.

I look to Tess for help, but she just stands there smiling at me, and beside her, stands Izzy wiping her eyes.

Back on the 1st Floor, I thought more of myself and basically ignored most of the others, ready to toss them aside. Yet, over and over again, they held their hands out to me, despite my terrible personality.

I don't understand why; maybe they were trying to hide behind someone stronger, maybe they're broken like me. Maybe they are just straight-up weird.

Why would you even want to befriend someone like me? I wouldn't do that. Yet somehow, we wound up like this, and I remember the words left behind by my duplicate.

For the first time in a long time, I have people I want to call friends, I guess.

"I'm back," I say.

Chapter 328: 6th Floor

"No," I say, responding to Maya, who is currently holding my damaged arcane ax.

"Come on, I'll buy you something from the system shop worth 10 thousand shards."

"Fifty thousand."

"How the fuck would I even get fifty thousand shards? Ask in three to five more floors if I'm lucky."

"Forty-nine thousand," I prod.

At that, Maya grabs a small stone from the ground, throws it at me, and smiles before continuing to examine the ax.

I continue to pet Biscuit. Ever since I found them, he's refused to leave my side and lays in my lap while I sit against the wall of the cliff we've chosen to shelter our camp. Not that I mind, the best doggo of the 6th floor deserves all the pets I can give. It's hard to believe I've been able to cope without him for so many weeks.

Sure, Vega is a great ESM, but there is something hard to explain when I pet this silly corgi or boop his cold nose.

Damn, I've missed him.

"Nat! You killed a Veil Guardian all on your own?" Min-Jae interrupts, eyes wide, in anticipation of an exciting story.

Biscuit woofs, either at him or at me for stopping petting, so I continue.

"A few. I brought a few voidsteel blades with me, so later we'll see if we can't get someone to make something out of them for you. By the way, you need to spend some more time training your [Telekinesis] and [Gravity Well]. I saw some scary stuff they should be able to replicate."

"Oh, me too. I saw a Veil Guardian using strong gravity attacks against the Bastion. The Housekeeper nearly died when he focused it on her. But the guardian didn't use telekinesis or anything similar."

I nod, "There was one more monster. I saw it wave its hand and destroy an entire city. It tore down skyscrapers like they were nothing and kept throwing building-sized projectiles at me. Scary stuff."

The boy continues to listen as I describe a bit more of what the Veil Weaver did. Back then, I don't think I would have had a chance unless I could cooperate with my duplicate.

"What about you, Tess? Did you kill a Veil Guardian?" I ask her.

“Two of them on my own and one with the help of the Bastion,” she says. “I just needed to keep my crown charged and set some preparations in place. Then I’d just shoot them from really far away. Sophie was able to kill two of them. She even controlled one for a while.”

Sophie looks up from Izzy leaning against her, “I only controlled it for a few seconds. The Veil didn't like that at all, and it nearly killed me but the Butler and others killed it before it could finish the job.”

“That was dumb Sophie,” Izzy mumbles.

Noodle is there as well, coiled around her arm. I can tell that he’s looking at me, he’s probably hungry for my mana, but a single glance at Biscuit in my lap makes him stop. I can’t help but wonder how these two managed to establish their pecking order.

“During our last day on the Floor, I killed five,” Lily says.

Most of the eyes in the group turn to her.

Of course, it wouldn’t be that hard for her. She probably boosted herself with [Sacrifice] and she has the most powerful damage skill out of anyone in group 4, she would kill them. Her level is also getting rather close to 200, but it's still scary to think that she might be able to pull that off.

Well, it's scary, but she is our scary crazy healer, so that's fine.

The others also managed to kill a Veil Guardian but they always had assistance from the Bastion itself or the four assholes running the place, mostly the Housekeeper or the Butler.

The only people who managed to kill them on their own, whether they took them on in a straight up fight or by setting ambushes and traps, are those in Beyond. Well, other than Sophie, who I think would also do well. It's just that she already used an upgrade token, and she’s unwilling to leave Isabella for so long. Well, it's not like she needs Beyond rewards with her [Manipulation].

Of course, I killed the most Veil Guardians. My duplicate and I hunted them at every opportunity not to mention the ones I fought on my own.

But group 4 is as scary as ever.

“So Biscuit, how was your disciple?”

(Friend!)

“Oh, you liked him?”

(Food.)

“I agree. Disciples should be respectful towards their masters.”

(Food food!)

“Totally.”

(Asshole?)

“Oh no, my disciple was great.”

(Food?)

“I think it's close but you are just a tiny bit cuter than her.”

At that, he just woofs but continues wagging his short tail from side to side. Cute little rascal, I wonder how strong he got and what his disciple looked like.

“Have you guys found any monsters on this floor?” I ask.

“A few,” Tess answers me. “They don’t seem to be active at night, and they only really come out during the day. They’re all level 150 and over, and many of them rank in the two hundreds. But we know how it goes, there will always be stronger variants.”

This is such a weird setup. Isn't night usually more dangerous, shouldn't that be when all the dangerous animals leave their hidey holes?

“ Do we have any other info on the floor, what about news from the twins?”

Tess moves closer and Sophie takes over, keeping watch with her web of mana and the swarm of mana constructs.

I was able to grab one so I examine it while I listen to the others. Sophie doesn't seem to mind even though she rolled her eyes. I like how different our approach to mana can be, there is still so much to be learned.

Taking a seat next to Maya, Tess explains, “The twins are being held by the master of the Black Tower. They’ve tried to escape multiple times, but they were caught and punished...” She narrows her eyes and her expression changes, “Apparently the second in command marked them and they’re using that to track the twins.”

I don't like that either, “We will locate them and get them out.”

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“We will, but carefully. Apparently, the master of the Black Tower used to be a Champion’s disciple before he was sent to Astral Prison. So far we don't know his level, but the twins have placed their estimate somewhere around 300.”

“It doesn't matter.”

Tess smiles, "I thought you would say that, Nat. As you said, it doesn't matter. We will get Aaron and Dennis back, and we'll punish anyone who's hurt them. I think everyone here is up for that." She looks around.

Surprisingly, the rest of the group seems to agree with Tess. I think as time passes, the people of group 4 are beginning to bond.

"We probably won't be able to do it before the tournament, we only have fifteen hours until it starts," I note.

"That's true," Tess agrees with me. "We still don't know how the tournament works, but hopefully, it will allow us to come together and plan everything out without Community censorship and time limits. As for the rest of this floor, we have only bits of information from Aaron and Dennis. Apparently, it's a prison as the name implies. The entire moon serves as a dumping ground for the criminals, from multiple planets, they're left to fight amongst themselves or die of starvation."

"Are there any guards?" I ask.

"We don't know."

"You said the twins are being kept by people from the black tower and this Black Tower has a master who presides over its functions, what is it?"

"The prisoners on this moon have created several groups in order to survive. Black Tower is one of them."

Nothing about this floor has been what I expected.

The last floor was probably meant to illustrate the dangers of tampering with creation. Its whole purpose was to show us a world that fell at the hands of the Enchanter Guild who, in their hubris, enslaved a young divine beast. It also gave us a chance to learn more about the Pairing, enchanting, and the dangers of mana radiation.

So what is this one about? We have to escape, but how? Is it supposed to teach us about portals between planets and planetary defenses? Are we going to find something like the orbital base from the 4th floor? What about spaceships?

Well, I'm sure we will learn as the floor progresses, but currently, we've got the tournament looming on the horizon. After that, I will be able to enter the 3rd Beyond trial, and we need to free the twins.

Things here really refuse to get boring.

"Nat."

I look at Lily who's clearly the one who called out to me and take note of her hesitation.

"Did you miss m...us?" she asks in the end. For a moment she even looks vulnerable.

Lily must have grown up like Min-Jae, though she looks a bit calmer now, but of course, her separation anxiety still seems to bother her.

"Lily, don't bully Nat, you know..." Min-Jae starts.

"Yes," I say simply.

Multiple pairs of eyes turn to me and I slowly return each gaze. Briefly, I meet their eyes. "Yes," I repeat.

"Fuck, how can you say that with such a straight face? Someone might fall for..." Maya mumbles quietly, looking up from the damaged arcane ax she's been babying.

Isabella tries to connect to my feelings but I disrupt her attempt. Then I reach out and pinch Lily's nose and shake her head slightly.

It's nice to be back.

“So, my eye totally got stronger with me, Nat!” Min-Jae happily reports “All these waves I’ve been seeing are gravitational in nature. Look what I can do.”

He rushes and his eye shines slightly and I feel a weird burst of mana emanate from his body. Then he touches a rock as big as he is and the rock flies into the air.

Both of us stare at it as it continues to fly higher and higher, “I can do this to monsters and people too. Of course, the stronger the monster is, the harder I have to work to get through their natural barrier. At a certain point, it just won’t work no matter how much mana I spend if the monster is too strong. But when it comes to weaker monsters and objects...” a single pulse of mana is all he needs to lift a dozen similarly sized stones into the air.

“I can do that to weaker monsters even without needing to touch them, but when I touch them it works better.”

As the stones he sent flying about half a mile into the air before he plummets, I start imagining what would happen if he did that to monsters or people incapable of flying or landing safely.

“Can you send them into orbit?” I ask.

Right away he steps up and he turns to me with even higher excitement, “I knew you would understand, Nat! I just thought of it a few days ago, but you figured it out immediately!” he says, speaking faster, happy to share it all.

He continues, “Right now I can’t, but I’m sure I’ll be able to in the future. Just imagine sending monsters to orbit or launching them into space. Or I could lift them into the air and let them crash to the ground.”

“Tess, Nat is at it again and Kim is getting riled up,” Maya calls from somewhere nearby.

“Min-Jae, my boy. Why would you stop there? Imagine if you could lift a rock as big as a building into the air and then increase its gravity and send it crashing into your enemies. Or perhaps you don’t use a building, maybe you use high density metal projectiles, the sheer kinetic energy behind it would be terrifying. Did you hear about kinetic bombardment?”

"I did not!"

"I saw it on TV, it was some old army project. Tungsten rods or some such. As tall as telephone poles and probably as thick as Biscuit."

A woof sounds from somewhere nearby.

"They wanted to put these rods in orbit with satellites and then send them crashing to the ground, using gravity alone. supposedly they would reach speeds as high as Mach 8 and deal as much damage as a small nuclear bomb."

"Isn't that overkill, Nat?"

"You have to think big. With your gravity skill and telekinesis, you might be able to do it even without putting them into orbit."

"I will think about it. You really like using your surroundings to fight. Whether you're using gravity, falling rain, or wind to generate kinetic energy or absorbing it from pre-charged orbs, I've noticed that."

Well, he is not wrong, "It gives me more firepower quicker. I told this to my disciple as well, but you should always try to gain an advantage, don't bother trying to fight honorably. That's an idiot's game. But now I need to accept one of my rewards. Tess, will you keep watch?"

"Sure, enjoy."

Thankful, I move away from the group somewhat, filter out their conversations, and accept my skill combination token.

You have used an active skill combination token. Please pick two skills from the following that you would like to combine.

Warning! Combining two skills will reduce the level of the acquired skill.

Warning! Combining incompatible skills may result in worse skills.

Warning! After combining these skills, it will be extremely difficult to reacquire the skills used in the resulting combination.

List of available skills to combine:

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 47

Perception - Lvl 43

Tether - Lvl 35

Regalia - Lvl 23

Infusion - Lvl 28

Five skills available. [Focus], [Redistribution], [Resonance], and [Mana Domain] are not here at all.

I once again wonder if they are skills that are unavailable to combine or if they are higher tiered than the active skill combination token. If there even is something like hidden rarities as I've taken to thinking of late.

[Mana Manipulation] with [Perception]

[Mana Manipulation] with [Tether]

[Mana Manipulation] with [Regalia]

[Mana Manipulation] with [Infusion]

[Perception] with [Tether]

[Perception] with [Regalia]

[Perception] with [Infusion]

[Tether] with [Regalia]

[Tether] with [Infusion]

[Regalia] with [Infusion]

Well, the last time I didn't even consider using [Mana Manipulation] given the way I relied on it, but this time I'll keep it on the menu, I think I should be fine, even without it.

Let's consider our options.

Chapter 329: Brilliant idea

[Mana Manipulation] with [Perception]

This combination could create something akin to my Mana Wavelength Iris, so this is most likely a pass for now. It could be great, but I already have my trait, which is more than good enough for that.

[Mana Manipulation] with [Tether]

Sounds interesting, but I really like [Tether], and I still don't think I've explored it properly. So, this one is also a pass.

[Mana Manipulation] with [Regalia]

This one sounds the most interesting so far. I will think about it.

[Mana Manipulation] with [Infusion]

This is one to seriously consider, though I suspect that it'll just create a stronger, more mana-focused version of [Regalia]. Or maybe it will allow me to infuse mana more easily? In higher amounts? Like an improved version of my former skill [Mana Surge]?

It's not very enticing.

[Perception] with [Tether]

Also most likely a pass because I want to keep [Tether].

[Perception] with [Regalia]

This one is a straight-up weird combination, and I can imagine a worse skill coming out of it.

[Perception] with [Infusion]

Better [Infusion] maybe, a higher version of it? Though that could end badly as well.

[Tether] with [Regalia]

It could be interesting, but once again, nope.

[Tether] with [Infusion]

Also nope.

[Regalia] with [Infusion]

And once again we have something truly interesting.

So, in the end, it's either [Mana Manipulation] with [Regalia] or [Regalia] with [Infusion]. Either seems to be a good option.

Would the first option make a more controllable version of [Regalia], so perhaps the second will make a stronger version of it?

These options seem fairly similar. When I did this before, I gave up [Mana Infusion] and got [Infusion] in exchange. It would be cool if it came out the same, and I could get [Manipulation] instead of [Mana Manipulation], but unfortunately, I don't think that will happen. I just don't have the same kind of talent as Sophie, in the same way, it's hard for me to do healing. I've even tried to get other forms of Primordial energy, especially Tess's lightning, but I have failed.

Now that reminds me of something.

Tess combined her [Lightning Armor] with [Lightning Manipulation] and got [Storm Crown]. Does that mean that if I combine [Regalia] and [Mana Manipulation], I'll wind up with something similar? That could be cool.

At this point, I can manipulate mana pretty well on my own, and the skill mostly serves as a definitive numerical value for my skill level. Losing the skill would, of course, be noticeable, but I'm confident that I could adapt within a few weeks.

That's what I like about this. With all the things I've done, I should have a dozen more skills, but for some reason, the system doesn't give them out quite so easily. though that also means that I can do some stuff without having the skills, so that's cool.

The system is clearly a mess, it's highly situational and individualized, given the way the rules change slightly from person to person.

Well, let's hope things work out like they did for Tess. It might also force me to improve my manipulation of mana without the skill.

"I want to combine [Mana Manipulation] with [Regalia]."

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Mana Manipulation] and [Regalia]! A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Mana Crown].

[Mana Crown - lvl 0 > Mana Crown - lvl 9]

I'm sure Tess back then got it to level 2, so at least that's something. But it also irks me a bit. Tess got her crown earlier than I did. Does that mean I'm behind? Is my new skill stronger than her crown? It better be, Tess is just as competitive as me when it comes down to it.

First, let's check my mana. As I use Mana Cycling, I quickly notice a difference. It's not horrible, but it's there, and it's quite noticeable.

Well, it's time to get back to the grind. Getting a skill back seems nearly impossible, even with the system warning of that during my use of the first skill combination token, but that's fine. Only casuals from other difficulties rely on skills; I will learn on my own, yup.

Let's check the new skill then.

As it activates, I feel a big chunk of my mana move and then form a halo over my head made of pale blue mana. Gradually, that halo hovering over my head expands a bit and changes shape, taking the form of a simple crown.

I notice Tess glancing at me as she mouths, "I got it first."

Tsk.

Focusing on my new skill, I examine its functions and effects. So far as I can tell, it's basically an empty mana reservoir similar to the version that Tess has, though hers stores lightning.

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It's not unlike the orbs I've been filling with my mana and Primordial energies, but unlike the orbs, the crown's reservoir seems to be massive and optimized for mana. Of course, the question is how much I can fill it without destabilizing the whole thing. It's also more stable than the orbs, so filling it and keeping it running should be easier.

As I examine it more, I notice that controlling my mana seems to be a bit easier now, as if the crown is filling the gap left by [Mana Manipulation] while I have it active. The same goes for [Regalia], I'm still able to create armor and weapons at the same level as before without any extra effort.

More testing is needed to see the difference between old skills and the current one. But there is something that interests me more. I want to see how the crown interacts with my Mana Wavelength Iris and the black mana.

I activate my eyes, and there is a small difference. It's hard to explain, but it's as if the crown has made them easier to control. It's like it's dominating the mana and anything related to it.

It's not a very big difference, just a tiny bit, and I can't help but be a bit disappointed. But it's fine, my strengthened Mana Circuit has already helped with my eyes a lot, and my passives are doing their part as well. The problem probably lies with the low level of the skill as well. My eyes are a powerful trait so they might require more.

Now then, black mana.

I activate [Focus] and, with the help of [Redistribution] and [Infusion], I fill the pale blue orb with a lot of mana and continue to compress it. It's a bit harder now without [Mana Manipulation], but nothing I can't fix with some training.

When a golf ball sized black orb forms over my palm, I get a bit more attention from group 4, but too curious, I ignore them and continue.

What I notice right away is that [Mana Crown] is reacting to the black mana. The crown and black mana seem to be at war with each other.

Then I get a brilliant idea.

Should I? It could be dangerous.

No, I'm sure it WILL be dangerous.

But I really want to try.

"I will be right back," I quickly tell the others and push myself far away.

When I land, I'm surrounded by the same darkness as before, lit only by the beautiful bright stars overhead complimented by the giant purple nebula that takes up a third of the sky. Under that night sky, I use the method I learned in collaboration with my duplicate on the fifth floor to dominate a small amount of the black mana. It's harder to do it outside of my body, without my passives and circuits to help, but I activate my eyes and push through.

Then, slowly, carefully, I take that dominated small part of mana into my crown.

In a blink, the blue crown hovering over my head turns pitch black.

Then I start losing control over it. At first gradually, but it keeps getting harder to control faster and faster.

I fight the process, giving my all.

[Mana Crown - lvl 9 > Mana Crown - lvl 10]

[Mana Crown - lvl 11 > Mana Crown - lvl 12]

[Mana Crown - lvl 12 > Mana Crown - lvl 13]

[Mana Crown - lvl 13 > Mana Crown - lvl 14]

[Mana Crown - lvl 14 > Mana Crown - lvl 15]

But no matter how much I try, how much pressure my constructs or passives work against it, the crown turned black judges me unworthy to control its power... for now. The black crown reaches into my body and starts absorbing my mana in defiance of my attempts to stop it, once again slowly, but then quicker.

[Mana Crown - lvl 15 > Mana Crown - lvl 16]

It slows for a moment but then speeds up again and when I decide to try to cancel the skill, it refuses to listen, akin to how black mana behaves, just much more strong-willed now.

My body's mana is gone, all of that big mana pool taken against my will by this unholy abomination over my head.

With nearly suicidal fascination, I watch as it even reaches into my Mana Reservoir and starts emptying that as well.

How the fuck is this even possible.

So interesting.

I quickly tie an anchor to a mana orb, shoot it toward the others, and then fly further and further away from them, even teleporting through anchors multiple times.

When I finally stop, I find myself really far away from where I started and I've depleted most of the mana in my reservoir, but I finally manage to remove the crown from my head and throw it away.

[Mana Crown - lvl 16 > Mana Crown - lvl 17]

It tries to reach me, to take the rest of my mana from my reservoir, but I move further away, and it seems like the crown can't move on its own. It just hovers there eerily, slowly spinning. The connection it had to me disappears and as if unable to maintain its properties without me, it finally stops, without any mana left for it to absorb.

Damn, what a terrifying thing.

I love it.

The way it absorbs mana is scary and it doesn't even feel like its real power, just a side effect created by its combination with black mana.

Well, I can observe it a bit longer. If it's like a black orb, it will start crumbling after being deprived of mana for a while. Well, with as much as it did absorb, it will take a while, but...

The black crown shifts through a series of colors in quick succession. From black to pale blue to darker. Streaks of light blue appear, quickly joined by purple streaks. Then the crown turns bright white.

And as terror-struck as fascinated, I watch it all happen.

Then I teleport away as quickly as I can.

I land next to group 4 once more, only for them to pepper me with questions, I turn in the direction of the crown. Wondering if we're far enough away. I flew a pretty good way out, didn't I?

A bright white light appears on the horizon. At first, it is the size of a fireplace, then it quickly grows larger as the crown releases all the mana it has collected, unable to maintain its shape without its connection to me.

There is no way that's going to reach us, right?

The light becomes brighter and I check my mana stat.

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1015 + 1015

Then I remember that my Mana Reservoir basically triples that amount.

I reach into said Mana Reservoir and move the rest of my mana, creating a pointy barrier in front of us that should divert most of the explosion, though we will still take some of the impact.

"I might need some help here," I call to others.

There must be something in my voice because they immediately rush to join me in my effects. Everyone who can, moves to reinforce, creating barriers of their own or using support skills. Sophie even shows off her manipulation of the earth forming a sizable mass of rocks into a wall in front of us, which she proceeds to strengthen with her web.

The horizon turns bright white and then a light flashes, illuminating a huge area around us, turning the night into the brightest day. Every stone, every inch of the cliff face looks like someone is shining a massive flashlight across its surface.

Then the heat follows and even as far away as we are the heat wave crashes into us, slamming into Sophie's rock wall and baking the stone. The shockwave follows next and I feel pressure against my barrier and pieces of the wall crumble, while some of the weaker barriers the others made start to flicker.

All of this is followed by the deafening roar of the explosion, just before the Mana Radiation hits us.

Similar to what I felt back in the Veil Ignition Station, next to the cracked core. It's not nearly as strong and it's not dangerous to anyone here, but it's there and I can feel it hanging in the air.

Lastly, with Mana Radiation arrives a weak field, which seems to be an attempt at disrupting mana. It's weak and barely noticeable, but with my experience, I can sense it.

Gradually, the light and the heat dissipate and we lower our barriers after making sure that it's safe.

We were so far away, and yet this happened. Could I do that on my own, by compressing mana into an orb? I don't think so. I wouldn't be able to keep that much mana under my control or collect it quickly enough.

Could I do that with the help of items, perhaps some epic mana stones filled with my mana? Probably yes, but I would need help to create such an item, like when the Craft Guild on the 4th floor helped me create the ant obliterator. But even then it wasn't this potent. There was some Mana Radiation, but it was even weaker than what happened here and there was no disruptive wave following that. I mean it was almost like an EMP.

And that's not even what it's meant for, it was just a side effect of losing control of a combination of two incompatible or exceedingly compatible things.

I love it.

"Who wants to check the crater?" I turn to Group 4.

Huh, why are they giving me those expressions? Aren't they curious?

Chapter 330: Start of the 1st tournament

POV Tess Hansen

Nat and the others stand around the crater created by his skills. "A small accident", he calls it. Kim and Lily following are close behind, though I notice that he seems to be a bit disappointed.

"I thought it would be a bigger explosion. Was most of the mana wasted? Or is it..." he mumbles under his breath.

Well, it's Nat, so I'm not even surprised, as I observe the crater and remember the explosion and how far away we were when we felt its effect.

Could I have created something like this? Probably not, I mostly focus on increasing single-target damage, that's why I picked Potency mana upgrade. Nat could probably do similar damage to a single target, but I believe that mine is stronger; it's just that his skills and their applications are... exotic.

As I watch Lily and Kim follow him like little ducklings, I can't help but smile. It feels nice for the group to be together once more.

"That's a nice smile," Maya says as she stands by my side.

"Thanks," I say, smiling at her as well. "It's nice to have the band all together, well, most of us."

"Dennis and Aaron will be back soon, and then it is group 4 at full power once again. After months," Maya sighs and looks at Biscuit as he floats around Isabella, who, with a serious expression, tells him that she could create a crater like this as well.

"Yes, and when they get back, it'll be us against the world once again." I say.

"Heh, so silly."

"I know, right? So what do you think of this?" I ask, gesturing at Nat.

"The crater or the guy?"

“The guy. Things like the crater are old hat at this point, and they come as a package with him.” As I say that, I declare the space around Maya and me as mine, preventing our conversation from leaking out.

He notices right away as I create the field, and a golden light flashes in his eyes before he turns back to Kim and continues to explain something.

“He seems a bit more approachable. Even his expression is softer when he talks to the others,” Maya says.

“So, It’s not just me.”

“You know him better, so what do you think?”

I take a moment to think about the answer, “Nat is... well, his upbringing has been a bit difficult, so he likes to close himself off and keep to himself. I think having to take care of his disciple on the 5th floor has helped him realize a few things.”

“I can imagine that with the way the system chose our disciples. Mine was way too similar to me, Tess; it was almost scary. As if I was seeing myself as a kid. How was yours?”

“Mine was the same. It was like looking in a mirror, but I'm happy for that. It made me realize how cute I used to be and how well I've grown,” with a smile, I poke her side and then dodge her playful attack.

I continue, “As for our walking bomb, I'm happy to see him like this. You might laugh at me, but I think out of all of us, he might be the most normal person here.”

Maya shoots a few small mana projectiles at me, and I evaporate them with my lightning.

Unbelieving, she lifts her eyebrow, “I know he keeps saying that, but Tess, you at least, should know better than to fall for it. The guy is bonkers. But now then, do you still have that snack you stole from the Butler? I will trade you a few rare-grade mana stones for it.”

I partially filter out Min-Jae's and Lily's conversation and examine the crater once more.

How is it so small!

From the way the shockwave hit us, I expected the damage to be bigger. There was no implosion either.

Did most of it get sent upward? Is the rock here more durable? Was there too much mana for an implosion to occur, maybe it was the lack of negative pressure?

The smaller crater could also be because it was just compressed mana without any skill infusions or instructions. That could be it.

As for the crown and black mana, I've already thought about what went wrong. It's highly likely that the crown should dominate mana, maybe even the black stuff; it's just that the level is too low or, maybe I used too much mana when I created the black orb. Both of these problems seem to be similar in nature so in the future, they could probably work pretty nicely together.

Imagine a crown infused with black mana absorbing the mana from the attacks being thrown at me and filtered through the crown to change the frequency so that I can use said mana. Later on I might be able to use the crown as a medium to absorb ambient mana.

I already have a few ideas, inspired by the ethercrystal shortsword I got from that guy, Elydor. I wish I could meet him one more time... to talk.

The combination won't be viable for a while yet. Pushing black mana into the crown gave it easier access to my own mana. It continued to absorb my mana even through the Mantle and my natural barrier, it usually wouldn't be capable of that, at least not at this level.

Then it even absorbed mana from my Mana Reservoir and I find that highly interesting. Very, very interesting.

Damn, this shit is going to be good. I just need some training and levels.

That's when Lily moves closer and pokes my side.

I don't let her know, but I carefully strengthen my body and even then I feel it. Once again, I'm reminded of the physical power of the muscle heads in group 4. The heretics that didn't go full mana.

"You said you missed us, did you mean me as well?" she asks carefully.

But I can see where she's going. She knows the answer but wants to hear me say it out loud. I don't mind all that much, it's not that difficult to say, but something in the way this petite girl looks at me makes me want to tease her.

"Oh, yes, I missed Biscuit," I answer before turning around, and heading to the bottom of the crater.

"H-hey!" she shouts and quickly follows me, nearly immediately appearing by my side with a quick movement.

Did she use [Sacrifice] or is it her own strength?

"So you said you upgraded your Constitution?" I say changing the subject.

She pouts for a moment, but happy even for that conversation she answers, "Yes! It will make my body much tougher. But the main reason is that the stronger the body I have, the more I get from [Sacrifice]."

Lily is still somewhat awkward. We haven't seen each other in weeks so it will take a bit to get as comfortable around each other as before, but it's also fun to see her struggle.

Am I the bully here? Am I the asshole as Earth's future Absolute declared so long ago and my first minion confirmed?

"Any improvements to your usage of the skill or [Reconstruction]?"

Her eyes shine at the opportunity and she gestures for me to look.

She uses her skill and slowly her face changes, her nose becomes a bit longer, her cheeks sharper and even the shape of her eyes changes. Her lips grow bigger and her chin moves too.

In the end, there is a small but clear resemblance to Tess.

“I can reconstruct my body and face a bit. Though I don't know how to change the color of my hair, yet, but I will get there,” she declares proudly.

Is she using such a top-notch skill to do magical plastic surgery? Did she spend her time on the 5th floor learning that? What the heck? If she is going to waste such a great healing skill like that she should give it to me!

“All those small changes taught me a much greater degree of control. I leveled so much!” She says quickly after seeing my expression.

Oh, that makes a bit more sense.

“And look!” Without any hesitation, she rolls up her sleeve, and a dagger made of gray mana forms in her hand, just before she cuts her arm off at the elbow.

The gray mana in the dagger then lashes out at the arm as it, disintegrating it. Min-Jae, standing nearby, pauses whatever he was doing and has an expression I can understand.

I watch as with visible speed, Lily's arm grows back. She doesn't use [Sacrifice], it's just her healing skill, and it only takes her a few seconds.

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

The petite girl smiles cutely, "I can control [Disintegration] a bit more, and if I want, I can ensure anything the skill touches becomes more difficult or nearly impossible to heal. Well, it's not like I need it that much. Usually, when I hit something with [Disintegration], it dies, so anti-healing isn't needed."

"Hehe, I see."

"That's cool, right?"

"Very cool, Miss Lily! And yes, I missed you as well."

"Oh," a slight blush appears on her face. "Nice try!" she giggles. "But I'm still mad at you for leaving me alone. I can understand, Tess explained it to me, but I can't help it!"

Should I deploy the hug strat? She is weak against it. But somehow, that feels cheap, "That's fine with me. Let's just give it time, and we will see."

After a short silence, she answers, "Yes, let's do that."

It looks like the 5th floor helped her. She seems to have calmed down a bit and she's not as clingy. That's good to see.

(Food!) a message sounds in our heads.

"We're coming," I shout back and gesture for Lily and Min-Jae to follow me.

As we get out, we rejoin others that already made a small circle around Isabella's fire orb, taking out food and water.

Tess starts talking first, "We now don't need as much food or water as we did on Earth, hell we can last days without it, but let's be careful. It seems like food is going to be scarce here, that is if we don't want to eat the monsters, and most of them don't seem very tasty. As for water, we haven't found any yet, so let's go over our reserves."

“Water shouldn't be a problem.” I show Tess my epic water bottle. It's filled with multiple swimming pools worth of water that I filtered in the Sanctuary.

Hearing my explanation, she tries, “Try if you can use it. The system might have blocked its use.”

When I do so, it works just fine.

“Great, so the water won't be a problem, and with the food we have, we should be able to last comfortably for multiple weeks.”

(Food!)

“A week or two less if we have to feed Biscuit as well,” Min-Jae jokes, and I'm sure he gets called an asshole for that by our cute doggo. Deservedly so.

Biscuit wobbles on his short legs in front of me. His expression gives the impression that he's asking if I can believe such rude behavior, and then he climbs into my lap. There, I sneakily feed him a few small pieces of the dried deer meat I made on the 5th Floor.

Slowly, hours pass, and the tournament is coming closer. Everyone takes a few hours of sleep while others keep watch, and stories are told.

We joke, we tease each other, and we fight over whose disciple is stronger or cuter. We theorize about how we will find them or get the coordinates to their worlds.

Even in the cold area and lit by light from the stars only, it feels somewhat cozy.

Biscuit's small body is comfortably warm and heavier than before. Lily is sneaking and moving closer to me. Maya teases Min-Jae, and Sophie refuses to leave Isabella's side. Noodle seems to be annoyed by that but doesn't show any aggression towards her. Smart small danger noodle.

But the happiest of all seems to be Tess. She is quiet most of the time, but she has that smile on her lips as her golden hair seems to shine in the starlight.

So we wait, and then the notification finally comes.

Congratulations on your 1st year in the tutorial!

The tournament preparations have been concluded.

During the duration of the tournament of the 5th round of the tutorial, all Floor quests will be put on hold.

The tournament will have a 7-day duration, and you can decide to participate or not.

More information will be given after entering the tournament floor.

Would you like to participate in the 1st tournament of the 5th round of the Earth's tutorial?

Yes/No

“Does it mean side quests can still be done?” Sophie asks. “Or maybe it will pause the floor fully, and all natives and monsters will disappear?”

“It's possible that side quests will still be available for people who decide not to enter the tournament,” Tess joins in. “That would mean that the system will either block the progression of Floor quests or remove the natives or places you need to visit for them. It should be capable of that.”

“The seven-day duration is interesting as well,” I say, adding my piece. “That probably means there will be one long event or we'll have multiple events.”

Min-Jae asks, "Do you think there will be any duels or will it be something else? What if we aren't able to meet each other, and only see each other during the duels?"

"In that case, I want to apologize ahead of time. I won't hold back," Tess says, smiling brightly.

Please decide in the following 30 seconds if you would like to join the tournament.

"Someone's impatient," Sophie sighs and then grabs Isabella's hand. "In case we get split, try to find me, okay? I will be using our signal if that happens."

"I have Noodle; I will be safe, Soph!"

"First place is mine," I tell Tess.

"We shall see," she says, returning my gaze.

The time ticks down, and with a small bag of a few important items and a damaged arcane ax in my hand, I click yes. The rest of the things stay on this floor, buried deep underground and hidden to be retrieved when we come back.

I don't even feel the effects of the teleportation and find myself in a different place. The bright sun makes me squint my eyes.

Around me, I hear small birds sing, the sky is beautifully blue, and the gentle breeze moves through the leaves of the trees all around me. The air smells like summer.

Then I sense a presence behind me.

Mana rushes through my already strengthened body, and I swing the ax in my hand, ready to redirect it if needed.

As my body tilts, my shifting point of view reveals a thin girl with messy brown hair and lively eyes.

She ducks under the ax and tries to stab me with the dagger in her hand. It's a playful move, but extremely quick.

Kinetic energy explodes into the area around me, and sensing that, she aborts the attack. With an even higher speed and three nimble jumps, she moves behind just out of reach. In the process, she easily dodges the few small orbs I launch at her.

Then there she stands, her lively eyes observing me. There is no text over her head, identifying her as one of the other tutorial attendees.

But just the way she hid her mana from me is scary. I couldn't feel it until she was nearly touching me. Even now, as I look at her, she is barely different from the tree next to her when it comes to sensing her presence. And that speed.

"Who are you?" I ask.

Lowering her guard, she just shrugs her shoulders. Then she lifts up one of her fingers gesturing for me to wait and nimbly moves towards one of the bushes and breaks off a small thin branch.

She takes a few steps closer, not worried at all, and draws into the dirt on the ground.

(;-_)ノ

Haaa, Is no one here normal?

Tacita?" I ask.

She nods energetically, happy for my guess, her brown hair bouncing around her head as she does so.

The tournament is a competitive base, but also an opportunity to meet your fellow tutorial attendees.

In one day the events will start, until then please enter the common area.

There are no monsters or natives, allowing other tutorial attendees to get to know each other.

Death is impossible on the tournament floor.

Enjoy your first tournament!

I look at the woman next to me who is still reading the notification. She is the first Beyonder I've met other than Tess and Lily, so I'm curious. So far she is the same as she was in the Community and refuses to talk. She only uses emoticons.

My theory that I'm the most normal here is getting stronger even as I meet more and more people.

I'm Noname, you may have seen me talking in the Beyond community."

She nods a few times and does some hand signs. Sign language? Is she mute?

Seeing my expression, she just smiles weakly, as if not expecting me to understand.

Well, it doesn't matter that much. The tournament has finally started and even though it's not what I expected, I feel myself getting excited.

I can't wait to see people from Hell and other difficulties.

POV Tess Hansen

We got split again. At this point it's starting to get annoying how often the tutorial does this.

Hello friend, my name is Gareth. I'm happy to finally see someone outside of my group," the man in front of me smiles friendly.

He is tall, muscular, and has a face that seems like the kind you see on superheroes. The man is wearing full plate armor made of silver metal. I don't see any weapons on him, but the armor itself feels like it's at least mid epic grade.

Hello Gareth, I'm Sset, we've spoken."

Oh, a fellow Beyond explorer!" he says excitedly. "It's nice to finally meet you. I hope we get along!" he says energetically and with a smile.

Right away I know Nathaniel is going to hate this guy.

POV Lily Chen

The man in front of me doesn't move. Even his expression is neutral. But the way he stands makes me put my guard up.

Even though he is missing his right arm judging by the empty sleeve where it once was, he feels very dangerous. And there is a beautiful sword on his hip. The sword is broken, and half of the blade's missing, yet he's still carrying it.

His face is calm, even pretty, he has a small birthmark under the left corner of his left eye. He has long black hair tied into a ponytail and very light green eyes.

Are you a healer?" he asks.

How does he know that?

And if I am?"

Then I will ask you to restore my arm. If you are capable of that, I'm willing to offer a trade." He pauses, his eyes observing me, "Are you his healer? Grumpy?"

I get ready to use [Sacrifice], "Savant?"

His expression changes and he nods.