

Tutorial 451

Chapter 451: White Whale

Five hours of testing later and I feel like I have a pretty good idea of what's changed with my new skill.

I can still place anchors, and I need to place them either very close to my body or within my active domain. Exactly the same as before, it doesn't change even with the crown active.

These anchors though, are much more durable, and I think that if I use just the right amount of mana, they should easily last weeks, likely even months without crumbling. Sure, they will still be somewhat vulnerable to external interference, but even that should require a higher degree of expertise, given that these new anchors seem to be much less noticeable, more durable, and tend to require less mana overall.

From what I saw, most people tend to have some basic ability to manipulate mana even without any skills. Nearly anyone can learn to create mana barriers or simple projectiles with the right amount of effort, and the same goes for the disruption of things like anchors and the ability to sense mana.

Everyone can do it, but the difference in proficiency is huge. I mean really huge. Someone with low-level abilities wouldn't have a chance in hell to make a barrier capable of defending against even my weakest attacks, much less disrupt one of my anchors — assuming they could even sense them.

Still, it's kind of fun to consider that things like this should be so common. It almost reminds me of the way so many people on Earth know how to ride a bicycle or how to throw a rock. Hmm, there's probably a better example, so what... I pause there. I'm getting off track again. I tend to do that a lot when I'm excited or happy, my mind just wanders, jumping from one interesting thing to another.

Who can blame me with so much to discover!

Anyway, I'll probably need a better name for these things than "anchors". Maybe I can just call them "marks" or something like that. It's something to think about anyway. Other than vastly improved anchors, [Ley Line] improves the connection between them. I can send much more mana through without having to worry about breaking them or finding ways to strengthen the anchors.

It feels like there's a line connecting me to my anchors and my anchors to one another, invisible and strong. It can easily handle an impressive amount of mana, especially with how thin it is.

The efficiency, speed, and losses involved with sending mana across such a vast distance are things I still need to test.

What interests me the most about the skill is these Ley Lines, as I've cleverly dubbed them. It seems like I should be able to do even more with them, almost like Sophie's web. There's a chance they might remain stable even without anchors between them, but that's another aspect I still need to test as I level the skill.

Overall, very good stuff.

Plus, I got my [Mana Manipulation] back just like I did before, even though it doesn't seem like it should be that easy. It's obvious that mana and I just go together that well, even the system can't split us apart.

Jumping off the bed, I head over to the mirror and examine my face.

Still the same asshole.

I breathe on the mirror, coating it in the fog from my breath, and draw two cat ears at the top of my head.

"Nya," I whisper, and my reflection does the same.

What a dumbass.

I then pick up my clothes, something I let the seller pick for me. A while back, Maya said that I dressed like a homeless man, so I decided to let the shopkeep pick something out for me.

I also remember that when Maya said that, I complimented her shirt, and told her that it was fitting for an older woman like her.

Surprisingly, she wasn't very happy with that.

Anyway, the seller spent a surprisingly long amount of time picking these out for me. She even made me try on several different outfits. We picked the pants out fairly quickly, settling on a simple, sleek black pair that turned out to be very comfortable.

The shirt took a bit longer while she tried to match it to my eyes. We tried gray, we tried brown, but she wasn't the least bit satisfied with either option.

In the end, she decided on a pale shade of green, which I approved because it felt nice to move my arms in.

Happy with it, I asked her for multiple pairs of the same pants and shirts, and she looked at me like I was some kind of barbarian.

Isn't that normal? If you find fitting clothes, just pick as many of the same shorts or pants as you can before they stop selling them a year later when you might want to buy them again.

Even as a customer, I found myself forced to buy a range of different colors, so I ended up with gray pants, another pair of black pants, and three shirts: pale blue, burgundy, and gray.

I liked the feel of the material though, so I didn't complain much, even as she demanded an outrageous sum in exchange.

At least the bag was free.

With an hour remaining on the clock, I finally stop by the blacksmith.

The metal sphere I ordered is ready. It's a bit taller than me, and its surface is very smooth, extremely smooth. The only interruption in the surface is a circular hole just wide enough for me to crawl through.

“Don’t look at me like that. The integrity of the sphere increases if the entrance is smaller. Now just get in so I can seal it.”

With a sigh, I do as I’m told, having already paid.

The weirdness of what I’m doing doesn’t escape me. Willingly entering this weirdo sphere to be sealed inside. If I didn’t have an anchor placed in the inn I just stayed at and enough mana to defend myself, I would probably be worried.

I light one of my thermal orbs and examine the sphere as it seals around me, and blankets me in darkness.

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There is a bit of food, some water, and a bunch of rib-like braces around the walls for strengthening.

I asked the blacksmith not to use mana while making it and to try to purge it of any kind of residual mana, which, to his credit, he promised to do, already seeming to know about its effect on the white sand.

Still, I know for sure there will be some remaining, but it’s just something I have to expect, and I only need the sphere to hold on for a second or two at most.

I start working on my plan as well while making sure I’m touching as much of the sphere as I can—I wouldn’t want to leave it behind after all.

Using a bit of my mana, I form the thinnest and most durable mana projectile I can. It’s barely the width of my pinkie and about as long as my pointing finger.

With my new skill, I tie an anchor to it and continue compressing it for the next thirty minutes, turning it a dark shade of blue with hints of purple and light blue streaking through it. It’s getting close to

destabilizing and exploding after turning bright white. Then I start storing kinetic energy behind it, ready to launch it away, focusing almost the entire capacity of my vortex core into that one point.

Lastly, I wait, watching the countdown and packing my bag, filling it with food and water.

As the timer ticks down, I breathe slowly.

Breathe in. Breathe out, my mind constantly keeping the projectile and kinetic energy in check.

Then the timer hits zero, and I leave Beyond.

Immediately, the sound of compressed metal creaking surrounds me, and I hear the sound of charged white sand even through the thick metal of the sphere.

A single grain of white sand pierces through the wall, and I tilt my head to avoid it.

So much for no mana, but I shouldn't have expected such a complete mastery of mana from the blacksmith.

I throw a spoon I stole from the inn into the air and watch the direction it falls. Then I shoot the projectile in the opposite direction.

The projectile explodes forth at such a high speed that a small shockwave erupts within the sphere, rebounding off the metal walls of the construct.

My hearing cuts out only to be replaced with constant high pitched ringing, I watch as the projectile easily pierces the metal, creating a small hole through which grains of sand slowly start falling in.

I wait until the last possible moment, and teleport away, just before a grain of sand makes contact.

The process of teleportation turns out to be smoother than before, and it feels more stable. I appear near my projectile, which quickly disappears from my sight, continuing to fly higher and higher.

I take a moment to assess my current altitude and let myself fall for a moment before I start absorbing kinetic energy to stop the fall. Mostly to avoid triggering whatever aerial defenses they have around this moon.

Looking down below me, I see a seemingly endless stretch of white dunes giving the impression that it could go on forever. Now though I find a single giga-dune right below me.

It's enormous.

As the sand got pulled toward the Champion, it must have flattened the surrounding area, only for the wind to slowly grow the dunes anew.

The white sand now lies scattered, a prison that lost its purpose the moment Caius died.

The huge number of sand particles floating in the air does make for a bit of a problem though, they were likely ejected into the atmosphere in the process of killing the champion.

I pop my [Mana Domain] into existence, and any time a few grains enter my domain, I send a small pulse in that direction to draw them away.

With the number of particles in the air, it's difficult, but still doable.

As I start thinking about what direction the central region might be, the air reverberates with a hum I can feel in my chest.

Down below, a geyser of sand explodes high into the air, and a massive monster emerges, leaping into the air, just one of its eyes turning out to be several times my size.

[Dustveil Whale - lvl ???]

It has three eyes on each side, each of these eyes yellow with a red pupil in the middle. The whale is massive, even bigger than the Gaiathra I met back on the fifth floor, and its color is pure white, more so even than the sand it leapt from.

The air reverberates again, though this time it's an attack directed at me.

My body shakes wildly, and my mind blinks on the verge of passing out. As the attack proceeds the Dustveil Whale moves its huge tail, flinging a massive amount of sand my way, sending a stream of the particles right at me.

Okay, let's keep a distance and then shoot it with some huge attacks.

Redirecting more kinetic energy, I fly away at high speed, even at the cost of some of the sand piercing my domain and burrowing its way through my body. I start creating a javelin next to me, quickly condensing it into a bar of tricolored mana, ready to destabilize at a moment's notice as I continue to feed it mana.

By the time I turn around to shoot, the whale is nearly below me. The monster, the size of a skyscraper, moving at a speed comparable to mine.

I don't think I've been so surprised in a long while.

Still, I launch my javelin at the beast, and it breaks the sound barrier, the boom echoing through the area as it disappears from my sight.

The whale twists out of the way in a moment, opens its mouth, and eats my javelin.

Its six eyes watch me as I count down to the explosion, and when it finally explodes, there is no sign of it. No mana escapes the monster's mouth, nothing seeps through the skin. Instead, the whale buries itself deep under the white sand, swimming and then leaping into the air once more, its massive body twisting in the air like a dolphin.

Another attack slams into me, and my altitude drops for a moment before I fly higher again.

FINE then.

I change tactics, instead of focusing on a single powerful attack, I start forming dozens of mana projectiles, each one shaped like a nail with a flat end, to keep them from piercing too deep.

I shoot them at the whale, running through dozens of them every few seconds, and I speed up, adding more until hundreds of them are flying through the air like bullets from a machine gun. They embed themselves in the skin of the whale in large numbers, while it follows me nonetheless as I continue to fly at high speed.

The mana on the projectiles charges the white sand, which immediately starts attacking the whale, the grains moving wildly through the air.

Burrowing under the sand, the monster appears on the surface soon again. Wounds scarring its massive body, Though it's still not enough to take it down.

When I repeat, the whale burrows under the surface and jumps back up, only to unleash that acoustic mental attack once more before burrowing again.

The monster follows me for hours, quickly being joined by two more whales, and another three after that.

Six giant monsters, two of which are slightly smaller and faster, constantly following me and attacking relentlessly, draining what little mana I have, even after a day in Beyond. But the desert is getting smaller and shallower at the edges.

I don't think they were lying when they said the entire mana desert would attack the Champion if even a single grain of sand touched him. All the sand, charged by the mana batteries scattered across the desert, kept attacking until the Champion died, only stopping once he was gone. Meanwhile, a huge pile of sand has built up in the center, but the desert is slowly returning to its former state.

It isn't long before the sand isn't deep enough for the moby dicks to follow, and they stop, their sad cries sounding like music to my ears.

Though I'm clearly still in the desert, since my mana isn't recovering, so I guess the edges aren't defined by the sand after all.

With the promise of revenge against the white whales guiding me, I continue to fly, and when my mana finally starts to recover, I land safely on the rocky ground, and as is typical of the 6th floor. It's night, and a purple nebula shines in the sky.

My next steps are simple.

Find out where the hell I am—whether I'm in the central region or back where we came from.

Figure out a way to go back, grab as much sand as possible, and make a ton of items to sell in the system shop.

Lastly, resume training with the RTE and orbs, and regroup with Group 4—or at least with the twins, Lily and Biscuit, as we planned before.

Chapter 452: A lot of shards

[Ley Line - lvl 9 > Ley Line - lvl 10]

[Ley Line - lvl 10 > Ley Line - lvl 11]

[Ley Line - lvl 11 > Ley Line - lvl 12]

[Ley Line - lvl 12 > Ley Line - lvl 13]

[Ley Line - lvl 13 > Ley Line - lvl 14]

After doing a bit more testing I finally figure out the difference between [Tether] and [Ley Line].

Where the main idea behind [Tether] was to create a tether, anchor it in space, and connect two disparate locations, the point of [Ley Line] is to create a line between them, not the anchor itself.

I'm starting to suspect that as I reach higher levels, I might not even need the anchors. In theory, I could just create lines. However, I still have no idea how that would work.

It's hard to explain since I mostly go by feel. Yes, anchors, marks, whatever you call them, are important, even with my new skill, but they seem to be more of a side benefit than the main focus.

I have a suspicion that my new skill, at a really, really high level, could have the same potential. Perhaps allowing me to cover the entire earth in invisible lines of mana and do... something.

I'm sure I'll come up with something amazing eventually. Maybe a personal transportation net. Or a system to detect monsters with invisibility and kill them on sight.

I know I still don't have a proper understanding of the skill, these are just the questions I have at the moment.

What's the advantage of using lines over anchors? Lines have a larger surface area and more points where they can be damaged, while anchors are vulnerable to the anchors themselves. Yes, lines cover more space—the entire breadth of the line—whereas anchors just connect two points.

It needs more testing, but it's not like I mind. After all, it's a shiny new toy I can work on, and I already did over the past few days.

I've also figured out that I'm somewhere in the central region, though I haven't seen much difference so far, but then again I haven't actually delved any deeper than the border of the Mana Desert.

I still haven't given up on my goal of using the sand to acquire mass quantities of shards, I'm also waiting for Aaron, Dennis, Lily, and Biscuit, the group I was supposed to guide, before delving back into the Mana Desert.

Tess and the others decided to go forward with the plan, so we'll be splitting group 4 to cover more area, train, and level up for the next few months.

Something tells me things aren't going to be quite the same with the group after the days of amplified emotions in the Champion's prison, but I don't ask. I'm sure Lily and the boys will tell me more when they get here.

That is if we can even detect each other. Currently, the plan is for them to reach the edge of the desert and move across it until we meet. Of course, with help from my constant signals and the twins' attempting to use [Connection].

There's also a crown over my head. For the next few months, I plan to find out how much mana I can store in the thing. I also want to move my mana to it for when I inevitably go to collect white sand for crafting.

At least I managed to get the blue brothers to teach me how to purge the mana from my clothes, so I don't have to go naked anymore.

An interesting question comes to mind. If I were to leave my things and crown here and go to collect some white sand, would it be possible for someone to steal my crown?

I mean, it would probably explode eventually, but it would still be interesting to see how the skill would react if someone else were to touch the crown.

A day later, I shoot off a couple of flares made of thermal energy, launching them high into the air, while storing my mana in the crown. Then I do a few rounds of expunging and purge the mana clinging to my clothes and body.

As I pass the border and my mana stops regenerating, I repeat the process again. Only then do I use kinetic energy and make my way over to the white dunes.

Upon reaching them, I immediately start checking for more of those annoying whales and push as much of the white sand as I can into the bags I brought with me.

In the end, it probably comes out to somewhere around half of my weight, before running back satisfied with the result—without any whales attacking me this time.

I stop just before passing through the border so that my mana doesn't regenerate. There, I already have a few molds prepared, granted they're mostly just holes in the ground made with my mana and purged.

At this point I grab the white sand and start pouring it into one of the forms before me.

A single big dagger with a handle made from the horn of a monster I killed not long ago.

I repeat the process from before, using a stream of golden thermal energy to melt the sand until it begins to bubble, releasing trapped air and starting to glow. I take a moment to let the gasses finish venting and let the blade cool. Then I do the same with the other 4 forms, ending up with five daggers.

Taking the bags of white sand, I put them in a hole on the side where mana doesn't regenerate and push a rock over them.

Then I take the daggers and walk across the border with them, returning the crown to its place over my head.

Like the spears I made before, the daggers begin to tremble, reacting to having a source of mana so close, despite being trapped in the form of glass where the individual particles can't pierce me.

Mana-Reactive Dagger (Upper Epic): This dagger ignores mana-based defenses and absorbs mana on impact, sharpening its edge against physical armor and barriers. It becomes progressively more effective the more mana it absorbs, but if pushed too far, it can shatter explosively, scattering a mist of fine, cutting particles that may cause a significant degree of harm to anything in the area.

Not bad. Let's sell it.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 1,830 shards?

Mana-Reactive Dagger (Upper Epic)

Yes/No

Well, well, well, if it isn't the system scamming me again.

Upper epic items often go for over 10 thousand shards or more. The fact that I crafted this one means that I should receive 50% of the item's total value instead of the 10-20% I get for items I find on the individual floors. And yet this sale is going to net me less than 5 thousand.

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There could be any number of explanations, like the low quality of the item or the fact that the blade could shatter and kill its owner at any moment.

Little things like that.

Still, I may as well just blame the asshole of a system.

I confirm the sale and then move to another dagger with the same description.

Unable to sell the same item twice.

As I feared. Even though I made each dagger slightly differently, using handles made from different materials in a variety of shapes, the message remains the same.

Just like before, when I tried to sell coordinates to Lissandra's world twice, the system just wouldn't allow it.

I have a strong suspicion that there was a powerful duplication glitch, and this is just how the system patched it out. Hats off to the lucky fella who abused it.

But it's still something I expected, so I move to plan b and open the easy difficulty tab of the community.

Noname (Hell, group 4) – yo, name all the different kinds of weapons and simple armor and items you can come up with. Dagger, spear, axe, and the like. If you give me an idea I haven't thought of, I'll buy you something in the next tournament.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) – hello boss! The items you gave me are doing great. I killed a boss monster on my own!

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) – I have a few ideas, but these are probably the ones you didn't think of flail, warhammer, halberd, scimitar, throwing knife, katana, glaive, nunchaku, morningstar, quarterstaff, sickle, trident.

What the hell is up with that guy? I really didn't expect any of his suggestions. I'll seriously fuck up anyone who tries to take him away.

Maria (Easy, AFK)

Potato (Easy, Royals) – Noname, giving away free items? I want some too, hopefully something from Tent Creep, hehe. Tomahawk, boomerang, pike, bayonet, harpoon, hook, glaive, estoc, fang, kris, falchion.

Huh, there are a few here that I didn't think of either.

Sami (Easy, AFK) – Helicopter.

Sure.

Maria (Easy, AFK) – While he's at it, he can make a tank or two.

Channeler (Easy, Steakhouse) – Noname, you should also try making a spiked gauntlet, knuckles, and garrote.

I didn't think... well, whatever.

Noname (Hell, group 4) – I have no fucking idea how some of these Items look, so I'm going to need you to describe them for me, mainly their shape. If anyone thinks they have something funny to say, I will make a living hell out of the next tournament just for you.

And with that, everyone becomes much more respectful, while I collect the resulting ideas.

I'm rich, but now I can be even richer.

There are a few arcane passives I've been eyeing for a long time.

For each item, I make 5 forms and create five pieces of it even though I can sell only one. The remaining ones I throw into 4 different piles.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 1,790 shards?

Mana-Reactive Gladius (Upper Epic)

Yes/No

Of course, I want to.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 1,861 shards?

Mana-Reactive Scythe (Upper Epic)

Yes/No

Gimme.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 2,111 shards?

Mana-Reactive Claymore (Upper Epic)

Yes/No

Yes, yes, yes.

Some items are failures, like the boomerang, club, and warhammer. Some wind up going for much cheaper, many of them set somewhere around 1 thousand shards.

I think there are requirements for the usefulness of the weapon. You can't just create a shape and expect it to be declared a weapon by the system.

Other items take more attempts to get right. For example, the scythe took a lot of time, and some things like armor, gloves, and chest plates just didn't work at all. But I don't mind it too much. I have scores of weapons, and I'm visiting multiple Communities, offering some nice stuff to people who come up with items I didn't think of.

Most of the things that work turn out to be weapons, as things like brooches and pendants don't seem to do much, turning out rare at best.

It takes multiple visits to the desert and another two attacks from those goddamned good for nothing whales.

Monsters begin appearing as well, as they always do during the day. They're stronger than those I find in the outer region, but how could they cause trouble for me?

I mean, even with the quantity of mana I'm turning into thermal energy and the amount of time I spend training with RTE and orbs, I still have plenty left over to fill my crown.

These are beautiful times.

A week or two passes like that. It's hard to say with all the training and crafting I do.

Finally, I detect Lily, the best doggo of the 6th floor, and Aaron and Dennis. They reach my campsite, and the expressions on their faces as they do just look plain weird.

Lily rushes in first, hugging me with a big, bright smile, and I'm in a good mood, so I return, tapping her on the shoulder after a moment, signaling her to let go.

She doesn't.

As I start thinking about whether I should strengthen my body and how much kinetic energy I would need to dislodge this musclehead, she finally lets go.

"You sure made a mess of this place," she notes, still smiling.

I look around and realize she's right. There are dozens of holes in the rocky ground, the newer ones growing smoother as I experimented with my skills to make the edges of the forms better. Beyond the border to the Mana Desert, next to the forms, there are a multitude of bags, full to bursting with white sand.

On the opposite side, in the central region, there are several monster corpses that I tried cutting apart to use for weapon materials or as anatomical guides for the more annoying ones.

I even dug several holes in search of metals to use for weapons.

This place really is a huge mess.

But it feels cozy. Though maybe that's just because I'm getting richer by the minute.

I grab one of the daggers from the pile and throw it to Lily.

"How much can you sell it for?"

"It says just over 600 shards."

Hmm, I see. I could sell it for around 1,800 shards. So if I make the weapon myself, I can sell it for 50% of the system estimated value, but if I hand that weapon to someone else, it acts like they found the weapon on the floor itself, so the sale price gets reduced to somewhere between 10-20%? I'm starting to wonder if the system isn't just fucking with me.

It's probably a combination of both.

"Good," I say, taking a few steps to lift Biscuit into my arms and turning him to make sure he can hear what I have to say.

I hold the best doggo in my outstretched arms, with his hind legs hanging free as I shake him from side to side. Which he seems to enjoy.

"There are 4 piles of about 70 items each. Go and sell them to the system shop. Each of you should get," I try to do a quick calculation but give up. I hate math, "30-40k shards. Half is mine, which you will use to buy whatever I want."

"The fuck?" Dennis says, staring like he's never seen me before.

Aaron pokes him, "Shut up before he changes his mind. We'll do it!"

They rush away, and Lily follows after a quick moment of persuasion.

Then I whisper to Biscuit, “And you, buddy, if you can sell them, you can keep all the shards and buy whatever you want. Depending on the floor, you can even buy food.”

(Food!)

“Yup.”

I put him on the ground, and he wobbles to his pile before stopping and turning back to me.

He stops in front of me and bumps my shin with the top of his head, before returning to his pile.

I open my status and check my shards.

Shards: 268,614

It's time to treat myself to something nice.

Chapter 453: One of us

Passive Skill: Mana Pulse Circulation (Low Arcane)

The user's mana pathways are not only enhanced but supercharged with pulsating mana, passively optimizing all their physiological functions. This results in vastly increased stamina, increased energy reserves, and near instantaneous healing of minor to moderate injuries. The effects increase with more mana, and the constant high-speed circulation of mana through the brain grants enhanced cognitive clarity.

Passive Skill: Mana Veil (Low Arcane)

The user becomes nearly imperceptible to all forms of magical and physical detection, making them almost impossible to locate by normal or supernatural means. The veil not only blurs their outline but also distorts light and sound to the point of making the user appear invisible to the naked eye. Incoming attacks are not only distorted but are also partially redirected or nullified, and disrupting their mana flow becomes an almost futile effort.

Passive Skill: Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

The user's mind becomes an impenetrable fortress, fortified by impossibly complex mana weaves. This passive grants immense resistance to all forms of mental attacks, including illusions, mind control, and psychic attacks. Additionally, the passive allows the user's mind to endure the immense strain of using powerful skills and traits.

Passive Skill: Thermal Rebirth Matrix (Low Arcane)

The Thermal Rebirth Matrix allows one to absorb and convert ambient and internal heat at an exceptional rate. The user can regenerate from grievous injuries, including regrowing entire limbs and organs, almost within moments. This process also cleanses the body of any poisons or harmful substances. The user now possesses high resistance to all but the most extreme flame and heat-based attacks, making them virtually impervious to most forms of thermal damage.

Passive Skill: Mana Sculptor (Low Arcane)

These are the passives I'm seriously considering.

One that grants minor mana-based healing, body strengthening, and a bit of overall improvement.

Another that grants mana-based mind protection and likely slight improvement to cognitive abilities.

And then there's the healing passive based on thermal energy and the Mana Sculptor thingy that I really liked the look of.

The dark horse here is mana veil, honestly, the part about distorting the trajectory of incoming attacks interests me, and then there's the part where it promises to help me hide my mana, which I can only think will become more and more important as I grow stronger.

Overall, any of these passives could give me a huge boost. Though the descriptions are about as simple as ever.

With a few changes, one might even cause one to mistake them for epic passives, but the term 'arcane' in their name speaks volumes. You could easily have a passive with 'rare' in the name and damn near the same description, yet the difference would be immense.

Even so, I can only ever bring myself to think of them as learning tools offered by the system. Sure, it's a goddamn arcane passive, and I'm quite sure that means there can't be many people that have one.

Getting it before level 300 could also improve my selection of Primary classes when I get my next upgrade. And given a few months or years, I may even learn to emulate the passive's effects on my own. Perhaps I could even turn it into a more active healing skill, right? Right?

They're all low arcane, so I could always just wait until I can afford something in the range of mid arcane, but I bet if I did and got to mid arcane, I would just convince myself to wait for something in the range of upper arcane.

These are tough times indeed. I truly have the mother of all first world problems: too many good passives to pick from.

"Biscuit, I'm frustrated and I can't decide," I groan, laying back against the rocky ground.

The cute corgi leaves the pile of items that he was selling. It's interesting to note that it's the first time I've seen him interact with the system this way. Well, he has been able to use the Community from the beginning, so it's not too big of a surprise, but some functions still seem to be locked on his end, I think.

His cold nose boops its way into my ear, and I hear him sniffing for a moment before he moves a bit and licks my temple.

He lays down next to me, resting his chin against my neck while I lift my hand, mindlessly stroking his back. I can feel his warm breath against the bottom of my chin, and it tickles, and I let it be.

And for a while, I rest, just like that.

"So, how is the group?" I ask, finally broaching the topic with the others.

"Not well after the Mana Desert," Dennis replies, his tone solemn, while his brother remains silent. Though I can imagine him silently nodding along.

"Sophie took Izzy and left the group after getting into a fight with Tess," Aaron eventually confirms.

"I see."

"You don't seem surprised at all," Dennis says, though he looks surprised himself.

This time I decide to ignore it and shrug, but gently, to avoid interrupting Biscuit's rest.

"Believe it or not I think about these things, little twerp. And if you're worried about it, don't be. You may not have noticed, but Tess can be a bit naive at times and sometimes she pushes things too far. She's still a good person though, and Sophie knows that."

"They could always just solve it with a bikini clad mud fight," Aaron suggests, sighing alongside me.

Right now, I'd love to see the glare Lily's surely sending his way, but I can't interrupt our future Absolute's rest to look.

"How is Min-Jae?" I poke and receive the silence I expected in return.

"They tried to apologize, but he told them to—now how did it go?— 'eat shit,'" Lily responds in the twins place.

"You know, Kim can be really stubborn when he wants to," Aaron grumbles.

"Those orbs he shot at us really hurt," Dennis adds.

As the sky grows darker, I create a larger thermal orb and reduce the light being produced.

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

Just for fun, I turn it into a cube the size of both my fists put together. I play with it a bit longer until I create a change in the thermal energy within. The light shifts and fluctuates in a similar way to how a campfire would.

With just a bit more work, even the heat it radiates changes, radiating just as flames would. Sometimes the heat hits one place stronger than the other. I tried to come up with a way to add sound effects with kinetic energy, though I've failed so far.

Standing up with Biscuit in my arms, I create a manabloc chair for each of us, seated around the huge boulder.

As they sit in the chairs, I concentrate a bit more and make them a touch more flexible so they deform them slightly in response to the weight. Then I fix them in place, each chair perfectly shaped to the position they're in.

"Manabloc chair, is that what you called it?" Aaron asks, giggling quietly, but I can tell his heart isn't in it.

As Biscuit drifts off to sleep, I form a mana arm to reach out and grab a blanket and gently drape it over him, allowing his head to peek out. Then, I begin petting him softly.

Biscuit occasionally twitches and lets out a series of soft barks in his sleep, but gradually relaxes as I keep running my hand over him.

An hour passes in silence, and it's strangely comfortable to just sit here after two weeks of crafting and training.

The steady rise and fall of his breathing becomes the only sound I hear, and for the first time in a while, I let myself relax, enjoying this quiet break from the recent madness.

I carefully break the silence, looking at the corgi in my arms, “When Biscuit was just a small pup, his owner’s granddaughter would leave him out in the wind, snow, and rain, without food or water. And she would record videos of her “saving” him, probably with titles like Saving a cute corgi from the rain and bathing him in warm water. Bringing a cute corgi in from the snow and giving him a warm spot by the fire. Finding a hungry corgi outside and feeding him. The last was her favorite and she often left him to starve. I think she kept making new accounts, posting the videos, in the vain hope the videos would go viral, and kickstart her ‘career’ by bringing her an audience.” I state, nearly spitting the words as they come.

After gently booping Biscuit’s nose I look at Lily and the twins, who seem to have been stunned into silence.

“She never got her viral break, and so she kept trying until she got bored, and gave Biscuit to her grandparents, who she lived with—and who must have known what she has done.”

I pause for a moment to calm myself down, and only when I stop feeling like I want to punch someone, do I rest my hand back on Biscuit’s head.

“Being a simple pup and a normal dog, Biscuit never understood. He shared some of the images and feelings he had back then, so I know a bit about what happened.” My eyes meet Lily’s. “He was always happy when she pulled him from the rain and snow when she fed him after starving him. He loved her. Just how silly is that.”

No one says anything for a while, and I increase the output of my thermal cube, the light flickering across the nighttime scenery.

“Aaron and I come from a very wealthy family,” Dennis says, the first to break the silence. He and his brother exchange a series of messages through their link before he continues, “And by wealthy, I mean tens of millions. At least we were, you could say.”

There’s a smile on his face as he continues, stumbling over his words for a moment as his shyness gets the better of him, “Our parents died when we were younger than Isabella, and our family’s passed us around ever since. Grandpa wasn’t that bad, and we spent a few nice years with him. Then he died, and we got sent to our uncle and then to our aunt.”

Aaron joins in, "She always hated our parents but didn't mind taking us in. You know, it meant she could take a bite of all that money they left us after all."

"Her and everyone else who got the chance. Father's old friends, distant family members, the state, the city, our accountants—they all made sure enough got lost along the way."

"We never saw a cent. There's still some locked away in secure accounts, but most of it's gone now."

"Auntie took care of it." Dennis smiles even wider. "She also liked to show us how she despised her 'whore' sister's brats," he reaches over his shoulder and taps his back, "We have plenty of scars to prove it. Of course, nothing too visible, we wouldn't want people to start asking and take us away."

"Us and the money."

"And the money," Dennis confirms.

Aaron leans back, eyes distant, as if recalling memories he'd rather keep buried.

There's a shared understanding between the twins, the kind that can only come from years of unspoken pain, but they don't linger on it for long.

The casual way they speak about their past almost makes it sound normal like they've long since accepted the unfairness of it all.

It's clear they've grown accustomed to brushing off the pain with forced smiles and empty gestures, but the quiet tension tells a different story.

Then we turn to Lily, hearing a soft sobbing coming from her corner, as she wipes her eyes with her sleeves. "I didn't know," she mumbles. "I didn't know any of that."

"It's not like we go around telling people," Dennis says, a gentle smirk on his lips, his blue eyes glinting in the light from my cube.

"We mostly kept it to ourselves," Aaron adds. "It's not exactly easy to talk about."

Dennis looks at his brother. "But we always had each other, no matter what happened. I hate that creep sometimes, but hey, we're still in this together."

"Dennis is a dick, but hey, at least I can do some evil things and blame it on him." Aaron nods seriously and turns to Lily. "So what about you? Everyone here seems at least a little messed up. Particularly Tess with everything she's done, Kim mentioned something in his own past, poor Biscuit—and I bet Nat also has a thing or two, at least looking at the way he and his sister fight."

With curiosity, I watch as Lily hesitates, but the twins wait together with me.

She starts softly, "It wasn't until I got older that I realized my father and I were poor. He was hardly ever home, there was never much in the way of food, and our apartment was either freezing cold or unbearably hot. I couldn't leave because it wasn't safe outside. For years, my only friend was Grumpy, my cat."

I increase the warmth from my cube, and we sit quietly, soaking it in for a moment.

"They eventually took me from my father and placed me with a new family, they even let me keep Grumpy, I haven't seen my dad in years. The people I'm with now are kind enough sure, there's always food, and I'm not cold anymore. But over time, the way they treat me has changed. I wasn't behaving the way they wanted. 'They'd always ask, "Why don't you smile more, Lily?"' 'Why are you so quiet, Lily?' 'Why doesn't your father ever visit, Lily?' 'Why, why, why, why, why.'"

She swallows hard, her voice catching, but then she smiles as she looks from the twins to me.

"When I get back to Earth, I hope Grumpy is still alive. He'll be old, but cats like him can live for 20 years. I know it! I'll make him immortal, I'll make him young again, and then we'll be together just like before."

For the last time, she wipes her eyes, “I know it’s childish, but it’s something to hope for. So tell me, Aaron, am I messed up too?”

“You’re totally messed up, Lily. A fitting member of group 4,” Aaron confirms with a nod.

Slowly, the conversation shifts to other topics, and I notice they deliberately avoid asking about my past.

It’s more comfortable that way, and I feel a quiet sense of relief, so I let it slide.

Then something cold pokes my left hand, the pale one.

I look down and my eyes meet Biscuit’s.

He doesn’t say anything, but he keeps poking me.

Firmly. Gently.

My conversation with Tess back in the caves under the Mana Desert comes to my mind.

The silence stretches on, but no one pushes me to speak.

“My father was a drunkard who beat my mother and sister, who always protected me, despite the fact that it only ever got her extra beatings.”

All conversation stops, but I don’t look up, fixing my gaze on Biscuit. And he stares back at me.

A gentle little soul with a terrible past, just like the rest of us.

“I tried to kill him one day, but I couldn’t go through with it. I still remembered how he was when I was younger. Our visit to the zoo, when he bought us the tastiest ice cream I ever had. All the times he

carried me on his shoulders when my legs hurt from walking. A perfect sunny day in the park. That time he and Mom danced in the kitchen when we moved into a new home—they were both so beautiful then. I still remember all the times he put Vic and me to bed and gently kissed our foreheads.”

Another cold-feeling prods my hand.

“My sister killed him in the end. Because I couldn’t and because he would’ve killed our mom eventually. Ever since then, she’s been in prison, and I was decried as the brother of a murderer.”

Biscuit licks my arm, and I ruffle his head, lifting my head up. “Tell me am I as messed up as the rest of you?”

“You are truly messed up indeed,” Dennis confirms, nodding along with me.

“Terribly messed up,” Lily whispers quietly, her big eyes on me.

“Just like the rest of us,” Aaron says. “Another fitting member of group 4.”

(Food!)

I look down at him and feel myself smile, “You as well, Biscuit. You’re one of us too.”

Chapter 454: Shaping the Invisible

In the end, I decide to go with

Passive Skill: Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane) - The user's mind becomes an impenetrable fortress, fortified by impossibly complex mana weaves. This passive grants immense resistance to all forms of mental attacks, including illusions, mind control, and psychic attacks. Additionally, the passive allows the user's mind to endure the immense strain of using powerful skills and traits.

It's shameful to admit, but as of late, I've been having trouble focusing my mind when I need to use my skills on a really big scale. At this point managing some of the larger constructs, inscriptions, and splitting

my mind into the necessary parts with [Focus] has begun to prove difficult. And I find myself wanting to act on ever larger-scales.

Not to mention all the ways it should improve my capacity to use [Ley Line], and a lot of other skills now that I think about it, even my domain, I should be able to expand it further now without a lot of extra strain.

And I can't forget my eyes. With this passive, I should be able to strengthen my trait even further. I just need to get the token for 1st stage, after all, I don't want to waste my 2nd stage token.

I know its main effect is to defend my mind, not to make it stronger—that would require a different passive. Still, even that small additional effect is a nice bonus.

Mana Sculptor was tempting too, but I think I should be able to recreate it on my own.

Though I'll probably find myself regretting not choosing something with a healing effect. No, I know I'll regret it, but I'm kind of used to bleeding and losing limbs for the sake of progress. I've always preferred to be a glass cannon.

Hopefully, my epic healing passive will hold on for a bit longer. I'm still working on those new body modifications with Lily, and then there are those healing marks she's been working on.

My main priority will always be protecting my mind and its freedom. It's something I've been forced to worry about ever since the 1st floor when Sophie got her hooks in me and used that to manipulate my actions. I fully intend to learn how this passive works for future abuse. And just as an added bonus, it's due to come with a boost to my concentration and insight when it comes to researching new skills.

As just over 230 thousand shards disappear, the passive appears in my status, leaving me with just under 40 thousand shards.

My new passive doesn't flare into immediate action, as pain floods through me. And I mean, a lot of pain. My entire head feels like it's about to melt, and I feel like some vast and unknowable thing has decided to skewer my brain with a red-hot iron.

Note to self: having a high-tier passive applied hurts like hell.

I begin doing mana shaping exercises in an effort to ignore the pain, resuming my work with the evil orbs. I glance at them now and again, curious to see if the passive has made any difference, and it's clearly noticeable even in this incomplete state.

There were levels in mana shaping I could delve into, but the pressure on my mind wouldn't allow for much probing when I first started, so, of course, that means I've gained a new avenue for training!

Right away, I add two more evil orbs, totaling seven before I get slowed by my inadequate mastery over mana rather than a weakness of my flesh.

Over the last few days, I've been planning to set up a large-scale web, similar to Sophie's using [Ley Line], I should be able to put this new passive through its paces then. After that, the next test will be to focus on compressing my mana and delving deeper into the kind of things Mana Sculptor passive described.

I will improve my mana armor, weapons, projectiles, and manabloc chairs.

Actually, the more I think about it the more "manabloc" makes sense as a name for the compressed mana I use." So by that token, I would be using manabloc swords and armor.

And damn if I don't know my share of people who would absolutely hate it.

Anyway, my big mecha armor requires testing. With my new passive, I should be able to make it bigger and stronger, and the self-repair function would certainly be nice to learn. I'll definitely need to make the longest lasting creation possible. I've even got a head start with the chairs I made a few nights back.

The events of that night are still awkward to think about, and I'm going to need to kick something's ass just to feel manly again. Bullying the twins could work, but they've been suspiciously not annoying, and something in me thinks it has something to do with their adaptability as if they've figured out my patterns and made an effort to avoid giving me an excuse.

Tsk.

"How's your training going?" I ask, stopping by to check on them, and finding the lazy asses sitting in the chairs I made with modified evil orbs floating over them.

"You're a frigging monster," Dennis groans.

I track his eyes and find them on the seven orbs following me.

"Skill issue?"

"Please, Nat, don't use that jargon."

"I heard it from you, so who's really to blame here? I'll remind you once again: if you fail to meet my expectations within the next few months, I will force you to switch to Hard difficulty. You would be dumb not to take me at my word."

"We know, we know, damn it. You are not the type to back down from this kind of stuff," Aaron, sighs from his position next to me, his evil orb vanishing.

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

I modify one of mine, move it over to him, then replace it with a fresh one.

"Any reward if we succeed?"

"Becoming stronger?" I ask, mild confusion evident in my tone. "If you work at it you'll improve your control over your skills, and maybe you and your brother won't have to keep being the weakest members of group 4. You could even beat Min-Jae if you do well. I'm sure Tess' working on a training regiment for him as well, so you can't really afford to lose."

“Are you maybe competing with Tess to see who can raise the stronger pet?”

“Are you trying to turn us into your disciples?” Dennis smirks.

Now that’s an amusing thought, I think, making the orbs a bit harder to handle. “In just a few years, Vega will wipe the floor with you. Both of you at once. If she maintains her current rate of improvement, and I get the chance to summon her during the tournament, no one from Hard difficulty will be able to face her.”

“She’s a demon, that girl,” Dennis says, swatting away the remains of his burst evil orb with a free hand.

In response, I immediately create a new one.

“So, what happened with the group after you left the Champion’s prison?”

“Well, we were confused at first, what with the missing thylarin douches and the fact that you’d stayed behind, but we checked the Community, and you were still there. Izzy seemed to know something though, so she got us all calmed down,” Aaron says lazily.

The way he handles the orb tells me he’s starting to get the hang of it, so I increase the difficulty.

Dennis continues in his place, “We appeared in some old, abandoned fort. We cleared the surroundings of monsters and posted a guard while we rested. Then, Sophie and Tess started fighting sometime during the night,”

“More like Sophie started drilling Tess,” Aaron adds quickly before returning his focus to managing his orb.

“She is always like that when it comes to Izzy’s safety,” Dennis confirms.

When Aaron’s orb bursts open again, he leans back in his chair. “They fought and damn, if Sophie decides she wants to cause trouble, she can really do some damage, even to Tess. Izzy had to step in

before someone died then Sophie took her and left. I really didn't expect it to happen, and neither did Tess. She seemed... hurt. Are you okay with that, Nat?"

"You guys act like it's the end of the world or something. Just give it a few months. Maya will keep poking and prodding at Tess, Izzy will manipulate Sophie, and the gang will be together again. Have you met anyone from the central region?"

"Not a single one so far, honestly I think we're way off target from where we were headed. Kallus seemed lost too, but he was a bit more open about sharing information on the central region, and any hints and rumors he had about the remaining containment zones. We'll have to get you up to speed on everything we've learned since then."

"Good, the Champions' containment cells seem like a solid lead to getting us off this moon."

"That's what you call a solid lead? After the blue maniac in the hole? Are you sure you want to mess with even more Champion-level beings?"

"Why not? It ended perfectly well last time."

"Suuureee."

I increase the difficulty of the orb and then create a few more which I set to hovering nearby. That way the twins can grab new ones if the ones they're training with burst. I'm quite happy with the new orbs. They'll only activate their ever changing frequency and mana level requirements when one of the twins takes them. Until then, they'll remain inactive. Sandra would be proud.

Well, if I were being honest she would probably just compare me to a pet or something.

Walking towards Lily, I spin the evil orbs around me and examine each one. I could probably manage a few more, and that annoys me as much as it makes me happy. It shouldn't be this easy. I should be straining as blood seeps from my ears and nose just to handle the one. Just like the good old times back in the pyramid.

Tonight, I will have to sit down and check the mana stones Lady Lissandra gave me and ramp up the difficulty. I'm sure she modified the orbs for me, just as I did for the twins, surely I can modify them again.

The thought of me being to her what the twins are to me prickles at my competitive spirit. If I don't come up with a way to make this significantly more difficult, I'll check out the other shaping exercises, even though Lissandra recommended starting with this one.

I check on Lily to find that she's currently resting with her back against a boulder with her eyes closed, her hands clasping the finger bone of the champion from the 5th floor and some of the others I've collected.

Careful not to interrupt her, I connect to my Ley Lines, and they appear, flaring in my sight. A dozen invisible pale blue threads stretching in all directions. They're part of a new test I thought up. Each one is tied to a different item. And though it's something I could easily do with normal mana, these are something people can pass through and still have trouble sensing.

They don't have any effect on the physical world yet, but I'm sure I can come up with something clever once I have a few more levels in the skill.

I touch one line, and for a moment it shines, and I give the anchor a strong pull, yanking it towards me. A chair gets pulled to me through the open area, and I grab it by the leg, setting it upright so I can take a seat.

As I do, I think about this new skill of mine.

These threads that make up my Ley Lines—what can I make with them? They are of a material I have yet to meet, and I know the intention is to make them hidden, but during previous testing, I was able to make part of one line show in the physical world. That single short thread was stronger than anything else I'm currently capable of creating.

It took a lot out of me. It scared Biscuit, and the twins said they felt like they were about to pass out as I strained my skills, pushed my limits, and burned through a metric ton of mana to make it happen.

I can usually estimate how much strain something will take, and honestly, I don't think I can push it any further at this point—at least not without seriously hurting myself.

Fortunately, I just got a new arcane passive and that should allow for more testing.

The materialized Ley Line is impossible to disrupt, and impossible to cut, at least with my current level of skill, even running [Resonance] at full power didn't do anything, I couldn't burn it either nor could I affect it kinetically.

It took a lot of effort just to materialize this weird, finger-length, thread.

But at that moment, I decided it was something I wanted to exploit. Together with the intended use of the skill, I will try to materialize it as much as possible. I have the skillset for that. I can do it.

And once I've mastered it I'll weave things from the thread.

Weapons, armor, barriers. I'll learn to make the threads, the Ley Lines, as thin as possible, if I can make them fine enough they have the potential to make my creations infinitely more delicate. I will learn as much as I can from this skill and add its properties to everything I create with [Mana Manipulation].

One day I'll even weave it through my mana mech, making it that much tougher as I use the lines for muscles and tendons.

The sheer amount of processing it will require to materialize that many Ley Lines makes my head spin, but my arcane passive will help.

And it's not like I don't have options: I can level my [Focus], allowing it to handle more of the strain of that, and split my mind into multiple parts to process everything I need to control. I could also make an item, something to handle part of the strain.

The Ley Line thread is already gone, I couldn't keep it materialized longer than a few moments, but its image is still fresh in my mind. A delicate, pale blue shimmering thread, a color so similar yet distinct from the pale blue of normal mana.

Chapter 455: Seventh variation

“I’ve already modified my arm, I mostly used the Champion’s bone as inspiration. It’s the toughest body part I’ve seen so far! Of course, I wasn’t able to modify my own arm to the same extent, but look!”

Lily then takes one of the daggers I made out of the white sand, one she hasn’t sold yet. She sends a bit of her mana through, activating it, and slashes into her forearm, the blade only stopping once it hits bone.

She doesn’t even bother to heal it right away, and as her blood drips down, she looks up at me with a big smile on her small face.

“I tried it before, and though it took some effort, I still managed to cut all the way through. But this time, the blade stopped the moment it touched the bone! Look!”

Lily pulls the dagger free, and the wound closes almost instantly. She grabs the dagger in her other hand this time and slashes the other one with great force.

This time, the blade slides cleanly through flesh and bone and severs her arm at the elbow.

“I told you!” Happily, she grabs the cut-off arm and holds it to the wound, as her muscles stretch, reconnecting the limb to her body, as new skin spans the gap, and the limb shifts position as it audibly snaps back into place, leaving her cooling blood as the only sign that she had ever been injured

I’m jealous. I wish I had a skill like that. I wish there was a way to make it happen, maybe a passive or something.

Tell me, are you watching, Lady Handler? Do you read my records? Do you still think I’m not normal?

“So when can we start working on modifying my body?” I ask.

“I’m not sure, Nat, sorry. I just started with the bones in my forearm, and I still need to go through the rest of my body before I’ll feel comfortable modifying yours.”

“Makes sense.”

She immediately perks up as if she were worried I would be disappointed for some reason. “Give me your left hand,” she gestures quickly.

Curious, I lift my hand, and she grabs it with a smile. “I’ve been working on my healing marks and I still haven’t come up with a cool name yet.” As she speaks she reaches out to me with the tip of her finger and presses against the inside of my forearm, and I feel her mana make contact.

I allow it to pass through my natural barrier, and a burning itch spreads through my skin at the point of contact.

“Huh, it’s surprisingly easy to work on your left arm. I think you were right back on the 4th floor. I restored it, so I have a stronger connection to it. That’s why I can sacrifice it and not your other limbs. But isn’t that weird? I healed your other limbs too but I still can’t sacrifice them.”

“I think it has something to do with our subconscious perceptions. Back then, when I said it, you accepted it as fact and believed it. And I still believe in it, quite strongly. After all, you made a strong impact on me back when you first restored it.”

“So in theory it could work with your other limbs too, and it doesn’t right now because we just don’t believe it?”

“Something like that,” I agree. “To sacrifice something, you must have power over it; it must belong to you. And the more precious it is, the better it will be as a sacrifice.”

Lily hums in agreement and touches my forearm again, a bit higher this time, and a mark starts spreading across the surface of my skin, tracing its form in a pale shade of white. It’s barely visible against the pale skin of my arm, almost like a faded scar.

“What do you think would be the best sacrifice, Nat?”

I've actually thought about it a lot. Her skill fascinates me even now, so I actually have an answer ready. "I think your own life or memories."

She stops for a moment, surprised by the answer, and her eyes meet mine. "Not people?"

"Do you think you could even own a person on a level fundamental enough to sacrifice them like that? I don't think it would work. No, I think sacrificing parts of yourself would work the best. Just imagine permanently sacrificing your being, what makes you you, just to power your skills. It would be worse than killing yourself, you'd be forgetting everything that makes you, you. It's a terrifying thought," I answer with complete honesty.

Would I ever be able to do that? Just the thought is...

"You're wrong, Nat," Lily objects, shaking her head in disagreement. Letting go of my arm, she takes a step back.

She doesn't continue, so I let it pass.

Looking down at the white mark on my forearm, I ask, "So what now?"

"It should activate easily enough as long as it comes into contact with your blood. I tried to make it activate with mana alone, but I couldn't figure out how. I'm going to need your help to come up with a trigger for it."

"Got it, we'll work together to come up with something."

Then I stop holding my mana back for a moment, placing my normal process of mana cycling on temporary hold deactivating my passives as I do.

There are definitely easier ways to injure myself, but I may as well take the opportunity to see the effects of my uncontrolled mana on my body.

Right away, I destabilize my control over the mana in my left arm. More and more mana seeps through my skin, causing Lily to take a step back as a wave of my mana washes over the area.

My arm twitches, and twists in several places. Muscles and veins erupt from my flesh, and mana tears through the surface of my skin, ramping up in time with my heartbeat.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

Then I reactivate my passives and constructs. I once again dedicate part of my mind to the process of cycling my mana through my body as it seeps back into the proper paths through my body. The feeling of a bomb ready to explode is gone.

I watch as blood touches the mark, and it rapidly begins to fade until it disappears completely.

The same warm mana I've grown to associate with Lily spreads through my arm, and with a speed unmatched by any of my passives, the bones snap back into place, and the muscles, veins, and nerves reconnect. Then the mana the mark held runs out, leaving the skin still torn in dozens of places, as blood drips freely from the wounds.

Stepping closer, Lily puts her hand on mine, healing the rest. "It's still a work in progress, and I'm not sure how long I can make it last. It doesn't hold much healing mana either, and it breaks every time I try to give it more."

"It's fine, we'll test it out. How many variations have you tried?"

"Around seven?" she demures, closing her hand into a fist and counting fingers, "The first one just didn't work, the second one blew off my arm somehow, the third one started growing the bones for new arms through my skin, the fourth one started healing the skin and started spreading through the muscles and bones and screwed up my arm in the process, the fifth one sent healing pulses through the rest of the body instead. The sixth variation grew muscles out of bone. So I spent a lot of my time on testing before I made the 7th variation. The first test went really well too!"

"Lily, by any chance, when you say 'first test' do you mean the one we just did?"

“Yes!”

“The one you just tested on me?”

“Yeah! But I was pretty sure it would work!”

“I see.”

Lily giggles and shoves me and I manage to strengthen my body just in time to avoid being thrown to the ground by the petite healer, narrowly preserving my dignity.

“I’m joking,” she chuckles, her eyes crinkling into a smile. “I did a lot of testing before I even thought of giving you the mark. And do you remember the Last King’s crown? The one the Saint created? It might take a bit longer, probably years, but I think I should be able to make something similar work. A mark like that would be too difficult, but with your help, we shouldn’t have any trouble making similar items work all on our own. I wouldn’t even need to get close to heal people, and with a bit more work, I should be able to heal someone from miles away.”

“That sounds plausible. And what exactly happened to those items?” I ask. If I remember correctly, they were technically mine and I was just renting them to group 4.

“I’ll remind you that you said you didn’t mind if I destroyed the crown. The crown kind of broke when I was examining it. I had to cut it apart, but it helped me create the mark, so it was well worth it!”

I can’t even argue with that. What she’s saying is true, and I would have probably done exactly the same thing in her place. But it could have easily sold for hundreds of shards. The thought just makes me sad.

Relieved, Lily brushes her hair from her face. “You may not have realized, but each of these items held some part of the Saint. The crown had a piece of bone, and the sword had a piece of a finger. I started examining them as well, but I don’t think they’ll be as useful as the Champion’s fingerbone. For some reason, they feel like they’ve changed too much even without the damage..”

"That's kind of creepy, isn't it? She used parts of her own body as a medium to make it easier to send healing energy to a given target didn't she?" I ask.

"I think it was something like that, but they didn't feel as effective as they should have been. I think she made them before she even became a Champion, I just can't imagine her needing something like that at her level."

"Then the Last King and his warriors probably kept them out of pure sentiment. Could it have been a failsafe too? Say, if someone had evaporated her body, could she have restored herself from the remains she left in the items? Like Vic did in her duel with you?"

"It felt different. I don't think your sister is actually a healer. She wasn't good at healing her body either, at best she was abusing her passives and traits, she certainly wasn't using anything resembling an active skill. I think she's something else entirely, maybe she had something like an [Avatar]

"Good catch. I thought of it as well, and I'm of the same opinion. Vic can probably create her own Avatars or Duplicates with free reign to control and swap her mind between them."

"Wouldn't that make it almost impossible to kill her beyond a certain level? Couldn't she just store one of her fingers on the opposite side of the planet and regenerate from that?"

"Yeah, I think she probably could. But I don't think that means killing her would be impossible. There's always a way if you're creative enough. For now, though, give me one more mark. I want to get another look."

A few hours later, I decide to check on the twins. They're quiet and heavily focused, each struggling to deal with a single evil orb.

Activating my eyes for a moment, I examine the process.

"Good, two orbs each starting now," I say, creating two more orbs and moving them over to the twins.

For a moment, I think they might complain or push back, but the idea doesn't seem to take root, instead, they leap right into the challenge.

Their first attempts end in both orbs bursting open near instantaneously. And the cycle repeats over each attempt.

Dozens of attempts later, and they haven't improved. Neither of them seems capable of handling two modified orbs.

Too little mana, too much mana, they're slow to react one moment, or a distraction gets the better of them the next. The cycle continues like that for hours, and they do not stop.

As I work on my own training nearby, I can't help but glance at them every once in a while—they're sweating, and gasping for air, as their mana fluctuates from the strain. They still do not stop.

It's a deeper glimpse into something I've noticed before. Aaron and Dennis are easygoing; they like to joke and they usually pick the easiest solution to every problem. But every once in a while, there are times like this. Moments when they buckle down and do their best. They have that same sense of competition, the same hunger for improvement that everyone in group 4 has.

I don't think their talent is any worse than Izzy's or Min-Jae's, and I don't think that's what makes them the weakest members of group 4. I've seen them try, in those small moments when their competitive spirit came to the fore, drawn out by the people around them.

Their skills might be better suited for support roles. Particularly their [Connection] and [Sensory Deception].

Maya tried to train with them, and even though their [Haste] puts their speed on par with Maya's, they just don't have the same talent for close-range combat. They're more like guerrilla agents.

But they should be able to do so much more. I still remember Lissandra doing something they should be able to emulate with [Connection].

That fiendish Absolute had a habit of letting people activate their skills and then connect to those skills, resonate with them, and use them instead. A complete show of disrespect, claiming she could use your skill better than you, without even possessing it.

My logic is simple. We'll work on improving their [Mana Manipulation], and experiment with [Connection] if only because I think they should be able to do so much more. And in the process, I'll work on improving my [Resonance], in my own attempt at achieving the same result.

Chapter 456: Like in the movies

"Nat, please put your shirt on," Dennis complains.

Unfazed, I continue working on the stances Lissandra taught me.

"Why? It would only get dirty," I reply.

"There might be dangerous predator in the area," Aaron says, his tone serious.

"Huh? There is not, I would've sensed it."

"Is he making fun of us?" Aaron asks, turning to his brother.

"He can't be like that, right? He must be trolling us."

I ignore the twins and continue. The idea isn't to learn martial arts or anything like that. The intention is to move my body and, while doing so, send kinetic energy through, practicing moving it in bursts at the right time.

With the Burden Enhancement Inscriptions drawn all over my skin, I wouldn't be able to move without kinetic energy, even if I wanted to, but fighting the inscriptions burdening me while moving kinetic energy this way puts a tremendous strain on my body, and I can feel sweat pouring out of me.

Lately, I've been spending every free moment either doing this or training with the Restrictive Training Emblem, which is visible even now, as a tracery of lines across the skin over my heart. Between the two,

my body is getting annihilated, but my control over kinetic energy is vastly improving, and my body is getting stronger.

Of course, the only reason I'm making my body stronger like this is to prepare myself as a vessel for more mana, but I can't say I'm not enjoying the process.

Back on Earth I always liked training, whether I was learning a new style of fighting, or going on a simple run. I've always found the feeling I get after finishing a difficult bout of training addictive, and this is no different.

I watch as my muscles twitch and stretch, fighting the inscriptions restraining them. I sense kinetic energy as it flows through the fibers, supporting them, as I strain to synchronize the motions.

Lissandra couldn't use kinetic energy. Likely because she couldn't be bothered, so by far, the best user of kinetic energy I've seen is Whitey.

The field he created, halting everything around him in the air, be it people, debris, or projectiles, was amazing, but the part I keep coming back to is his movement. It's not just about raw power. Within that field, he tailored his expenditures, using the minimum amount of energy to accomplish each specific task, whether that be holding a stone in place, shifting large fields of debris, or restraining Beyonders, who each require a unique application of effort. All in the name of maximizing efficiency.

Then there were those quick, twitchy movements of his. His steps launched him across great distances without ever disturbing so much as a single grain of dust. He had an insane degree of maneuverability and not even the air seemed to betray his movements.

Whitey is... was a Champion candidate. I could feel it the moment I saw him. There were a few people on the Entrance floor who had the same aura about them. For instance the man with the fire crown, and the beautiful woman with her even more beautiful mantle moving around her as if it had its own mind.

Neither one bothered to hide their title, unlike me. There is an option to do that, and I'm doing it. But not them, they flaunt their titles with pride, shoulders wide.

Dumbasses.

Unlike them, I will move sneakily. Like a true hypocrite, I'll gladly do the very things I'm always complaining about. Maybe that's why people find my pride so strange.

My control over kinetic energy is growing every day. And I don't think it'll be long before I can reliably take someone my level with kinetic energy alone. Hopefully.

For that, I need to see Whitey.

And then, after you throw in all the free stat points I've been getting, my new arcane passive, the body modifications I've got planned, Lily's healing marks, and the arcane items currently in my possession, it should be more than possible. However, I don't exactly have most of them on me at the moment.

I still have Flamebearer though, and the Echo Gauntlet which allows me to replicate spells or abilities. And that's something I totally can't wait to play with.

Maya has Bloodthirst; I've rented it to her for now, in exchange for a reasonable amount of compensation, to be determined later. The Golem Heart is still with Sophie, under the same terms I established with Maya.

Lastly, there's the cursed phantom something ring, which remains with Tess. I would probably have sold it anyway, and it would probably help them more than anything the extra shards could do for me.

Of course, that comes with its own offer of future compensation.

Good, but doesn't that mean I have most of group 4 firmly in my grasp? If I wanted, I bet I could overthrow mighty Tess, it wouldn't even be hard with all the trouble she's made. But that problem is well on track to solve itself.

I have plenty of other items too—mana stones, loaded with information, mana stones from multiple Veil Ignition stations, the information I've gotten from other people, documents from the Bastion, materials produced from the bones of powerful monsters, a cache of metals I've collected over our travels, including the arcane alloy I got from Nevan.

I don't have a hoarding problem.

I'm sure I can use every one of these items.

It's a shame there is no inventory or spatial storage items in the system shop. I would have expected something like that to pop up by now, especially after I got that vial that allows me to compress and store a swimming pool's worth of water.

At some point, I stop thinking and delve deeper into my training.

Movement after movement, the kinetic energy within me surges, battling against the inscriptions. I focus on the need to actively breathe, forcing my chest to move with kinetic energy because I couldn't figure out how to exclude it from Burden Enhancement Inscriptions.

A quick step, kinetic energy shoots from the bottom of my feet, traveling through my legs and waist, before joining with another burst of kinetic energy born from a twist of my waist. They mold themselves together, becoming entangled, as they war against each other while being forced together by my will.

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

The wave shoots past my shoulder, with a slight twist of my elbow, forcing my forearm to contract, and then... nothing.

Instead of kinetic energy bursting from the palm of my hand, it bounces back, flowing back through my body, mixing with an oncoming wave, then once again interfacing with the muscles and bones of my body.

I take a step back, a wave of energy shoots down through my legs, building from the bottom of my feet, strengthening my stance, a wave spreads through my back, flowing around my waist and rejoining itself on the other side.

I feel a slight tear in some unimportant organ followed by the burn of a pulled muscle, caused by an excessive burst of excessive energy. A too-slow reaction from my side, and my shoulder dislocates under the strain. A lightheadedness as I forgot to breathe for a few minutes already.

When I stop and the inscriptions dissolve with a mana wave I send through, I feel my arms shaking and take a deep breath in.

My skin burns, and I feel like falling to the ground.

“Pulling” on one thread, my aqua arcanum vial flies to my hand, and I dump a bathtub’s worth of water on my head, reveling in the refreshing sensation.

I comb my wet hair with my fingers and sweep it away from my face, catching Lily’s gaze. For a moment, she looks almost scared that I’ve caught her and I follow her gaze, to somewhere around my chest where I hold the glorified water bottle in my hand.

“You look thirsty, Lily,” I say, holding the item in a questioning gesture.

Lily, looking scared, turns around entirely and plops down on the ground, with renewed interest in her dark experiments.

“There is no fucking way he didn’t do that on purpose.” Dennis wildly shakes his head.

In reaction, I pop all the evil orbs that float around them, “I will be modifying them a little bit.”

For the next few hours, both of them have to go back to a single orb, as they struggle to keep them up for longer than twenty seconds.

The next day, I take my mana and form it into the shape of a sword, using the same process I used to create the manabloc chairs. The goal being to make it last as long as possible.

It's more difficult to restore, and slightly more "brittle," and I can't make it as sharp. But I know the sword I just made has the potential to remain intact for weeks without losing its shape.

There is some mana leakage, yes, and it'll still dissolve over time, though I can't say it's any worse than I would expect from an experimental process.

My goal is to make this "manabloc" material as flexible, sharp, mana-conductive, and repairable as normal mana. All while keeping its property of being able to stay materialized for a long time.

Who knows, in a few years I might be able to make items like this that last for years at a time. Then perhaps my next goal can be to make them conductive to mana other than mine.

Another goal after that would be to inscribe them so some sort of effects would activate while accepting foreign mana.

I'm imagining not needing to use arcanadium, endurium, voidsteel, or any other materials. Just my materialized mana and the epic, maybe even arcane weapons made of it. Even if they only ever last a few decades, I would be happy with that.

But to reach that goal, I'll have to keep experimenting with this manabloc material. Instead of materializing my mana in a loosely imagined form, I try to weave threads of much thinner mana through it. Perhaps that'll solve the issues I've been having with brittleness and durability. Though it does add quite a bit of difficulty to the process, not to mention that I'm not sure how this is going to work for parts like the blade.

Maybe I could combine it with a different type of mana; some of the weapons I've seen were made like that. Formed of varying alloys, each tuned to fit a different function. It was even in notes Miwa left me, so it could definitely be worth trying.

It's also possible that I'm just being extremely dumb and making things far more difficult than I need to, but I think it'll be a good training method for materializing Ley Lines. That's the main reason I'm even doing things this way.

After all, I've already spent an inordinate amount of time experimenting with those pale blue threads that feel so different from the pale blue of normal mana.

I don't even think I would be able to materialize much more than a finger's length without my new passive. At least not without melting some part of my brain.

My mana reserves are quite large, I would say, and I think most people would agree, but even I was surprised how much of my body's mana it took just to make that short thread, not to mention how much I had to use my eyes in the process.

Honestly, it probably means I shouldn't be doing it and that I'm going against the nature of the skill in some way, at least I think it does.

As if something like that ever stopped me before.

Maybe I should try using black mana. I'm curious how well I can handle it now, particularly with all the levels and passives I've picked up since last time. I'm curious how it would react to a [Ley Line], materialized or not.

But, I've already made up my mind that I'll try to avoid using it before I reach level 60 in [Focus] and [Mana Manipulation]. It was part of the recommendations Lady Lissandra left me with. I need to work on my basics before trying to mess with things like that.

It's yet another thing for me to look forward to when the time comes.

POV Maya Jones

Now that it is night and the rest of our small group has gone to bed, Tess changes her bearing. Her shoulders slump, her eyes lose some of their shine, and her movements don't feel quite so domineering.

It's a part of herself she only shows to me and Kim, now that our group is split. She puts on a front for Famir and the others.

Though maybe she's not exactly the same; she is a bit less controlling now.

It's a good thing.

I sit down next to her, and she leans against me with a sigh, her blonde hair tickling my nose. Sometimes, I get a little jealous of how tall she is. I'm not the shortest, but having a girl eight or so years younger be a bit taller than me is quite a funny experience.

It's amusing to see her like this though. Even I thought she was pushing things too far, and that guy noticed as well. He really can be annoyingly intelligent at the weirdest times.

Tess is young, 20 years old. What she's going through is probably something she feels for the first time, and for her, it seems like the worst thing ever.

In a few years, it will all be a distant memory. In a hundred, she might not even remember the details, only the feelings she had.

I can't help but feel a bit scared at the thought of living so long. How will I interact with normal people knowing they'll live such short lives by comparison? How will it feel to love someone and watch them grow old while I remain the same?

I won't lie; there are things I love about all of this, and I wouldn't want to give any of it up, but there are other things that terrify me. That's why I love what Tess is trying to do. She wants to make us companions, friends who survived the same experience, who are equal and can understand the troubles others might have. Not just friends for a few years, but someone we could still call a friend tens or even hundreds of years later.

"Did you think it would be like in the movies you told me you liked to watch?" I ask, smiling as I give her nose a flick in response to another tickle from her hair.

That young blonde doesn't react, and that's all the answer I need.

"Silly girl." Sometimes I forget how young everyone is.

Myself included, of course.

Chapter 457: Show them

The first test of the giga-web, made with the help of [Ley Line] was a huge success!

I didn't die.

That's it.

No need to go into the details. I'm sure the next attempt will work out! I just need to iron out some... things.

I'm also kind of amazed by my new passive. Even with all that... happened... I didn't even break a sweat. There was barely any strain on my mind, and somehow I find that more exciting than the results of the giga-web test. It means I can push myself harder.

I'm always worried about my mind. My body can be fixed, I can replace my limbs with mana, but my mind? If my brain melts I'm screwed. You can't just power through the destruction of your brain, unlike the rest of your body.

But now that I have this new arcane passive?

It's got me full of new ideas for improving my constructs, It's got me thinking of ways to compress enormous inscriptions down to the size of a fingernail. It basically means that the amount of information I can process is only limited by my skill, rather than the physical limitations of my mind.

Maybe I was a bit disappointed at first. After all, I have been saving up for this for quite a while, but part of that disappointment has evaporated. Now I just need to find a powerful opponent with mind magic bullshit and totally stomp them. Only then will I truly be happy.

I look at the twins and increase the difficulty for their evil orbs, forcing them to drop back to a single instance instead of the two they've been managing. They're used to it by now, so they don't complain

too much, keeping their energy focused on training. The blood, sweat, and effort they've put in is all the proof I need of their will to survive.

In two hours we'll abandon the evil orbs for the time being, and spar instead. All part of striking a new rhythm in the twin's training.

This method may be cruel, but they need to experience what it's like to get hit and be injured.

As much as possible.

We have Lily to restore damaged limbs, repair punctured organs, and staunch any excessive bleeding. It brings me no pleasure to hurt them like this, rather, it feels like a duty, it's something I just have to do.

Still, each and every single time I ask: "Do you want to continue?"

Of course, I listen to their answers, but more than that, I watch for their reactions. Their expression, and the look in their eyes.

And even though they are shaking, scared of what's to come, they agree.

Dennis and Aaron don't like to get hit. Often, even a smaller wound makes them drop out of the fight, lose consciousness, or try to run. They tend to rely on their high speed, illusions, and amazing cooperation to avoid being hurt in the first place.

There is a big weakness in that strategy. You need to strike a balance between being careful and fighting at full power, even when wounded, even when you know you're going to get hurt.

So you don't freeze mid-combat.

They just need to get used to it, and I'm helping with that. Keeping the injuries small won't help, they have to experience true danger, so I provide it.

“How will you try to attack me this time?” I ask them curiously.

If they have enough presence of mind to answer, I will up the difficulty of the orbs.

“This time we will try to win through sheer speed. One of us will act as the main attacker and the other will serve as a healer so he can go all out,” still not taking his eyes off the two orbs over the palms of his hands, Dennis answers.

Aaron also adds, “We thought of using ranged attacks, but we have a suspicion you would just bombard us with explosive orbs or teleport around us.”

"It's just like a video game! When you try to attack the boss from a distance, it changes its moveset, gets more aggressive, and counters with its own ranged attacks."

“The goal is to force you to go into a second stage one day,” Aaron jokes, smiling playfully.

“The loot drop would be amazing,” his brother chirps mischievously.

“Maybe his second stage would be him dying, then some orchestral music would start playing, and Biscuit would be revealed as the real boss all along.”

“They both have similar skill sets: mana constructs, flying, orbs, so it makes sense,” Dennis says, seeming to agree.

I listen to their banter with a growing sense of fascination, finding their train of thought almost as amusing as it is baffling.

“It’s just a shame that Nat does more damage to himself than we ever could,” Dennis sighs in the end and turns to me. “You want to raise the difficulty of our orbs, right?”

“How did you know?”

“You always do any time we improve even the slightest bit or poke fun at you.”

“Wouldn’t it be smarter to pretend you have trouble or try to avoid poking fun at me?” I ask, curious.

“It would, but I think you’d probably notice, and wouldn’t that render the whole thing useless anyway? We both want to improve.”

His brother nods, “The suffering sucks, but it makes it easier when we can see you doing the same things, and you’re even harder on yourself. Seeing that it would only feel shitty to look for ways to avoid it.”

Dennis pops his orbs, “It would be pathetic of us to try to avoid it, especially since you’re taking the time to help. I know you probably won’t say it, but I don’t think you would be doing this if you didn’t care.”

“And we appreciate that, really.” Aaron nods seriously.

“Of course, we still hate you a bit for all the pain, and given the opportunity, we will get our ‘revenge.’”

“That’s exactly how it should be,” I confirm. “And you’re free to try anytime.”

Royal Road is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

A day later, Lily places another mark on me, and I watch the entire process.

At this point, it may as well be routine.

Her body’s already accustomed to the influence of her mana, and rapid healing, not to mention all the ways it’s more durable than mine, which makes my body the perfect test subject for revealing any mistakes in her process.

However, that also means that my left arm takes a lot of damage. And damn, it hurts.

As a few times before, I watch the bones grow through each other, shattering and breaking in the process while new flesh keeps growing over that mess at the same time.

"It looks like you used too much mana around the edges of the mark," I note and stretch my messed up arm in her direction.

"I thought I'd made enough improvements for the mark to handle it," she sulks, as gray mana coats her arm before she cuts off the mess she made.

Then, as my arm regrows, she uses [Sacrifice], causing the severed arm to vanish, as it's converted into mana that flows to her.

"How much more mana did you use compared to the 7th variation?"

"I think about three times more? Using double the mana worked really well, so I thought it would be fine. I also made adequate changes."

"You should go over the mana stone Savant gave you again; you broke the loop, and it messed up the distribution."

"Isn't your weak body the real problem here? I tried the mark on myself, and it worked just fine."

"Okay. Will you say the same if Grumpy breaks like my arm when you try to heal him?"

Lily freezes mid-movement, shock written across her face, and I see a flash of anger behind her eyes as she does. After a few seconds, she calms herself, seeming to push those feelings aside, without so much as yelling at me.

And once she does I explain, "I think you are often forgetting how different we are from normal people, Lily. You, me, the twins, Biscuit, everyone in group 4 is so much stronger that we don't break nearly as easily."

I open and close the hand of my freshly restored arm into a fist before looking back at her, "You tend to let these things slip by you. You sacrifice efficiency without a single care for true mastery, relying on your skills to fix your mistakes or your body to endure them. It's also how you like to fight, and I think Tess showed you just how foolish that is back during the tournament."

As I speak I take a few steps over to our baggage nearby and locate the mana stone Savant gave Lily. The one with the information on body modification, among other things. A truly valuable repository of knowledge compiled by Hella, a disciple of Champion Tristan.

Which Lily clearly hasn't studied as deeply as I would've liked.

I hand it to her, "Whether or not that changes depends on you."

If I were her, I'd be studying this research data, experiment results, and ideas until I could recite them, even if someone woke me up in the middle of the night.

Then I watch as she closes her hand around the stone, nodding with her gaze fixed on the ground.

That night, we sit quietly around the fire. However, maybe "fire" is the wrong word. It's one of my trademarked thermal cubes.

It's vastly improved from before, and even its insides are made from multiple layers with the intention of testing how much I can concentrate thermal energy through it.

Just for the fun of it, I send it into a slow spin and cause it to flicker like the light of a campfire.

I still haven't figured out how to make it sound like crackling firewood, but I still haven't given up on the idea. With some internal modifications and possibly the use of kinetic energy, I should be able to get it to produce some noises.

There is also a single evil orb floating over my shoulder. And this is the most evil variation yet, specifically designed to be a challenge even for someone like me. It's forced me to split my mind into pieces, each one dealing with a different annoyance the orb provides.

It's worth it though, doing this has brought plenty of its rewards over the past few days.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 49 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 50]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 50 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 51]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 51 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 52]

[Focus - lvl 53 > Focus - lvl 54]

My precious skill has gotten stronger every day since it returned to me, and soon it will be right where it was before I used it for my skill combinations. It honestly kinda surprises me that it's not back to its former glory already, given all the new stuff I've been doing, but who the hell knows how the system calculates this stuff.

"I would've thought you'd want to do more hunting. To raise our levels and get stronger," Dennis says.

Once again he's proved himself the braver of the two brothers. Aaron usually prefers to let Dennis initiate conversations before joining in himself.

"What part of our status do you think holds the most importance?" I ask in place of my answer.

"Skills?" he asks hesitantly.

"Yup."

"But wouldn't raising our attributes make us stronger?" Aaron asks, not seeming to agree.

“Let’s say you have a thousand points in a single attribute, and you spend days leveling up and gain three stat points. How much stronger did you become?” I counter.

It’s funny to watch the gears spin in his head, trying to come up with a counterargument.

I reach down to pet Biscuit, who’s currently sitting in my lap, and continue, “Even if my level dropped by 100 right now, I don’t think it would make much of a difference. The same logic applies if I were to gain 100 levels and put all 300 points into mana, which would be doubled with my attribute upgrade. Sure I’d have 600 extra points, but that’s it.”

I know what Dennis wants to say, so I lift my finger to stop him.

(Food!)

“Oh, sorry.” I quickly lower a hand and continue to pet the best doggo of the Astral Prison. “Of course, the extra levels aren’t useless. At a certain point, you start unlocking Primary Class upgrades, and you get access to body upgrades, Traits, and more attribute upgrades, and more besides. All this just to say that your priority should always be your skills.”

(Food!)

“And eating well,” I add.

“Shouldn’t Biscuit be training too?” Aaron asks, unsatisfied. In fact, it seems like he’s gotten so invested that now he’s looking for something to poke at.

I glance down at Biscuit and back to the silly twin.

“Show them,” I whisper to the corgi.

Biscuit lazily opens an eye and yawns, his pink tongue lolling out with a cute sound as he does so and closes his tiny maw.

Then the mana that he's kept moving through his body, in his own crude imitation of Mana Cycling comes to a halt.

His purple mana begins to seep out of his body just a little, and all the sounds of the world slowly fade away.

The twins start looking around, confused, and no sound emerges as they open their mouths to speak.

My thermal cube flickers and the heat within fades slightly. The light slowly dims as if it were being pulled away, towards me in fact. Or rather towards the creature on my lap.

Biscuit's body feels much heavier now, his presence overwhelming, and even though I'm looking at the back of his head, I can still imagine his purple eyes.

In the fading flicker of my thermal orb, Biscuit's shadow expands and grows until it's many times its original size. Seeming almost too big.

And then the growling starts. A deep growl that awakens something in my primal instincts. The urge to run, The burning need to grab a stick and fight back. The urge to fall to my knees and beg.

A myriad of umbral tentacles extends forth from the shadow, surrounding our camp, and then they stop and change direction, all of them turning towards Aaron, who leaps to his feet, his chair tumbling to the ground as he struggles to escape their reach.

"That should be enough," I say laying my hand back on Biscuit's head.

All the shadows freeze and are slowly, gradually, drawn back into the enormous mass, as it too begins to shrink back into itself.

The light returns and my thermal cube glows and radiates heat once more.

Lily and the twins stand, their faces pale, holding their breath. I can even sense the mana gathering inside their bodies, ready to fight—or flee.

Slowly, Biscuit turns around, and when I finally see his face again, it's the same cheeky corgi I know and love.

"Good boy."

Chapter 458: The Arm Collector

The twins continue to demonstrate their [Connection] for me with a series of attempts at seizing control over one of my simple mana orbs and altering the settings.

I made it as simple as possible, with two modes: hover in place and spin. In fact, I've "hardcoded" the states into its functions.

Later, we'll move on to other skills too, but for now, I'm just trying to get a grasp on their process.

I'm also wearing the echo gauntlet. The idea being that if it's already allowed me to copy that weird blood skill that guy had on the 1st floor of Beyond it'll probably work just as well for mimicking the twins, in theory, it should give me some idea how it feels to use it.

I've already tried a few times before, but most of the time I find myself getting no feedback. The glove just allows me to use the copied skill—not as well as the original, but it still packs some decent oomph.

Then there are some skills it can't copy, like Lily's [Disintegration], but I was able to copy her healing and the twins' [Sensory Deception].

To be honest, I absolutely recognize the glove for the boon it is, especially given how helpful it could be in certain situations, but I still don't like it very much.

So I just think I will take it apart sooner or later. Observing how its inscriptions work and what connection of materials allows it to have such an effect will probably bring me more. Items just can't be overly relied on or trusted.

What if some asshole decides to steal it? The kind of guy that comes in and steals everything that's not bolted down. That kind of maniac.

I like that plan.

As that train of thought reaches its end the orb, which was hovering in place, starts spinning, then stops, only to start spinning once again.

The twins jump for joy, practically dancing with excitement, as they spew forth a seemingly endless stream of trash talk regarding my skill's efficacy.

They even have the gall to start issuing challenges.

I let it pass, empathizing with their joy and excitement over taking another step down the road of progress.

When we regroup with the rest of our band, I will tell Maya some of the more interesting things I've heard them say.

As I sit to the side, I watch as Lily and the twins spar. Two blonde boys attacking the black-haired girl.

Even though she's holding back and taking plenty of damage in the process, Lily's still winning.

They get their hits in, sure, but she takes it like a champ. Unlike them she doesn't flinch at every cut and blow, she doesn't hesitate, she doesn't let the pain make her overly cautious.

I recently found out that she's created a number of fake organ-like structures inside her body to use as sacrifices to fuel her skills. Each one about the size of a marble.

Though in terms of efficiency, they can't really compare to the real deal, which seems to confirm our theory regarding the importance of a sacrifice influencing the power received. But these organs are also her flesh and overall generate more power than they consume in the process of being converted into anything she might need.

Aaron and Dennis place several fast moving decoys throughout the battlefield, but it still doesn't present much of a problem for Lily.

Does she use logic to locate the originals and ignore the fakes?

No way in hell.

Lily just boosts her body and passes right through them, leading with her shoulder and ramming the copies.

I bet the twins are sweating bullets right now, knowing full well that if she were to tackle one of them like that, it wouldn't end well.

They quickly adjust their strategy, placing more illusions in front of trees and large boulders, in a bid to cause our petite healer to take on more environmental damage.

But Lily once again cosplays a bulldozer, smashing through any obstacles in her path. It's so similar to her fight with Tess that I should probably be offended, but I do notice some differences.

She's using much less mana without wasting as much on healing herself, choosing to focus on boosting the healing process a bit before letting her natural regeneration take over.

And damn, is that natural regeneration strong.

Lily probably has the highest Constitution in group 4, she even enhanced it with her attribute upgrade. Gaining something like Mana Potency for constitution. And once she gets her body upgrade at 250, it should improve even more.

And like she said, the stronger her body gets, the better [Sacrifice] works, which can only make her more versatile. She's mentioned that she goes 4 parts Constitution, 2 parts Mana, 2 parts Strength, and 2 parts Dexterity. She might change it up later, but it seems to be working just fine at the moment.

As for the twins, they go for 4 parts Dexterity, 2 parts Constitution, 3 parts Mana, and 1 part Strength. Though, much like Lily, they've said they might change that later. They both chose Diligence as their subclass, and they seem happy with the choice.

Sensing something flying my way, I step to the side, and Dennis blows past me, crashing into the boulder I'd been leaning against. He coughs up a bit of blood, but his wounds manage to heal quickly enough for him to leap back into the fray, a skill he shares with his twin, though it's not nearly as effective as Lily's.

I move once again, and Lily crashes into the space once occupied by Dennis, dust from the exploded stone covering her.

Royal Road is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

She disappears again, Aaron slamming against her from the side while Dennis takes a swipe at her leg in perfect synchronization.

Letting my thoughts waver once again, I think back on Mana Cycling, the mana technique Lissandra taught me so long ago on the 3rd floor. The process that's been helping me handle my mana.

So far, I haven't seen anything like it. Not in the mana stones, I've found on the various floors, not in the information I've gotten from the natives, not even when I asked around in the tournament and Beyond. But the more I use it, the more small changes and improvements I make, the more I find myself amazed by the sheer complexity of the technique, especially after seeing the improvements left to me in that mana stone.

It doesn't just help my body handle my mana, but it also helps me hide the excess while improving my control. And now, with the improvements Lissandra made, I think it'll have an influence on my body as well.

I don't know what to think of it yet, given that it's still wayyy too soon to tell, but its mechanisms are the main reason I didn't choose Mana Pulse Circulation and went for Mana Fortified Mind.

The description of Mana Pulse sounded just similar enough to Mana Cycling to bias me against it.

Is there a chance Mana Cycling is a somewhat active version of that arcane passive? Will the technique replicate the passive's effects as I reach the higher stages? Why are the names so similar?

When Caius spoke from his deep prison of a hole, he said that Lissandra left a mark on me, what's more, he called it archaic, bordering on ancient. A relic of the Absolutes and Champions of old. He said it had a degree of disdain to it like he thought it was uncivilized, like something from the stone age.

Liss would've kicked his ass if she'd heard.

Mana Cycling reminds me of Lissandra's mark—an archaic technique that modern Champions and Absolutes would almost certainly call obsolete. But I like it that way. I like how much it demands from me, what it does, and how it punishes me every time I slip up, letting my own mana harm my body.

I have a week left until I return to Beyond, I'm already eager to find out if I'll get to meet any humans from Earth who've seen the message I left on the board. Tess hasn't done her 3rd trial yet, and Lily's even further behind than her. And Sophie's got longer still. So I'll be on my own again.

I already spoke to Tess about it, so I'm sure she's mentioned it in the Beyond Community for our fellow Earthlings.

There's only one guy who could join me though, and I bet it would be annoying. Actually, make that two—though given the first Beyonder's penchant for never speaking, I sometimes forget he's even there.

My goal is to spend the next three days in Beyond trying to reach the checkpoint. I'll even bring some of my white sand with me to get some quick cash, though I'll have to find a way to seal it somehow.

I'll find out if I can enter the first floor of the dungeon on my own. If it's manageable, I'll go in solo a few times.

Afterwards, I'll save my stay tokens for future expeditions with Tess and the others and we'll hunt some lurkers on the first floor just to show them the ropes.

I don't think we have enough time to work on my body modifications with Lily, but she should be able to leave a few marks on me just in case.

We also start cutting off my left arm, so she can feed it to [Sacrifice] in an emergency while I'm gone.

We perform a few test runs and find that sacrificing my severed left arm gives her an even bigger boost than it did before.

And honestly, I would've been angry if it hadn't. It's the arm of a Champion candidate, someone on the cusp of reaching level 300, and an individual with an arcane passive. It better be good stuff.

With fascination, I also watch as Lily brings out a big bag and packs my arms into it. It seems it has just enough room for a few more, and then she will... well, I don't really want to know what she's going to do with the rest. She could always bury them underground, or just stuff them into another bag.

What I find creepy is that she starts cutting my arm apart and testing the level of boost and asking questions. How much of a boost will a hand give? How much from a single finger? How much from the bones?

I'm getting more and more worried about her future.

I can already see the necklace made from my finger bones and tendons hanging around her neck.

So while we prepare arms for her, I also give her a mini quest: to observe how my arm will behave over the 7 days I'm still here and then when I leave. I don't think it'll change much, at the very least it won't decompose or start rotting. Still, I'm eager to find out.

Would my body remain preserved, even after a year? What about ten years later, or after I die? Would it be possible to emulate my traits with it? Would my heart be useful at all?

If I died because of a destroyed heart and my head stayed untouched, would it be possible to get me some new fancy heart and then kickstart my brain again, even years later?

These thoughts fascinate me, and Lily seems to share the sentiment. So we talk and theorize, ignoring the twins and their concerned gaze.

I don't deserve such looks from them.

A day passes.

I train, I spar with Lily and the twins. I work on improving [Resonance] by observing the twin's use of [Connection]. It feels like I'm close to working something out, yet something's still missing, but I don't waste time dwelling on it. I just put in more effort.

The twins are doing surprisingly well and they almost seem to have found aspects of their training to enjoy. They're getting better at close-range combat too.

My style of letting the enemy hit, so I can hit back twice is what I'm teaching them. It won't be their main tactic by any means, but I like to be flexible, so it may as well be another trick up their sleeve.

And over time, I've begun to notice them getting more and more comfortable around me. Up till now there's always been a little bit of tension on their end, and even now I can't see that ever fully going away.

Lily, lord have mercy on her soul, runs around with my arms and sometimes bones from the arm. She does some body modification testing, and sometimes these bones explode... violently.

It would certainly be a shame if something like that were to happen to my spine while she was trying to modify my body, right?

I try to ignore it as much as possible. It still surprises me how easygoing Lily can be about things that would make the average person lose their lunch. I don't think a normal person would be so casual about breaking down a human arm.

I watch with great interest whenever she trains her [Disintegration], and the twins seem to take an interest as well.

She works on everything from shaping projectiles out of her gray mana, to making weapons, mostly smaller ones, and threads.

She's really beginning to improve, and it doesn't seem to be straining her nearly as much.

We even test it against my highly compressed mana, which she tears through with ease. I even attempt to disrupt the skill, all to no avail.

At one point, I use a large chunk of my body's mana to materialize a finger-length thread of [Ley Line], and her gray projectile collides with it.

And my beautiful new skill resists. A goddamned beautiful thread of whatever this material is actually manages to resist the tiny terror's gray mana.

Lily, decidedly less pleased than I am, attacks again, drawing more from her reserves, taking this new attempt more seriously.

In the end, after multiple attempts, the thread does get destroyed, consumed by her evil gray mana.

That simple exchange feels almost like a challenge between Lily and me, and we stare at each other for a moment, our competitive spirits thoroughly awakened.

I'm sure Lily's skills will only grow stronger over time, but that goes for me as well.

Chapter 459: On the schedule

Over the next few days, I go out hunting in the area surrounding our camp, trying to complete side quests to earn more stay tokens.

With the twins, we experiment a bit and came up with a way to make some items to sell for extra shards, gaining me around 15 thousand more and some for the twins as well as I make the different variations of each item. We go through quite a number of attempts and failures, but the boys are eager to earn their share of the shards and have already set to spending their share to buy themselves a decent variety of stuff.

Lily and Biscuit seem to be saving their shards, and so honestly I don't have anything I want them to buy with my 50% share. I mean, there are plans in the works, but I don't have the time or space to put them into action yet.

After I get back from Beyond, I fully intend to get myself an undamaged arcane item, even if it means I have to destroy some of the damaged ones currently in my possession.

I have plenty of materials and ideas, so I should have the resources at least.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Dennis asks me curiously.

He's watching me from across the border with brother in tow, refusing to cross beyond the point their mana stops regenerating. I, meanwhile, am standing well within the mana desert, directing my flames at the molds I've sculpted in the ground.

"Who knows?"

"Nat, tell me, did you use to take things apart just to see how they were working?"

"Lucky guess."

"Got it. Now get back to your training, Your orb's going to disappear."

“There’s no way. I have it under control...” He doesn’t have time to finish, and the evil orb beside him bursts open, “...under control.”

His brother laughs. “I told you he was about to start changing them without telling us! Nat, did I do well?”

“Better than Dennis,” I agree as I watch him handle the sudden spike in his orb, a new way I found to tortu... train the brothers.

Weakening the flame I turn my attention back to the mold and send kinetic energy through the molten sand in the form. I modify the output to create a deep vibration throughout the mass, shaking the bubbles out of the form at high frequency.

Then I continue to heat it up. I’ve started taking things slower than before, watching the surface and the color. Once in a while, I use kinetic energy to help the process along, typically to release more trapped bubbles.

I’m trying to make a simple dagger, a good form for testing as we’ve found over a few days.

“What are you looking to add to the mix today? Do you need another one of my finger bones?” Lily asks, sounding genuinely curious.

She’s sitting off to the side, examining a mana stone loaded with information on body modification.

“We could try to add one of Biscuit’s whiskers,” Dennis recommends.

(Asshole!)

“You know I wasn’t being serious, Biscuit! Nat, what did he say?”

“He called you an asshole.”

“Oh...” His brother laughs at him while Dennis deflates.

“We tried enhancing them with your thermal orbs, random bones, and metals, but we’re kind of hitting a wall by not being able to add mana,” Aaron sighs.

“We did?”

“You did, but we supported you from a distance.”

“Sounds about right. I don’t think I’m going to add anything this time. Someone else might be able to get more out of this sand, but I can’t do anymore at this point in time.”

It’s frustrating. I can’t inscribe it, I can’t add my mana to the mix. I can’t even use mana while making it.

And in the end, as the dagger cools down, the blade is still ugly. Somewhat.

The surface is nice and smooth, white-ish and thoroughly glass-like. Probably the best I’ve made so far. However, the description is no different than it was before and stubbornly retains its upper epic rarity and its ineligibility for sale in the system shop.

I pocket it in the same fashion as the failures that came before.

“Why don’t you make items for the others? Like you did for us?” Dennis asks as he watches me stow the dagger.

“We won’t be meeting them soon enough for that. Do you want to carry all those items for the next few months?”

“I guess we can come back later. But damn, even if we’re taking 50%, you still have a lot of shards invested in us.”

“Yes. I intend to use them to buy materials for crafting, testing, and other stuff. Did you already use the detachment token on [Connection]?”

“We both did, but damn, Nat, it’s not a nice feeling removing a skill upgrade. We didn’t bother using one on [Mana Manipulation] either.”

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“It’s worth it in the end, and don’t worry, I’ll push others to follow suit.”

The sleepy-looking Lily yawns, speaking lazily as she does, “I used them before we even reached this floor, back when you first mentioned it, Nat.”

That makes me turn to the twins. “Why can’t you guys be more like Lily?”

“We don’t have the Handy Backpack she has.”

“It’s a Chop Sack,” Aaron disagrees with his brother.

“No, it’s an Armory Bag.”

“Disarmory.”

Catching Lily’s gaze, I shrug and she repeats the motion, adding another yawn. “I’m going to get a few hours of sleep. I think the 11th variation of my healing mark is due to be the best one yet.”

“So there won’t be any more veins growing through the surface of my skin?”

“Nope, I fixed it. Night, boys,” she waves before heading off to rest.

Something nudges my feet, and I look down to see Biscuit.

(I require sustenance.) He says, uttering a series of words I haven't heard him use in a long time.

Knowing what that means, I head to my backpack and open a secret compartment, and pull a sealed box free, taking a single piece of Archdeer jerky from within. A commodity that's rapidly becoming more and more precious as time goes on.

Biscuit patiently waits, but I can see him tippy-tapping with his front legs, even jumping subtly as he struggles to contain his excitement.

"Paw," I say as I squat in front of him.

He immediately lifts his right front leg, and I grab it, shaking it and feeling the soft toe beans beneath.

Feeling refreshed, I hand the jerky to him, which he gently takes into his mouth, then turns around, heading to his usual resting spot at which point he proceeds to nibble on it.

"Did you have any pets back on Earth, Nat?" Aaron asks, in an uncharacteristic show of Initiative.

I shake my head. "Never. But I remember a time when I was younger, there was a boy who got a puppy for Christmas, and for a year or two, his mom often brought it with her when she went to pick her son up from school."

That memory flashes in my mind.

"The dog was always so happy, just seeing that boy, and the boy was happy as well. It didn't matter if he got bad grades, or someone was bullying him, or if a teacher chewed him out. Every time he saw that dog, a smile would light up his face."

"That sounds nice."

"Yup." I stretch and activate the burden enhancement inscriptions, forcing myself to move kinetic energy throughout my body. "It's time for some light sparring. Your goal is to maintain the evil orb while we fight."

"I wish he had better names for these things. It makes me feel lame that I have so much trouble with it." Dennis sighs, fixing his clothes as mana starts flowing through his body.

"We should have known what we were getting ourselves into when he named our group: group 4."

The sparring match takes off, and they don't have the luxury of speaking anymore.

Just two days remain until I start my next Beyond expedition, and my training is in full progress. I cut down on my sleep planning to make up for it before I go to Beyond.

Be it day or night, all of us train, my companions deciding to follow my example and stay up for the next few days.

Much like before, there is no hunting, we only resort to killing monsters when they attack us. And this close to the Mana Desert, that rarely happens, leaving our campsite unusually quiet.

Here on the 6th floor, days are hot, and the sky makes it impossible to see where the light's coming from, almost like we were caught in a perpetual storm or the sky was covered in sand or something.

Day is also the time when the monsters seem to be the most active, and yet the nights are cold and quiet. And I've grown to enjoy the nights here, even as hostile as they are. If only for the view I still can't get enough of.

It almost looks like I can reach my hand and touch the stars. Myriads of them in the sky, mixing with purple nebulae that cover a huge part of the sky as well.

Sometimes I just like to sit there for a few minutes and watch it, thinking about just how real it is. How far does the tutorial reach? Did it stop at recreating the moon, this Astral Prison. Is everything beyond

the borders of this satellite just an even bigger fake? A projection set there for convenience? Like some giant TV screen? Is it just an illusion? Graphics that only bother to load when we look at them?

Or does the system do more? Back on the 2nd floor, old Liss said she couldn't leave the planet, so maybe it just ends. But there's a chance it doesn't.

I'll have to find out next time we're on a floor without aerial defenses. I'm curious to see if I could fly up to outer space and survive there.

A few minutes remain, and I adjust my backpack, it's already been loaded up with all my most important stuff. I have the Flamebearer, I have my Echo Gauntlet, I even have a few weapons made from white sand, and plenty of other odds and ends.

I also have somewhere around a dozen healing marks dotting my body, though most of them are confined to my left arm. The current and 12th variation has been tailored to send a scan through my body to find the wound and focus its healing there.

Though it would certainly cause problems if someone were to sever my left arm—which is, sadly, not impossible—so we decided to space out a few more marks across some of my other body parts, even though it made things a bit more difficult for Lily.

I endure a second long hug from Lily, suspecting her of milking the situation while fully aware that she might try it again.

"So, You're planning to be back in three to five days right?" Aaron asks.

"Yup," I confirm. "I'll start with a one day token, and use more based on how that goes."

"Take care, Nat," Lily cries, seizing the opportunity to give me a third hug, and I look over her head at the smirking twins.

Then I push the baby koala away and lift Biscuit to eye level, letting him lick my face a few times.

Trading a final round of well wishes, I take a few steps and grab the nearby stack of boxes. Each one made from melted white sand, sealed airtight, and impossible to open without breaking the container itself. Inside, there's nothing but a hollow space filled with loose white sand.

Yup, I'm using white sand to store white sand. I have a dozen boxes just like it, each the size of my head.

"Later," I shout, waving as I use a Beyond Stay token and the environment around me fades.

And there she is, my beloved Lady handler, seated within the same endless space, behind the same, old wooden table.

I follow her eyes to the boxes filled with white sand behind me and can't help but feel proud. It took a lot of testing to get it right and even more effort to create them and store the white sand within.

"You can't bring those to the Entrance floor or into the dungeon," she says resolutely.

Yeah, I never liked this old hag of an asshole lazy handler.

Chapter 460: What a beautiful day

"I want to change handlers," I tell her and wait for a pop-up message.

"That doesn't work here," she sighs and points at the storage cubes I brought with me. "White sand was made by a powerful Absolute long ago. It was his way of dealing with annoying mana users and he modified it to trap Champion Caius and others. You surely must know how dangerous it could be if someone were to release it on the Entrance floor."

"There are people with damaged arcane weapons and surely there are others with full arcane weapons. Plenty of people would be capable of wiping out the entrance floor on their own without any need for a weapon or item."

"Even arcane items need to be used with intent, while there is not a single attendee capable of controlling the white sand. Do you think you're the first one to bring white sand here, to Beyond? What do you think would happen if you were to release it here in the highly mana-saturated entrance floor?"

“What happened last time?”

“Someone brought it here, it got out of the container, became charged by the abundance of ambient mana and the mana radiating from the people here. It wiped out one of the entrance outposts—and any attendees and locals that were there. A single pile that was probably smaller than two of your boxes combined.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. So let’s do it like this: I will take these boxes, I will also take the weapons you made out of it. There are a few handlers with permission to play around with things like white sand, so I will sell it to them and give you a portion of the shards later. And if you try to bring more, I’ll just take it from you.”

“And you’ll take a cut?”

I can’t help but feel disappointed. Part of me expected this, but I was hoping for a different outcome. At least I’ll get some shards out of it. If I don’t get enough to make it worth it, I’ll be angry.

“Can’t these handlers just ask Rulers to get them white sand or find some themselves?” I ask.

“I know what you’re doing you know, but I’ll play along this time and give you this for free. It’s impossible to enter the tutorial twice. No one can enter the tutorial other than the attendees from the First Generation.”

“Not even the Rulers?”

The look she gives me makes it clear that’s all I’m gonna get.

After a while, she smiles from behind her table. “Weren’t you going to change handlers last time?”

“I forgot.”

“Did you?”

“Well, a lot of things happened. I might be thinking about it now though, so you better have some good information for me.”

“Nope.”

“I’m asking for a new handler the second I get out. What with your attitude last time, and now this situation with the white sand—I’ve put in a lot of effort, you know.”

“Sure, do it.”

Her smile widens even more as she watches me, resting her chin in the palm of her hand, “But I’m in a good mood, so if you ask the right question, I might answer. You only have a few more seconds before you get transported to the entrance floor, so be quick.”

“Who was the ruler on the first floor?” I ask.

She chuckles and leans back in her chair with a relaxed ease. A playful light flickers in her eyes, and she waits a bit, stretching the seconds until I feel myself getting pulled away.

As if that were the signal she’d been waiting for, she asks, “Do you remember that deer you skinned?”

Then I disappear, without even a chance to respond.

And there I stand, shocked to my core, surrounded by the dozens of Beyonders walking all around me, going about their business here on the entrance floor.

There is no fucking way.

An hour later, I’m 99% sure that old hag, asshole of a handler, was just messing with me.

I catch myself wondering why I haven't already asked for a new handler. It would be so simple—just say the words out loud and go through the options. But to my frustration, I still haven't done it. All because I believe her when she tells me she's one of the few handlers who can provide the kind of information she gave me last time.

Damn it.

I still have a few hours until I have to go to the meeting I advertised on the board, so I take a moment to walk around.

This time I have my crown over my head, and after a few weeks on the 6th floor, it's nicely filled. It seems to be a running trend with me: filling my crown only for things to go to shit. So I'm expecting something to go wrong fairly soon.

And just like that, there goes my act as melee fighter Noname. I'm sure there can't be many people who could see how much mana I have stored without me noticing. The crown is something I'm deeply connected to. It would also be rude, so it's pretty rare for anyone to try to scan the people around us, mostly rookies.

As for my crown, I have to wonder just how many people would recognize it as a [Mana Crown] in the first place.

To mess with them a bit, I move a bit of my thermal energy, creating yellow flames that flicker around the crown, trying to disguise it as a [Fire Crown]. And for the most part, I try to make it as close as possible to the one I saw before.

From what I've heard so far, the fire-based crown would get less attention. Lastly, I finish off my camouflage with a simple mask made of mana to cover my face and hide my Flamebearer under a wrap made of cloth.

It's so silly it nearly makes me want to forget the whole thing, but still, I continue.

Duncan told me a lot of things the last time I saw him. Sometimes people disappear, their bodies are never found, likely taken apart for their traits. In other cases, people with rare skills are kept for testing.

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

In the near future, I fully intend to reveal some of these skills to purposefully get myself kidnapped. The kidnappers can then serve as a valuable source of information and loot.

Your body changes and adapts to your powerful skills as they level up. Either because it needs to or as a side effect of a skill's influence on the body. Even that little is enough for some people to risk it on the small chance it gives them hints to acquire a powerful skill.

Attribute crowns are some of the most sought after, especially [Dexterity Crown]. as are Strength and Constitution while Mana is mostly considered just a variation of a mana battery. An amazing one at that, the skill likely being equal or better than even the greatest mana batteries, but [Dexterity Crown] seems to be on a different level.

I still don't fully know how one would even go about filling that crown, but I can clearly imagine its strength. Just imagine a person storing Dexterity over months, over years.

It's so crazy. How do you fight someone who moves so quickly you can't see them? Someone who moves faster than you can teleport, to the point that even if you do teleport, they're already there waiting for you?

Give them a powerful weapon, and they're one of the most terrifying opponents you could ever face. Just the crown, a method of enduring the strain of motion, and a blade sharp enough to pierce through armor and barriers—and that's it for you.

I stop mid-stride and take a few steps back.

Off to my side, I spot Duncan, hurrying off somewhere with his signature big bag strapped to his back and a smile on his face. He quickly greets a group of feylith and rushes off between the houses.

It almost makes me feel ashamed for slacking around like this, so even though it's a bit early, I head over to the spot I arranged for my meeting.

The closer I am to it, the more I start focusing again and pushing these constant thoughts away. Now they all get replaced by curiosity.

All 10 rounds of Earth's tutorial should be synchronized now, meaning I have every chance of meeting Beyonders from any given round of the tutorial. And as I get closer, I find that that's exactly what's happened.

A tall, bald man sits there, raking his fingers through his beard. He's wearing a tank top, and either one of his arms must be thicker than my leg for sure. Hell, his leg alone probably weighs as much as I do.

It's the winner of the 1st round's 1st tournament. The one we saw during the Chronicle of the Past.

Next to him sits a boy, no older than 12, with a slim build and wavy brown hair matching the color of his eyes which constantly flick from place to place, full of curiosity.

Opposite of them is a woman with short black hair, kind-looking eyes, and a golden retriever sitting next to her with his head in her lap while she scratches him behind the ears.

Extrovert class, both of them for sure. The woman is smiling and nodding, while the big, tall, muscular man laughs loudly and happily, ignoring the looks he gets because of that. The boy seems to be used to that, and I can see him rolling his eyes. The way he sits close to the bald man tells me they are most likely used to each other, likely from the same round.

As I approach, the boy finally detects me and pokes the bald man. He doesn't let it show and continues to act normal, yet the feeling of danger increases to an overwhelming degree.

As if I had walked into a den of beasts the sense of hostility continues to ramp up as I continue my approach, and despite the man's relaxed appearance as he continues laughing in time with the conversation, the current atmosphere just doesn't fit that picture.

I let my heartbeat, kinetic energy flowing through my body, permeating my muscles, to counter his pressure. I match the tension in the air as I proceed, each of my steps reverberating through the floor around us, my heart beating just outside the range of normal hearing.

My hand closes into a fist and opens.

Winner of the tournament? Let's see.

"Noname?" Asks a voice, seemingly out of nowhere.

The moment feels frozen in time, and the bald man, in the process of standing up muscles bulging, stops mid-movement. He glances at me, then at the woman with the retriever, the one who interrupted us and sits down.

With that, the feeling of danger is gone.

Disappointingly.

"Hello," I greet.

"Hello," the woman smiles, turning to me. "Luna noticed your approach," she says as she pets her dog, who wags her tail in response. "She said you smell like a human from Earth, so I thought you might be the one who left the post."

"Luna's pretty smart."

"She is, right?" The black-haired woman smiles happily. "My name is Leticia, and this is my Luna as I've already said," she states, introducing the golden retriever as if she were the most important member of their party.

Luna turns to me, the same gentle brown eyes retrievers usually have. But there's an uncanny intelligence behind those eyes. I don't feel any indication of a scan, but I'm sure the retriever is checking me out and appraising the danger I present.

"It's fine, Luna, we're all from Earth here," Leticia says, smiling and petting her once again, prompting Luna to quietly turn away from me.

Leticia then gestures at the young boy. "This is Spacewolf. He's really sweet, so please don't mind the name! The mountain pretending to be a human next to him is CarrotCake."

The bald man, who sits almost two heads taller than me and twice as wide, smiles brightly, his teeth gleaming in the light.

"My name in the community is Noname," I introduce myself.

"Hello, Noname. I hope we'll learn to drop these nicknames sometime in the near future. My handler told me that you can even change your Community name, but only once, and only to your real name. So please think about it."

Spacewolf snorts while CarrotCake stands up and stops in front of me. Obscuring most of my view with his beard as I look up at him.

"Round?" he asks.

"Fifth, you?" I return, curious if he will try to lie.

"First round, winner of the 1st tournament. You?"

"I won our first tournament as well."

The feeling of danger rises again and it's immediate this time. Even stronger than before and the man's smile becomes even brighter.

Then the two presences I felt coming closer reach us, Luna the retriever reacting exactly the way she did when I showed up.

“That makes three of us,” says a man a few years older than me, bringing himself to the muscular man’s attention, which he ignores. “I’m Derick, and this is Noelle, 8th round.”

Derick has long red hair tied into a ponytail. He’s slim and dressed in a pair of black pants and a long sleeved shirt. And to top it all off he’s unarmed.

Noelle is shorter, with brown hair, and wears a long bow strapped to her back, seemingly made out of metal with no string.

They, like the others, seem accustomed to each other’s presence.

“Isn’t that great! What a beautiful day this is shaping up to be!” The bald man, who I refuse to call CarrotCake, shouts as he stomps, leaving a crack in the cobblestones lining the street below him. It’s just a simple movement, playful, devoid of mana, yet it perfectly illustrates the power of his body.

I smell another single-attribute enthusiast. It's just a shame he chose Strength.

Leticia rushes to calm the bald man down, and I have a strong suspicion he wouldn’t mind starting a fight right here and now. He certainly seems like the type.

Derick and Noelle stand quietly off to the side, talking to each other. The winner of the 8th round's tournament, it makes me curious about what kind of abilities he could be hiding. Unlike the musclehead over there, it's not quite so obvious.

I check the countdown, the time for the meeting nearly up.

Exactly on the second, the last person enters the area, a young man with green eyes and long black hair tied back in a ponytail. He has a beauty mark under the corner of his left eye. That guy...

So we have three winners from the 1st round of tournaments.

An archer with a weird ass bow.

A woman who snuck her dog into the tutorial.

Spacewolf.

And lastly, the cowardly Savant.