

Invoker

As the blazing crimson cloud swelled around me, a voice echoed all around.

"SEIZE THE ONLY TRUE WAY. PANDEMONIUM, FREEDOM."

The cloud was reaching out to me, and each heavy, clinging strand seemed to yank at pieces of me buried deep inside. An intense surge of fear and anger pulsed through my veins as if I had been injected with a powerful drug. My heart began to soar and I was filled with an inebriating sense of euphoria. As if I was finally given leave to enjoy life to its fullest. My emotions were calling out to me, tempting me to dive deep into their depths and finally experience freedom for the first time ever. That I could be strong and true to myself. That all I had to do was take the plunge and free myself from the shackles of my thoughts.

A voice inside my head screamed at me to take the plunge, to finally relinquish control and accept the inevitable. I could feel my internal struggle spilling out as if it were a volcanic eruption, threatening to consume me. I had been living my life on someone else's terms for too long, and this was my chance; this was my time to seize the reins and become my own master.

Yet I knew that this was the trap that Shadow warned me against. I knew that I had to resist, but it was so hard. I could tell that if I tried to suppress what I felt, it would be an impossible task.

*It is telling me to accept what I feel. Was that not what Shadow taught me? I **do not suppress my Emotion, I Embrace.***

I heard my own voice echoing inside my head. Then I shook my head, *No.*

The tenants of the Heart of Azure and Scarlet were never meant to be a surrender. Embracing one's emotion wasn't about giving into it, but rather using it to guide your actions, so that you could accomplish what you set out to do without being overtaken by it. But this... it felt like surrendering. To give in would be contrary to the message of the Heart of Azure and Scarlet; embracing was not surrendering.

I let myself feel, embraced those feelings, and the cloud pulsed around me.

"RENOUNCE THE HERETIC CONSTRUCT THAT BINDS YOU. REJOIN THE WAY."

I realized my mistake then. The emotions that the blight made me feel were too strong for me. I wanted to fight against the surging emotions, but I knew that it would be too much for me to bear. The temptation to give in was strong, and I could feel myself slipping away. I tried to embrace them, and felt myself being trampled. I fought against the urge, knowing that if I succumbed I would lose all that Shadow had taught me. And yet, it was such a hard battle.

My heart and my mind were battling one another, trying to outdo each other in a desperate and silent power struggle. On one hand, my heart screamed for freedom and the chance to be true to myself, it listened to what the blight had to say; on the other hand, my mind argued for control and stability, it argued against what Shadow taught. It wanted to fall back on what I had been taught my whole life, to suppress emotion. It felt like a waking nightmare; one where I would never have a chance at winning unless I chose a side and made it through the ordeal alive. What I learned from the Heart of Azure and Scarlet was still too recent, I did not

understand it fully enough for it to provide enough protection against the blight.

Red was filling my mind, and I could glimpse in it the freedom that it offered. For a moment I understood, the madness of what Shadow called blight was freedom from all restraints, from all morality, from all concepts such as good and evil. Acting solely on what you felt in the moment. It resonated with me, resonated with the **thirst**.

I felt the blight find purchase, then I felt it start worming its way in-

The world around me shuddered, and the red cloud pulled back. For a moment there was silence, and then the blight's voice boomed all around me.

"KHANUM," the red cloud trembled, it tried to get closer to me but something held it back.

In this strange place that was in between a memory and imagination, I turned and saw something step in front of me. A person, shrouded in a black mist, nine tails waving behind them.

"Shadow?" I whispered, and was surprised when I heard my voice.

The person glanced back at me, but all I could see was the black mist waving around. It did look vaguely like Shadow, it even had ears on top of its head.

The red cloud bulged and churned. **"A THOUSAND TURNS, AND STILL YOU REFUSE YOUR NATURE."**

"I am nothing like you, Voice," Shadow said in a deep and distorted voice.

"YOU KNOW THAT YOU ARE. YOU FOOL YOURSELF KHANUM."

"Enough," Shadow said, waving a hand. **"This is not the moment you tempt her. Begone."**

The cloud surged forward, then, as if it hit a wall it scattered and it broke, flowing away.

Immediately, I felt all the pressure building inside of me drain, and I sagged to the ground. I managed to raise my head, and see Shadow standing over me, . I opened my mouth to speak, but he did before I could.

"Wake."

* * *

[Empty Slot] skill gained.

Mask of the Drainer — No Investment; 10th Carving

Mask of the Drainer > Mask of the Blood Invoker

Mask of the Blood Invoker — First Investment; No Carving

[Potential Augmentation] trait unlocked.

[Swap Profile] skill gained.

Ornament of the Student – No Investment; 7th Carving

[Practical Learning] skill gained.

I opened my eyes, and was welcomed back to the world of torment. I took a deep breath and the smell of blood and sweat assaulted my nostrils. I opened my eyes and sunlight pierced through the branches above me to stab straight into my eyeballs, immediately igniting the worst headache I have ever felt. Everything was so raw, that for the moment I didn't know what was happening. Then the rest of it hit me. Every single part of my body hurt, as if it had been run over by a truck, repeatedly. I opened my mouth to speak, and the only thing that came out was a groan filled with agony.

"Slow now," a voice whispered from next to me. I tried to turn my head, and pain shot through my neck.

I grimaced, my vision darkening for a moment. When it cleared up, I saw Shadow leaning over me.

"I'm alive," I said. I glanced around, seeing that we were nestled between a boulder and a few trees. I saw no signs of the sikiri or our battle.

"You are alive," Shadow confirmed with a smile.

Then memories flashed through my head. The fight with the sikiri, me drinking its blood, then the blight.

"Oh no," I whispered. "Am I infected, I drank its blood, it spoke to me-"

"-No, no," he said hurriedly. "You are not blighted, that is not how the blight infects. It is the disease of the mind and Source, and yours is clean. You fought it off, and I am proud of you. Many who are stronger would've succumbed, and many had."

I remembered the person shrouded in a black mist. "You helped me," I said slowly, though my throat hurt. "I would've succumbed if it wasn't for you. It spoke to me, and then you... you kept the blight away. But, how did you-"

"Do not," he said quickly. "Push it out of your mind, do not think of what happened, do not think about what you heard. The more you think of it, the more power you give it. It is madness, nothing that it says ever makes sense. Yet if you think about it, it will start to make sense to you, and it will drive you mad."

I swallowed, hard. Just remembering the red cloud and how I felt... It was overwhelming. I did as he asked and closed my mouth.

"You resisted on your own," he glanced away, almost as if he was ashamed. "I just gave you the tools you needed to do it."

I opened my mouth, then closed it, deciding to follow his advice and not think about it again. It was an easy decision. What I experienced was not pleasant at all.

"How long was I out? And where are we?"

"A day. Your body was almost fully pulverized at one point. If you were anybody else I would have written you off for dead. But your healing

saved you, though it had slowed down considerably with the arrival of dawn," he said.

I grimaced, that explained why I was still feeling like shit. It was day, but somehow I felt almost as if it was night. Or at least my body did, my senses felt closer to what they were normally, without the sun's suppression.

"We are near where we fought the sikiri," Shadow answered the second question. "I was not well enough to carry you far. Now that you are awake, we should find better shelter. The jungle is still full of danger, and neither one of us is in any fighting form."

I nodded, then paused. "Wait, where is Saia?"

Shadow glanced away. "She was destroyed in the fight," he said slowly. "I am sorry."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. "Oh, that's okay," I said. Saia's drone wasn't her. She was inside of me.

"You are reacting a lot differently than I expected," he commented.

"Because she is fine, her real body, or I guess you could call it her core, is inside of me," I told him. "I'm going to need to get her more mass to rebuild, but that shouldn't be an issue."

As long as I figure out how to do that without her drone around.

At his blank look, I gave him a short explanation. I knew that we touched on some things concerning Saia, but I didn't think that he really understood everything.

"The wonders never cease," Shadow shook his head.

I smiled, and then felt a pressure in my head.

Ornament of the Revelator — No Investment; 3rd Carving

I blinked, and remembered what happened when I woke up. "I've gained more investment," I said slowly. "A lot more."

Shadow perked up at that, one of his ears twitched on top of his head.

I grimaced, then groaned as I pushed myself up into a sitting position, with Shadow's help. I glanced down and saw that I was wearing different clothes. The last thing I remembered was the sikiri using its skill and it breaking my bones. If Saia was destroyed, then I could assume that my clothes were as well.

"What did you gain?" Shadow asked, bringing my attention to him.

I relayed what I woke up to. His eyes widened and his tails twitched behind him.

"Three Carvings? So, you do get more investment if the blood comes from a live target. Perhaps it was because you landed the killing blow? Or because you drank while killing it? The sikiri was at least mid-Fifth Investment, the disparity between you and it could have garnered you a significant amount of investment, regardless of my involvement... Hm... you will need to do more tests to figure out what exactly do you gain your investment from, though the Mask name change does suggest blood as the main source."

"Why did my Student Ornament jump that much?" I asked, it had gotten even more carvings than my Mask.

Shadow waved his hand. "Combat is the great teacher, and those who survive it often learn much about many things."

I nodded slowly, looking back, it did make a lot of sense. I've learned how to set up a trap for a much stronger opponent, and I could definitely say that I learned a lot from the fight itself. Like how much I still have to grow.

"What is a trait?" I asked.

"It is the core of every Mask," Shadow answered. "Once a Mask reaches First Investment, it gains a trait. It consists out of a passive and an active effect which you trigger by wearing your Mask."

I blinked, I had tried wearing my Mask before, though only in my inner space, and it hadn't done anything.

"All Masks increase their wearers attributes significantly while worn, and usually grant a unique benefit," Shadow continued. "Though how it does that differs depending on Mask type. They can also not be worn for a long period of time as they are very draining, and they almost always have a very big drawback to their use."

"So, it basically gives you a boost?" I asked, then something occurred to me. "Wait, why didn't you use your Mask when we fought the sikiri?"

Shadow sighed. "I am in no state to bear the fatigue that comes with my Mask, nor, would we be able to... handle, the drawbacks of it. The sikiri was, as wrong as it seems to say, the lesser threat. Putting on my Mask would've meant certain death for us both."

I frowned. I wanted to ask more, but I also knew that it was a private thing, and I didn't want to push unnecessarily.

"Do you think that it's safe enough for me to see what it is?" I asked.

Shadow glanced around them, then nodded. "We should be safe until nightfall. Hopefully you will be well enough by then to move."

I tried to move my legs and felt stabbing pain shoot through me. Yeah, hopefully.

Without a delay, I focused on my chest, and pulled myself in.

My soul space manifested around me. The wooden room with empty shelves on three walls and pedestals in the center. Now, there was something new on the far wall. I started toward and was interrupted almost immediately.

"Statement: This Unit is pleased that the Host survived."

"Saia," I yelled, kneeling down and picking up the tiny dragon. "I wondered if you would be in here."

I was immensely relieved to see that she was fine. The dragon had grown on me, both literally and figuratively.

"Statement: This Unit is bonded with the Host," she said simply, as if that explained everything, and perhaps it did.

"I was a bit worried since I got pretty torn up from what I remember, and from what I can tell by how I feel," I said.

"Statement: The Host's injuries were severe, the [Repair] engram has been working beyond current peak capacity. The effectiveness has increased to 10.2%."

I smiled. "That's great, thanks for the help."

"Clarification: Of course, this Unit's survival depends on the survival of the Host."

"You do know that you can call me Mari, right? I think that we've been through enough together for that much."

Saia looked up at me for a long moment, and then responded. "Report: This Unit will oblige, Mari."

"Now," I turned my eyes toward the changes. "Let's see what's new."

I approached the center pillars where my Mask and Ornaments were displayed. The first thing I noticed was that my Mask was slightly different. The teeth were longer, more savage looking, the horns sharper, and the jade had spread somewhat over the black, obsidian-like, surface. The tiny etchings that I had seen had also cleared up, leaving the Mask feeling as if it was a smooth piece of art.

It seemed like the Carvings would be starting again from scratch with each Investment tier. Next, I also noticed that physical was added to the other two attributes next to my Mask name. From what Shadow had said, that meant that now I would be getting a slight increase to all of my attributes with each carving, instead of just two. The second big change was another plaque beneath the main one. I leaned down and read what was written.

|Potential Augmentation| trait

Wearing the Mask of the Blood Invoker grants a significant increase to all attributes. All cooldowns are greatly reduced, after the Mask is removed, all used skills are put on a long cooldown.

Slotting skills of the same type grants bonuses.

Current bonuses available:

Beast: Slotting in skills that all contain <beast> type increases their effectiveness and reduces cooldowns. All physical senses are heightened.

Movement: Slotting in skills that all contain <movement> type increases their effectiveness and reduces cooldowns. Air resistance of your body is reduced.

That was very interesting, though I didn't quite understand everything. I raised my head and looked over the pillar to the far wall. There were some changes there too. I walked over to what was now three pedestals. I approached the [Empty Skill] pedestals and took a closer look. Each of the pedestals now had two bowls instead of the usual one, and the second bowl on each pedestal was grey and inactive.

I glanced down and saw that there was an extra greyed out plaque on each one. Then I noticed another change on the skill plaque.

[Mist Step]

You may turn to mist and execute a step in mist form.

<beast> <weave> <survival> <movement>
<mist> !wind!

There were what appeared to be tags on the skill, written down on the bottom of the plaque. It was the only way that I could describe them. I glanced at the other skill I had slotted in and saw that it was the same.

[Lesser Strength]

Grants you a passive increase in strength.

<beast><physical>

That was very interesting. Though... [Mist Step] had a tag that was marked differently, !wind!. It clicked nearly instantly, I had used one of the gemstones on it to upgrade it. That had to have added that tag. That was something that I would need to talk with Shadow about.

I glanced at the last pedestal, but just saw that there were two empty bowls. I continued to the side of the wall where my other skills were and looked the new ones over. The first was a symbol of two arrows chasing each other in a circle. It was obvious which this skill was immediately.

[Swap Profile]

Instantly swap to the second set of preset skills.

<weave><esoteric>

I glanced back at the pedestals and the extra bowls on each pedestal. I had already figured out that it was something like that.

"Well, Saia," I started. "It seems like we have a lot more options now."

"Feedback: The intricacies of the Mask system and the designs of the Great Spell are remarkable. It rivals the greatest deeds of Ke Erzi."

I smiled at her but didn't comment. Pride in ones creator was understandable.

I took a look at the last new addition. It was a plate with an image of what appeared to be myself in the process of swinging a long stick.

[Practical Learning]

All learning through practical means is accelerated.

<learning> <physical> <esoteric>

That seemed like it could be very useful. Lastly, I walked over to the shelf and took a look at the skills that I had stored there. All of them had tags added now, and all of them were tagged as <beast>. Which, if I thought about it made sense. They came from animals in the first place. I looked over the skills available to me and found that I had only one more <movement> skill, the [Lesser Leap] skill, not enough to slot all three for that bonus. Though, I wondered if it would work if I slotted just two. Regardless, I wasn't about to experiment right now, not after the sikiri. I needed as many skills as I could get. Then I paused, as I remembered

something. When I woke up, I had felt a bit more... awake, for the lack of a better term. And by that I meant that more of my vampire side felt awake, and it was during the day. The Beast bonus did say that all physical senses were heightened. Perhaps it did work with only two.

It didn't matter in the end, my reasoning still held. Movement bonus was nice, but I still preferred more skills. I picked up [Debilitating Wave] to round up my three, then went for the last three skills to set up my second profile. Then something occurred to me.

I put the skills back on the shelf then walked into the hallway of doors, as I started to call it. I walked down the ones I had already entered and gotten a skill from, and found the new ones. There were a few, I had hunted a couple of bird-like animals over the weeks to sate my **thirst** and to gather blood to have on hand.

While I was debating going in to get new skills, I noticed the last door. It was made out of red stone shaped like a snake twisting around the door frame, with a wooden door etched with an image of the sikiri. Just looking at it made me feel anxious. I was definitely not entering that place, I had barely survived with Shadow and all the prep we did. I stood no chance on my own. There were three doors that I had no intention of opening anytime soon, the sikiri's, the reaper's, and that of the mature ferrorn's. I knew the advantages that being a vampire gave me, but I also understood how lucky I was to have survived all three of those encounters. If Shadow wasn't there, I would've died a long time ago.

I shook my head, then turned my attention to the three doors occupied by bird-like animals. I glanced at Saia and raised my eyebrow.

"You up for some hunting?" I asked, and she shifted into a weapon.

Together, we made quick work of the animals inside. Not like they were any challenge, at all. One of the doors had belonged to another of

the cresser birds, which did give me an answer to the question I had since all this insanity started. My doors weren't race specific, but rather source specific. I could have duplicates of the same race, as long as I drank the blood from a different source.

The three skills I gained were nothing special, as I had expected, the animals had been barely in their First Investment.

The first, and the most useless one was [Peck], which allowed me to "peck" something with my beak, which I didn't have. The last two were a bit better.

[Quick Claw]

Execute a quick attack with your claws.

<beast> <physical> <offense>

[Sharp Eye]

Focus on a faraway target.

<beast> <physical> <esoteric>

I wasn't quite sure what the difference was between using a skill and just executing an attack on your own without it. Though, that was something to discuss with Shadow. Either way, I now had seven skills on my shelf, and six eligible for use. I've already decided to use [Debilitating Wave] in my main profile, so that left five for the other three skill slots.

After some debate between me and Saia, we settled on [Sonic Screech], [Lesser Impale], and [Quick Claw]. All three were offensive in nature, and I felt like we needed that. And there was still a lot to test out, I had no idea how the switch worked.

I walked back to the pedestals and slotted the four skills in. The three in the secondary bowls were inactive, looking the same as they did when placed on the shelves, which I had expected. They would probably activate once I used [Swap Profile].

With all of that done, I turned to look at Saia.

"So," I started. "How do I get you biomass to create a new drone?"

"Feedback: This Unit currently has a swarm spread throughout the Host body, making repairs to broken biosystems."

I nodded. "Right," because all of that made complete sense to me. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath because I realized that I wasn't even joking. "And that answers my question how?"

"Feedback: The best manner of providing biomass would be through ingestion."

I blinked, then narrowed my eyes. "You mean you want me to eat it."

"Feedback: Yes," then after a moment she added. "Mari."

I closed my eyes. Of course it did.

* * *

"That is an amazing trait," Shadow said as we walked through the jungle.

The night had fallen, and we had started on our journey again. After I had tried to eat pieces of the sikiri. It didn't go well. I had nearly chipped a fang. I've only managed to drink its blood from the wounds that Shadow had caused. Though, I also doubted that Saia would even be able to consume sikiri's biomass. She wasn't able to do it to the reaper's remains.

I was going to need to find some weaker prey.

"You think so?" I asked through gritted teeth as we walked. Our pace was abysmal, neither one of us could move at anything like our usual pace.

Also, the Beast bonus did work, as I had found out when the night fell and my already heightened senses got even more so. It turned out that having your sense of touch be more sensitive when you were injured wasn't a good time. I was having to suppress a wince with every step, partly because I felt so raw I could barely force my muscles to move, and partly because I could hear my bones groaning in my eardrums with each step.

"Some Masks get special skills that they can only use when their Mask is worn, others improve their existing skills. Being able to use your skills faster is very good. Though you will need to test out just how long this "long cooldown" actually is."

I grimaced and resisted the urge to curse. I would've liked to test it all out now, but I also couldn't afford for us to be caught with me not having access to skills.

"Yeah," I said instead. "How long have we been walking again?"

Shadow glanced up at the moons shining above us. "It is not even the middle of the night."

This time I did curse. Shadow chuckled but didn't comment. Rest would be a long time coming, I gritted my teeth and kept going. There wasn't much else to do.