

“Get rid of it?” Cayden scoffed.

“Not permanently,” Elise hurried to respond. “Just remove it from your active skills with [Save Progress]. To make it temporarily inactive.”

“...why?” Cayden said with a frown.

With him learning [Dual-Speak] while his throat was healing, he’d already done more swapping of his [Borrowed Power] skills than he’d wanted to, and using [Save Progress] on [Immutable] would force him to start over on another of those skills. Granted, it wasn’t the worst thing in the world, but it was annoying and would cloud his and Elise’s tests of how [Borrowed Power] leveled.

Plus, losing [Immutable], even temporarily, would leave him...vulnerable.

He didn’t think he was in any serious danger at the moment, secluded in his dorm in the middle of the academy. Despite the official semester at the academy having concluded and most of the students returning to their homes, more students than usual chose to remain at the academy during the off-season for the safety it provided. The academy was famously neutral when it came to the kingdom’s politics, protected grounds against any chaos that might embroil the lands around it, and many nobles had decided to safeguard their children within its walls.

It wasn’t that there was necessarily too much chaos currently embroiling the kingdom. Despite the deaths of the former king, queen, and crown prince, there had been no official statement from the government aside from the coronation of the new Queen Evelyn, Princess Valeria’s older sister. But attempted coups like the one from Duke Vass weren’t typically responded to with leniency and forgiveness, neither side willing to simply ‘let bygones be bygones.’ So, much of the nobility was nervous, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And Cayden had been instrumental in the coup’s failure. Of course, he’d ended up on the winning side, and his level of involvement wasn’t publicly known, but that didn’t stop him from worrying about knives in the dark. What if a loyal subject of the duke was looking to extract some vengeance before fleeing? What if Princess Valeria wanted to claim credit for the duke’s defeat, and needed to eliminate Cayden as a potential loose end? Or, as Henrietta had hinted, what if the new queen had secretly been part of the coup, and was less than pleased with Duke Vass’ death?

Not all of those were as likely as the others. He’d already chosen to trust Valeria when agreeing to work for her in exchange for Tiana’s freedom, and on that she’d delivered. But that didn’t change the fact that he was currently in the center of an extremely complicated, extremely volatile political situation, and being at less than his best – especially when he was already vulnerable without his eyesight – was something he wanted to avoid.

So Elise would need to provide a good reason for him to agree to her request.

"I think it's messing with your head. The skill makes you 'less affected by external forces' and specifically mentions your mind as something it affects. Can't you see how that might be an issue?"

Cayden shook his head dismissively. "We already talked about this. If you can point to an example – to some behavior of mine that looks different – I'll consider it. But I don't *feel* any different, and being mentally 'less affected' doesn't seem like a bad thing. That's basically the same as [Mental Resistance], and you had no issues with that skill."

"That's different!" Elise exclaimed, and there was a pause as Cayden heard her take a deep breath. "...do you trust me?"

"Of course," Cayden instantly replied. That was one thing that was never in question. But his trust didn't mean she was always correct.

"Well, I need you to trust me right now. Can you focus on trusting me, rather than on anything else? Not for too long. Just a few seconds, [Save Progress] and then lose [Immutable]. If I'm wrong, you can get the skill right back. Just...*trust me*. Please."

She was making it difficult to refuse, yet still Cayden hesitated. It all felt so...unnecessary. A waste of time and effort. Elise was usually all about efficiency...

"I agree with Elise," he heard Tiana chime in, and he sighed. With Tiana and Elise both united against him, the outcome was inevitable.

It pained him, but with a few moments of focus he was able to [Save Progress] on [Immutable], losing the level three [Spear Mastery]. As Elise had suggested, he focused on his trust in her as he went through the process. Which helped, for some reason.

Save Progress (active) (lvl 4): User can store the progress of 1 other skill before losing it, allowing that skill to be re-acquired at its previous level. Minimal mana cost.

And then, with a thought, he lost [Immutable]. And despite remaining blind, he felt as if the world *jumped* into focus.

He was lucky the couch was behind him, because he fell backwards into its soft embrace as he gasped for breath. In seconds, Elise and Tiana were at his sides, each holding one of his arms as his claws clenched inside of their sheaths.

It wasn't that he felt completely different. There were no significant changes to his personality, no overwhelming red flags that something *external* had been controlling him. He was still *him*, both with and without the tier-three skill.

But now that he didn't have [Immutable], he realized some of the things that he'd been ignoring. Things that *should* have had more of an effect on his emotions...but hadn't.

"I'm fine," he managed to get out, even as his mind was awirl with processing everything that had occurred over the last week.

He'd lost his eyes. He was blind, and Tiana's teasing of his handicap was suddenly much harder to ignore. Sure, he'd previously lost and then regrown an arm, so he supposed losing his eyes shouldn't have been *that* big of a deal, but for some reason it felt so much more significant than just losing an arm. With one arm Cayden still felt like essentially the same person, able to do everything that he could previously, just at a lessened capacity. But after losing his eyesight, he'd needed help even to use the bathroom while he was recovering, the not-quite-suppressed memories making him blush in his seat. Luckily – or perhaps not *luckily* – those memories were quickly brushed aside by more important ones.

A girl had *died*.

Em, he remembered. A fellow student and teammate of Princess Valeria, killed by the duke when Cayden exacted his revenge for his parents' murders. He'd barely known the girl, hadn't exchanged more than a handful of words during their time as students...but she was just a kid, no more than seventeen. And now she was dead.

It wasn't his fault, he knew. It was likely that the duke would have killed her regardless in his coup. But that didn't change that she was now dead, killed while trying to help Cayden kill the duke.

Which was something else that had happened. Cayden had killed a man.

Even without [Immutable's] influence, Cayden couldn't find it in himself to regret that. Through his creation and administration of the fateweaver compound, Duke Vass was responsible for Cayden's parents' deaths and Tiana's imprisonment, and he deserved everything he got and more. Yet still, killing another person...

Cayden felt it should affect him more than the simple 'nothing' he had felt while under the effects of [Immutable].

One by one, Cayden reviewed his memories of everything that had transpired since waking up a week prior, letting himself feel the full impact of each. Trying to allow himself to be affected as if he hadn't been [Immutable].

It wasn't as easy as he had hoped.

Despite it only being a week, that was long enough to dull the sharp edges of most of the memories. And it wasn't like he was able to re-experience the memories for the first time. It was still him who had experienced everything the first time; everything he'd done – the way he'd acted, the words he'd said, the thoughts he'd had – was a way he legitimately might have responded to what happened. It wasn't like [Immutable] changed who he was. In fact, it was probably closer to the opposite, he realized.

He was fully 'himself' under [Immutable], and anything external would have to work much harder to change that. His baseline state was, in a word, more *powerful* when [Immutable] was active. Resistant to change.

But that wasn't how people were supposed to be.

People were *supposed* to change. People were *supposed* to be affected by the words and actions of those around them. And despite [Immutable] not truly being a mind-control skill or changing him in the way he was so scared of from other mind-control skills, its effect was just as insidious.

Luckily, he had only been under that effect for a week. And Elise and Tiana were giving him the time to fully process everything that had happened. In this instance, at least, Cayden thought his lack of eyesight might have been a boon – it seemed easier to parse his memories without his sight cluttering everything up.

Tiana's freedom from the fateweaver compound had left him appropriately happy. That gave him some consolation about the skill – a strong enough emotion could still affect him, it was just much more difficult than it otherwise would have been. And even afterward it might not *keep* affecting him how it should.

Delphia was a good example. She'd saved his life, had sacrificed her own health to keep him from passing over the brink. Even with the skilled academy healers, she'd taken longer to awaken than Cayden – and Cayden had repaid her with no more than a single 'thanks.' The very same day she'd awoken, she'd been summoned by her father back to her family's barony. And Cayden had scarcely given her more than a single thought since.

One of his only friends had disappeared with no more than a subdued and hurried goodbye, and he hadn't even *cared*.

"...I don't think I like this skill," he mumbled, and he felt Tiana and Elise relax on either side of him. His rehashing of his recent memories left his voice feeling raw in his throat, but the emotions were a relief. He knew he still needed to revisit everything that had happened, that his quick parsing over the last few minutes wasn't sufficient to feel the full emotional weight of

everything that had transpired. But for now, it was enough, and he was able to give his attention back to the two girls waiting for him.

“It was affecting you, then?” Elise asked.

Cayden nodded before pausing. “More like *not* affecting me. Or keeping other things from affecting me. Definitely messing with my head, though – thanks for persuading me to give it up.” He could hear the familiar scratching of Elise’s pen against her soul-notebook, and he sighed. “It’s kinda a shame, though. I was looking forward to figuring out everything that it could do.”

“Whoa, are you planning on giving it up? Completely? Just like that?” Tiana asked.

“Well, yeah. Of course. It was messing with my *head*,” Cayden reiterated. “That’s not something I want to play around with, no matter how powerful a skill it might be. It’s a pity, though. It seems like it might otherwise work well with my build if we could figure out its quirks, and we worked so hard to get a tier-three skill.”

“...would you be willing to do some testing, first?” Elise asked.

Cayden frowned. “Aren’t you worried I might not give it up next time? I wasn’t exactly easy to convince this time. And I’m not entirely comfortable messing around with a skill that tries to lock me into keeping it.”

“Correct me if you think I’m wrong – you obviously have more experience with the skill than I do – but from what you’ve described, you might actually *struggle* to keep the skill long-term if you were to reacquire it from [Save Progress].”

“...explain.”

“Well, you said the skill keeps other things from affecting you, right?” Elise asked, and Cayden nodded. “Which lines up with its description. But your ‘base state’ has to come from somewhere. I’d assume it’s from your original state prior to accepting the skill. When you first got the skill, you saw it as a defensive tier-three skill, something extremely powerful and useful at a point when you were feeling vulnerable and weak, something you’d never want to give up. But now that you view the skill as dangerous and potentially harmful...”

“I’d be much easier to convince to give it up,” Cayden finished, finally understanding what his friend was implying.

“More than that. I’d be willing to bet that we’d have to work hard to convince you *not* to give it up the first chance you get. Your impression of the skill will match your current negative impression, and we’d struggle to change that impression.”

“That...makes sense,” Cayden conceded. “And that would make it much less dangerous to mess around with for short periods. But still, it’s not like I’ll be keeping the skill in the long term, so what’s the point?”

“It’s not every day I get the chance to test a tier-three skill,” Elise dryly responded, and Cayden chuckled. He supposed he should have expected that from his curiously-minded friend. “And it’s so much more vague compared to [Resistance]. It makes you ‘less affected by all external forces.’ How much is ‘less’? And does ‘all’ truly mean *all*? Because that could lead to some *really* interesting effects. Even if you abandon the skill and we never see it again, this is a good chance to see how the effects of constituent skills might combine into a greater whole.”

Cayden gave a sigh before nodding. He still wasn’t enthused about being back under the effects of the skill so soon after escaping it, but Elise made good points. And he was fairly sure it would work like Elise had theorized, that [Saving Progress] on the skill a second time would be much easier now that he had a better understanding of the skill’s effects.

Worst-case scenario, he still trusted Elise, and she should be able to use that to again persuade him to abandon the skill after their testing.

“...and if we’re lucky, we might be able to figure out a way for you to keep it long-term,” Elise added, and Cayden started.

“Wait, what? How?”

“Oh?” Tiana said, and there must have been some non-verbal communication between her and Elise, because a moment later she continued. “Oh! Yeah! That...huh, that might work...”

“What are you two talking about?” Cayden asked, annoyed with his inability to see his friend and sister.

“...what if we had a skill that could counter [Immutable’s] negative effects?” Elise proposed, and Cayden could *hear* the excited grin in her voice.