

CHAPTER 131: ESSENCE OF THE END

Balanced as he was between utter destruction and salvation, Sam let out a roar of denial and let go of the created [Voidshard Blade].

Severing the Void would not only change everything, but it would stop him from being able to guide it in any way. Perhaps that was selfish, or egotistical, but this fight showed him that he had some connection to both the Void and the Shadrune of Il'dran.

Maybe he wasn't the savior or watcher of the Shards or some such nonsense. But at this point, he had stood between the darkness of nothingness itself, the essence of the end of all things, and he had denied it from going any further.

That had to count for something.

He feared what would happen if he threw it all away. Sure, a more normal life might be his to have, but who wanted normal? This was his home now, and he would defend it to the death.

The silvery light filled him and mixed with the Heart of the Void. The dark pulses of purple-black mana rolled into him.

For a brief moment he wondered if he had made a mistake in not severing the connection as caustic pain assaulted his every nerve. The purple-black mana surged through his body like wildfire.

Sam screamed into the nothingness ahead of him. The sounds were swallowed too soon, but they did not come crashing back.

He had no idea how long he writhed in agony, but when it was over, there were notifications awaiting him. *A lot* of notifications.

Rank Up!

Your [Void] Path has reached Copper Rank.

You now receive the following per level:

+2 Insight Talents | +1 Strength Talent

+2 Arcane Talents | +1 Vigor Talent

+1 Control Talent

For defeating a Scion of the Void, you gain the following:

Void Essences Unlocked!

[Essence of Escha]

+25 Bonus Points

**Your Void Mana Attunement (F-Class Apocalypse Gate) has reached
(★★★★ Legendary V).**

Your Void Mana Affinity has reached (★☆☆ Uncommon).

Your [Void] Path has reached Level 20.

+2 Insight Talents | +1 Strength Talent

+2 Arcane Talents | +1 Vigor Talent

+1 Control Talent

Your [Void] Path has reached Level 21.

+2 Insight Talents | +1 Strength Talent

+2 Arcane Talents | +1 Vigor Talent

+1 Control Talent

Level Up!

Your [Voidknight] Legend has reached Level 15.

+2 to all Stats

+1 to all Talents

Your [Void] Path has reached Level 22.

+2 Insight Talents | +1 Strength Talent

+2 Arcane Talents | +1 Vigor Talent

+1 Control Talent

Sam stared and reread the notifications again, just in case he had missed something.

So, I didn't get the bonus from reaching Copper again. Must be a onetime thing then, which makes sense if there's a scaling bonus for getting all of your pillars of progression lined up so they all Ascend at the same time.

Those 25 bonus points appeared to be from defeating the Scion of the Void, not hitting Copper Rank in his Path.

Sam didn't know how he was going even out all three pillars of progression, but at least getting a whopping 3 Void Path levels would go a *longway* toward making that a reality. Already he was only 2 levels behind his Swordsman Job.

Just means that once I get a Profession — if any of the professors are alive — that I'll need to spend a crazy amount of time just pumping my Profession up full of Experience so they're all at the same level.

Keeping them in lockstep wasn't going to be easy. Killing and fighting things seemed to give a lot more Experience than training or sparring, likely due to the inherent risk involved.

It seemed putting his life on the line paid out in Experience, not just for him but anyone else in the party fighting too.

While he didn't get the extra points from rising to Copper, he *did* get nearly an equivalent amount of stats from killing the Void Golem, which the Shard called a "Void Scion".

It was hardly an easy fight, and one he could have quickly lost if he hadn't caught on to what was right behind him the entire time. Still, it had required *asking* for help and looking for it rather than trying to rely on his own strength.

Maybe that was the Shard trying to give him a heavy-handed hint.

Before Sam allotted his bonus points, he looked closer at the Void Essences unlocked. It just seemed to be one for now, but it wasn't as if he had ever expected anything more to come from his Void Path.

[Essence of Escha]

(Void Essence)

By tapping deeper into the Heart of the Void, you've gained [Essence of Escha]. Many believe Escha to be the end of all things, both living and dead, real and unreal. And at such a time as the Eschaton occurs, all things are remade. But the Void is eternal, and it has imparted a portion of its designs of death itself to you. [Essence of Escha] changes all of your Void Arts into Escha variants. You may only have one Essence active at any time. The strength of your Essence is dependent upon your Void Path's level, Rank, as well as your Void Attunement and Affinity.

Just as Sam was about to try it out, he felt a tug just behind his navel and, strangely enough, tasted blue raspberry.

"What the fu—?"

The last words were ripped from his mouth and lost to the ether as he was pulled through a portal, a tunnel of scintillating light.

He bounced from one side to the other, adding bruises to his already battered body. He still sported the Void wounds he had received from the Scion, and they made themselves known as he was shunted back to reality in the depths of the undercroft.

Slamming into the dusty, rubble-strewn floor, Sam groaned and just lay there for a while.

He let the pain wash over him and slowly abate, though the largest wound on his chest was protesting quite loudly that he stop grinding mortar dust and shards of stone into it with every breath.

“Sam!” Raiko shouted. “...Sam?”

The sound of many pairs of feet suddenly stopping and then shuffling reminded Sam, rather belatedly, that he was entirely naked still.

He really couldn't have cared less at that point. It felt good just to be alive and in something approaching normal reality.

Even if he was mooning everybody and they were surrounded by vicious monsters that had, in all probability, been alerted to their presence by the blasphemous [Ridewords].

Sam only hoped that the things would flee rather than act as some sort of early warning system for whatever had killed those people up in the storeroom.

“You're a bit... naked,” Matt put in. “Just so you know.”

“Did they steal your armor?” Kai asked.

Lenal squeaked.

“Did *you* steal his armor?” Raiko demanded threateningly, presumably of Lenal. She knelt by Sam's side.

Whimpering, Komachi scampered over the top of Chompers and began to sing in her tiny kittenish voice. [Regen Paeon] swirled around all of them.

Tiny dancing magical musical notes drifted about in the air like fireflies in the dark.

Sam could feel some of his wounds closing, but those dealt by the Scion were stubborn. He could feel them fighting against the healing, and he wondered what he should do about them.

For the first time, Sam was growing concerned about not being able to heal away the damage. So far, he'd had no lasting issues with any wound. Magic was a cure—all up to this point, so what was different?

The blade of Void mana it used, Sam thought to himself, still getting his bearings.

Kai knelt down beside him and cast [Cure] on him, the sparkling motes of green light pushed back against the stubborn Void wounds, but it would not heal them entirely.

The golden light of [Glyph: Refresh] emblazoned upon Komachi's floppy hat. It gave him something to focus on. It looked a lot like a magical buckle.

The restorative force of [Regen Paeon] doubled up, the stacks building.

“It's not enough!” Komachi wailed.

Sam slowly got to his hands and knees, then stood as he reached into his Inventory and, thankfully, found his Thanas armor. He was too far gone to give a damn that anybody could see him, even in the sparsely lit gloom.

Raiko rose, moving between Sam and the rest of the party, with the exclusion of his cat. Though her face was beet red, he was grateful that she wasn't looking down.

Not caring wasn't the same as being cool with being ogled.

Sam donned his equipment once again, somewhat appreciative that the Void hadn't brought his armor too. The damage he took would have likely shattered the breastplate and the gauntlets as well.

Playing the fight over in his mind, Sam realized just how close he had come to death. The Void Golem gained strength not just with each clash of their blades, but for every second it was alive.

Waiting and planning had never been a valid option, and he was never going to defeat it in a head-on struggle without finding some way to gain greater power.

Is this what every new Rank for my Path is going to be like? Sam thought to himself.

He looked at his 27 total bonus points and couldn't exactly be *upset* about the matter, but he didn't expect to nearly die, either. And worse, Ascending to Copper in his Path didn't seem to heal him at all.

"What happened to you?" Raiko asked, deeply worried. "You don't look the same. No flying book could have done this."

Komachi whimpered, too stressed to speak. She knew how close to death Sam had been from [Wound Sense].

Sam gathered up Komachi and tucked her into his arms with her paws up in the air. "I'm okay now, Komachi." He looked up at Raiko. "Apparently when my Path hit Copper, I had... some extracurricular activities to complete before I could fully Ascend. It was decidedly unpleasant."

“Mysterious.” Raiko frowned, looking him over. With considerable care, she checked various parts of his armor, and fitted his loose gauntlet into place. “So, you fought something to Rank up your Path. And won, within an inch of your life. You must be even stronger for your brush with death. At least, after rest.”

“He’s not a Saiyan, Raiko,” Matt told her with a snort.

Raiko gave him a curious look.

“He’s better than a Saiyan!” Komachi declared proudly.

“He disappeared!” Lenal wailed. “I saw him there one moment, then he was just... gone! How?”

“Calm down,” Sam said gently. “I don’t think anybody expected that to happen, least of all me.”

Lenal shivered. “You were as cold as a corpse when you came through, Sam. Are we all going to have to go through some sort of horrid solo trial when our Path hits Copper?” She didn’t look happy about it, and who could blame her. Ascending was supposed to be positive, not a free-for-all brawl to the death.

“No,” Raiko said forcefully. “Your Path, whatever it may be, will not be as full of strife as Sam’s. You study and investigate. The Path you take will likely echo that.”

“He’s just lucky,” Matt said.

“Is there an alcove,” Raiko asked Lenal. “Somewhere that we can hastily fortify to rest?”

Lenal motioned all around. There were vaulted ceilings in all directions and pillars aplenty. “We could go back through the collapse and guard it. I don’t think anything is coming down through the storeroom after us or it would have already.”

“I vote we take a break so I can eat some poison and recover a bit. My legs are not supposed to look like jerky strips. This isn’t Dark Souls.”

“It’s not what?” Lenal asked, bemused.

The undercroft rumbled ominously. “I wish you had consulted me,” Kai said, turning to the hole he had held open with root and vine.

All creations of mana that are not actively channeled fade over time if they are not protected in some way, and Kai’s roots and vines were no exception.

Those vines just weren’t the same as the work Kai did back in their settlement.

They collapsed into shimmering motes of Nature mana and the heavy load they were supporting caved in, cutting off their retreat and any sense of safety.

Matt sagged against a pillar. “Cool, cool, cool. Very cool.”