

Tutorial 131

Chapter 131: Lily Chen

I'm not going to lie. I think I am amazing, like really, really amazing. And I think that's even underselling it a bit.

The reason?

The spear made of my mana that I just gave Lily. It's dark blue with wisps of light blue mana inside of it. I didn't push that much while creating it, so there isn't a chance that it would untangle and hurt Lily.

Instead, the weapon is just slowly dissipating. If I'm right, it should be able to hold strong for 15 minutes, and after that, it will become much weaker. Then, in five more minutes, it will disappear.

I used a lot of my mana to create it, yet it will only last that long. I could probably increase the duration by infusing more mana, but hey, I don't want to kill off our healer. That would be dumb.

Yet, I think I can say with confidence that for these 15 minutes, it is at least as strong as the common weapons I saw here on the third floor and through the rewards for the side quest.

Oh, and I am also dumb. Like really dumb.

I realize it only after I gave the massive spear to Lily, and she awkwardly grabs it into her one hand, barely able to balance it properly. Her eyes turn to look back at me, and I can see that she is trying hard not to laugh.

Still, she makes fun of me by waving the stump of her left arm in front of me. The arm has regrown slightly under the elbow.

Dang it.

"Sorry," I say, and my voice sounds weak even to myself as I grab the spear out of her hand and make it shorter and thinner. Even though it's made of mana, it has some weight to it.

"Don't worry about it!" she giggles. "It's kind of fun to see you so speechless. You should see your eyes when you came to realize it." The petite brunette covers her mouth as she continues to smile.

When I hand her the new spear, she grabs it and tries to swing it around, nearly cutting me before I step back to observe from a safe distance.

It seems much better now. Yes, her handling of it is terrible, but it will improve with time.

She then hands me the spear back after examining it for a bit. "It's nice. I can feel how much skill it takes to create it!"

Oh, a compliment! Finally, someone appreciates my talents. Feel free to praise me a bit more. But why are you giving it back to me?

"Oh, you wanted me to fight with it," she declares as she comes to the realization, and a big smile blossoms on her face. "Thank you, but I won't need it! Let me show you how I fight!"

So, how does a petite, innocent-looking girl fight? The person who has healing powers and is nice enough to sacrifice their own arm for some maniac she just met?

You would think from a distance, right? Keeping herself safe so she can heal others. Maybe using a bow? Having skills to increase the abilities of others?

Nope. Lily fights up close and personal.

I watch as the last surviving Rottenfang vermin I left alive jumps against her, and she just stands there. The moment it reaches her, Lily punches it with her tiny fist. A flash of grayish mana appears on her fist and eats a good chunk out of the monster's body where she punched it.

The vermin doesn't feel the pain, so it attacks again, only for the girl to nimbly move away. Her stats aren't that high, so there is a lot of predicting the monster's trajectory on her part, and she punches the monster again as it passes by. Again, a chunk of the monster's body disappears.

When it attacks again, Lily doesn't dodge, and the monster bites at her. I'm about to kill it before it does, but her eyes turn to me for a second, making me stop.

So, I do not move, and when the vermin bites into her arm, she nods at me thankfully for not stepping in. Then the monster's head explodes in a flash of gray mana, half of its head destroyed by her skill and it falls down, unmoving.

Lily then kicks it one more time, making sure it's dead before happily moving towards me. As she does so, I can see warm white wisps of mana around the wound on her hand that heal her quickly enough for me to see her wound closing and soon disappearing without any trace.

She then stops in front of me, shy yet proud as she looks at me, "What do you think?"

What do I think about this innocent-looking brunette with a cute small face and a tiny nose punching giant decaying rats, even letting them bite a chunk of her so she can kill them?

"Lily, you are so goddamn cool."

As I said, and I'll be repeating it up until my last breath. No one from the bus passengers of Group 4 is normal. I'll practice, and I'll even create a construct that will activate when I die and will make me move one last time and make say that no one from Group 4 is normal.

Not a single person, not a single corgi.

"I much prefer healing. It feels better, and I'm more useful that way. But I know that I have to level up too. But Nat, you should have seen Kim's face the first time he saw me fight," she giggles deviously, her eyes glowing as she remembers it, "He totally did not expect it, and neither did you! I saw you wanted to help me at first," her expression changes as she moves bangs of her forehead, "But I'm glad you didn't. Kim wasn't able to and kept trying to help me. It felt like he is looking down at me."

It's a bit later, and after a few more fights, as we sit there and she is healing her freshly wounded right arm, I also watch as the wounds slowly disappear, and even her missing piece of a pinkie finger is restoring.

"I'm stronger now than I was on the first floor," her eyes seem distant as she says so. "So I won't be a burden, and I'll learn to control all my skills, not only healing." A small wisp of gray mana, her skill [Disintegration], appears around her hand, only to slowly disappear as she clenches her fist and stands up, "I want you to let me try to fight an Alghoul this time," she is serious as she says so.

I'm sure it will hurt, hell, it might even come close to killing her. From some point of view, it might seem like a bad decision, but from mine, it seems seems... reasonable.

People that are nice to me should be able to live their life as they want, to change the way they want.

"Sure," I say simply. I'm sure she has thought about this a lot, judging from the look in her eyes. She already saw me fighting two Alghouls after her first fight against the rat so she knows what to expect.

Ten minutes later, I watch her stand against one of the lower-leveled Alghouls. It continuously attacks her, much faster and stronger than her. Yet, the girl has surprisingly high constitution, probably even boosted by some skill. Even as she is thrown around, she gets back on her feet, and white mana appear on her wounds, closing them with a speed that is possible to watch with eyes.

She does not scream, she does not ask for help, and she only glances towards me a few times, as if wanting to stop me from interfering.

But I just stand there and watch while she is getting hurt.

At first, it seems to surprise her, but later it only look of determination appears on her face as she continues to try to hit the monster with her skills. She has already succeeded a few times, and gray mana has torn off a few pieces of the monster and cut off one of its arms in exchange for multiple wounds on her body.

The interesting thing is that when the monster activates its green flames to heal its wounds, they do nothing. Lily's skill damage doesn't allow the monster to heal.

So the fight continues, and Lily gets thrown around a lot. The monster even tries to tear off her limbs a few times, always quickly followed by the girl's gray mana appearing and stopping it from happening.

What surprises me the most is how fierce she is. She wasn't like this back on the first floor. Or maybe she was, and I just didn't see it? Did she change because of her skill misfiring and killing Kevin? Did something happen on the second floor?

I do not know.

Finally, after what feels like ten minutes, the monster dies, unable to deal more damage to her truly sturdy body and unable to overpower her healing. Lily's [Disintegration] isn't as strong right now, but it's easy to see how powerful it might become in the future.

As I stand there, watching, she slowly comes to me, her wounds still healing, and white mana makes it look as if there is smoke leaking from her wounds. She is moving slowly, tired, but she is smiling happily as she stops in front of me, tired and wounded. Bloodied.

"Thank you for trusting me."

She then passes out, and I grab her before she falls to the ground.

Silly girl.

Chapter 132: Level 100

I am the most normal here. Yup, totally. Fight me if you disagree. Lily, my last hope, the only person who seemed somewhat normal, showed me the middle finger, wrecked my thoughts and stepped on that last hope, kicking it away.

My last hope is dead, and I'm the only normal here.

Okay?

Okay.

Anyway, it's kind of fun watching Tess struggle as we try to hunt down one of the sparrows, and the said sparrow continues to dodge all of her attacks, no matter how quick they are.

Could I try to replicate the traps and maybe create a few more to hunt the sparrow? Yup, I could try that, and that's exactly what I did, but I gave up after a few minutes. Left without any result, and my head hurting just from looking at the intricate structures etched into the small metal disk.

I tried to remember as much as I could and I'll continue to observe it a bit more as it might be useful for the future, but there is no way in hell I'll be able to replicate it anytime soon.

So here we are, two hunters stalking our prey and getting our psyches hurt more and more with every failed attempt to hunt them.

So I do what a normal person would do. A javelin hovers over my shoulder, as long as me, and filled with tricolored mana, threatening to explode any second if I lose control over it. It's slim, it's sharp and beautiful. And best of all, it's dangerous.

Sparrow Obliterator 3000.

"Do you want to hunt it or evaporate it?" Tess says snarkily, but I can tell that it's her annoyance after an unsuccessful hunt talking.

At this point, it's way too late to hold back Tess! The sparrow looked deep into my eyes, examined them, and chuckled in my face. Bambi, sparrows, goddamn were-something monsters on each floor. They all exist just to piss me off. So just for this once, I'll vent a bit!

I breathe out and [Focus], and the javelin over my shoulder starts rotating, similar to the way a bullet would after leaving a gun barrel. I spin it faster and faster until it's just a blurred mess of tricolored mana, and I hear ringing in my ears from how hard I'm trying.

Then my heart beats, and I wait.

Two heartbeats.

I wait.

Three heartbeats.

Need more.

Seven heartbeats.

A bit more.

Ten heartbeats.

Good!

I push against the javelin with all the force I can muster and even use a surge to give it even more before it leaves my range.

The javelin flies faster than ever before, a high-pitched noise sounding in the surroundings as it pierces the air, and in a split second, it reaches the sparrow, totally obliterates it in an explosion of feathers, and then continues to pierce houses in its way.

And it just goes and goes on, and even a few seconds later, I can still hear it crashing through the houses until a few moments later we see and feel an explosion far in the distance.

We then rush towards the place where the sparrow was and find only tiny pieces of feathers that weren't obliterated by the javelin. There is not a single piece of meat, not a single bone to bring back to the doggo. The javelin... the Sparrow Obliterator 3000 did exactly what it was made for.

Huge success!

Even the looks Tess is giving can't diminish my happiness. She'd better not think I didn't notice that tiny satisfied smirk on her face as she glanced at what is left of our worst enemy.

We did a bit more while hunting. I was able to gain two more levels, and Tess leveled up too. Unfortunately, we weren't able to hunt any sparrows no matter how much we tried. Not a single trap worked. Sneaking didn't help at all, and they even noticed the tiniest threads of mana that I tried to create.

That's when we decided to leave the sparrows to the natives and their traps while asking them to tell us more about the mice they mentioned before, another source of their food.

So here we are, in the sewage part of the city. Fortunately, it's been long unused, and only monsters crawl around, so that's something, right?

It's nicely built to the point where it surprised me how much work the builders of this city did, even while hastily building the last livable city on the planet. The sewage tunnels are made out of gray and red bricks, and in the middle of them, there is a canal with walkways on both sides. On the roof, there is a weird moss growing that emits a soft greenish-yellowish light, illuminating the tunnels.

This time, Lily is joining us as I wanted her to level up a bit more, so I and Tess only fight when a stronger monster appears, leaving everything else to Lily while providing moral support.

I'm missing one level to reach level one hundred, and one level to reach level thirty in [Armament]. So I'm not getting that much from weaker monsters, but in a group of three, the stronger ones could appear while I also help Lily to level.

It's a win-win for everyone other than the Rottenfang vermin that Lily continues to delete from the face of this world. I continue to observe her skill, maybe in hopes that I would be able to learn it, but nope. Nothing. I can barely feel its effects. It's as if the skill is even disintegrating the mana I use to perceive its effects.

It's a truly dangerous one, and the brunette is learning to control it more and more, getting advice from me and Tess as well. She also continues to restore her arm, and she is already up to the wrist, forming a hand.

She giggles as she says she is really trying to make it stronger and thinks that she succeeded in making her own muscles firmer.

I don't know how much it will show when there are people with plenty of strength stats and yet their muscles look the same as before, but it's a really interesting test, and I'm curious about the result.

As we walk and Lily fights the monster, me and Tess have a little disagreement.

"Nope, I don't think we will get a subclass anytime soon. The earliest is when we enter the fourth floor." I say.

"The system likes rounded numbers. It might unlock at level one hundred. Both you and I got the side quest to get 3 skills to level thirty and reach level hundred for a skill upgrade. We both agree that this skill upgrade token will be able to upgrade an already upgraded skill."

"That's true."

"So I think there are some requirements the system has for you to unlock a subclass. I think one of them is having a twice-upgraded skill and level one hundred." Tess says.

"I agree with that. But as I said, the system is an asshole. It might give you better side quests after you finish this one, but the subclass will be unlocked either on the fourth or fifth floor. That's just how it rolls."

Lightning crackles from her hand, and the chameleon bat sneaking up on us falls down, dead and burned, while she continues as if nothing happened. "I still think the new side quest will be to fulfill more requirements, and the reward will be a subclass."

Poor naive Tess, you don't know the ways of the system! "Nope, some sort of upgrade token at best, or maybe rare gear? But I don't think that will happen. There is already a reward of rare gear for the floor quest, so the system wouldn't give it away in a side quest..."

I'm interrupted by Lily coming back, her wounds once again healing, with white mist flowing out of them.

"Anything fun you guys are talking about?" She fixes her hair a bit while her gaze shifts between me and Tess.

"I'm explaining to Tess how assholeish the system is, and she doesn't believe me."

"Nat thinks the system works the way he would design it."

Huh? Did I just get dissed? But there might be some truth to it. I would totally do some things the system does right now and have fun observing people in the tutorial.

To that, Lily laughs, "You're right! I can totally imagine Nat doing some things in a similar way the system does."

Oi, you should be helping me.

"You know," the petite girl moves closer to the blonde and whispers loud enough for me to hear while looking at me, "Nat is like a cat, and the system also sometimes feels like a cat."

"What?" Tess blurts out, and the confusion on her face is quite funny to watch.

"Lily, what animal is Tess?" I decide to tease her a bit more, and Lily pauses, giving it serious thought.

"Tess is a chameleon," Lily says without any hesitation, as if it's a sure thing.

"Because of her eyes?"

As a reward for my innocent joke, a small flash of lightning fires at me, and I cancel it out with disruptive mana I shoot in its way, further annoying Tess.

A few minutes later, we find the first mice. It's as big as a smaller dog, with a short tail and a well-rounded body, and it moves slowly, wobbling on its short legs, its fur black.

An easy hunt, you would say?

Nope.

The moment we look at it or send mana towards it, the animal disappears into the shadow, and its presence is gone.

A bit later, we find another one, and the same thing repeats.

And then again.

Even when I try to quickly light up the surroundings with my flames, there is still a shadow under the mice. Not even [Disruption] reaches it quickly enough. I barely start forming the skill, and the mice are gone.

That's when we decide to rely on side quests a bit more and the traps of the natives, and move deeper inside the city, hoping to find another source of food.

But first, this.

[Lvl 99 > Lvl 100]

Congratulations! You have successfully completed your side quest - Side Quest: Reach Level 100. You have acquired - Reward: Body Upgrade Token.

Level 100 at last.

Chapter 133: Caught

Barely holding back from looking through the options, I return to the hideout together with the two girls. Lily leaves to continue restoring her hand, and Tess goes to deal with some peopley stuff. Like the freeloader I am, I move to the corner of the hideout/cave and finally scroll through the notifications.

I really want to check the body upgrade and when I open it, the notification pops out:

Level 100 status reached. This signifies a further evolution in human potential.

A necessary body upgrade is pending, designed to withstand the rigors of heightened strength, dexterity, mana, and constitution.

The upgrade will prepare your body, heart, and brain for the execution of higher-leveled skills and support stronger passive abilities.

Note: Following the upgrade, your body's requirements for sleep, food, and water will diminish due to the robust support of stats and mana.

Well done!

Oh my my. Does it mean what I think it means? It does, doesn't it?

More mana is on the menu!

Well, it never left the plate, not even talking about the menu, but that's not what I mean.

I check the upgrade a few more times, as well as my body, and don't notice any change as of now. The system says it's a pending upgrade, so maybe it's a slower process that will be applied over time, further evolving my body? What's the difference between this and just upgrading stats?

From the looks of it, something needs to be done for the body to not crumble under all these stats. But isn't constitution doing something similar?

It also talks about upgrading the brain, heart, and body, so it's something that will show, or is it just something that needs to happen, otherwise higher-leveled skills would fry my brain, stop my heart, and crumble my body? That sounds like the main reason for the upgrade.

Another nice bonus is less water, sleep, and food. I already noticed it in other people, but even though logically our bodies should require more food and water than before, they are still somewhat fine? Is this mana keeping the body going, or can even stats have such effects? Something to think about.

Overall, it's nice, amazing reward fitting for reaching level one hundred.

But now, back to the most interesting part! Skill upgrades!

Congratulations, you have acquired a skill upgrade token. The offered options are based on your performance up until now within the tutorial. Choose carefully!

As I thought, there are options for only two skills.

Focus (Dual Focus)

Enhanced Dual Focus: Sharpen your abilities and enhance the efficiency of your dual focus. This upgrade increases the effectiveness of your multitasking, allowing each action to be performed with even greater proficiency.

Triple Focus: Push the boundaries of your mental prowess to focus on three tasks simultaneously. This builds on your Dual Focus skill, adding another layer of complexity and power.

Dual Focus Consolidation: Learn to consolidate your dual focuses, channeling them into a single, more powerful force when needed. This can help amplify the power and precision of your tasks, especially when executing complex maneuvers.

Dual Focus Overclocking: Push your cognitive boundaries to temporarily amplify the output of your Dual Focus, increasing its efficiency and effectiveness to an extraordinary degree for a short period.

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation)

Expert Mana Manipulation: Extend your understanding of mana to refine your manipulation techniques. This upgrade allows for an even more precise control and intricate shaping of magical energies.

Mana Sculpting: Further improve your control over mana to form detailed and intricate constructs of magic. This extends your Advanced Mana Manipulation skills, allowing you to perform elaborate magical feats with a high level of precision.

Mana Imprinting:

Mana Veiling: Perfect the art of concealing your mana, making your magical presence less detectable to others. This can be useful in evading mana sensors or hiding your magical abilities.

As expected, all the upgrades sound amazing.

For [Focus], I can improve on my current upgrade, making it much stronger. I can even go for triple [Focus], which, not gonna lie, sounds super useful. Overclocking is also something situational but super strong. It probably allows me to overclock the skill for a short moment, making it stronger than ever before.

On the other side, Consolidation sounds the weakest out of all of them. It only allows me to turn the dual focus into a single one. It's not bad at all, but it just doesn't strengthen the existing [Focus] and only allows them to combine.

It's something I think I might need, and even if it will be weaker than the other upgrades, in the future, when I get another opportunity to upgrade the skill, it might allow me to get on the right track.

As always, my bad decision comes back to kick me in the ass.

[Mana Manipulation] is also something I would want. Expert Manipulation? Gimme! Sculpting? That would boost my abilities with [Armament] even further, and I can't even imagine how powerful the skill can be if I'm not even using it to its fullest potential right now.

Imprinting? Interesting, maybe something to do with [Mana Infusion] and allowing me to infuse it into items or maybe into the air, leaving behind something like a temporal construct? This one sounds good, like really good, but can't I also learn it on my own? I think I can.

So thank you for the hint, system! I still hate you, but it's nice to learn a thing or two from descriptions since you are so tight-lipped all the time.

Mana Veiling

Oh, I did jinx it, didn't I? I'm sure I'll pay for that sentence.

Dang it.

But yeah, back to the skill. I already know what I need to pick; it's just that I'm too weak to do it. So let's ignore it for a bit; it might solve itself if I ignore it for long enough.

Tess has already left to deal with some people, and I keep sitting in the furthest corner of the hideout, practicing and observing others, without being bothered. I kind of like it being like this.

I let them deal with people, food stuff, water stuff, and making plans. If everything goes well, there is no need for me to step in.

Leech? Freeloader? Totally not!

In case any monster appears, they just need to point at it, and I'll tear it apart! Problem with Cipher? The guy is careful around me; just a few words are enough. Natives being annoying? I'll tell Biscuit to calm them down.

Actually, am I not the leader here? But that's job is for extroverts. I'm the shadow eminence, whispering the words from behind the throne. It's kind of give and take. I take a lot, but I also allow them to come to me and ask for reasonable things in exchange. Almost like the Divine Beasts natives talked about.

In the end, me and Biscuit are not that different; it's just that he is much more terrifying. He still can't fully ignore my [Disruption], but he is getting close, so I use it sparingly. The doggo, as if knowing all of this, continues to tease me by walking on his big human mana arms, like a spider, with his short legs hanging in the air.

He knows that I hate it, so he challenges me to use my skill against him so he can learn how to counter it. Probably to be able to get more food or something.

Once again, I'm reminded that the world belongs to animal archmages.

"Hello," Lily's soft voice sounds, and she sits next to me. Noticing my glance at her hand, she lifts it up, her palm nearly restored, with only the fingers missing.

"I still don't get how you could continue to move around and fight with an arm missing. It's so much harder to control mana like this," she continues while looking down at her arm. The same as mine, it's also strikingly pale and without any hair or blemishes.

"It's good practice," I answer her, and I mean it. It did help me improve a lot.

She moves a bit closer; this time, she looks at my hand and puts hers next to it. Both of them are the same paleness. Both of them restored by the girl. Lily smiles as if something made her happy.

"You and your practicing, don't you get tired of it?"

Hmm, do I get tired of it? I don't think so. I might complain, but... "It's fun," I say.

She nods and then her hand moves through her long black hair; she seemingly tries to tie it with a single hand. Why won't she just cut it? Long hair must be so annoying here. I continue to watch her for a bit and then sigh, taking another look at her missing fingers.

"Come here," I gesture to her, and for a moment, she looks startled. "Come on, with your back to me," I hurry her up, and she finally moves with her back to me. She looks so small, so weak, yet I saw the determination in her eyes as she fought.

I take a second to remember and then start tying her hair into a three-strand braid. I think that's how Victoria used to call it. First, I carefully split the hair into three sections and then start crossing them over and into the middle, and continue from there.

I do it slowly, delicately, careful not to pull her hair, and make sure to make it neat.

"Lily, you know, I'm not stupid. You could ask other girls to do it, but then started acting off in front of me," I know she knew I would do that. Somehow, I'm getting easier to read for some people. What am I doing wrong?

"Hehe, was I caught?" she giggles, with some happiness clear in her voice.

It annoys me slightly, so I stop for a moment and gently slap the back of her head, "Stupid girl."

"I'm not stupid!"

"Only a stupid girl would sacrifice her..."

"Sacrifice her arm for some maniac stranger," she jumps in. "You keep saying that all the time!"

"Because it's true." I know I'm right! And I'll continue to repeat it until the end!

Well, it's not like I'm not stupid either. I have already decided to go and hunt the Undead Aberrant Deer, the two-question mark monster we encountered last night. That might be a bit worse, just a little bit, right?

Chapter 134: Undead Aberrant Deer

Yup, in the end, I decided on Dual Focus Consolidation: learning to consolidate my dual focuses, channeling them into a single, more powerful force when needed. It may be the smallest upgrade out of

all the options, but I need some good basics for the future. I'm sure that, in this way, [Focus] can become much stronger. I already have a few ideas on how to use it in the future.

So yup, and yes, the pain of upgrade was... easy to endure. Totally easy.

I also leveled up once, and my mana stat is now just three points away from a beautiful 300.

Well, first things first. It's already almost night, and this time I'm going out there on my own.

Is it stupid? Probably. Is it risky? Totally. Will the rewards be worth it? Maybe.

I just can't get the two-question mark monster out of my head. I keep imagining the fight with it in my head. My moves, the monster's moves. The ways to hurt it, ways to kill it, ways to run away. I don't think I'm without a chance.

I believe I can do that. I actually think that. Even though the monster is at least 50 levels higher, I know I can prepare, I know I have plenty of advantages.

It's hard for it to find me as the mist is making it harder for monsters affected by Decay to find humans. And I have a strong attack, and this might be the biggest reason. I just want to go all out and test it. Shooting it against alghouls, buildings, gargoyles, or rats isn't that satisfying. The deer is a beautifully massive target.

So I have already prepared plenty of excuses for why it's a "good" idea.

Also, it's too late to turn back, right? I'm already sitting in the room, a small amount of mana running through my body. I send a pulse of mana through one of the threads of mana that is as thick as a hair, and it makes one of my orbs, filled with tricolored mana, explode.

Far away from me, the orb expands, and then the massive bubble bursts and an immense sucking force makes debris rush and spin at the place where the center of the orb was.

Another pulse of mana filled with [Disruption] makes the thread that connected me to the orb dissipate without leaving any trace of my mana. Then I wait, forcing my heartbeat to slow down, collecting mana as carefully as possible to not let it leak outside my body.

And I watch. I do not use [Perception] and only stare with my eyes that can barely see anything through the mist, looking for that green light the aberrant deer had. And thankfully, I do not have to wait for too long.

The world around me vibrates, and waves of mana hit even my body as the giant deer comes from the air and lands at the place where the orb exploded.

This time, even its antlers are glowing, and three car-sized projectiles hovering over its back start to emit a similar light. I can't see it properly, but they seem to be spinning.

A horrifying sound hits the surrounding buildings, and I feel the pressure on my body as the monster rages, destroying the houses near it.

I can do it.

I CAN do it!

I stand up, and three more pulses are sent through three more threads, quickly followed by disruptive mana.

My heart beats.

Another house explodes into a bubble of tricolored mana, making the monster turn its attention to it. One of the massive projectiles over its back flies towards the bubble and pierces it, and the ensuing explosions send a massive wave of mana into the surroundings.

Another heartbeat, and I open my mouth. An orb the size of a golf ball flies out, filled to the brim with light blue, dark blue, and purple mana. The orb threatens to explode and delete my head and entire body from existence.

The deer starts turning its head towards me and the humming orb of immensely squeezed mana. Then another bubble bursts into existence, triggered by the second of three threads that I used.

The projectile flying over its head hits it, leaving only one more. The explosion grabs more of the monster's attention, and I activate [Focus]. I push it to the brink, consolidate, and then elongate the orb into the shape of a javelin, while more of my skills come to existence, pushed to their current limit with my new upgrade of [Focus].

[Redistribution] moves a massive chunk of my mana, finally making me feel a sizable dent in my mana reserves.

[Mana Surge] boosts the skills even further, making the mana move at dizzying speeds, aided by [Mana Manipulation].

And then, all this mana moves through [Mana Infusion]

Another heartbeat and more kinetic energy flows inside my body. The undead aberrant deer once again turns to me when the last orb bursts into a massive bubble, meant to take its attention away from me.

It doesn't work.

Through the mist, I can see its glowing blind eye staring right towards me and the last remaining projectile over its back spinning even faster and glowing intensely.

Both of our projectiles shoot at the same moment.

My javelin, longer than me and as thick as my arm, boosted by all the kinetic energy my Kinetic Mana Heart generated. Deer's sickly green projectile, as big as a car and as long as a bus.

The projectiles crash against each other in an immensely short moment. Not even enough time to blink or twitch a muscle. Yet, under the influence of consolidated dual [Focus], it feels as if the black-white world came to a halt, and the only mana that has any colors exist.

Two attacks meet, and two projectiles. One of them is so much smaller than the second. The explosion of green mana lights up the surroundings, making the houses around shatter and the entire street block get destroyed in what feels like even less than a split second. The shockwave even sends my body against the wall of the house I'm in, ignoring the massive tricolored shield floating in front of me and throwing me through the wall and rolling outside.

But then there is nothing. Silence. Not even the wind roars, as it's canceled by the massive shockwave that even clears a huge area of the mist, offering a clear view of the aberrant deer.

It stares right at the javelin stabbed at its feet, the green mana floating around it and covering it in layers and layers of barriers. Then there is a shift. The tricolored wisps of mana stop moving, and the javelin turns bright white.

I close my eyes and only continue to perceive as I build barrier upon barrier around me, all made of tricolored mana and dense to the brim.

Then the javelin explodes, and a short but immensely strong blast of heat and shockwave hits the surroundings, expanding from the epicenter and pushing everything away while burning the wood, heating iron parts of houses to the point they glow yellow, and destroying the massive area of buildings, even pushing and throwing me away with my barriers glowing around me.

The ring of shockwave and heat destroys half of my barriers and expands even further behind me, setting the houses on fire at the same moment as destroying them.

Out of nowhere, a short moment of silence ensues, and my [Perception] turns to the deer, the monster now only burning bones and a little bit of meat and fur, yet alive and with its mana still strong.

And then, all the air and debris come flying back towards where the javelin used to be, filling the vacuum left after the explosion. All are affected by the immense force and pulled back, the force tearing houses, ground, and everything, to fill the vacuum.

The Undead Aberrant Deer gets pulled in first, all its limbs twisting and breaking, even as its mana fights against it. The monster's body gets squeezed and twisted into a shape and size reminiscent of a beach ball while what remains of my creation sucks in even more of the surrounding area.

Finally, as quickly as it came, the force pulling me in disappears. Explosion and then implosion, it all took barely more than a second.

The mist rushes back in, and the wind starts to blow again, and I decide to quickly, very quickly leave the area.

Ten minutes later, I sit inside another hideout, barely bigger than a single room. My hands are still shaking, and my heart is beating wildly as I continue to calm it down to the point where I can properly [Focus] and then open the notifications.

[Focus - lvl 31 > Focus - lvl 32]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 31 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 32]

[Armament - lvl 30 > Armament - lvl 31]

[Mana Surge - lvl 19 > Mana Surge - lvl 20]

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

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

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

[Redistribution - lvl 24 > Redistribution - lvl 25]

[You have defeated the Undead Aberrant Deer - lvl 156]

[Lvl 101 > Lvl 104]

C+*g#atul@t1ons, y>u h\$ve m3t two o\$ t%e r@qu!rem&nts to e@+er %e^*@d D#ff!culty

Chapter 135: Using Upgrade token

I see. Hmm, interesting. Now it all makes sense. Now I understand everything.

"..."

AS IF!

What the heck, system? If you want to give me notifications, at least do not censor it just to not give me a notification. Dang it.

But it's fine. Not even the system being an asshole will ruin my mood! I did pretty well, didn't I? I did amazing. I was amazing. Someone praise me, I want to show off.

No one?

It's fine then. I'll be happy by myself. As for Bambi, screw you! Not this time! I won't let another monster keep bullying me the same way Cinderbear, screw that guy, did.

Get totally destroyed. Easy, not even close.

"..."

Okay, I really need to calm down. Slow breath in, hold it, breathe out. Much better.

As I observe my body, I notice that my mana is still not fully back, and this is surely the first time something like this happened, like ever? For the first time, I actually spent what feels like a good chunk of my mana. Maybe fifty, forty percent? It's hard to guess. More testing is needed.

I'm also really proud of myself. This time, I didn't wreck my body to do something. I'm learning, slowly but surely. My control over mana is better now, and I can also strengthen my body much more than ever before, allowing me to handle larger quantities of it. And that's good, really good.

As for the attack, to be honest, I did not expect the effect it had. Did the heat and shockwave come from the mana expanding after I stopped holding it in the shape of a javelin?

The explosion was seriously strong, the shockwave is something I did expect, and the heat is a bonus. But the clear winner of the day is the following implosion. Even standing as far as I was, I was able to feel the sucking force as the air came back to fill the vacuum left as the mana expanded, even sucking in the level 156 named monster.

Poor Bambi did not have a nice end, not at all. Yet, I'm sure the curse of Bambi will return to bother me on the next floor. In the same way, I'm sure that my left arm will get broken and explode a few more times. It's something I just need to get used to.

While investing my stat points into mana, I once again go through the fight, thinking about the places where I could improve or change my reactions, or even create a better plan. I know that I was able to take it down only thanks to taking advantage of my surroundings and distracting the monster.

The goal is to take on the next one in a fair fight. Well, it's not like I'm ashamed of what I did today, totally not. If I could, I would without hesitation cheese the deer. I just want to become strong enough to not have to do that.

As I enter the hideout, I spot Lily talking to Cipher and Goldie. Cipher is even smiling at her a bit, while Goldie just stares at the petite brunette. Then Lily notices me, and a big smile flowers on her face. She immediately ignores the duo and comes running to me.

I notice a short flash of annoyance on Cipher's face before it disappears as if it never existed. The man then waves at me and points at a few filled bottles near Tess, and I nod at him. Surprisingly, Goldie seems to be even more annoyed than him, and she is not hiding it that well. But Cipher just grabs her arm and pulls her away.

Should I beat them up?

"Look, look!" But Lily is already here, waving at me with her fully restored left arm. The color is still pale, the same as mine, but she doesn't seem to be angry about it and even confirms it. "In the middle of the restoring, I learned how to give it some color, but I decided to keep it pale." Her eyes keep glancing between her and my arm, and when I try to catch her gaze, she averts it.

She is really amazing, isn't she? I remember how I had to nearly force her on the first floor to scratch her arm to practice healing it, and now there she is, regrowing arms.

"I also thought about my skills," she makes sure I'm paying attention before continuing, "I think I might be able to make myself taller, change the size of my nose, how tanned I am, and such stuff."

Oh? What the heck? Doesn't that sound super cool?

She probably sees something on my face because she proudly lifts up her nose and smiles brightly, "I think I might be amazing, like really amazing! You know, while I was restoring my left arm, I learned how to influence a few things. I'm sure I made my bones a tiny bit stronger and my skin tougher. But then I did this..." Lily then shows me one of her fingers that is noticeably longer than the others, "I made this finger longer to test if I could, and it did work! Now I'm learning how to make it shorter without having to cut it off and regrow it again."

The petite brunette then pauses, and the silence hangs between us as she looks at me as if expecting something, her eyes big and scarily direct. Knowing what to do after spending days with Isabella, I can guess what she wants to hear.

"Lily, that's super cool. Are you maybe a genius?" To that, she giggles. Even though I didn't say it as enthusiastically as some people would, she seems to be happy, and I don't mind it that much.

While walking towards my usual place and leaving Lily to play with Isabella and poor Biscuit, once again snatched by the girl, I continue to inspect people around me. I'm especially checking for suspicious mana close to their brains, Sophie's mana.

I don't find any yet. Sophie feels my probing, and I'm sure she is realizing what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. Yet she doesn't say anything. There isn't even an angry look on her face as she stares at me.

I then again and especially carefully check Lily, Tess, Biscuit, Kim. Only Tess notices my probing, and I feel her mana moving away after she realizes it's me, letting me probe her without any resistance.

There is nothing.

"Nothing?" Tess asks as I sit down.

"Nothing," I confirm.

"Did you kill it?" she asks.

Huh? How did you know?

"I'm not dumb, Nat." Tess continues without me having to answer.

"It's dead," I decide not to hide it and tell her about the hunt, to which she nods.

"I also reached level 75 and got an upgrade token." Her eyes meet mine, and she asks, "Are you going to use it the way I think you will?"

Why are you so smart? Why do you know me so well? I'm trying to be mysterious here.

"I think you don't have to hesitate. I already used mine." A small smile flashes across her face, "I still didn't meet all the requirements, though, I'm missing three and I don't think you met them all either." Then she stands up and leaves, going for another hunt, I'm left alone in the corner of the hideout. Carefully sipping the water from one of the bottles, enjoying every drop, and then eating a small piece of sparrow that the natives hunted with their trap.

I check the tokens I have.

[Upgrade token: 1]

[Difficulty change token: 1]

I wanted to wait a bit longer to not be enticed the entire time, but now I think I can resist, or maybe it just won't work as I didn't meet the requirements.

I move my eyes over my stats. I'm sure I can upgrade my trait Mana Circuit. It would probably help a lot, but it's not what I want. I can also probably upgrade my class and my skills. Maybe even my constructs and passive skills are possible to upgrade.

Any of these options would give me a massive boost to my strength, but there is something even more alluring. My eyes move again and pause at one word: "Mana."

Yes, I think it is possible to upgrade my attribute, and just the thought of it sends shivers down my back. The boost would be immense, I can tell for sure. Yet, I still hesitate. I'm not totally sure if I will be able to upgrade my attribute, and I can't even try it as the system rarely offers a confirmation window. So if I decide to do it, the upgrade token will be gone.

But there is something else I saved it for. I wanted to use it even since the first floor, but then stuff happened. The petite brunette that was too nice to me for her own good. The brunette that I owe a lot and can't leave alone before paying it all back or at least making sure she will be as safe as possible.

So I kept saving the token, careful to not get lured by it, and used it in a moment of weakness. Still, I decide to trust Tess, "Use the upgrade token on the difficulty change token," I whisper softly, and the upgrade token disappears from my status.

New notifications appears.

Congratulations, you have fulfilled three out of four conditions required to use the %e^*nd D#ff!culty entrance token!

Chapter 136: The Wall

Congratulations, you have fulfilled three out of four conditions required to use the %e^*@d D#ff!culty entrance token!

That's it, just one single sentence.

It almost makes me want to scream. All this time, I thought I would just get an upgrade change token that would take me to a higher difficulty, always luring me to use it. Yet, I was bamboozled.

Goddammit.

The only change is that both of my tokens are gone, replaced by this:

[%e^*@d D#ff!culty entrance token - 3/4 conditions met]

So what are the conditions? Use of the upgrade token is one of them. The second and third could be either me reaching 300 points in the mana stat, me killing a monster 50 levels higher, or me creating an especially strong attack. Heck, even seeing Lisandra's [Singularity] could be one of them.

I do not know, it could also be all the things combined to fulfil one of the requirements. Maybe there's something else I didn't think of. But it doesn't matter that much as there is still one condition, and the system didn't give a hint. There is nothing at all.

At this point, I'm not surprised at all.

As usual, I show the middle finger to the status window before closing it and lean backwards to stare at the ceiling of our hideout.

What is higher difficulty like, and why did I decide to go this way instead of just upgrading my attribute? It's quite simple - higher difficulty means higher danger, and higher rewards. In the long run, it should make me much stronger than just upgrading my Mana attribute or skill.

But it's still quite funny, knowing that higher difficulty than Hell exists. Normal people would use the difficulty change token to go to lower difficulty, yet out of all the surviving members of group 4, no one did that. Quite opposite, Tess and I both used our precious token to get to a more dangerous place. How can I call Lily stupid after all of this? That would be way too hypocritical.

I pause my thinking, and instead, I decide to check the quests, and finally, there's a new side quest joining the one existing.

The old one:

Side quest:

Kill 800 enemies

Rewards:

Common gear of your choice

Food and water rations

And the new one:

Side quest:

Get all of your skills over level 20

Rewards:

The passive skill of your choice

It's similar to the first one that rewarded me with a passive skill. It's just that this one, instead of requiring three skills to reach level 20, requires all of my skills to reach it. From learning about the levels of skills of other people, it sounds like something difficult to do. What if you have a skill you are not that good at and it is stuck at a really low level? In that case, this quest would be super difficult.

But not for me.

Focus (Dual Focus Consolidation) - Lvl 32

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 32

Perception - Lvl 26

Oscillation - Lvl 23

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 25

Armament - Lvl 31

Mana Surge - Lvl 20

Disruption - Lvl 19

Mana Infusion - Lvl 16

[Disruption] one level and four levels in [Mana Infusion], and I'm ready to go.

The morning comes, and with it, the day we decided to move. That means a lot of screaming and crying. Cipher is there with the Icy guy and Goldie, taking away the trap used to hunt the sparrows. Natives are staying behind as they would slow us down, yet it would be stupid not to take a trap with us. Plus, the bigger group means more danger.

They are fake in the same way Lissandra and Ruby were. A copy of people from a world dying under the Decay.

Isabella sobs while Sophie holds her, and a few more people awkwardly look around. There is guilt on their faces, and Kim and Aaron are already outside, too young to deal with it. I can understand that, yet I decide to stay and watch. I won't be hiding behind Cipher doing it just so I can pretend I didn't have anything to do with it.

Tess is also outside, but not because of guilt. The young woman is already scouting ahead, and I'm sure if she were here, she would do the same as I do, unlike Lily, who looks at all of this with sad eyes.

Finally, Cipher grabs the trap from them while they even knock off a few natives that continue to look towards Biscuit, begging. The doggo is uncharacteristically quiet.

"Nat," Lily says, and as I turn to her, I notice her firm gaze.

"Yes?" I ask simply.

"I want them to keep the trap," she says, her eyes serious and so unusually firm. There isn't even a speck of hesitation.

"We need it," I say.

"Yes."

"They are all fake."

"Yes."

"We will suffer because of it."

"Yes."

"Did you think it over?"

"Yes," she answers simply.

Our eyes meet, and for a few seconds, I just look at her. There is no wavering, just clear and firm decisiveness, "Okay." I answer her.

"Uh?" For the first time, she is surprised and blinks, confused.

"Cipher, natives are keeping the trap," I say to the man who turns to me. Mana flashes in his eyes, and he examines my body, and my stance, and looks at my face. He then nods, and when his companions start complaining, he just shushes them and throws the trap towards the natives, who just catch it. The man then gives them the last disgusted look before leaving outside.

"Nat, why..." Lily asks quietly while walking by my side.

"I owe you," I answer simply. Why is it so hard to understand? When I decide that I owe something to someone, I do not say it easily.

Risking my life? Enduring hunger? I should be able to do at least that much. It's pathetic to owe to someone only when it's comfortable to do so.

Mana arrow hovering over my shoulder shoots ahead, tearing through the monster and hitting the ground. Three more projectiles appear, and I continue to infuse them with mana, using the skill as much as I can in an attempt to level it.

I also create a sword and infuse it with mana. The sword is dark blue with wisps of light blue mana going through it, and the blade gets covered in [Disruption] as I try to do anything to level up the skill. I have already kept practicing with Tess and Lily, disrupting their mana and trying to improve the skill, yet it's still refusing to pass through the bottleneck of level 20.

So I change the tactic; mana arrows disappear together with my sword, and a thin barrier of mana appears right on my skin, barely noticeable and almost invisible. Then I start infusing the barrier with [Disruption], copying what a few monsters did.

It doesn't work that well and the barrier disappears, so instead, I just try to infuse my skill with disruptive mana, focusing on trying to make it flow through it and radiate it to the close area around the skin.

When another Alghould appears, I just strengthen my body with Symbiotic Transference and get into the melee, each hit of my fist weakening the monster's flames without letting them hurt me.

When the flames strengthen, so does the disruptive mana leaking from my skin, and I continue to [Focus].

The monster's hand leaves a bruise on my side, but I ignore it and grab its neck. More bruises and more blocked attacks, and my mana continues to fight against the green flames, stopping the monster from regenerating and not allowing them to corrode my mana, unable to wound my strengthened body.

When the monster finally dies, the skill's level is still 19 and I send the monster's corpse crashing through the side of the house.

This might take a while.

Then I feel a pulse of mana from Tess. Ahead of us, two monsters, strong, fight. I translate it as such and jump back on the roof, which is not noticeably better than the ones before. Even the houses are bigger and taller buildings start appearing.

I join Tess, and together we fight the monsters. Me in melee, practicing my skills, and with each hit I deal, I try to infuse the monsters with my mana. When I get to hold the monster for long enough and use [Focus] and surge, I move a massive amount of mana, pushing against the monster's resistance, and my mana literally tears the monster apart from the inside.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work on every monster, but even something like this is interesting enough. Right now, it's too slow and simple, but with oscillating mana, it would be quicker and much more mana effective. But still, it might be more useful in the future.

After getting to the last monster, I reach towards it with [Redistribution], and the blazing rat stops its movement, unable to move at all. I then reach out and start absorbing the heat of its flames and from the surrounding area, noticing that it is getting noticeably colder as all the heat gets sucked to me.

Then Tess finishes the monster with her lightning javelin that immediately comes flying back to her, and I release all the heat in front of me in a strong blast of dark yellow flames.

I reposition a bit, moving closer to blonde while looking in the distance at a massive wall that towers over the city. Tess says we are still miles away from it, yet even now, it seems massive.

The wall is beautifully white, almost without any blemish, and Tess says she can even see some mana around it or going through it.

In this massive city that is so full of empty houses, monsters lurking around, and a permanently gray and cloudy sky, the massive and beautiful white wall seems amiss.

Chapter 137: What are you doing?

Sophie tries to catch the sparrows with her [Manipulation], but unfortunately, she was unsuccessful. The moment her mana reaches towards them, they fly away.

On the other side, I was able to kill multiple of them, yet every time not much was left of their bodies. My attacks needed to be too fast in order to kill them, obliterating them in the process, barely leaving anything behind.

When I try weaker attacks, they just bend around the birds or miss them. The sparrows are even able to sense the mana threads I create in an attempt to trap them.

It's annoying, it really is, and more so now that we are without food.

Aaron and Lily are sometimes too weak to even walk and need to be carried, although all of this is alleviated by the water that Cipher creates. But he doesn't complain, not to me. He doesn't tell me how dumb of a decision it was to give up the trap. He is too smart for that.

His companions, on the other hand, give me angry glances when they think I don't see it.

In comparison to others, I don't seem to be so bothered by the lack of food, water, and even sleep. The body upgrade is showing more and more as time passes. I don't know if it's just a simple effect of the body upgrade or if the upgrade allowed my body to use some of my mana to keep going. Both options are equally probable.

"More?" I head from beside me and turn my attention back to Kim, who stands next to me, catching his breath after a fight we just went through. There are massive circles under his eyes, and even his body bears the marks of lack of food, and his lips are dry. Yet the 15-year-old boy continues to push, showing surprising mastery over his skills.

"Take a break," I answer him.

"I can still cont—"

My mana flares up for a moment, and he stops, immediately closing his mouth and then just sitting on the edge of the roof next to me. Both of us looking towards the giant white walls far in the distance.

I then stare at the palms of my hands, the left one is still itching annoyingly, but I ignore it and once again try to replicate Cipher's skill and create some water. Yet, as before, the structure of the skill just refuses to come into existence and always crumbles the moment I try to push some mana through it.

It doesn't work no matter how careful I am, no matter how much mana I'm using, and no matter how carefully I'm watching Cipher do it. But I do not give up and continue to try.

"Do you think there will be some food and water behind the walls?" At Kim's question, I take my eyes off my hands and also look at the wall.

"Most likely," I answer shortly.

Knowing the system, there will be more danger and better rewards, and the closer we will be to the end of the third floor and finding out what's happening here.

In the community, the system continues to censor everything about the place behind the wall. Group Whitewing and also Savant seem to be already be there, yet we haven't learned anything.

Another annoying thing is that we haven't met Hadwin yet and didn't see any of the areas covered by poisonous clouds that he talked about. After a bit of talking, he, Maya, and Dennis decided to stop waiting near it and move closer towards where the white walls should be. Well, not much we can do about it, right?

"Go ahead and ask what you wanted to ask," I say to Kim, who, ever since we started hunting together, continues to glance at me, clearly having something he wants to ask but not brave enough to actually do it.

"Oh," he mutters, surprised. His reaction only reminds me how young he is, the youngest out of our group after Isabella.

I keep forgetting that.

"I'm sorry... you know... with Lily and all of this." The skill I'm trying to replicate once again fails, and I start trying again, nodding to him to continue.

"I... would never..." he starts again.

"I understand," I stop him, and this time, I give him my full attention. "You did a good job protecting her, and I owe you because of that. So if there is something you would like in exchange, feel free to ask."

There is no need to be so roundabout about all of this. I already told you I owe you.

"I really mean it when I say you did a good job. It must have been hard for you." I continue with the compliment, and I see his eyes light up. It's as if he is craving recognition as if he wants to hear it from someone.

As for why it makes him happy hearing it from me and why he looks up to me, I don't know. I really don't. I might be somewhat strong and decisive, but I'm totally not someone a young boy should look up to.

Still, it's not a problem to compliment him once in a while. It doesn't cost me anything, and it seems to make him happy, so what's wrong with that?

"Please train me again, help me to improve." This time his eyes do not waver, and he looks straight at me. I notice his slightly shaking hands and noticeably twitching lips. He is so nervous; it almost makes me want to bully him a bit.

Well, at least he finally got out what he wanted to say.

"Kill that rat from here and with this," I give him a small stone as big as my fingernail and point at the rat far in the distance, way out of Kim's usual range.

Unlike Tess, he seems to focus on mid to close-range way too much, and his long-range attacks are terrible, so that's something we will start with.

He opens his mouth as if about to complain, but then he stops and I feel his mana gather up.

Good.

We return when both my [Disruption] and [Mana Infusion] are at level nineteen. I once again tried to hunt sparrows and even only boosted some stones with kinetic energy or created projectiles as small as needles, yet everything failed. I was also unsuccessful in trying to replicate Cipher's skill.

I will also need to do something about [Disruption] and [Oscillation]. The two skills feel too similar to each other. I have some ideas, but I'll need a bit more time.

Then there is a problem with Lily. The girl nearly ignores drinking the water before others have it, feeling some regret that we are now a few days without food because of her.

Seeing her just sitting there, looking hungry, and weak annoys me even more. Yet, I keep my calm, and as always, I just use [Focus] to push all the emotions to the back of my mind.

Little Isabella probably notices that because she comes to me and looks up, her face angry and brow furrowed.

"You can't keep doing that, it's not good," she pouts in her soft voice, and I just pinch her cheek and caress the top of her head.

"Go and play with Biscuit, okay?" She is too young to worry about useless stuff. I can handle myself.

Isabella listens, but one last time, she gives me an angry look, which makes her look more like an angry kitten than threatening.

So that's how I'll end up, even little kids worrying about me. I would laugh if I could.

I return from another hunt, tired and even more annoyed. The only success was leveling [Perception]. There are still about two more hours of light, yet I decide to return to the hideout, finding everyone already back inside.

As I enter, I see Cipher talking to Lily, who just sits and nods to what he says. Both of them smiling slightly. Behind Cipher, there is Goldie staring at the girl.

Sophie is sleeping in the corner with Isabella on her chest. Tess is talking with Kim and Aaron.

So should I bully Biscuit a little bit...

Wait. What is that?

My eyes move back to Lily, Cipher, and Goldie, and I notice a weird shine in Goldie's eyes that I didn't see up until now. It doesn't contain any mana, and it only looks like fractured light. Yet, it does something, and it is clearly aimed at Lily.

WHAT

ARE

YOU

DOING.

POV Kim Min-Jae

It came out of nowhere. A sound that reminds me of a heartbeat yet impossibly strong, and right after, I notice my movements slow to a crawl. Panicked, I try to move my arm, but it's hard to do, and it moves terribly slowly.

Then I feel mana, his mana.

It explodes into the surroundings and fills the entire hideout, making the walls vibrate, and everyone is immediately up, feeling the threatening pressure.

My eyes slowly turn to Nathaniel, and there he stands. Thin, messy, yet so strong. His gray and brown eyes seem to glow in the dimly lit hideout, and he stares at the group of three people in the corner of the room.

"What are you doing?" His words are quiet, yet in the silence, everyone hears them, and they send shivers down my back. They are so cold.

He takes a step towards them, another heartbeat sounding like a gong vibrating the room, and the air becomes colder as I start seeing my breath become visible in the chill.

"Nathaniel, I can explain," the man named Cipher says, seemingly calm even as Nathaniel takes another step towards him, "Please think calmly, you need me, Lily needs me," Cipher says, and that makes Nathaniel stop in his walk.

There is a short moment that feels like an eternity as both men stare at each other. Then his mana weakens, and the air gets back some of its warmth.

"But I don't need her," Nathaniel turns to woman next to Cipher, and as his mana rises up, there is a sharp flash from Goldie's eyes, and something hits him.

"Goldie, No!" Cipher screams desperately, yet it's too late.

"Huh, I wanted to block all his skills but only managed to block one. It's called Focus?" Goldie blubbers out as she probably reads the notification. She sounds confused, and scared, probably not even realizing what she did as her eyes continue to tick around.

"Oh... fuck," I hear next to me, shocked, I realize that it was Tess who spoke, making it the first time I've heard her swear.

Then slowly, a laugh sounds in the room, a laugh that I do not recognize. It's a soft, gentle laugh. It's not cruel, it's not mocking. It just sounds like something incredibly funny happened, and they can't help but laugh at it.

Only then do I realize that the one laughing is Nathaniel.

Chapter 138: Hypnosis

POV Kim Min-Jae

Nathaniel, laughing, looks so different from his usual self. His face seems softer, friendlier. He even appears handsome now.

This time Cipher seems to seriously panic and quickly starts talking, "I'll do everything you want. I won't ever talk back to you. I'll do anything, just let me..."

"Shhh," Nathaniel just lifts one of his fingers and Cipher stops moving. Only his eyes continue to tick from side to side. The man is terrified. Nathaniel closes his eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath, a big smile on his face, "That's an interesting experience, I don't think I've ever turned off my [Focus] so totally ever since the tutorial started. The weird thing is, it also slightly affected my emotions," he opens his eyes again and takes one more step towards the duo that is unmoving, "well, it's not like it matters."

On the opposite side, Lily is not affected at all and continues to look at him without saying anything.

"That's it, I guess, you stepped over a line you shouldn't step over," his eyes move back to Cipher and the pressure intensifies.

He doesn't say anything else and Cipher just continues to stand there, unable to do anything under Nathaniel's gaze. His chest stops moving and consciousness slowly disappears from his eyes, and then he dies while standing. The same thing happens to Goldie.

Both of them die just like that and Nathaniel just tilts his head, almost as if surprised, and then he chuckles, "So weak," Right after, mana fires up from him and the bodies of Cipher and Goldie explode into pieces. Not a single piece is bigger than a fingernail and the blood splashes everywhere. A lot of it hits Lily, who doesn't react even after all of that, and continues to look at Nathaniel with big eyes.

Nathaniel looks around and he seems almost refreshed, as if getting rid of something that kept annoying him for a long time. Again, he smiles, "Sophieeee," he says, turning to the brunette sitting in the corner of the room.

A javelin made of mana immediately forms over his shoulder.

My javelin misses and embeds itself into the wall right behind Sophie, only leaving a deep scratch on her cheek that starts bleeding immediately. She is still not moving, her eyes wide, and I can see fear in them. So I turn my gaze to the person that made my javelin miss.

“Nathaniel,” Tess is standing in front of me, lightning cracking around her body and her hair slightly lifting up with lightning cracking around them as well. She is the only one able to move through my [Redistribution].

“Can you [Focus]?” she asks, taking another step and stopping just an arm's reach away from me. In between me and Sophie.

“Yup, who do you think I am, Tess? Her skill surprised me, but that's it. She was terrible at using it.” Just a few seconds were enough to find out what her skill did to me and to be able to cancel it.

“So why don't you [Focus]?”

“Because I don't want to. You know her skill didn't only affect my skill, it also did something to my emotions. It's hard to identify what exactly, but it doesn't feel that bad. But don't worry, I should be fine in a few minutes. So please, can you step away so I can kill Sophie in the meantime?”

“I can't allow you to do that,” she says firmly.

“Why? I know I'll feel much better if I do that. It's too irritating to keep dealing with her and her skill.”

“I promised it to her.”

That's annoying. “Is your promise to her more important than our promise?” I rouse up my mana a bit more.

Yet, she doesn't even flinch and continues to look into my eyes, “No, it's not. But I'm sure you'd want me to stop you, if you were thinking logically.”

That makes me laugh. “Tess, I don't want to think logically.” I put even more pressure on her, yet she fights against it.

“You're scaring people, Nat. Just look at Lily, look at Isabella.”

"It doesn't matter. I don't need them to like me. I just need to pay back what I owe." Finally, her body seems to be getting affected by my [Redistribution] and I feel her pushing more mana into her [Lightning Armor], "Tess, get out of my way," she won't stop me.

"This is not you, not even back on Earth, not even without your skill. Can't you see that she did change the way you think, even if it's temporary?"

Oh, that's a good point. Goldie's skills did affect some of my feelings and part of my behavior as well. I know I can turn on [Focus] anytime I want and get rid of these effects. Yet I hesitate. I know when I activate it, I'll stop and push my feelings to the back of my mind. My annoyances, my rage, my sadness that I've been hiding, all the stress I'm feeling.

My eyes move over Tess's shoulder and I see Sophie who just stands there, unable to move at all. Only her scared eyes move, staring at me. She doesn't even use her mana, probably scared of annoying me even more.

Then I move my gaze a bit lower and look at Isabella. The little girl is clinging to Sophie and also looking at me. In her eyes, I do not see fear, nor anger. Just pity as she touches me with her skill.

So annoying.

My mana moves again and while hearing the notification, I disrupt the mana around Tess. A pulse of kinetic energy then throws her away from me. With speed even faster than before, another javelin appears over my shoulder, this time bigger and with a hint of light blue mana in it, and tempered with all the anger I feel at Sophie.

I know that I'm smiling as I do so, about to throw it at her.

"Nathaniel," a soft quiet voice from behind me sounds from behind me. The voice immediately makes me stop the javelin.

When I turn around, Lily is still sitting on the ground, covered in the blood of the exploded bodies of Cipher and Goldie and pieces of meat and bones. Her entire face is covered in blood and only her eyes shine through.

“Even you, Lily? What do you want?” You better talk quickly, I already feel the effects of Goldie's skill dissipating and reason coming back to me.

Lily then pulls out a knife from her pocket and stabs it towards her own heart.

The world feels as if it slows down as I put both [Focus] into boosting my body, dashing towards her, moving faster than my mana would be able to reach her.

Just before the tip of her knife pierces her chest, I grab her hand and stop it from moving. Then her mana engulfs me and the remaining effect of Goldie's skill disappears and I'm back to my rational self.

Right afterward, Lily slaps me and I don't dodge, only tilt my head a bit so she doesn't hurt her hand too much.

Well, I kind of screwed up, didn't I? Just a little bit. Our water dispenser is gone. Lily is pissed off and still shaking. I nearly killed Sophie. I scared everyone, and I even hurt Tess. That's quite a list.

Damn it, if only Cipher and Goldie had tried to control me instead of Lily. In such a case, I would have been able to stop. It would have been just an attack on me. But seeing them doing this to her, just snapped something inside me.

Goldie's skill was something similar to hypnosis. It used only a really minuscule amount of mana that entered her eyes and refracted the light to affect her target. To be honest, I still don't fully understand what it did. But I know enough to realize that she was probably the reason the trio rose to the top of the Hard Difficulty tutorial. Her skill even allowed her to block skills and influence people.

Sure, her usage of it was trash, and I would have been able to unblock my skill in a split second, I just didn't want to. At the time, it felt weird to not think about the consequences. It felt good.

Now, I realize how stupid it was, but it's not like I can blame myself too much. The best solution would have been to beat Goldie and then let Sophie mindblender Cipher, but yeah... things went differently.

I reach out and pet Biscuit who seems totally unaffected by what happened and he snuggles closer to me. He is already sleeping, but his warmth is nice and calming.

"It's okay," Tess says, her body already healed by Lily and she really doesn't seem to be blaming me too much, "I knew the risks, yet I did what I thought was the best decision."

Goddamn it, her being so cool makes me feel worse.

"Should I punch you to make you feel better?" she asks and immediately I lift my head.

"Would that work?" I ask.

Tess sighs and ignores my question, "I'm sure they'll realize you weren't yourself, so just give it some time. As for the water situation, we'll deal with it somehow. We still have some left."

That's it, I guess. We'll have to push on and finish the quest.

"But what were they trying to do to Lily?" Tess asks.

I pause to think before answering, "They probably wanted to hypnotize her gradually, bit by bit. I didn't notice it back then, but they had spoken to her a few times before. Cipher likely wanted a healer on his side," I shrug. "I'm not exactly sure how Goldie's skill worked."

They didn't try it on me, probably worried that I would notice. Cipher, with his perceptive skill, read people well, picked his targets, and then gradually won them over using Goldie's skill. Not bad, but far from sufficient for Hell Difficulty. Such tricks won't work here.

They made a big mistake by switching difficulties, and then they made an even bigger one that cost them their lives.

Chapter 139: Group 4 Reunion

Flashback - Nathaniel Gwyn (11 years old)

A young boy, barely over ten years old, slowly opens the door to the apartment. It squeaks as he closes it and locks it. His face bears no emotion as he looks around.

After checking the floor and not seeing another pair of shoes, a small smile flashes on his lips. He quickly takes off his old, battered sneakers and removes his bag from his shoulder. The entire time, he is careful to use only his right hand.

Then he rushes towards his room, and his smile becomes even bigger when he notices the light shining under the closed door. Without knocking, he barges in, only to be rewarded by a long, annoyed sigh from a girl sitting behind a table, reading.

Her posture is near perfect. She sits without rounding her shoulders and holds the book in front of her to avoid slouching and bending her neck. There is a lamp next to her, shining on the book that she now puts on the table as she turns to her brother.

"Nat, how many times..." she pauses and her eyes move up and down her brother.

Another long sigh.

The boy seems somewhat proud as he carefully puts away his bag and sits on the edge of the bed, turning to his sister, "Is Mom not home yet?"

"She's still working and won't be coming home anytime soon. And Rob is... who knows where," a slight hint of disgust sounds in her voice as she talks about the man she should be calling 'father' instead.

The boy only nods, and it's clear that he is waiting for his sister to ask something.

Victoria sighs for the third time and just asks, too curious to tease her cute brother any longer, "So, Nat, why is your left arm broken?"

Nathaniel smirks proudly, seemingly not bothered at all by his broken bone and the pain he must surely be feeling, "I broke it!" he sounds proud as he says so, and in the dimly lit room, his eyes seem to be shining.

Before Victoria can ask, he continues, "The older kids tried to bully me again today, and they called mom names..." There is a dangerous glow in his eyes as he says the last part but he quickly hides it, "This time more of them came, but I managed to run away," he giggles.

The entire time, his sister quietly listens, a curious look on her face as her brother explains. As he talks, she is sitting there, her posture perfect, her hands on her lap, and her eyes bearing a hard-to-identify emotion.

"They were always careful not to hurt me too much, so I can't tell on them. So, I learned when the director leaves the school and which way he takes. Then, I broke my arm and acted as if I had run into him by mistake. I even pretended to try to hide it!" he laughs, "I made him ask me who did that. At first, he even thought it was Rob," he quickly corrects himself.

His brown and gray eyes shine even brighter as he continues to explain to his calm sister, "I tried to cry, but you know, Vic, I'm bad at that. So I just pinched myself really hard and looked at the ground, pretending to sob, and then told him that the other kids did it."

As if waiting for her reaction, he pauses.

"That's smart, Nathaniel, but what if the other kids have... an alibi," she says carefully.

"I thought of that! I did all of it when they were hanging out outside and remembered who was there. I..." he pauses when both of them hear the front door unlocking and the creaking sound echoes through the apartment.

"That's Rob... now, get that smile off your face, Nat."

For an answer, the boy only nods, and the smile disappears. His face looks as emotionless as when he entered the apartment. His sister mirrors him, and soon a man's shouts reach their ears.

"I'm sorry!" Lily lowers her head and when I stay quiet, she carefully looks up with a look on her face that makes me want to pinch her nose.

"..."

I don't have to explain anything! I just really want to pinch her tiny nose. Also, why are you like this? Shouldn't I be the one to apologize?

Probably seeing my confusion, she continues, "I'm sorry for slapping you."

Ohhh. She's still bothered by that? It's already been like... two hours? To be honest, I think she hurt herself more than me when she slapped me, and I kind of made a big mess, so she did have the right to be a little bit angry.

Hmm, wait a moment? Should I spin it to make her feel bad for me and make her owe me a bit? I once again look at her face and then I can't bring myself to do it.

I'm truly getting weaker.

"It's fine, Lily, I'm sorry I didn't notice them trying to hypnotize you earlier and also for... this mess I made." It's true that I could've been a bit more delicate.

But as we talk, I look at her and ask, curious to see if the death of two people in front of her caused some damage. I know for a normal person it should be... traumatizing.

"It's fine." she says, "They were bad people, trying to hurt me and you as well." Her eyes are serious as she says so, "They deserved that."

Oh boy.

I'm definitely the most normal here.

I pull Biscuit's cheek and boop his nose and continue to ignore his woofing while I think over what I should do with Sophie. I really don't feel like apologizing and I won't do it. The relationship between us is delicate, to say the least.

Lately, I've started thinking that I've kept her alive only because of little Isabella, so Sophie can take care of her sister and not make a little girl sad or hate me.

Sophie is annoying to deal with constant worry about her [Manipulation] and always sitting on the border of worth and not worth to be kept alive.

"Biscuit, what should I do?" I ask probably the smartest and most normal member of Group 4 after me, obviously.

(Food?)

"Nah, we can't eat her."

(Food.)

"Yeah, we could feed her to monsters."

(Food!)

"No, you still can't eat monsters, you will get sick. But we were talking about Sophie, It's annoying to deal with her, isn't it?"

(Asshole!)

"Yeah, she is?"

I pet the top of his head and the best doggo closes his eyes.

Hmm, I should teach you a few more words. We're going to have you surprise Hadwin.

I give most of my food to Lily and a bit to Biscuit and then once again leave our hideout. Alone. I need to clear my head a bit and give others some space.

Tess is fine, Lily and Kim also seem to be somewhat unaffected. On the other hand, Aaron avoids me even more than before and Sophie is staying out of my sight as much as possible, keeping Isabella with her.

I guess she didn't take my feelings seriously when I let her peek at them while she was strengthening my body and helping me handle my mana. This probably opened her eyes a bit.

I check the new side quest and it's as I thought.

Side quest: Kill 800 enemies

Other side quests just need me to get [Mana Infusion] to level twenty and I'm ready to get a new passive skill.

As for my reward for killing 700 enemies...

Short Sword (Common): A practical choice for any adventurer, this iron short sword boasts a sturdy blade and a reliable leather grip. Perfect for those beginning their journey, it's simple yet effective for most combat situations.

I then tie one of my mana stones to the blade and continue trying to infuse the stone with my mana as it holds it much better than the sword, and then have the stone continuously infuse the blade with the mana.

I even etch some pathways into the blade and try to keep them working thanks to the mana from mana stone.

But as before, the sword cracks and breaks, mana leaks terribly, and pathways are not working. But it's fine, I'll learn from my constructs and create one for items as well and instead of my mana heart, the mana stones will keep them working.

How cool is that?

The icy guy, now alone, is now one of Sophie's pets if I can call it like that. When Sophie sees that I noticed that she looks at me, her eyes firm, as if asking me to say anything.

But I do not. It might be my lack of interest in the guy and not caring what happened to him or maybe a half-step back to allow Sophie to keep some face. It could easily be either option.

But later that day we finally are close to the walls. The way there was easier than before, a lot less monsters moving around and close to the wall. We also hurried to meet with Hadwin, Maya, and Dennis as they acquired one of the traps used to catch sparrows. I do not ask from where but it's easy to guess.

For the last five minutes, we are led by Aaron that finally gets within reach to communicate with his twin brother and soon enough we finally meet the last three members of our group.

Like all of us, they are thinner, messy, with wrecked clothes, and looking more like wild animals after days on the third floor.

"Hey," Hadwin says simply as we meet, while Aaron is meeting with Dennis and Maya awkwardly keeps looking between Tess and Sophie.

Good, finally I can dump everything on Hadwin, but first, Biscuit go!

Feeling my thoughts, the best doggo on the third floor moves in front of me and speaks telepathically toward Hadwin.

Chapter 140: Selling the corgi

"What are you even—" Hadwin pauses, sighing as he looks up at me.

What? Why is everyone sighing so much around me?

"You are ruining this corgi," he says, stepping closer. I notice he is holding a nicely crafted shield, and I can even feel some mana emanating from it.

I'm not ruining Biscuit! He was ruined from the start. I mean perfect. He was perfect from the start. Moreover, I have to do things like this once in a while. It continues to make me feel better, even though it might seem silly.

But now, "Show me your shield," I gesture to Hadwin. The man, not even surprised at this point, hands me the shield.

Reflective Shield (Uncommon): A shield that creates a weak shimmering barrier and reflects a portion of incoming attacks back at the enemy. It strengthens with each reflected assault but requires mana.

Oh ho, isn't that interesting?

"You can't have it," I hear somewhere in the background. I decide to ignore it, already sending my mana into the shield to observe it.

The moment my mana enters, it gets sucked inside, moving through thin, circuit-like paths into what I think is a mana stone. Then, inside the stone, something happens and mana is sent outside again, this time with some reflective properties. Terribly weak, but surely interesting.

"You can play with Biscuit three times if you give me the shield," I say without thinking.

"The heck, I don't want..."

"Five times," I quickly add. When I hear Biscuit woof at me, I look up and finally remember that it's not Isabella I'm talking to.

Oh, awkward... But that makes it better, "I'll be taking it for a few hours," I say, and boost my body to launch myself around the room, "Go and talk with Tess. You guys can take care of everything."

Huhuh, good job Haddy! You can cook, you bring me nice shiny new stuff, you will deal with people instead of me. I'll make sure to pay you back somehow!

But now, let's examine the shield. After seeing Tess keeping a watch, I lift my eyebrows in a question, and I swear she sighed before nodding, indicating that she'll be on lookout.

So, I combine both parts of my [Focus]

I broke the shield.

Hadwin is asking for the shield from down the street, so I tell him I need more time to examine it.

After a few more fights with monsters that I do not join, Hadwin is asking for the shield again.

Now I start panicking.

What the heck! How the hell is the shield so weak? I only sent a minuscule amount of mana inside it. It's uncommon; it should be better! Maybe it was broken even before I touched it? Could I say that to Hadwin?

Okay, okay, let's focus.

Once again, I send my senses through the shield and this time, look at the circuits that are hidden under the surface of the shield, leading from the handle towards the mana stone that is safely imbued inside the thickest part of the shield.

This one seems fine. This one is good. Why is this one so oddly shaped? This one isn't leading anywhere? What the heck does it do?

Oh, this one is slightly burned. Now then, I consolidate my [Focus] and [Oscillation] and activate them as I carefully send the tiniest thread of oscillation mana through the destroyed part, then reach towards it with [Mana Manipulation].

It doesn't work. I can't reactivate the circuit. So, I use [Mana Infusion] together with [Mana Manipulation] and examine it closely while sending the tiniest bits of my mana towards it.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 32 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 33]

This is so weird. Is the mana able to stay semi-permanent because of the metal the shield is made of? Oh! What if it's the mana stone? I quickly reach towards it and send a bit more to wake it up, then try to connect the newly fixed circuit to it. I stop thinking and just let the feeling lead me. My heart beats calmly as I delve deeper and focus more on the task in front of me.

[Focus - lvl 32 > Focus - lvl 33]

The world becomes black and white, and within it, the thin threads of circuits filled with my mana shine. Not even realizing what I'm doing, I send my mana towards the parts that I consider poorly made and circuits that look damaged either by the passage of time or by a lack of care during the shield's creation.

Full of satisfaction, I watch as the mana stone starts humming, absorbing the mana that continues to flow into it and then creating a weak reflective effect in front of the shield.

Just now, I notice that the mana stone itself has circuits etched all over its surface, and even more inside. A dense web of twisting and beautiful circuits.

Okay, this should be enough for now. I stop and let my mana dissipate, exiting the deep focus I was in, to be welcomed by Tess sitting next to me.

"You broke the shield," she says, her voice flat.

"Pfff, as if I were that stupid. You can check it; it's totally fine."

"Hadwin risked his life to get it," she points out.

Fine, fine, I already said I'll pay him back. Darn it. Even I'm not that evil to destroy another man's toys.

"Nat, tell me, what level is your highest-leveled skill?" Tess asks.

Huh? Did you get curious? Anyway, it's not a problem so I tell her.

A long pause then hangs between us.

"I guess it makes sense, you being you... mine is 23." She then stands up, jumps from the roof we're on, lands softly on her feet, and rejoins the others.

When I return the shield to Hadwin, he instantly grabs it and sends his mana through it.

Oi! You'll hurt my feelings. Do you think I'd break it...ehm...do you think I'd break it twice?!

Biscuit, defend me!

Feeling my distress, the best doggo comes running and barks at the older man, (I require sustenance!).

Good boy!

"Why does it feel stronger than before?"

"Of course, it's not brok..." What? Stronger than before?

"Did you upgrade it?" He sends more mana through it and then tries to hit the wall next to him with the reflective barrier in front of the shield, "Oh, it really is better."

Uh oh.

"Sorry, I thought you broke it and yet you were trying to upgrade it for me. I apologize for suspecting you."

"It's fine," hehe. I quickly look around, trying to detect little Isabella and, as I thought, she is nearby. Her eyes are wide and focused on me. Her expression clearly says that she knows as she reads my feelings.

Dang it.

I lift my hand, showing one straightened finger. She shakes her head silently and lifts her hand showing three straightened fingers. Then after exchanging a silent glance, we both lift hands showing two fingers and she smiles.

I'm sorry Biscuit, I sold you out once again.

Hadwin uses the trap twice and catches two sparrows that are bigger than usual, allowing us to have some food after a long time. My piece is the smallest as I give half to Lily and then some to Biscuit.

Right now, I feel that my body is fully upgraded and ready for more levels of skills and more stats. It's not like now it's not a problem to dump most of my stats into mana and ignore constitution. Nope, this part is still a problem.

Another issue is the itching palm of my hand. It started a few days ago and it's getting more and more annoying, yet I'm still unable to detect the reason. I'll have to continue to observe it carefully.

The body upgrade just made me less reliant on food, water, and sleep, and I still don't know exactly how it works. The system obviously didn't give me detailed descriptions, but I did continue to observe my body the entire time, looking out for some noticeable changes.

There are none, or what is most likely, I'm not able to observe them at my current level of skill.

Nothing unexpected.

"Are you scared of me?" I ask Kim during a moment of boredom while both of us keep watch. It's morning and we're letting others rest a bit before we move the final stretch towards the wall that is now much closer, making us realize it's even higher than we thought.

"I...I don't know." he says.

That's a weird way to answer. You either are or are not.

"Partially, I understand that you won't hurt me the way you did to Cipher and Goldie, not if I don't try to hurt you first or betray you," Kim says cautiously, clearly still worried about my reaction, "But I'm still nervous and can't help it. It's not because I'm planning to hurt you, it's just..." He pauses and thinks, looking for the right words, "I'm scared that I'll make an unintentional mistake and you'll treat me like your enemy."

He looks at me. A young 15-year-old boy, someone with an inferiority complex because of his talented siblings and overreaching parent. In my eyes, he's still just a kid.

"It's scary, Nathaniel, you are scary."

I see, that's also a way some people see me, and I don't think the way he thinks is unreasonable or untrue.

"I'm not worried about what happened to Cipher and others. They tried to control Lily and always acted so arrogantly, and you didn't even see how they treated the natives," he shakes his head. "I think all of us have already gotten used to all this blood and stuff."

I remain silent and listen to him.

"But," he moves a bit closer and our eyes meet, and this time I do not look away, "Tess, Lily, and Izzy don't seem to mind, but everyone else? Sophie is always walking on tiptoes around you. Aaron and Dennis are scared of you, Maya avoids you, and Hadwin is very careful about how he treats you. You just seem like you could snap at any moment." Kim finishes his sentence.

"Thanks for telling me," I tell him.

This time it is he who nods.

He might not know, but I'm trying; I really am. I'm trying to stay patient, I'm trying not to cast people away, and I'm trying to open up slightly to some of them.

I don't even know what I am expecting from that, but I think that's something time will tell.