

Tutorial 161

Chapter 161: Giving a little push

That's quite a rude thing to say, Haddy. I just introduced you to the mighty Absolute – a woman with the ability to mess with the system and thousands of years of experience. Yet, you're talking about burning her and asking me a question with such a rude tone?

When I met her in her new form, I showed her the utmost respect, and.... hey, Izzy, what are you doing? Are you seriously going to burn her?

I quickly stand up and disrupt Isabella's mana which has already started turning into flames.

That was close.

"It's creepy!" the little girl complains.

"You can't burn stuff only because they are slightly creepy." I look at now-silent Lissthanial – an oval brooch made out of meat, skin, veins, and some hair – the thing is living and slightly pulsating.

Damn, maybe we really should burn... no no! I have to hold myself back.

"There is no need to be so creeped out. Say hello to Lissandra. Some of you have met her on the second floor. An older gray-haired lady who did collect so many of us."

Just saying that makes plenty of them remember, and from the looks on their faces, it didn't make them any happier.

So, I quickly give them a short description and warn them multiple times to not come too close to her and never ever touch her. They can learn a thing or two and if they are dumb enough to ignore my warnings they won't last that long anyway.

I leave them to play with Lissandra while I move a bit further from them.

Obviously, Lissandra isn't too happy about all of that and is mostly silent, but I'm sure she will open up! It's nice to make some friends. I'm also sure she will get super annoyed seeing them practice their skills and will offer some rude advice or two.

That's the reason why I took her with me – it's totally not because it would be too annoying to try to hide her, yup, totally not that.

"Are you sure it's safe to have her around?" Tess asks as she moves closer. I can feel her mana constantly monitoring Lissandra even as she talks to me.

"Yeah, I did think it over in the past few days, and I really think she can't do anything drastic. Her mana is low; she is limited by the system and unable to take over our minds or bodies. She can at most attack us." I pause. "She could kill some of us even with as low mana as she has, but I don't think she will do that."

Lissandra and I are similar, and even more so now that her imprint became somehow affected by me.

Obviously, I can't be absolutely sure. I know that I would try to cling to my life even to the point of breaking an agreement we have, but she knows the moment she tries something and I notice it, our deal is off. And she has a really strong impulse to fulfill her mission of giving me coordinates and making me stronger to be able to reach the real Lissandra.

I noticed that in the past few days while talking to her. It's as if the imprints base is its mission and everything else is secondary, even to the point of changing her behavior.

"Just in case, don't allow anyone to touch her. I'll be the only one moving her. Also, no one is allowed to talk to her one on one; there always needs to be you, or Hadwin present; otherwise, there will be consequences." I say the last part out loud, making sure everyone hears.

"Sophie can talk to Lissandra only when I'm around, okay?" I add and get multiple reactions that I already ignore, and then turn back to Tess.

"Does it sound reasonable?" I ask her, and after a bit of thinking, she nods.

"You don't seem to be affected by her, and everything you said is somewhat logical, so it's fine," Tess says, and both of us fall silent while looking at our group still gathered around the brooch, talking to Lissandra, who barely talks.

"Nathaniel?" another quiet voice sounds as Lily joins me and Tess. Her eyes flick between me and tall, athletic blonde Tess.

"Yup?" Am I not getting super popular? So many people want to talk to me.

"I think I noticed something weird," she pauses and then takes a deep breath, "I think there is some weird healing effect the closer we get to the blue wall," another pause, "it's not strong right now, but I can feel it. It's similar to my skill but weaker."

Oh my, so the natives were right? The closer to the middle of the city, the stronger the healing effect is, and near the absolute middle, it will be to the point of making people immortal?

"It might be the saint's field we heard about, but it's hard to imagine how powerful the saint must be to be able to cover such a big area, even though the effect is weaker at the edges," Tess says.

"Yes! It's super strong, I think. Maybe it's some item? You have a rare javelin from Nathaniel, Tess," for a moment, her eyes glance at me, and the look in her eyes is hard to translate, and she quickly looks back at Tess. "Maybe there is an item with a much higher rarity that is creating the field? I can't imagine her doing that constantly."

"She could be. It wouldn't be that hard for someone of a high level to have a high-rarity passive skill that radiates a healing aura. Or she could have something that constantly drains some of her mana and, with the help of her healing skill, radiates it. It could be an item, it could be a tattoo, or a construct. There are plenty of ways."

"Oh..." Lily says only that much.

She seems a bit down, so as I stand up, I compliment Lily for noticing the strengthening healing field closer to the blue wall. She smiles at me brightly while glancing at Tess. It all seems as if she is challenging Tess to say something or trying to show off in front of the older blonde girl.

I keep forgetting, but Lily should be close to eighteen years old. Of course, there are plenty of useless thoughts going through her head.

Having a feeling that she will cause some trouble in the future because of that, I flick her forehead preemptively before leaving her behind with Tess.

I take only a few steps and ignore Natssandra on the ground, stopping in front of the dark-skinned, athletic Maya. She is around 25, isn't she? She surely won't be as childish as others and cause me any problems.

"Tess asked me to give you a few pointers," I point at the small clearing some distance away. "Let's go there."

I notice that she enters her [Focus], which is much lower leveled than mine and possibly with different upgrades. Maya the nods and follows me, and as we walk, I notice that she is getting ready – stretching a bit, warming up her muscles. I can hear her breathing rhythmically as she tries to calm herself down and get ready.

When we finally stop, I notice that Kim is also nearby, and the boy waves at me, smiling apologetically. Behind him, two dipshi... twins are as well, watching, but the two of them avoid my gaze and look everywhere else.

I spend a few seconds staring at them, and in the end, I realize they aren't using [Connection] at all to talk amongst themselves. At least they learned that I don't like it.

Then Lily joined as well, increasing our audience to four people.

Dang it.

For a moment, I just want to send them all away, but all of them are super quiet, barely looking at us and further away from us. They are not even moving and barely breathing, and I don't feel them using mana.

It's almost cute how hard they are trying to not bother me but still want to watch.

"Okay! Fine. Just watch, you little twerps, but remember that it will cost you," I say, and they still do not move, only nod.

I turn to Maya while taking down my jacket. The third floor is still cold, so warm clothes from the system are something all of us have. They are warm but not as comfortable to move in.

After putting the jacket down, I start rolling up the long sleeves of my shirt until they are at my elbows. As I do so, I am once again reminded of the striking white paleness of my left arm, the same paleness Lily's restored left arm has.

I give Maya a bit of time, and she does the same, and soon both of us stand there observing each other.

[Focus], [Armament]. These are two skills both of us have; no one else from the group has them. I didn't give it much thought up until now, but Maya surely started with some nice skills. If it's as we think and we got offered skills that fit us the best, she can become really strong, which is also confirmed by the system throwing her into Hell difficulty.

"Focus more and do not move," I tell her, and she listens, once again without any words. The way her eyes calmly track me to the point it's almost creepy.

Is this how I look to others when having my [Focus] running nearly constantly?

I stop in front of her and I notice her body twitching, getting ready to spring up anytime and fight back.

"Do not move," I say to her, and finally, a knife forms in my hand, the knife I lift up and start slowly moving the tip towards her neck. I also enter [Focus], and I can see her breathing change; her chest starts moving faster, and the blood pulses vividly as it passes through her veins. She clenches her hand as well, but she is not moving. I reach out and observe her mana and realize that she is moving it through her body, ready to strengthen it at any moment.

"[Focus]," I repeat. I move my hand with the dagger a bit closer and then instead of using it I push her with the other hand. The entire time her eyes were glued to the dagger made of pale blue mana.

"Fuck, how can I [Focus] when you are about to stab me?!" Maya says as she slips out of her skill.

Wow, isn't this really awkward? Wasn't my [Focus] better on the first floor? Tess was right; Maya really needs a bit of help. How the heck can you waste such skill and use it so badly and get so easily scared by the dagger to the point of focusing only on it?

"Okay, change of plans, Kim, get your ass over here," I say.

Kim immediately steps closer, seemingly even happy to be part of it.

"You will take some smaller stones and will be shooting them at Maya while I spar with her. Only avoid her eyes; everything else is fine," I say, and that makes him hesitate a bit. So I add, "Can you do it?"

As if these are magical words, he immediately nods, and I turn back to Maya, the knife in my hand transforming into something looking like a stick.

I guess I will have to give her a bit of a push. I'm sure she will appreciate it... one day.

Chapter 162: Because of unexpected occurrences

"So you beat Maya, and that did help her improve?"

"Yup."

"Why do you sound so proud, Nathaniel?"

"Tess, look, we improved her [Focus] by three levels. She's also more used to getting hit, so she's not twitching every time something touches her."

"Nat, she came to me, nearly crying, asking me to stop you."

"Wow, does she have no pride? She's like 5 years older than you." I shake my head.

"It's also terrifying that her skill went up by three levels. I know how much she hates it, so what did you do?" Tess asks.

"She is dumb, anyway, it wasn't that hard. I just sparred with her and had Kim shoot some small stones at her. It helped her get used to getting hit and I kept doing that until she didn't have any other option than to enter deeper [Focus] to... to escape."

"I know that you probably know best how [Focus] works, so I won't stop you." even saying that Tess shakes her head.

"Good! You know, it's actually more fun... it's more productive than I thought! I can observe her and the way she uses her skills. To be honest, I expected her to be much worse, but she's not that bad, and the way she uses her skills is quite interesting."

"Why don't you put her against someone more on her level and only give her advice? Maybe Lily?" Tess asks.

"Oh, no, no, no. Nope. Totally no. Lily would tear her apart."

"... really?"

"Yup, if you aren't careful, Lily might get to Beyond earlier than you. Did you know that that silly girl already reached level 75 and used her upgrade token on a difficulty change token? She said she knew what I used it on the moment she got the quest."

"That might complicate things. Do you think she can clear it?"

"You might laugh at me, but I think she will be able to do it when she is closer to level 140, maybe 150? Her [Disintegration] and [Rejuvenation] are super, and I mean really super good skills. Damn, if I had them, I would bulldoze through the floors."

"What level were you when you entered Beyond?" After a short pause, Tess asks.

Hoho, competitive, aren't you?

"114, but multiple skills over 30. Right now, I am 124." I give her a short moment to take it in and ask, "What level are you, Tess?"

"102," she says shortly, but I can see that she is still thinking.

At this point, I'm sure she will enter Beyond the moment she fulfills all the requirements, even though combining two skills might be the most difficult one, so she might have to wait a bit.

"How do you like the body upgrade?" I ask her.

"Oh? That? It's as you said. I need less food and water, and I also don't sleep as much. Other effects are less noticeable, but even that is pretty amazing."

"Fair enough, the javelin I gave you?"

To that, she turns around and looks at the javelin that constantly hovers near her, even as we talk. The tip is pointing at the sky, and the gray metal shines ominously as it quietly floats near her. Tess is constantly keeping control of the weapon and making it float and follow her anywhere she moves.

At this point, it doesn't even seem to take that much focus from her. As I did, she also got used to her skills to the point it's not much of a problem to keep some running constantly.

"It's extremely durable and works surprisingly well with my lightning," another javelin moves a bit closer. It's an uncommon one she found here on the third floor. Similarly to the rare one made out of endurium that I gave her, it floats near her.

Not gonna lie. Tess looks extremely capable and cool, having two javelins constantly floating near her and doing all the fighting, talking, and other stuff without showing any trouble with keeping the weapons floating.

"Your dagger?"

To her question, I look at the obsidian dagger in my hand. The one I took from the goblin in Beyond's first trial.

"I like it. I already learned to strengthen its effect a bit by infusing my mana into it. There is a limit to how much mana I can infuse, but it flows through the dagger quite nicely, and the waste is lower than when I create a weapon from scratch."

I then move the dagger and cut my arm a bit while activating the dagger's effect, and I feel poison enter my body, immediately starting to limit my mana regeneration and making it harder for me to control my mana.

It's good training, if I have to say.

The goal is to strengthen myself against any disruptive bullshit as much as possible.

First, I will improve my hold over mana with Mana cycling Lissandra showed me. Then I will make it harder to do with the help of the dagger and by releasing some passives bit by bit until I'm fully capable of controlling my mana even without the help of the passives.

The next step is to practice [Resonance]. If my theory is right, I should be capable of changing the frequency of my mana into a frequency that would be different from a disruptive attack on my mana.

The theory behind it is difficult, and even Natssandra told me to put my mind to more useful stuff during one of our lessons, but hey, it's worth a try.

I stare down at the Alghoul that is held by four mana arms that reach out from behind my back and hold the monster in place two steps away from me. The monster continues to wiggle and try to get away while biting at me.

Its flames continuously try to corrode and melt my mana. An interesting ability Alghouls have, yet my mana is way too much for the poor guy that is barely level 100.

Yet, I continue to observe the green flames that continue to try to attack my mana arms.

At some point, I weaken one of the arms and watch the flames bite into it in an effect that is similar to [Disruption]. If I had to say, it feels like flames that are combined with [Disruption].

I quite like that, I like that a lot.

What if I cover my flames with a similar effect? Any dumbass fighting against me would get his face melted off by the flames that he thought his mana barrier and skills would stop.

Heheh.

Sounds good!

It's not something life-changing, obviously. For me, it's not a problem to disrupt opponents' mana and then use flames, but the constant pressure the flames could offer is nice, meanwhile, I use [Resonance] mostly in short bursts.

One of my mana arms moves and tears off the Alghoul's arms, the left one, obviously. If I have to suffer with my cursed constantly broken and injured left arm, so will this monster!

As mana flows before, the flames change the way they move, and their effect changes too as they start flickering around the place where I tore the arm off and start restoring it.

To that, I take a step closer and continue to observe the entire process while ignoring the monster that constantly tries to bite me, its teeth snapping close to my face.

This skill is too different from Lily's, so I hoped that I would be able to observe something, but even after a few days of bullying... of observing the guy, I didn't find anything. It feels as if there is something I'm missing, and it's starting to annoy me.

No matter how much I have Lily to help me, or how much I observe Hadwin's weaker healing skill or the monsters around, I'm unable to replicate it.

It feels like there is something else at play, something that I'm unaware of.

Whatever!

A notification sounds as four mana arms tear apart and kill the monster, and with a strong pulse of [Resonance], I stop it from restoring.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -I will owe whatever to whoever helps me learn a healing or regenerating skill.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Look who's talking! Just pick a healing trait or passive skill, lol.

Oh boy, do not remind me of missing out on them because of... unexpected occurrences, yup.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) -You have Grumpy, don't you?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - Yes, he has („> ˘ <>

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Wow, Noname really wants to dump the poor girl! Grumpy, never ever teach him how to heal. He won't need you then and will leave you behind!

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -He wouldn't do that!

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Probably, but don't you want to be absolutely sure? No one knows what this mana maniac is thinking about.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -Oh... that's...

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Oi, do you want to get beaten, Brainiac?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -I'm not scared of you! At this point, I'm sure the community tournament will never start, and it's not like I will meet you anywhere else.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - You will end up begging him to forgive you the moment the system announces the tournament.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Yup!

What a jerk.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Food!

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Oh look, Biscuit came here! Who's a good boy!

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -FOOD!

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Yes, yes, you are!

I close the community at that moment.

Okay, the healing would be nice to have, but currently, my constructs and passives, especially the reinforcement construct and Mana-Fortified Resilience, take a huge chunk of my mana and transfer it to body strengthening. It's at the point it almost isn't funny.

I'm sure my body is most likely more durable than Hadwin's when he activates his [Strengthening]. And then when I use Symbiotic Transference, the upgrade of [Redistribution], and use [Mana Infusion], as well, my body becomes strong to a terrifying degree.

Yup, with all of these things considered, I'm sure I could take on someone a few levels higher than me and focused on a melee build. That offers me multiple options, yet this one is secondary.

I delve deep into myself and observe my mana which is now, after an attribute upgrade, higher than ever. I reach out towards it, and it reacts to my thought and starts moving and circling the way I want. It strengthens my body, fuels my skills, exits my body, and changes shape as I want it to. Even with my passive and construct eating up so much of it, there is still plenty of it left.

So, it's time for another construct. Just one more before we gather some supplies and move beyond the blue wall and finally finish this floor.

The construct I will create will be something that increases control over my mana in case someone tries to disrupt it or take it. Something that will help me to keep it and won't allow any interference I won't agree with.

And to do that, I will combine my experience with disrupting mana and my newest skill - [Resonance].

I already have the structure in mind.

Chapter 163: 4th construct

"You can't hurt Soph!"

"I'm not going to hurt her."

"Lies, you really want to punch her every time you see her." The little girl squeaks at me while looking like an angry kitten.

Damn, Izzy, you are getting better and better at reading me. The problem is that your skill works with so little mana it's hard to block it. To be honest, it's quite fascinating.

"Do you need something from me?" Sophie says from behind little Isabella, who covers her older sister with her small body.

"I need you for a bit of testing," I say to her, and that makes her lift up one of her eyebrows in surprise. She thinks about it for a second and then taps the shoulder of her sister.

"Izzy, why don't you go and play with Biscuit?" Sophie says.

That finally makes Izzy hesitate a bit, and her defensive stance weakens, "I need to protect you! You are too dumb to do it on your own, Soph!"

That makes a gentle smile appear on Sophie's face, and she hugs Isabella from behind and gives her a small peck on her cheek, to which the little kid giggles, "It's fine, Izzy, I don't think he will hurt me without any reason, and you should feel it too, right?"

Isabella then looks at me and back at Sophie and sighs.

"Fine! But I will hate you if you do something!" she shouts at me before she heads towards where I saw Biscuit resting.

"Biscuit!" Isabella shouts, and then I hear a short, almost surprised sounding bark, and I see four human-like arms made of mana appear that start moving creepily. The doggo immediately tries to escape, just a moment after being woken up.

"Yes! Let's play catch!" the little girl says.

Oh, Izzy, I don't think he is playing. It looks more like he is escaping.

"So what was it?" Sophie asks. Her eyes are surprisingly calm as she looks at me.

I sit down and gesture for her to do the same, "It's quite simple. I will show you something, and I want you to check for mistakes with your [Manipulation]

"I'm surprised you are asking me, why don't you ask Lissandra for help? She seems to quite like you."

"I don't trust her," it's as simple as that. I do not trust Lissandra. Sure, I will take some advice from her, and improve my skills, and handling of mana, but I do not want her to mess with my constructs, not at all.

I believe she could give me some really deep knowledge, and improve them so much I would become much stronger. It's just that constructs are changes to my body. Circuits I barely understand at my present level. Who knows what a mess she could cause. Maybe she would be able to leave seeds of her imprint. Maybe she would be able to work around the system limiting her.

"Lissandra is out of the question when it comes to this," I say once more.

"I see. So why me?" this time Sophie seems to be slightly curious.

"You are the best one after me when it comes to manipulating mana. It's simple as that."

"And you trust me to be more reliable than Lissandra?"

"Nope, I just know I can handle you and that I'm much stronger than you. I can also notice your tampering."

"That's quite rude." even saying that Sophie doesn't seem to mind.

"Yup, so will you do it?" I ask her.

"As if I have any choice. But yes, I will do it if it means getting on your good side," she confirms.

"Good! Now, look at this mana stone. I etched a temporary construct inside it. It doesn't work right now, but that's fine. I just want you to check it and tell me if there are some messed-up parts."

When I give her the mana stone, she takes it carefully, and while still looking at me, she infuses it with her mana and then turns her full attention to it.

One minute.

Two minutes.

A sweat starts appearing on her forehead.

"T-this is crazy," she sighs, and when she looks at me, her eyes are full of emotion that is hard to read, "This is straight-up modifying your body. You would mess with your Mana Heart, and a mistake would affect it in a way that is hard to predict. You could easily end up constantly disrupting your mana flow."

"It's fine, I will deal with it somehow."

"This is not your first time; you already modified your body." Sophie says, remembering, "So you surely realize how crazily dangerous it is."

"Yes, yes. Now look at this thing," I put my hands on her and send my mana inside the mana stone, "Look at this and this part, they are the ones I'm worried about the most."

Her hand twitches slightly as I touch her, but then she also focuses her attention on the stone.

"They seem fine to me. I would be more worried about this part that should be connected to your Mana Heart. It's all weird." she squints her eyes a little bit while saying that.

"Oh, ignore that, it's fine. My heart is kind of weird. So how about this part?"

A short silence and I feel her mana moving through the stone. Her [Manipulation], is a skill including all kinds of manipulations. Manipulation of mana, manipulation of mana flow, manipulation of the body. The skill offers her some perspective I might not have.

I can probably do it without her; hell, I'm sure of it. But I want to be absolutely sure. Especially after the last time I tried to create a construct and nearly ended up the way undead Winnie did.

"I think you are right; this one is a bit weird. I don't have enough knowledge to say exactly what, but my skills make me feel that something isn't good with it," she points at the pathway and then at two more, "these ones are weird as well, it feels as if they are too 'sharp'?"

Oh? Interesting. I reach in and examine them as well, then I make a few small changes and send a tiny bit of my mana through them. I do notice a slight difference; the mana flows more naturally.

"This one is weird as well," Sophie says and points to another one. Even though she lacks the knowledge, her skill offers her some insight into this.

Then to test her, I make a mistake; I change one pathway in a way that would surely kill me if I went with it. It's a barely noticeable change, something I could easily miss. Then I watch her.

She examines the construct and finds the pathway I changed. It takes her a few seconds, and she notices the mistake immediately, saying, "Oh, this needs to be changed again. It seems super dangerous," as she continues to examine another part while I fix it.

After I fix it, she goes back to it and checks again, saying, "It seems fine now."

"I see." I say shortly.

We then continue for a few more hours, and Sophie is a great help. She points out a few more things and gives me more warnings. Stuff like: "A single mistake can kill you" or "I would not do that," or my favorite: "You shouldn't just go on and modify your body just a few months after getting mana."

No, you totally should. You can totally do it successfully as well! And I will do it for other people! My next construct will be for Hadwin. The older man doesn't know it yet, but I'm sure he would agree.

Just imagine, a bunch of people that I will strengthen with my constructs. By doing that, I will gain some experience and have them deal with annoying stuff like looking for food and water, killing weaker monsters, and building hideouts so I can focus on my own training and strengthening.

Sounds good to me.

But first, I check on Lissandra, making sure others keep their distance from her. During past few days she has already given a few good pieces of advice, and the one who spends the most time with her is Hadwin.

Just to make sure, I perceive him and the brooch for an hour and do not notice a thing, not a single whiff of mana from Lissandra and only some mana from Hadwin who continues to test his skills. I examine him a bit more, but I don't notice anything.

Seems fine. Now then, back to my construct!

I go to the place on top of the white wall where I get into position. Tess keeps a watch nearby. I close my eyes, putting my attention on my body and my heart. The process this time won't be as long or painful. I already have the design in mind, and I remember it, so I just need to repeat it on my body.

My [Focus] consolidates, and the world around me disappears from my mind. I only see my body, my pathways, and my heart that beats quietly intertwined with a web of mana that creates kinetic energy when I wish it to.

I am prepared. I've checked multiple times, so there's no time to hesitate. I immediately start working, and time doesn't matter anymore as I modify my body with the help of [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Infusion]. This part takes the longest, but slowly and surely, the construct is prepared.

Then I test it more, send some mana through, and examine the changes, not wanting the last time I did it to repeat. Everything feels right.

The construct is the most difficult I've ever created, and there are some parts where I'm not even sure how it works, so I'm only led by my instincts and my skills, with the help of all my testing.

[Resonance] activates to make the final changes, and it's ready as I connect it to my heart. First, mana starts flowing through it, and the construct slowly comes to life. The construct covers my entire body and affects my mana flow. And not only that, but it also affects my heart.

As many times before, I realize how crazy this kind of modification is, but I still push forward. This construct is something I need and something I will continue to improve in the future.

I do it because there are situations I do not want to repeat.

Finally, the notification sounds, and I check the text.

Congratulations, you have created your fourth Construct. The name will be kept as such and will be shown in the status under active skills and over passive skills. Well done!

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (construct): A protective mantle seamlessly integrated with the user's mana heart and body. Solely designed to prevent external influences from disrupting or hijacking the user's mana flow.

Chapter 164: Time to say goodbye

So, that's it. The fourth construct is something I would consider a huge success. The mantle takes around ten percent of my mana, which continues to change through the mana pathways that cover the entirety of my body.

I can turn it off or on when needed, but I decide to have it permanently running in the background.

Then there's the Reinforcement construct that takes thirty percent of my mana. The two constructs combined take quite a nice chunk of my mana, but the effect is a strengthened body and mana that only someone exceedingly powerful can take away from me. In the future, I will upgrade them further and tweak them, but right now, it's great.

In a good mood, I stand up and, after thanking Tess for keeping watch, I leave to give a few pointers to Maya and the kids.

POV Hadwin Harper

It's already night, and we can hear the wind from behind the white wall. Yet, the place where we are is nice and quiet, illuminated by multiple orbs that Nathaniel created and filled with some kind of mana fire. Some of them are bigger, and others are a bit smaller, but all of them emit a soft, dark yellow light and even some warmth against the cold air.

Nathaniel created them in a few seconds, and surprisingly, even after a few hours, they still emit some light and warmth. Weaker, but still present.

"For example, look at the orbs filled with thermal energy he created," Lissandra, the fleshy brooch on the ground, says. "Do you guys even realize that if he made them even slightly unstable, they would explode after a while and most likely kill a few of you?"

As many times before, Lissandra complains about Nathaniel. It's weird to hear that. In my eyes, he is exceedingly talented and daring, yet she seems to think it's not enough.

I yawn and look around. Others seem to be already sleeping, so I move a bit closer to her to catch some warmth from the orb that's near her.

"It's not like we have much choice but to push and risk it. You might not care, but a few of us have families back on Earth," the brooch listens as I talk, "Mothers, fathers, siblings, friends. They are still there, and if we are right, four rounds of the tutorial have already ended."

"You said you would be forcefully returned to Earth in five years. Doesn't that mean the first round was summoned 20 years ago and got out 15 years ago?" Lissandra says, and I know she is mostly polite. She is really smart, so I'm sure she has thought about it much.

"There are multiple options I could think of why we didn't notice anything," I yawn and move a bit closer. It's really cold outside. "The first one is that everyone died and no one got out of the tutorial. This one is a bit weird since there's an easy difficulty."

I pause, and Lissandra listens. She is quite polite today, but I don't mind. It's a welcome change from her grumpy self that slightly reminds me of Nathaniel.

"Another option is that there is someone policing them, taking all the returners under their control and not allowing them to do anything." I say.

"As if something like that would be possible," she says.

"I agree with you. Then there's also the option that the system has something to do with it even after the tutorial."

"This one is a bit better, but I can think of more," Lissandra interrupts me, and her voice, the vibrations she creates with a minuscule amount of mana, gets quieter.

How amazing it is to talk with someone who has lived for hundreds or maybe thousands of years. My only regret is that she seems to be an imperfect imprint of the original from the second floor.

"Time dilation. All the rounds will end at once, no matter when people enter. The first round could start and end in a few seconds after starting, and the others as well. Meaning all the rounds will get out in a short amount of time." When I want to say something, she doesn't stop and talks over me, "Yes, I understood that you guys heard about disappearances a few weeks ago already, so another option is that the tutorial summons people every few days and then lets them out all at once."

"What if everyone returns without their powers, and that's why nothing happened?" This question worries me the most. Like all of us, I've already gotten used to our powers and our bodies that now heal faster, feel stronger, and slowly heal all the imperfections and older wounds.

I once again feel like a young, energetic man and would have a hard time saying goodbye to that.

"Power given by the system cannot be taken away by the system." Lissandra's voice is now even quieter. At the same time, the orb near her starts blinking, and the area where it releases heat becomes smaller.

Weird, Nathaniel's orbs usually don't do that.

So I move closer to catch the head, but still stay careful not to get too close. Nathaniel warned us enough.

A silence ensues.

"Is Nathaniel really as talentless as you say?" I ask. It's something that bothers me a lot. Because if he is talentless, most of us are much worse.

In the silence, the light from the orb becomes even weaker.

When I reach out to push myself up to stand, thinking that she won't answer, she says something in a quiet voice, "He is not."

I pause in my movement and lean a bit closer, wanting to hear the answer more than any of the other questions I asked today

"He has great talent when it comes to mana." Her voice becomes even quieter as if responding to the light that also became weaker, "He could be considered one of the greatest talents back on my planet. Talented enough to become the apprentice of a Champion and maybe even replace him in the future, but that's it. He would have a hard time getting further with his talent alone."

The light becomes weaker.

"But that's only when it comes to talent. The little pup... Nathaniel... sometimes he terrifies me. The look in his eyes, the hunger and willingness to push himself to the brink of death. The absolute confidence he has in himself. He will either die young or reach places we thought were impossible."

The light blinks and turns off, and I feel something touch my hand and quickly pull it back.

"But it also inspires me. I long forgot how it feels to put your life on the line and push to the point of breaking apart. I want it, I want to do the same."

Then the light lights up again, and I glance down. The brooch is still the same and in the same spot, and where I kept my hand, the grass sways under the gentle light.

I let out a quiet, awkward laugh. What am I, getting scared by some grass touching me?

Then I ask another question.

My new construct? Good, very good!

I had Haddy try to disrupt my mana, and he couldn't do anything. I didn't even fight back; I just let my construct work, and Hadwin's attempts became a whisper in the wind, useless the moment they touched my body.

Sure, the mana outside of my body can still be affected, but the Mantle doesn't allow him to reach inside me and stop me from strengthening my body. I even went a bit further back and found an interesting duo of monsters. You know, those two mage hunters – Templar Revenant and Rogue Revenant.

Those poor guys were literally no match... well, they were super easy to deal with now. Sure, I made it last as long as possible, tearing them apart piece by piece, which helped me soften some bad memories I have of them hunting me for hours - all while I barely kept my body from breaking apart.

Ah, good old times.

Anyway, the Templar Revenant's disruptive skill didn't do anything. Nothing at all. I let him hit me multiple times. He was only able to disrupt some external mana, but anything beneath my skin wasn't affected at all.

It made me happy, almost as happy as kicking his severed head around. This will surely become one of my fondest memories.

I then spent a few more days giving pointers to others. Maya may seem reluctant at first, but when you push her hard enough, she follows through. I've realized that she's someone who needs someone else to follow to make decisions for her. Probably so she can blame anything wrong that happens on that person instead of having to deal with it herself.

That's why she so quickly joined Sophie, that's why it was so easy for Tess to deal with her when we got split on the second floor, and that's why I see some relief in her eyes when I tell her what to do.

The scary part is how thoughtfully she is following through. After some resistance, she just goes with it and even improves on the process, taking it a step further.

In the end, it's interesting to watch her [Focus] and see her calm gaze that takes in all the information and logically processes it before acting and improving on it.

Up until now, I thought that some members of Group 4 were weaker than others, with Tess, Sophie, and I probably being the strongest, and Lily showing massive potential. But I've changed my mind now. I think it's more that they didn't have an opportunity to shine and grow.

So, here's a question: Should I focus on my own growth or help them a bit more? A larger group of capable people can be valuable, and if they become stronger, there are things I could learn from them. On the other hand, there's a question of whether learning from them would give me more than training on my own would.

It's annoying to decide right away so I will keep doing what I do now and I'll see how it goes and deal with it later. It's another problem for future Nathaniel. Screw that weirdo.

I come back to reality and cut off my thoughts, turning my attention back to Lissandra on the ground. In the past few days, I did gather as much information from her as possible, along with some methods I plan to use in the future. Still, I try not to follow it all. I'll create my own way and gain my own strength. I won't mindlessly follow in her footsteps.

Lissandra teaches a thing or two to almost everyone in the group while sharing some interesting information they were curious about.

Now then, I should burn her before we move to the blue wall. Taking this thing closer to the highly regenerative aura of the Saint doesn't sound like a good idea. Not at all. I'm sure that if she gets there, she will be able to restore her body somehow and I don't trust her enough to allow her to do that.

"I think it's time for you to give me coordinates and say goodbye," I tell the brooch.

Chapter 165: Warrior of the last king

A quiet laugh sounds from the brooch. "So, you've realized it," she says.

I stay quiet. It's obvious that she would want me to carry the brooch closer to the regenerative aura of the Saint.

"Won't you change your mind? I could be a valuable help if I get back my body, even if I still won't have my mana. I believe I would be able to restore even my mana heart, given enough time."

The offer she gives me sounds tempting, but I don't have to think about it.

"No," my answer is short and final. I then throw the uncommon mana stone Sophie found, and I took it from her. It nearly lands on her, close enough for her to inscribe coordinates. "You can put the coordinates there."

"Aren't you too careful, little pup? Your behavior hurts me." Yet, I still feel her mana reach out and touch the stone. It takes just a moment, but then it pulls back to the brooch.

I create an arm made of mana to grab the stone. I then take five hours to examine it.

When I stop, my head hurts, but I'm quite happy with the result. There's no way I can use the coordinates now; I can't even understand them. But I transcribe them into my mind. I create something like a pocket for them and surround this pocket with the Mantle, which doesn't allow it to affect anything outside of it.

I need to do it this way, as I'm not sure if the system won't wipe the stone or if I won't lose it in the future.

Then I send kinetic energy through the mana hand holding the stone and smash it to pieces. I burn them as well and smash them again. [Resonance] fires up multiple times, and only then do I stop.

"That's too much," Lissandra laughs, and I feel her collect her last remaining mana. The tiny amount I wouldn't be able to use for anything. The amount is so small I wouldn't even be able to light a fire with it. Yet when she moves it, it feels exceedingly dangerous.

"I've noticed that you've sent others away. Is there a reason for that?" Her voice is calm and quiet, and the mana swirls around her. "Also, I consider it quite cheating that you came to me with so much kinetic energy already collected."

"I will make sure to deliver the coordinates," I say, and I mean it. She gave me something I've missed for a long time – a basic knowledge that I can rely on when I get lost. A knowledge I can use to make decisions faster and become stronger in my own way. And for that, I'm thankful.

But that's where our deal ends. I can't trust her not to try to take over my mind even though the system doesn't allow that, and I'm sure she would try to do that at any moment the opportunity would arise. She said that herself.

I transfer all the kinetic energy I collected while talking to her into thermal energy and make it denser, and more concentrated. Flames around me appear yellow but soon turn into golden ones.

"I know you will." She attacks me at the same moment my flames shoot at her. A short pulse of minuscule amount of mana, and the flames reach her, doing no damage at all. The brooch only moves slightly, as if in the weak wind.

Another pulse, and my flames disappear as if they never existed.

Three javelins I throw at her freeze in the air and just straight up refuse to move, making it look as if time itself stopped.

A wave of my kinetic energy destroys the huge area around her, tearing the ground apart, pulling the trees from the ground, and turning stones into dust. Yet, none of this touches her at all.

"This is how you do it, little pup," the brooch pulsates one last time, and a wave of mana hits me, destroying the armor around my body, ignoring my attempts to disrupt it, and pushing me back by one step. It doesn't even feel like an attack, more like a slap on the back of the head that a teacher would give to an inattentive student.

Then the brooch stops moving, becomes paler, and even its movement which seemed like breathing slows down.

All the mana the brooch had is depleted.

With no need for more words, my flames activate again and hit Lissandra, immediately burning her to dust. I continue to channel more and more energy through them and give them a few minutes.

When I stop, the brooch is gone.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, TheGuild) -Hm? Yes, there was a guy in our group who upgraded his mana attribute with an upgrade token he got on level 75. The poor guy literally exploded.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -I'm still saving my upgrade token! I need to get a bit stronger, and then I will most likely upgrade my attribute. I just need to be careful; our group also had a guy like that. Do you remember him, Lootenant?

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - Sure, I do. He upgraded his strength, and then his body tore apart every time he tried to move. The guy wanted to go with a low constitution and high strength.

Bard (Hell, IDK) - Yeah, I'm also saving mine. We heard about it a bit on the second floor. People there usually upgraded attributes much later, closer to level 150 and after careful thinking.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Noname, I bet you've already used yours on mana. How is it?

Should I tell them? They are people I might have to fight with in the future after we get back to Earth or here during the tournament. They seem friendly here, but who knows if it's just a front they put on? They also got into Hell difficulty, so they can't be normal people.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) -I recommend a high constitution or at least a (rare) passive that will help you deal with the upgraded attribute. That's all I will say.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - Thanks, Noname. I appreciate it.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Thank you, bro! It's better to be careful when even this maniac recommends it, lol.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, TheGuild) -It's a shame that the system barely gives us (rare) passives.

Bard (Hell, IDK) - Yeah, I've only seen two of them and...

Attention, a milestone has been reached. Entry into Irreversible Narrative Progression has been detected for all groups. In accordance, the Community Interface will now be deactivated for all groups within Hell Difficulty of the 5th round of the Tutorial.

The notification cancels, closing the community, and I close the window. Then I stop walking and look at the giant blue wall that towers high into the air, just a few houses away from us.

It looks like the third floor is slowly coming to an end.

"The same as before?" Hadwin asks as all of us stand under the wall, looking up at it.

Tess is near me, Kim is with the twins, Lily is near Biscuit, and Sophie is standing a bit to the side with Isabella. The only one staying behind will be the last remaining member of Hard Difficulty, the icy guy. I'm not surprised that he doesn't want to go with us, but I'm surprised that Sophie is letting him go.

(Food!) Biscuit shouts, and everyone turns to me as if waiting for something.

"What?" I ask, "Don't look at me like that; it creeps me out."

"Are you not going to translate what Biscuit meant by that?" Tess pokes at me.

The heck.

"He wanted to call Hadwin an asshole," I say.

(Asshole!) Silly doggo immediately repeats.

To that, Lily giggles, and even the boys seem to be smirking. Only Hadwin doesn't seem to be too amused.

"We won't need a platform this time," Kim interrupts and all heads turn to him. "I've improved a bit, so if you let me, I can make you all float to the top."

It takes only a bit, and everyone agrees. Then, when Kim's mana reaches me, I let it affect me while observing the entire process and the way he moves it.

Soon, all of us are lifted into the air after he makes us lighter with [Gravity Well] and then gently pulls us up with [Telekinesis].

As we're getting higher and higher, some people start to get nervous, but I'm enjoying the process. This is how I imagine astronauts in orbit around the Earth feel. It's a quite relaxing feeling, and it takes a few more minutes until we reach the top. Kim decides to do it slowly because of the scaredy-cats.

At the top, he pushes us towards the wall and slowly cancels the skill, letting us land gently.

Then the view of what lies behind the wall appears, along with us triggering some detection trap the moment we touch the top of the wall. For a moment, I track the pulse of the mana that is sent towards somewhere in the middle of the city from the place where we landed.

What lies behind the blue wall is the most beautiful city I've ever seen. Pearl-white walls of the buildings are adorned with delicate ornaments of blue or golden color. Hundreds, thousands of trees with vibrant green leaves. Fountains spewing pale blue water.

Even the inner side of the blue wall is totally covered by beautiful paintings depicting mountains, and green hills full of grass and flowers. All the buildings are in perfect condition, not a single one of them cracked or destroyed, and the roads and streets are lined with trees that would offer nice shade on a hot day. There are even gardens all over the place.

And then, there in the middle of the city, a simple tower stands. The tower is as tall as the highest skyscrapers on Earth, and its surface is without any ornament, just a polished white stone with lots of massive windows and giant balconies that oversee the city.

The top of the tower ends with a roof that seems to be made out of pure gold, and something reminding me of mana circuits adorns it. Even from this distance, I can feel the strong mana emanating from the tower.

I lift up my left hand, and resonating mana coats my right pointing finger. I make a cut into my left arm and then watch as it heals in front of my eyes. The speed of healing is equal to Lily using her healing to the fullest.

Just a few seconds after we landed on top of the wall, I feel a massive burst of mana from someone in the middle of the city. Through the air, a figure flies towards us in a blur, trailed by golden lightning.

It takes only a moment for that figure to reach us, and soon the man stands at the top of the wall.

He smiles at us warmly. He has blonde hair and blue eyes, a face that ten out of ten people would call handsome. The golden lightning lazily crackles around the man as he takes a step towards us and then stops. He is wearing shiny silver armor that is delicately adorned with blue ornaments of flowers. The armor is beautiful yet masterfully done. Slim, strong, delicate, and comfortable-looking, it moves together with the man, not hindering his movements at all.

Then, the blonde man looks at us, he touches his chest with his right hand and gives us a short bow before straightening up.

"My name is Edwal. I'm one of the three warriors of the last king and one of the protectors of the last bastion of humanity," The confidence he exudes makes him stand out even more, and he continues to smile gently at us, "Who do I have the pleasure of meeting?"

[Tempest Tyrant - lvl ??]

Chapter 166: Civilized

Okay, let's not send mana towards the man. Seeing question marks, he should be in the level range between 150 and 300. Sentient being with high stats and plenty of levels in skills. Something much more dangerous than a beast with mostly limited intelligence.

While Tess and Hadwin talk to the man, I continue to observe him with my eyes only and also examine the city behind him.

It's beautiful, yet I see no movement down there. Parks are empty, there is no one on the street. No matter how much I look, I don't notice anything. The city seems dead.

I feel the man move and hold myself back from attacking him, even though I collect more mana inside my body.

The man called Edwal appears in front of me, trailed by golden lightning. He moves so quickly it nearly looks like he teleported here. His face is so close I could easily headbutt him.

"I missed your name," he says as his pale blue eyes stare at me. He is still smiling.

"Nathaniel, it's a pleasure to meet you, the third warrior of the last king, Edwal,"

He laughs a bit, yet his eyes do not move from me. He is not even blinking, and his smile becomes bigger and bigger, "Pleased to meet you, Nathaniel," a short pause during which I gesture at Tess to not do anything. I'm sure Edwal noticed it, yet he doesn't do anything.

"I like the look in your eyes, Nathaniel," he says and finally breaks eye contact, turning to others, talking a bit louder now, "It's been a long time since we've had visitors from behind the wall!" The tone of his

voice is happy, "Even though if you got here from this way, it must mean you have killed his majesty's pet animals. Two wolves, deer, boar, and bear."

He pauses and scratches the side of his head, "I don't remember their names... it's been a long time..." he laughs again, "well, I stopped feeding them a few dozen years ago, so they've probably already died and been taken by Decay."

He turns to us, his eyes unblinking at all and his smile showing his white teeth, "Well, that's a bit annoying. His majesty really wanted to make Miss Saint happy and even built that garden so a few animals could stay there for her to watch," another pause and a giggle, "he even sacrificed one of the water sources to water the area and for animals to have something to drink."

The man is crazy. Totally gone. His eyes keep flicking around; he is smiling way too much, and the tone of his voice indicates he may snap at any time, "Anyhow! Please follow me," he says with a tone that leaves no doubt that we will do just that.

Then, unlike before, he starts walking along the wall, us trailing behind him silently.

Hmm, I think I can take him on. Should I do just that? It could be dangerous for some others, but with Tess as support, killing the man should be doable enough.

I think it over as we walk behind him along the wall. He is walking slowly, sometimes stopping for a moment, taking in a deep breath, and smiling brightly. Then he continues to walk again.

Let's do it. He is just a shadow. A fake of the person that existed long ago.

"Oh Nathaniel?" The man stops once again and turns to me. His armor shines as if there is a light landing on it even though there is no sun, and the sky is cloudy as always, with not a single piece of blue sky visible.

The man's eyes change, and he now looks somehow formidable. The handsome blonde man with piercing eyes. One of the three chosen warriors, protectors of the king and the saint.

"If you decide to attack me, I will ignore you and the girl bearing two javelins," he takes a step towards me, the smile gone from his face, "I'll focus on that petite brunette you often check on. The one that bears powers so similar to Miss Saint."

He pauses once again, moving closer again, "Then I will go after the little girl who has so much hot air around her and who continues to use [Empathy] on me. After that, I will kill the creature that reminds me of the dogs noble ladies used to keep. After the creature, I will tear apart that young black-haired boy who keeps looking at you as if you are his older sibling."

A hint of a smile appears on his face, "I won't do it with pleasure, obviously. I will do it only if you decide to attack me."

I don't say anything, and he continues, "It's hard to fight when there are people you need to protect, right? Trust me, I know that very well, too well!" He spreads his hands, and the armor folds around his body, "So let's be civilized, yes? There is no need to fight. You people are my guests until you get an audience with my king."

"I like the look in your eyes," he says only that, and then the smile reappears on his face, his eyes becoming less focused, looking at us without blinking.

"Yes, let's be civilized," I say and follow him, quickly joined by others.

Edwal leaves, saying that according to decorum, we will be let in front of the king three days later. Without any worry in the world, he disappears, only giving us a short warning not to leave the inner city. Otherwise, we are free to go wherever we want, with the exception of the tower.

The place where he leaves us is a giant mansion. All the buildings are made from bright white stone with attention to detail, making them beautiful. Even a simple column looks like it took dozens of hours to ornament and polish.

The mansion is surrounded by a giant garden full of trees. There are places to sit, and there's even a small river flowing through it with a few boats nearby.

Inside the building is just as luxurious and well taken care of. Everything seems new; there is no dust anywhere and not a single door creaks.

Yet there are no people.

The grass seems freshly cut to the perfect length, and the flowers are beautiful.

But there isn't a single animal around, not a single insect.

The entire mansion and the city with it are eerily quiet, and there is no wind at all.

"Fuck this place," Sophie says, and to my surprise, Izzy doesn't even complain about her cursing. She just snuggles closer to her older sister while looking around with big eyes.

She doesn't seem that scared; what Sophie did to her to prevent such overwhelming feelings from affecting the little kid and from causing trauma. Yet she seems nervous, to the point of starting to panic. The little empath must be feeling fear from everyone around her, the nervousness of her sister as well.

"Izzy," I say, and her big eyes look up to me. "Focus on my feelings," I continue.

Right after, I feel her mana desperately reaching up to me, looking for some feeling of safety, and I let it happen. Her eyes widen in surprise when she feels my feelings, and slowly she calms down. More and more, and soon enough, she even smiles at me.

"You good?" I ask.

"Yes, I am now!" she says, almost back to the cheerful devious girl that I got used to.

"Good, now then. I will be taking the master's room and taking a long shower. I saw something like that in there," I say out loud to this bunch of weirdos I ended up with. Just like Izzy, they are nervous.

But what is there to worry about? The feelings I let little Isabella sense from me were calm and expectation, the feelings I actually feel.

I do not worry. I'm not scared.

The shower was amazing. Feeling hot water on my body, the smell of the soap that is still somehow good, and then the soft towel as I dried my body was something I would exchange a rare piece of equipment for at any time.

After examining the way the water heating works - it is with the help of a few mana stones, I leave the shower-like room.

The clothes I used to wear, I burn in yellow flames, not caring about the marks the flames leave on the carpet and the wall. Then I spend half an hour going through the massive amount of clothes in the wardrobe room with a giant mirror.

I end up wearing simple yet expensive-looking black pants. A white shirt with long sleeves that I roll up to elbows, and a pair of somewhat comfortable shoes.

There is some stuff that can be either rat poison or hair gel that I take a little bit of and use it to fix my hair.

I then spend some time examining my image in the mirror.

The face I knew so well now looks different from before, and my figure has slightly changed as well. I also notice that there are fewer imperfections on my body and my eyes seem to have a shine to them, as if showing the inner power of my mana.

And my face... it's expressionless like I've gotten used to. The face that for some people seems distant, to others uninterested, to some arrogant. But I quite like it, it's my face.

Then I send my mana through the mansion and locate the room where most of the people are, and I slowly walk down there while looking around the mansion. When I notice paintings that show the blonde man who led us here, I burn holes into them or scratch them with my mana.

I enter the room, and the others look up at me.

“Oh, you are finally here. We just...” Hadwin starts, but then he trails off, at a loss for words. His eyes move up and down my body with something that I identify as surprise.

“Wow, Nat, that kind of clothing really fits you!” Kim reacts first with a smile on his face.

Lily is still not here, but everyone else seems to be already after a shower and in new clothes. Tess, Sophie, and Maya are wearing men's clothes as well, as they seem to be apparently easier to move in than dresses. Yet each of them took some effort to make them look a bit more womanly.

The boys and Hadwin went a similar way, and the clothes they are wearing seem comfortable. I even notice a few sets of clothes nearby, ready to be put into the bag and taken away. That's a good idea, I should do it as well.

“Sorry for being late!” Lily says as she opens the door and walks in. “I'm not used to this kind of clothing...” She then cuts off and freezes as her eyes land on me.

Poor Lily, bless her soul, is wearing a full-blown dress. A silly young girl dressed up like she is going to a ball or lunch with a noble. Her dress is simple yet quite pretty. Pale blue and without sleeves, showing her shoulders and her strikingly pale white arm that is similar to mine and that she refuses to fix the color of.

Seeing her so shocked makes me want to tease her, so I just utter, “So pretty,” and then I watch as she lets out a quiet squeak, and her eyes tick around, looking for help.

“Nathaniel, please, don't bully Lily,” I hear Tess sigh behind me. “Also, Lily, come with me. We will get you some more comfortable clothes.”

Chapter 167: Thousands of years

Lily and Tess leave, and I immediately take what seems like a super comfy giant armchair in the corner of the room with a nice view through the window that covers nearly the entire wall, offering a view of the garden outside.

Then I gesture to Biscuit, and with one bark, he starts running toward me, using two mana arms to jump himself up to me into the armchair.

For that, I get a rude look from Isabella, who tried to lure Biscuit closer to her so she could hug him and keep him close.

“Stranger danger, don't forget,” I whisper to Biscuit, and he tilts his head in a confused manner.

Then I continue to cycle my mana while listening to what others talk about.

It's mostly just some random stuff about the things they noticed in the manor and that they got to explore. Hadwin throws in a few jokes, and the twins and Kim laugh while also making some, all of them making fun of each other.

It looks like while I was showering and dressing, they did calm down a lot, to the point of enjoying the comfort of the mansion. It all seems surprisingly normal, nearly cozy, and I pet Biscuit and let myself relax a bit more.

When Tess comes back with Lily, who is now wearing clothes similar to the taller blonde, the petite healer girl refuses to look at me.

“Nat, could you beat that Edwal guy?” Out of nowhere, Kim throws at me.

“Oh, of course, he would!” This time it's Dennis who joins in.

“That guy wasn't even that scary, yes!” Aaron shouts as well. I think I notice the twins quickly exchange a few messages through their [Connection].

“Kim?” I say shortly.

“Yes?” he asks back while leaning a bit closer in my direction.

“Practice your skills the way I told you.”

“Oh,” he deflates but quickly grabs some weird box from one of the tables and starts heaving it while also trying to keep it up with his [Telekinesis].

The twins then quickly avoid my gaze, and I get back to just listening peacefully.

They don't need to hear that I believe I can beat the guy, but some of them could die in the process.

POV Sophie Martinez

“Yes, yes, we will steal the doggo from him,” I answer Izzy and hug her a bit tighter. Thankfully, she hugs me back, and I smile a bit, feeling her small warm body touching mine.

It seems like she isn't angry anymore that I refused to try to befriend Nathaniel.

While thinking that, I look up at him. The way he looks right now surprised me the same way as everyone else.

How to say it? This place, his clothes, expression on his face, seem to all fit together.

The way he lazily wears casual but luxurious clothes, with sleeves rolled up. The way he calmly looks around and sits in the armchair as if without a care in the world. The confidence that seems to radiate from him and his mostly emotionless face that sometimes appears arrogant, otherwise uninterested, or just straight-up calm.

Right now, Nathaniel looks like a young powerful noble. His confidence, the look on his face, and his clothes all combine into that image.

When I reach out to Izzy and send some mana to her, I feel that she is still using her [Empathy] on Nathaniel, and she is really calm right now. As if the young man's real feelings give her some sense of calm as well.

And I can understand that. I can understand why she, why the twins and Kim, why even Hadwin, Maya, and the all-powerful Tess look up to him.

The guy is a total asshole. Petty beyond belief, antisocial, cruel at times, and with a weird sense of humor. Yet he is powerful. Extremely powerful, and his confidence and calm attract others who are looking for some sort of safe haven in this fucked up tutorial.

And seeing him right now, I feel some of that as well. Nonetheless, I can't forget the way he looked at me with those eyes, after he had killed Cipher and Goldie and then went after me, all while under the influence of that woman's skill.

Then I notice weak movements of mana from him. He immediately notices my examination but only glances at me for a second, ignoring me afterward.

I examine it a bit more. He is creating thin threads of mana and filling them with some sort of fire energy or fire skill, then moving them through the air and slashing against the painting on the wall near him.

What is he doing?

I look closer and notice that he is doing it to the painting of the man who led us here. Edwal. Looking a bit longer, I spot that he is especially focusing on one place in the painting. The skin under the nose.

The thin thread hits that place and burns a bit of the painting, leaving a black mark behind, and there is already something like a mustache burned in.

“ ... ”

What the... I quickly shake my head, and to my surprise, even the corgi that lies on his lap tries something similar. A thin thread of purple mana reaches out from the dog. A few of them dissipate immediately, there's no fire energy, and they are much thicker than the ones Nathaniel creates.

"... you can't, Biscuit," Nathaniel whispers to the dog softly, but I can hear him by improving my hearing with mana.

"You are already powerful enough. I'll get scared if you get stronger...." He continues to say something else, but I already ignore him and turn back to the others.

"Oh, you feel calmer now, Soph," Izzy mumbles, halfway asleep already.

"Just sleep, okay?" I move my mana a bit, and when Izzy feels my intention, her own mana lowers her defenses, and I help her quickly fall asleep.

Then I hug her a bit tighter and return to listening to the others.

God damn corgi archmages. Seeing Biscuit do stuff like that after observing me and probably thinking that it will help him get more food motivates me to work harder.

Yes, when Biscuit rises to the top as the first Absolute from the earth, I'm sure he won't forget good ol' Nathaniel who used to feed him deer meat and pet him.

But that would mean no more booping his soft and cold-to-the-touch snout. He would not allow that, as I know that even now it annoys him, and he only tolerates it because I'm stronger and give him food.

And we can't let that happen!

Anyway, time to check the kitchen. Seeing how well-kept the manor and the city are, I'm willing to bet there will be some food in the kitchen.

When I stand up, Biscuit quickly joins me.

Oi, are you reading my thoughts by any chance? Why do you look so excited, Biscuit? Is there something you want to tell me? The best doggo on the third floor doesn't say anything, not even his favorite word: food. That makes me even more suspicious. But he looks too cute as he looks up at me with his eyes and stands on his short legs, so I decide to ignore it.

Disregarding the questions from others, I exit the room and once again find myself in hallways with floors of polished stone. I walk slowly on purpose because Biscuit's claws make noise every time he takes a step. They hit the floor, and in the silence of the manor, they are especially loud.

They sound really cute as he walks.

My [Perception] encompasses the entire manor, and I find the place that could be a kitchen on the bottom floor.

When we get there, I feel my excitement grow until I notice a young blonde man sitting there. The man I didn't see with my skill. Not even a hint of mana leaks from him and the armor from his body is gone. Instead, he is wearing clothes similar to mine, just a bit more formal and with a jacket. It reminds me of a suit.

"Greetings to you, Nathaniel, and to your little friend," he says with a smile, lifting up the glass in his hand toward me.

I do not hesitate and sit down opposite him, both of us sitting behind the table that cooks probably used to cut meat on or prepare food for cooking.

As if it's totally normal, he stands up, brings one more glass from the cabinet, and puts it in front of me. He then pours me what he is drinking as well.

When I grab it and take a sip without any hesitation, he smiles at me, his pale blue eyes shining in the dimly lit kitchen.

"How old is this wine?" I ask while taking yet another sip. It doesn't taste that bad.

"What do you think?" he leans back a bit in his chair and unties the top button on his shirt while also taking a drink.

"Most likely a few hundred years old. Either from before Decay or not too long after the start."

His laugh is quiet, and he doesn't look so crazy right now, "You seem to know a lot. Is it something you found out on your own?" he pours me more of it and for himself as well.

"It's not that hard to guess. The entire inner city is surrounded by some sort of field that I have a hard time deciphering, but it feels as if it doesn't only heal wounds, but also stops things like grass from growing, and food from getting stale, there is no dust either."

"That is some side effect of Miss Saint's skill," he drinks his entire glass and then pours himself another, "There are a few more after-effects, Nathaniel, but you might find out a bit more about them later. Probably. For now, you and your group feel free to eat any food you find and drink anything you find. I will stop by a few times to check on you. It's been a long time since I felt the need to eat food or drink water, and I take no pleasure in doing so, but I believe it would be fun to watch others do so."

I finish my glass, and when he offers me more, I decline, making him pour the remainder for himself and drink. Edwal then stands up, takes off his jacket, and rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, moving toward the dresser where he slowly washes the glasses. He then dries them with a nearby towel and then buffs them with another one until they are perfectly shiny.

Before putting them away, he giggles out of nowhere and throws them on the ground, shattering them into little pieces.

I do not react as he then grabs the broom and spends five minutes collecting them all, only to then scoop them up and throw them into the bin. He then, as carefully as before, washes his hands, dries them, unrolls his shirt, and puts his jacket back on.

When he turns to me, there is his ever-present smile on his face, "You know, Nathaniel, you were slightly wrong about one thing," he buttons up his jacket and then continues, "This bottle, all the food

here, the entire inner city, me, my two fellow warriors, and the mighty king. It's not all only a few hundred years old. You should count in thousands."

He then leaves quietly while wishing me a good rest of the day.

Chapter 168: Delicious food

I spend ten minutes going through the cabinets and the box powered by a mana stone that freezes the food inside it. Then there is another one that only keeps it cool, similar to a fridge.

All the food, all the ingredients, all the drinks, everything is perfect and fresh.

While throwing some meat at Biscuit, I examine the fridge and the mana stone imbued in it, along with the mana circuits going through the entire box.

When I'm done, I start eating all the food I collected and put on the table.

Dried meat that is aromatic, slightly dry, yet soft, and with spices that taste amazing.

Fruits that remind me of strawberries and are just much bigger and sweeter.

A drink that could be juice from god knows what kind of fruit.

And the sweets... I eat chocolate-looking stuff. I eat another chocolate-looking bar, this time with some nuts. I eat a small orb-like dish filled with something fruity.

Once in a while, I take a minute-long break and just enjoy the feeling of the food in my mouth with my eyes closed.

(Food!)

Yes, Biscuit, damn good food. Delicious food!

“Food!” I shout back at the dog.

(Food!)

“Food Food!”

(Food! Food!)

We continue to shout at each other, and obviously, that's when Lily decides to enter the kitchen.

For a moment, she stares at me and Biscuit as we keep shouting loudly, and there is a clear look of shock on her face. I decide to ignore it and just stuff my mouth with more sweets, chewing while looking at her and challenging her to say anything.

Instead, she just squeaks and quickly rushes closer. It takes her only a few moments to find and pick the sweet I already identified as the best one and put it away to save for later. Without asking, she grabs it and starts eating it.

“Oh... my god,” she sighs, smiling at me, “This is so good,” Lily then continues with her mouth full. Then, being as nice as she is, she leaves the room, and I can hear her calling others as she rushes upstairs.

I use the opportunity to grab things I enjoy the most and eat them later, just in time before others rush in. Even little Isabella is awake now.

Soon the kitchen becomes full of laughter and the smell of food. After just a while, Hadwin starts using some stove-looking thing and prepares a steak. He looks so happy as he carefully tastes the spices and puts them on the meat.

The boys are laughing and joking, poking each other and fighting over the best sweets.

Isabella is offering some chocolate to Sophie, which the girl eats with delight, making Isabella laugh.

Even Tess is smiling and talking to Maya and Lily, who look up to her while enjoying some treats.

The kitchen is so different from before. It's full of laughter and warmth that makes it feel smaller and cozier. So, I just sit there and observe the others while occasionally answering Kim or teasing Lily.

It's not something I would like to do daily, but it's not that bad, and I find myself enjoying it a little bit. Just a tiny little bit.

"Yesterday, you seemed in a good mood," Tess teases me while both of us stretch a bit, currently in one of the gardens on a clearing covered with grass.

I just straight up refuse to answer and continue to stretch and circulate mana through my body as well as perceive the entire area of the manor. This time I pay more attention. It was kind of annoying that I was unable to feel Sparkledouche the day before.

When we are done, I create a spear in my hands out of my mana, and Tess grabs her rare javelin, holding it similarly.

With just a short glance, we dash at each other, both of us somewhat limiting ourselves and focusing more on movements than pure strength or speed.

I dodge her stab; she dodges mine and jumps back, to which I quickly follow her, stabbing at her and then changing the direction of my stab.

Tess, instead of trying to move further back, steps toward me and flings my spear to the side using her javelin. She then kicks at me, which I dodge, and I stab at her again.

The spar continues for more minutes, and gradually we increase our speed more and more, the weapons in our hands turning into a blur as our bodies move swiftly across the garden.

Stab, dodge, kick, dodge, stab, stab.

Soon, we start adding skills to the mix.

Lightning starts cracking around Tess, and I strengthen my body with Symbiotic Transference. The attacks become deadlier, but it all feels fine, almost like a game and not a spar where a single mistake could mean a mortal wound.

After a brief series of quick exchanges, I finally get Tess to fall into my trap and stab at her, knowing that she won't be able to dodge but this time, I feel resistance, and her [Psychokinesis] pushes against me.

I take it as a challenge, and my [Redistribution] fires up, slowing down her movement to the point where she is forced to boost her body more. The red and white lightning crackling around her body becomes more visible and starts to feel dangerous.

At the same time, the air around us becomes colder as I start to absorb thermal energy while keeping myself warm with it.

Tess puts some distance between us, and with a piercing noise, the javelin flies at me. I tilt my head to dodge it.

The weapon then flies back at Tess, and I dodge it again, letting her grab it.

"[Declaration] is working pretty well," I stop there before getting too deep into it.

"Yes, I keep using it on the javelin, and I can call it back from longer and longer distances. And before you say something, don't worry, I'm thinking of more uses."

"Good," I cancel my skills.

"What about your mana? Any problems?" Tess asks.

"None at all. Passive is helping a lot, constructs are taking a big chunk of it, and the rest is taken care of with cycling. The annoying part is that I haven't had a chance to try it out yet."

"I bet you will have a chance before this floor ends."

"Absolutely... If you get to fight against Edwal, you need to be careful of his chest armor. It's enchanted, an artifact, cursed, or however you want to call it. There is some sort of connection going from the tower to the armor."

"That's quite interesting. Any idea about the effects?" Tess fixes her clothes a bit while asking me.

"I'm not 100% sure, but I think it improves healing even more," I show her my forearm and make a small cut with my mana-covered finger. The wound immediately heals, "If I'm not wrong, the armor boosts this effect to the point where he can regenerate his wounds nearly immediately."

"That could be annoying, especially if there are two more warriors like him, not even mentioning the king and the Saint." she points out.

"It will be fine. In the worst case, we will tie them down and let Lily use her skill; they most likely won't be able to heal that." I let mana javelin dissipate in my hands as I talk to her.

"Now that you mention it, we could have Lily try to wound us with [Disintegration] and check if it heals."

"We could if you want to risk having a wound that would never heal," I say.

Tess isn't dumb, so she quickly understands, her eyes wide open, "Do you think..."

"I'm not sure yet, but I have a suspicion that wounds caused by her skill might be extremely hard or straight-up impossible to heal." I still think that the petite girl's skill is much stronger than what she has shown up until now.

"Great, another thing to worry about."

“You can ask me for help if you really need it,” I tell her, and I genuinely mean it. I’m not such a leech to just sit there. Okay, maybe a little bit. But I’ll help if needed!

“There is no need to. You are doing pretty well, so just having you around deals with plenty of problems.”

Aren't I amazing?

“And, to be honest, you really suck at some stuff, so you wouldn't help much.” Tess smiles at me apologetically.

Dang it, you could've kept that to yourself.

I slowly walk toward the manor and decide to ignore Biscuit, who is climbing the outer wall right above the window. Eight purple mana arms extend from his back, and this time they are thinner than ever, more reminiscent of spider legs. The fingers on the arms are sharp and dig into the wall, and the doggo easily uses them to climb on the roof.

“Biscuit, Biscuit!” I hear from inside.

My eyes meet Biscuit's, and he doesn't send me a message, likely worried that the little girl might feel it.

I did not see anything, buddy. I continue inside the manor and enter the biggest living room, where most of the group rests or trains most of the time.

Here, I find every single piece of furniture floating in the air. Even armchairs and couches have people sitting on them. Lily, Aaron, Dennis—everyone seems to be enjoying it all as Kim practices his skill.

“Nathaniel! What do you think?” Kim throws me a smile, appearing proud and expectant.

It's too late to try to look more adult-like now, Lily. I saw you laughing and enjoying it like a little kid!

For a moment, I hesitate. Should I shout at them and tell them to take it more seriously? Or should I just let it go? After months within the tutorial, having a roof over our heads, nice beds, showers, and food feels amazing. Not even talking about this feeling of safety, however fake it is.

They all seem so happy, and relaxed, as if tension has left their bodies and they're allowed to act their age again. Act like the silly teenagers they are.

So I just hold it in and give a few pointers to Kim before leaving the room again. This time, I put more mana into my [Perception] and continue to monitor the manor more carefully while circulating mana through my body.

While doing so, I notice Sophie doing something similar in the room where she and Isabella are. Her detection, unlike mine, focuses on detecting minds. Yet, she continuously keeps watch, not even for a moment leaving her sister.

She notices my [Perception], and I send her something that feels like a nod, a short greeting.

It takes her a moment, and she replicates it and greets me back. Then, she returns to what she was doing before and both of us keep watch.

Chapter 169: Bag of silver color

"Nat, I think I might have fallen for Tess," Kim says.

What the heck? Why are you throwing such a bomb at me out of nowhere?

As if knowing what I'm thinking, the boy continues, "I can't tell it to Aaron or Dennis. They would surely tell her, and I don't know how I would survive that. But you, I know, will keep it to yourself."

Oh boy, should I ruin it for him? I might not tell it to Tess, but she is smart when it comes to this kind of stuff. I'm absolutely sure she has already noticed. Maybe even before Kim did, "It will pass with time," I simply say.

Kim is only 15 years old, and Tess is four years older. The boy is in puberty, so there is no surprise he is noticing girls, and Tess is... well, Tess. Tall, good-looking, and she has an aura that no surprise attracts the boys.

I glance at him, and his eyes are still on Tess, who continues to spar with Maya. Tess is moving swiftly, her figure looking nice even in the men's clothes she is wearing. She is nimble and moves with decisiveness while keeping a focused look on her face the entire time.

And Kim nearly drools.

Ew.

Anyway, I do not have the energy to deal with teenagers. Still, I continue to listen to him a bit longer before giving him a few more challenging tasks to train with. They are more difficult than usual and will likely take his mind partially off useless stuff.

Then, for the fifth time, I confirm that, no, Tess and I are not dating, and I'm not thinking of dating her. He mumbles something about good news for Lily, which almost makes me want to call Tess here and tell her about what Kim told me.

Kim probably notices that I'm at my limit, and he quickly stands up. Before leaving, he looks at me, "Nat... you can call me Min-Jae if you want," he says hesitatingly, with a look like a puppy left outside in the rain.

Oh boy, "Ok, Min-Jae, now go and practice," I shoo him away, yet he still looks happy.

"I overheard bits of your conversation," Tess says as she sits down next to me, and Maya does the same. They both grab towels and water bottles nearby, wiping sweat off their faces before taking sips.

"You didn't even have to listen; it's too obvious not to notice," Maya says and laughs, "But it's kind of cute."

Lately, Maya has become a bit more comfortable around me, probably thanks to a few pieces of advice from Tess. She's not pushing as much, but she also doesn't speak as carefully, as if I would lash out after a single wrong word.

"Well, all of them are still young, and now that we are in a slightly safer place, it's not surprising. Yet it doesn't make it less annoying," Tess adds.

As the two women talk, I just listen while practicing infusing my mana and kinetic or thermal energy. I shape them into orbs and keep trying to apply them to my skills. My goal is still to replicate alghouls' flames and infuse my flames with disruptive mana. It's surprisingly difficult, more so than I expected.

"Are they at least practicing?" Maya asks, offering me some dried fruit from a small pouch she brought as snacks.

I take it and, while chewing, I nod. "Kim... Min-Jae practices the most, but everyone else does too. It doesn't feel like they are totally slacking. They're just enjoying some free moments here and there while still being aware of our surroundings." I take another piece and inspect it before eating. Tasty; I'll have to find more of it.

"Oh, he asked you to use his first name?" Maya asks with a hint of surprise in her voice.

"Yes," I confirm.

"First name?" Tess asks as well, taking another sip from her bottle.

"Kim is South Korean, and they usually introduce themselves by their surnames. Kim is a surname, and Min-Jae is a first name. The order is switched compared to us. Usually, only family and closest friends call them by their first names."

"Oh, that's..." Tess realizes the implications of that.

Yup, it looks like little Kim considers me a close friend, something like an older brother figure.

Momthaniel, Brothaniel, Natbro, Natmom.

Hmm, how should I call myself now? And how the heck did that happen? I'm acting like an asshole most of the time, so why do so many of these kids look at me like that? They should be scared and do some fun stuff I can watch when bored, not annoying me.

Be ready to stab me in the back at any time, talk shit about me. Anything that would make it easy to deal with situations where... I stop, I shake my head. They have to be doing it on purpose after discovering my weakness. Devious little twerps.

Hell-difficulty people are all dangerous.

So why is it even my weakness? Is it because I had a kind of messed-up childhood around their age? Is it because their stupid naive faces are somewhat cute? Little jerks, all of them.

Anyway, back to Tess, who's staring at me, "What?" I ask her.

"Are you flying, Nat?"

"Not really, just floating," I answer and continue to focus on keeping myself afloat with kinetic energy generated by my heart. I move it delicately and keep releasing it gently, instead of using force like the way I did up until now.

"Seems difficult," Tess says and moves closer to the edge of the roof, sitting there with her legs hanging over the edge.

Meanwhile, I'm floating just a bit in front of her, above an empty space around three stories going down beneath me. Yes, it's difficult, but don't I look graceful? It's time to improve; I can't continue using my poor man's version of flying forever.

"Lily was asking for you. Kim too, even Hadwin," she said, tilting her head slightly. I feel her mana reach out to me, and she starts to observe what I'm doing to keep myself afloat.

I let her and respond, "There are two days remaining until we meet with the king, so I plan to train a lot and on my own. I slacked off quite a bit the first day and helped everyone."

"I see," Tess's mana continues to observe me, and I sense that even her [Psychokinesis] joins in. "I guess it's better if they don't rely on you that much and practice on their own. You can't be here forever giving them pointers."

"Something like that. Primarily, it's super annoying," when I say that, Tess lets out a short laugh, and I continue, "and they should be mastering their skills. Only getting advice from me might help in the short term, but in the future, it will hurt them." I send a bit more kinetic energy out and let myself float a bit higher while moving slightly from side to side. "Sure, I will share some good stuff if I feel like it, but there is a limit to it."

I pause as my senses catch something. "Edwal is coming," I say to Tess and then land on the roof next to her.

Then we wait as from far in the distance, golden lightning cracks, and we see Edwal flying through the air. No, it's not flying, he lands on the ground, and then, without causing any damage to the cobblestones, he jumps through the air so quickly and far that it looks like he's flying. He does it a few times, jumping from roofs, roads, and even from some common areas, and with shining armor around him, the young blonde man lands on the roof just a little bit near us.

"Hello, Miss Hansen, Nathaniel," he greets us almost as if we're friends and smiles at us.

I then feel a pulse of mana from him as he quickly detects everyone else in the house and then turns to us. "Well, I just wanted to say that I'm disappointed, quite disappointed," he takes another step toward us and then hands us a bag of silver color, a ball big enough to fit a watermelon in.

At the bottom of the bag, blood is leaking through and dripping onto the roof, "I did not expect any of you to try to escape," he is still smiling, but the aura around him is more dangerous now, and even his eyes seem saner, "To be honest, I'm quite surprised you were able to escape my detection and cross the wall without triggering an alert, but that's it," he throws the bag at me, and I catch it.

Then I also send my detection through the manor, locating everyone inside. I open the bag and pull out the head of a dead man, the last remaining member of hard difficulty, Icy guy.

I put the head back inside the bag and then burn it with a continuous dark yellow flame, "I would like to tell you that this man didn't come here with us, and we left him behind, in between the white and blue walls. At the place you called the garden for your king's pets," I inform him, and I feel Tess immediately calming down.

The handsome blonde man then stares at me for a long moment and smiles again.

I don't know why he went to that place, but I do know that he is not normal. His eyes are absent as he looks at me. He is trying too hard to not admit to himself that he screwed up. He doesn't want to admit that his mind is on the verge of breaking after thousands of years in this place and that some details he just keeps forgetting or not putting together.

Edwal is still smiling, as if the simple act of forcing his lips to twist into a smile makes him feel slightly better, "It doesn't matter that much. He was dealt with anyway."

Golden lightning starts crackling around his body, and he bows with his right hand on his chest. "Miss Hansen, Nathaniel." When he straightens up, he jumps far into the distance, lightning trailing behind.

But I do notice that this time, he is using more energy and less effectively. He is moving it more aggressively, and there are also some cracks on the roof he jumped from, unlike when he got here before.

Chapter 170: Camaraderie

Yeah, Sparkledouche is bonkers. Gone, not that well. He said adios to his sanity and jumped over the cliff. He locked it and threw the key away. No matter how much he tries to cling to what I guess is life from before the Decay, he is not normal.

I don't know if it's caused by the Decay or by thousands of years of life, and to be honest, I do not care that much. He is someone that we will need to deal with.

I spent an hour running around the inner city. I practice my poor man's version of flying, but I also try to look for any signs of life. There are none. I also didn't find any burial grounds, no skeletons, no corpses. I try to check the tower as well, but the moment I reach out towards it with my mana, I get attacked by something that felt like a slap for sticking my nose where I should not.

So my current suspicion is that only the king, Saint, and three warriors remain, and they were like this for god knows how long.

The last people from the old order clinging to life in their beautiful yet so sickeningly fake city.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. But it doesn't matter. The objective of the Floor quest is clear: Put the saint to final rest, and I will do just that. It doesn't matter if it will finish this place, destroying the barrier that keeps them safe against Decay.

There is also the option of staying in this place for the remaining 5 years and then getting summoned back to Earth. It's something that I already refused.

I need to push ahead, get stronger, and not be held back by some pity for the shadows of the people who are most likely already dead for thousands of years.

Now then, back to theorizing. I was once again thinking about my trait. A trait is something I got on the first floor, and humans can have only 3 traits with the possibility of strengthening each of these traits. I already strengthened mine once.

Mana Circuit (Passive) This integrates a network of mana channels throughout the user's body, optimizing the distribution of mana and amplifying the power of their mana-based abilities without additional mana consumption. This enhancement allows the user to draw upon their mana more efficiently, resulting in more potent spells and abilities while reducing overall mana expenditure.

I'm still quite happy with it as I've noticed plenty of times the difference between my handling of mana and the handling of mana of others. Of course, [Mana Manipulation] helps a lot, but the trait is also important.

Currently, I'm looking at the trait as some sort of strong passive that is possible to upgrade. Up until now, I didn't see any way of upgrading passive skills other than the upgrade token which seems to be super rare, and I wouldn't be surprised if I don't see that upgrade token ever again.

So, the trait is a passive that is possible to upgrade, but right now, It feels weak. I mean, you can have only 3 of them, so they better get stronger in the future. But to be honest, even the current Mana Circuit trait feels stronger than the rare-graded passive, Mana Flow, that I got some time ago. So maybe they are not that bad?

Another theory is that traits are changing the body while passives are just using possibilities that already exist inside the body. More observation is needed.

I return back to reality and start listening to the others inside the living room, which all of us occupy late at night. The room is lit by a few dim lamps only, and there is plenty of food, seats, and drinks on the table. Even the mood seems decently nice.

I'm sitting in the corner in a massive armchair that I declared mine, and Biscuit is here as well, for which I'm rewarded with a few glances from Isabella. I also think that she used her fire skill to pull some warmth from the air around me in a similar way I do with my skill.

Instead of disrupting her attack, I just turn some kinetic energy of my kinetic mana heart into thermal and send it through my body, feeling a nice, comfortable warmth spread through. Biscuit seems to like it as well and snuggles closer, his eyes still closed.

I reach out and flop his ears a few times and pet his head, to which he breathes out gently and continues to sleep.

Mine.

"Want some?" Tess, who's split from the group, gives me a glass filled with some drink. "It doesn't contain a lot of alcohol and it tastes really nice. No idea though what it is." She shrugs her shoulders, and I take the glass, taking a sip.

"Mmm, I like it."

"I will bring you more," Tess smiles at me.

Before she leaves, I stop her, "Tess, some time ago you told me that I have changed, but I think you've also changed a little bit," I say quietly while using [Resonance] to make sure no one behind Tess hears it.

She pauses for a moment, and I can see that she's thinking, "Maybe? Or maybe it is easier to be myself," she continues to look at me. Her mana reaches out, and she also adds to my [Resonance] with her [Psychokinesis], totally isolating us from the others.

I'm sitting, and she stands just a bit in front of me.

"You know about camaraderie in the army, Nat?" she starts, and I shake my head, so she continues, "In the army, some soldiers on active duty, the ones we send to fight outside of our country, often spend a lot of time together. They fight, they risk their lives, and they learn to trust each other. It takes a while, but camaraderie builds between them. They eat together, they talk together, they fight together. They rely on each other; they all go through the same experiences, and that's what connects them."

She moves a bit closer, squats, and starts poking Biscuit's belly while still looking at me. "From what I've heard, for these men, it feels like everything they do matters. They feel alive, they feel companionship. It's like they fit somewhere and people need them."

Biscuit opens one eye, and seeing it's Tess, he closes it again.

"The sad part for some of them is having to return back. Leaving their brothers in arms, and going back to their old lives. It's safe, they don't have to fight, they are not scared of some random attack, but there is something missing. The relationships they now have feel so weak, so fake, so shallow in comparison to the ones forged in life and death situations."

Tess stands up and smiles at me, "So, Nat, you might not feel it yet, because you like to avoid people, but it's different for me. This place is dangerous, and I could die at any time. And yes, it would be much safer if I just stayed with you. The two of us could easily climb the floors and survive the tutorial and Beyond. I know that. But Nat, I'm starting to feel like I care for others. Kids, Maya, Hadwin, and even Sophie. No one is normal, and some of us are murderers. We don't even trust each other yet." She moves a strand of her blonde hair off her face, and her eyes feel like they are piercing me, "But I, too, am not without any mistakes. I want to befriend them, and I want us to go through this adventure together. Through this dangerous, at times sad and shitty adventure."

Tess then leaves, her skill stops blocking the sounds, and I'm left sitting there and thinking.

As for her decision, it's up to her either way. She can do whatever she wants and then deal with consequences or be happy with results. And me? I'm not good at this so that's for future Nathaniel to deal with. Step by step.

Soon they become too loud for my taste, so I stand up and leave. Time for a nice warm shower before I get to sleep for an hour or two.

POV Sophie Martinez

The moment Nathaniel leaves, I notice that Lily's mood becomes a bit less cheery, and the look in her eyes changes a bit as she looks at Tess, who is already sitting with us after talking with Nathaniel. I would like to know what they talked about that they needed to combine two skills for us to not hear, but it seems that Lily is even more curious.

"Are you sure you are not dating Nat, Tess?" Lily asks.

Oho, this is interesting. It's been a while since I listened to some relationship drama. My ears perk up, and I pay more attention to them. After days when we could die at any time, this feels refreshing. Currently, there are only Maya, Tess, Isabella sleeping with her head on my lap, and Lily. Hadwin and the boys left soon after Nathaniel.

"Lily, you don't have to worry. As I said, there isn't such a relationship between me and Nat."

My gaze switches back to Lily, who pouts slightly. "I am not worried or anything, Tess," Lily says.

At that moment, Tess reveals a bit of her sometimes cheeky side and pokes at the younger girl, "Maybe I'm more interested in someone else, Lily." As Tess says so, her eyes change a bit, and her smile becomes... dangerous.

Tess is tall; her hair is a beautiful shade of blond, and her contours are sharp. And as she stares down at Lily, I can say without hesitation that Tess is pretty. It's not a traditional beauty, but she is.

Maybe it is the alcohol we are drinking that makes all of us a bit more open and in control of ourselves, but I'm starting to enjoy it. The stuff we drink must be special to cause this to us even though our strengthened bodies.

"Tess?" Lily seems almost scared as Tess reaches out and caresses her chin.

Tess then laughs shortly and stops, "Sorry, Lily, I had to tease you a little bit. I hope you don't mind." Her eyes seem to be smiling even as she says so.

"What do you even see in Nathaniel, Lily?" Maya joins the conversation. She is the oldest one among us and probably the most experienced when it comes to relationships.

"He is handsome," Lily says shortly.

What?

"And the look in his eyes when he gets serious. It's like he is looking down at the entire world and challenging it. It's hot."

What, what, what?

Unknowing what I'm doing, I straighten up my posture and listen carefully. Is the girl I thought fell for Nathaniel because he saved her from being thrown at Cinderbear just going after his looks? Sure, he is somewhat handsome, especially now when he is wearing these clothes that fit him so well, and his face becomes somewhat softer when he is in a good mood.

But really? That guy is a maniac.

"Lily, stop joking and do not tease Sophie that much," Tess giggles and turns to me. Maya joins as well, and Lily looks at me, her eyes shining deviously.

What?

"You have to be careful, Sophie. Innocent little Lily might not look like it, but she can be quite cheeky at times. You will get used to it." Tess says.

Lily is sitting here, smiling slightly, but I remember the look in her eyes when she talked about Nathaniel and the way she looks at him. Are you really sure she was joking, Tess?

Then the conversation continues, and I notice how carefully Tess manipulates it. She is friendly but not too nosy, and she leads the conversation to things that are easy to share or smile at while avoiding dangerous topics.

It's not like distrust between us has disappeared or as if we became best friends, not even friends. They still seem distant because of what I did before and because my skill that makes them nervous, but the atmosphere between us feels slightly lightened, just a bit.

I notice myself joining more and more in Tess's carefully controlled conversations.

After another thirty minutes I catch myself smiling and only then do I realize how much I missed pointless conversations like this.