

Tutorial 171

Chapter 171: The Tower

“So I do it like this,” Lily lifts up her hand, and in the shine of white light, her pinkie disappears. At the same moment, I feel mana in her body rise up, even if only slightly.

I'm not jealous at all, not even a little bit.

What she did now is [Sacrifice] her finger to raise her mana a little bit. Her skill allows her to do that and probably more. She can regrow the sacrificed finger, and it will cost her more mana than she gained from it, but the main advantage is that she can get mana immediately when needed, even if she is out of her reserves and catch an unsuspecting enemy by surprise.

Heck, she can sacrifice her entire arm to get much more. In the future, she might be able to sacrifice items or even people... okay, this is getting weird, but there are so many options.

“Lily, that's cool as heck,” I say honestly, and the petite black-haired girl laughs.

“Right?” she says. “It doesn't even hurt, so that's another bonus. I'm currently trying to apply it to strengthening my skills instead of turning it into mana.”

“Good idea. Also, just by the way, aren't you getting a bit taller?”

“Oh, you noticed! Do you remember when I told you that I was able to make my arm a bit stronger as I restored it? I did something similar, and I'm slowly making myself taller.”

“Oh, that's a shame. I thought you were cute as you are,” I say absentmindedly while also thinking about the ways I would use her [Sacrifice].

Puppies, kittens, and other animals are all cute when they are small. I bet even the Cinderbear would look cute as heck if he was as big as Biscuit. If Lily grows taller, pinching her nose and teasing her won't be as much fun.

“Anyway, continue doing what you do. I will go and practice on my own for a bit,” I wave at her before leaving.

“I won't mess with my height anymore!” I hear her shout as I leave the room.

“This is what we found. Edwal saw us looking around and taking stuff, but he didn't seem to mind at all, so we went all around the city looking for blacksmiths, armories, and places like that,” Hadwin points at a bunch of weapons and armor on the ground. Every single one of them is of an uncommon rarity at most; nothing higher.

“Edwal's armor seems to be rare or most likely even higher, and there might be good stuff in the tower, but the city is either cleared, or it's limited by the system,” Hadwin scratches his hand while turning to me.

“Well, it's something, so just take whatever you want,” I say, and to be honest, I'm quite disappointed. I expected some great loot, maybe even mana stones which I could observe, yet everything is just uncommon.

“As for other stuff, we already packed a lot of food, clothes, some valuables, and we split them into multiple stashes that we put all over the city—some closer to the wall, others closer to the tower,” Hadwin says.

Yup, that's how we spent our time. Well, Hadwin and Tess did. I wasn't joking when I said I would just leech off them while only practicing. Anyway, the idea is to gather food, water, clothes, and small but super valuable items like jewelry and have them prepared. Then we can take them to the 4th floor. Maybe we will need food, or maybe we can sell valuables to buy nice stuff on the 4th floor. We don't know yet, but it's nice to have such options.

The stashes are big but easy to throw through the entrance with our strengthened bodies. Damn, now that I think about it, we could be super rich, looking at the stuff we stole from all over the empty city.

It was Hadwin's idea, and I confirmed that there shouldn't be a problem with Edwal, “How are you progressing with your skills?” I ask him. Maybe I can offer him a piece of advice or two. I really like that he came up with the idea of collecting all these things.

“Tess already told me about the training regimen you recommended, and even though it sounds weird, it works surprisingly well. It helped me focus my skill on smaller parts of my body. I can now save some mana, and the practice improved my activation speed.” the older man says.

Yup, Hadwin's [Strengthening] skill allows him to strengthen anything he holds and his body—his skin, muscles, bones. All this kind of stuff. He decided to focus on this skill and on his weaker self-healing skill. This combination is slowly turning him into a really durable man.

Heck, if he gets good armor, and on top of that strengthens it, and also makes his weapons durable while improving his self-heal? Hadwin might be close to impossible to kill.

He also got an upgrade token and is saving it a bit. With the information we shared, he decided that he will reach level 100, get his body upgraded, and then use the upgrade token to enhance his Constitution.

Love the idea. A more durable Hadwin means I might actually be able to try creating some constructs for him. I could learn so much, and it could make him even more tied to me and cooperative. It's not much of a bother, and I can gain a lot, so I don't mind.

Hadwin is also capable when it comes to dealing with people and has good ideas. Obviously, I still don't trust him fully, but right now, I'm much stronger, so it's quite a bit easier to treat him somewhat... gentler when I know he is almost no threat to me.

Another thing is that he understands my priorities. For example, if someone ever came and forced me to pick between my sister, Victoria, or the entire group 4, I would save Victoria without any hesitation.

I think I wouldn't like it because some of the members have kind of grown on me, but I still know who is more important to me, and I think most people are like that. It's just that I'm more honest with myself or weird enough to think about such stuff.

Anyway, if I get strong enough, there won't be any need for such bullshit situations. I will just do whatever I want, and it will be me screwing over some pother guy.

“I will go. I have some training with Kim, and then we will be going through a few more buildings that seem interesting.” Hadwin picks the bag from the ground as he says so.

“Sure, just do whatever Edwal tells you, and do not piss him off. He seems like he is about to snap at any moment.” I warn him.

“Totally, I already noticed it.” Hadwin leaves, and I get back to my training. I'm carefully weakening my passive that fortifies my body the more mana I have, and I'm trying to take control of my recently doubled-up mana pool.

Unlike back on the first floor, I know much better what to do, and with the help of Mana Cycling, I rush mana through my body and continue to improve my hold over it.

I practice, enjoy the shower, eat some hidden sweets, and practice more. I do not join others anymore, staying closed in my room, and continue to working on my skills. The day and a half passes like that.

It's enjoyable as always. I put in effort and get rewarded, either by learning something new or by notifications. My level itself doesn't increase, but it doesn't matter. My mana doubled so that itself is like over 100 levels.

So I work on getting used to this power. I would like to go for another round of active tempering, but I can barely handle my mana when I weaken passives or constructs, so instead, I just slow down.

I continue to improve my control over what I already have.

I check my stats after a long while.

[Name:Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty:Hell Floor: 3 - Saint's Eternal Bastion

Time left until forced return:4y 231d 23h 33m 16s

Traits (1/3):Mana Circuit (Passive)

Lvl 124

Strength: 46

Dexterity: 43

Constitution: 115

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 372 + 372

[Primary Class: Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class:Unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus Consolidation) - Lvl 34

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 37

Perception - Lvl 32

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 35

Armament - Lvl 32

Mana Surge - Lvl 24

Mana Infusion - Lvl 26

Resonance - Lvl 19

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Kinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Tokens:

[Beyond Difficulty entrance token]

There are no new side quests and the only thing that's left is to wait, and I do just that. The silence of the big room feels refreshing after a few days of helping other members of the group or just talking or listening to them.

So the last night in the manor, I do not sleep and continue to move my mana while the room is lit only by a few orbs that I keep moving around and filling with bits of thermal energy. Soon two become five, five become ten, and then I end up with around one hundred of them.

Some of them are smaller, and others are bigger, all of them glowing in a similar dark yellow color that lights the room as they float around.

At some point, I pull them all towards me and join them into a single orb as big as a basketball. I push, and the ball becomes smaller, and the light starts changing a little bit. The big orb shrinks and becomes as small as a golf ball, the color turning golden. The thermal energy is lazily swirling inside and emitting pretty light while threatening to explode at any moment. It's not radiating any heat anymore; instead, all of the energy is stored inside.

Without any hesitation, I resonate mana along my finger and cut into my belly, and before the wound heals—under the influence of the saint's aura—I push the orb inside. Then the wound closes, and the orb stays in the space between the organs.

I shift my Mantle a little bit to cover it, then I sacrifice part of my [Focus] to keep [Resonance] surrounding the orb while turning the kinetic energy my heart generates into thermal energy and feeding it to the orb. Another part of my [Focus] then puts a hold on the orb and keeps it from exploding as I feed it more and more energy.

I do it through the night. I continue even through the morning, and when Edwal comes to take us to the tower, the small ball is filled to a terrifying degree. Yet I continue even as we walk through the streets and toward the tower.

The tower is even more imposing up close. Tall and seamless, with a lone door at the bottom. The door opens, and another man steps out. He introduces himself as Aias, one of the three warriors of the last king, the same as Edwal. Aias is much taller than any of us, easily towering over us and looking down at us. He is also wearing armor similar to Edwal's, but I don't feel the same connection Edwal's armor has toward the tower from his. Instead, the sword on his waist has such a connection. A beautiful silver blade with simple ornaments. Simple but deadly-looking.

We enter the tower, and the doors slam shut behind us.

Chapter 172: The last king

The third and last warrior we meet inside the tower is a woman called Nylia. A tall redhead with a sharp look in her eyes. She also wears similar armor to the other two but it's bracketed on her left arm that is connected to somewhere in the middle of the tower.

In silence, we walk through the hallway, our steps echoing around the hall. Walls on each side are painted with beautiful sceneries of mountains, forests, or lakes, and are lit by lights at the ceiling that have a shine that lights the hallway in a light that reminds of daylight.

We reach something that I quickly identify as an elevator and step in, only for the elevator to stop moving upwards, slowly but without any shake. It's to the point it almost feels as if the world around us is sinking down.

Out of nowhere, Edwal giggles but quickly stops. The other two ignore it as if it's something they've gotten used to.

"How long do you think they will last?" the tall man called Aias asks redhead Nylia.

The woman looks all over and even sends some mana toward us, "Few hundred years? The one with differently colored eyes will probably last much longer, I know his type." She then shrugs her shoulders.

[Ethereal Battlemage - lvl ??]

"Nylia, that's quite rude to say in front of our guests," Edwal keeps smiling and turns to me, "Apologize, my colleague, Nathaniel. She can be quite rude sometimes, however, she is a great servant of the king."

"I guess, sorry for that. It's hard to keep my act together after all this time so I tend to slip up," surprisingly the redhead apologizes with a sigh.

Then the tall man moves a bit closer, "It's all up to the king how we deal with them. If he says so we will kill them. If he decides to keep them we can befriend them afterward. It's useless to do anything right now."

[Steel Sentinel - lvl ??]

"I personally hope to keep them. They are fun to watch. They spend days going through the city, collecting trinkets," Edwal laughs a bit but quickly apologetically waves his hand at us, "Nothing against that, it's just that I find it funny, that's all."

"Edwal, when was the last time you slept?" there is a hint of worry in Nylia's voice. The woman's face even shows something I could describe as pity.

"You know I don't like to sleep, Nyl," At that moment Edwal looks somewhat sad but then he quickly smiles, "Let's not talk about such things in front of our guests, there is no need to worry them with frivolous matters. Anyway, we are almost there." The elevator finally stops and the doors open on their own revealing another hallway.

Again in silence, we follow the three warriors towards the silver door at the end of the hallway. As before, they also open by themselves and we enter a surprisingly small throne room.

There is a table made out of white wood in the middle of the room. The top of the table seems to be carved from grayish stone, at the top of the table there is a chair that could be a throne, massive, yet somewhat comfortable looking even though all of the luxury.

Next to the throne, there is a smaller chair of similar style. On the opposite side of the table, there are three more chairs.

Five chairs, one for the king, another one for his saint, and three for the king's warriors.

Five chairs for the last remaining people from the era that started thousands of years ago.

The king is an ordinary-looking man. He is dressed in casual clothes, of average height and his hair is brown and curly. On top of his head, a simple crown rests, a crown made from silver metal with blue ornaments that is connected to someplace in the middle of the tower in a similar way to Edwal's armor, Nylia's bracelet, and Aias's sword are.

There is also a short sword on the king's waist, also connected to that place.

"We will have to kill them," that's the first thing the king says. His voice is firm and bears no hesitation, but there is something like a hint of sadness in it.

His warriors do not even hesitate, as if they practiced it they put their right hands on their chests and bow slightly, "Yes," they say all at once and Edwal adds a question, "Right now, Your Majesty?"

"There is no need to do it right now, we are not savages. We will offer them the last meal and then they can decide if they would like to die on their own or by our hands." The king fully turns to us and his eyes are beautifully green as he looks us up and down.

[Harmonic Disperser - lvl ??]

"Black-haired girl with healing powers will stay alive," As if that's all the king turns around.

The three warriors immediately replace the table with a bigger one and bring in more chairs and start setting up the table while we watch it. I don't even have to have Isabella's skill to feel how nervous others are, surrounded by people much more powerful than them and probably insanely hard to kill.

I told them before, but the healing aura is much stronger for them thanks to the connection their equipment has to that place in the tower. Place or a person, the Saint.

"So Miss Saint was the Absolute of your planet?" I ask as I sit down, and at that moment, everyone freezes. My group, warriors, even the king.

Yet, I continue, still the only one sitting and already reaching out for sweets on the table, "I think it's unfortunate that she died," I ignore the king's aura that starts pushing on me, "You know, I have a really funny theory," I say as the steps sound in the room; it's the king moving towards where I sit, mana already moving through his body.

"I will make it quick. Ms. Saint died. Mr. King didn't want to die yet, so he kept it secret and somehow kept her body alive to keep generating a healing field. Then the Decay appeared, twisted mana that started radiating from her body after her death together with her healing aura. Am I close?" I ask.

The king stops, and I move my hand, throwing one of the glasses off the table. The sound of shattering glass deafeningly resonates in the eerily quiet room, "Oh my bad! Silly me. Anyway, you said we could have dinner before you kill us, right? A king wouldn't go back on his word, right?"

I'm calm, so calm it nearly scares me. My body is heating up, my mind is sharp as always when I fight, and my heart is beating wildly. I also feel the intense heat from the orb full of thermal energy that is at the point it's starting to leak some, and constant heat burns my insides, only to be healed by the regenerative aura of the Saint.

My hand is not shaking at all when I grab the glass and pour myself some drink from the table.

The king's oppressive pressure disappears, and he smiles at me; it's a gentle, understanding smile as if he is dealing with a silly child, "Obviously, I won't go back on my word," then he gestures, and with a flash of golden lightning, Edwal appears next to him, pulling out a chair and seating the king.

Three warriors then start moving around, seating others as well before disappearing outside, probably to prepare some food.

The king stays alone with us in the room, yet there is no worry at all; he is smiling gently and totally ignoring others, his eyes fixed on me, "Nathaniel, I guess?" he asks, and like everyone else, he doesn't touch any sweets on the table nor takes any drink, but I guess his reason is different from the remaining members of group 4.

"Edwal did mention you, and I have to agree with him; you are really something else," the king laughs again. It's the fakest laugh I ever heard; there isn't even a hint of honesty in it. It's the learned and thousands of times practiced laugh, a laugh that lost its meaning a long time ago.

It's as if a programmed machine does that, not knowing why, but knowing that it should laugh. The king is the same. An empty shell of the man who once was powerful enough to lead the entire kingdom.

"So, Nathaniel, it's as you said. Miss Saint is dead, and she has been dead for a long time, and trust me when I say a long time, it really is a long time," he pauses, and when I do not react, he continues, "You are using the word 'Absolute' freely, but I can hear in your tone that you do not understand its meaning fully. Absolute is a title that isn't lightly given and nor should be mentioned flippantly. I would like to say that you will learn about that more in the future, but that's not the case," He then adjusts his already perfect clothes and slightly shifts his sword and crown on his head.

"Ms. Saint was such a person. An Absolute

At that moment, the warriors, Edwal, Nylan, and Aias enter the room, all of them holding silver plates full of food. Even as they barely enter, I can smell the amazing aroma of it all.

They move nimbly as if they have gotten used to it and serve it all on the table.

First for the king, who also patiently waits as they do so. They are silent the entire time, and their movements are machine-like.

For me, all of them look like empty shells pretending to be humans and waiting to die. Minds broken and twisted after thousands of years of near solitude with just the four of them around. Unable or unwilling to befriend surviving natives.

"One day Miss Saint died. I still don't know if she took her life or if some old enemy found a way to kill her. Yet even then, her body stayed alive; there were no wounds visible, all healed by her powers. Her heart, her skills keeping her body in perfect state even after her consciousness disappeared." King's eyes become distant.

I sit in the middle of the table, and to my right are all of the warriors, with members of group four sitting in between me and the last king.

"I see her every morning. She lies on her bed, looking as if she is about to wake up at any moment, her heart beating even after she died and radiating all of this beautiful power. At first, after her death, we left her like that; hoping that she would heal. Then, after years of mourning and waiting, my court suggested keeping her body alive so that we and everyone in the city could live longer, as none of us have attained such a level of longevity." The silence that ensues feels full of shame, and the king smiles again, so fakely, "Then the Decay came, and we finally tried to destroy her body, but we were unable to

do so. Unsurprisingly, someone hired assassins to kill all the people who might be capable of overpowering her healing or possessing skills at a high enough level to counter it."

He fills his glass and gestures at me, "But it doesn't matter now; we won't ever try to hurt her again. No one other than me will ever look at her. Forever she will be mine, and I will guard her and defend her until she heals her own mind." the king's eyes shine with a crazy light as he says so, "But now, then, Nathaniel and your friends, let's start dinner! The last dinner of your lives, as I promised. And after it's done, we will kill you."

"I see," I say. I use [Resonance] and dig my hand into my belly and pull out the orb. I lift up my hand with the orb and point it at the three warriors on my right side. Expressions on their faces quickly change from confused to dangerous, yet they move slowly, not worried and relying on their healing they got used to over the millennia. Only Edwal seems to feel the danger.

I release all the thermal energy I was collecting while reducing the area they affect to make the flames much more concentrated. A blaze of golden flames envelops part of the room in front of me and the three warriors, burning and melting everything in its path without even leaving the ash behind.

[You have defeated the Ethereal Battlemage - lvl 183]

[You have defeated the Steel Sentinel - lvl 179]

[Lvl 124 > Lvl 127]

[Redistribution - lvl 35 > Redistribution - lvl 36]

I then stand up; the orb from my hand is gone, depleted of all thermal energy in a single brilliant blast of golden flames.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass," I say to the king.

Chapter 173: Unshackled

POV Kim Min-Jae

Nylian and Aias immediately disappear in a blast of golden flames that engulf them entirely. The flames exploded toward where Nat was pointing, right at the trio of warriors sitting to his right.

Golden flames devoured everything in their path. A huge part of the room is gone—walls, ceiling, furniture. The door we entered through. All melted from existence, and the remaining uneven edges where the flames struck still glow red-hot.

Even though Nathaniel's attack was pointed away from us, the heat fills the entire room.

I scream from pain as I feel the heat on my skin to the point where serious burns appear on my skin. I smell burned hair; some clothes catch on fire, and I hear multiple members of our group groaning painfully as well as Biscuit howling, surprised by the side effect of Nathaniel's attack.

Our wounds immediately start healing, and I can see them closing in front of my eyes, yet it hurts so much. When I look around I see Lily breathing heavily as she holds her burned hand, Aaron and Dennis also groan in pain.

Then Nathaniel turns toward us, toward the king and the remaining warrior, Edwal, who was able to escape and now stands by the king's side.

Half of Nathaniel's face is burned to the bone, his skin and flesh gone. Burns cover most of the right side of his body, and his right hand is charred and blackened husk.

Yet he doesn't care. He says something in a casual tone, and I feel my heart beat wildly.

Right now, even terribly wounded, he seems invincible, and even though I got wounded by him, I can't help but feel deep admiration for him.

He is everything I always wanted to be.

No one is moving, and I use this opportunity to let the healing aura heal my wounds. It's not as quick as I would like it to be, but it's enough. I'm still able to fight, and half of the enemy forces are gone.

The king and Edwal both look like they don't know what to do or feel. For the first time, I see genuine confusion on their faces, as if they can't understand what happened. They just stare toward where Aias and Nylia were. The only things remaining after them are the beautiful sword and bracelet; my flames were unable to damage them at all.

Yet, it was enough. I compressed the flames as much as possible, massively reducing the area of the explosion, and burned their bodies faster than they were able to regenerate.

The others got hit by heat I wasn't able to control, but that much is fine; it will regenerate fairly quickly.

"This is really confusing. I don't know how to feel," the king shifts the crown on his head, and the remaining warrior only waits for orders. Edwal has lightning cracking around his body, and his initially shocked face smiles again. He forces himself to do so and even laughs shortly as he looks toward where the bracelet and sword are.

I absorb the heat from the room and turn it into kinetic energy, adding more to it. Then I shoot it at the king in a thin cone.

The king's head explodes and his body flails around while the crown falls to the ground.

Before I do anything else, the head is back, regenerated at dizzying speed. The king casually bends down, grabs, and puts the crown back on his head, "I consider this dinner to be ruined already, so why don't you take care of your guests, Edwal?"

Immediately I boost my body, and Edwal appears in front of me; his pale blue eyes are cold. His fist hits my chest while he is barely slowed down by [Redistribution].

I crash against the wall, not wounded because of how much mana I'm using to strengthen it. The armor barely forms around my body, and Edwal hits me again. Golden lightning trails his limbs and strikes my body, burning it.

Everywhere the lightning hits me, the wounds heal slower.

I release a blast of kinetic energy, and Edwal is thrown away; half of his face is missing but healing already at a speed that is much higher than mine.

The javelin pierces his body, and the red and white lightning flows through it. For a moment that lightning clashes against his own golden one, and both disappear. Then the javelin then flies back to Tess.

I exchange a simple glance with Tess and boost my body, running toward the king, who is already fighting against the others.

Hadwin gets thrown against the wall, and when Sophie tries to control him, the king just cuts off his own head and quickly regrows it back; then, before Sophie has a chance to manipulate him again, he molds some mana into a projectile that shoot at her.

Sophie doesn't hesitate and reaches out toward it; [Manipulation] interferes with the projectiles and makes them miss.

At the same moment, blue flames engulf the king, but he only takes a single step, and stomps, and the flames disappear as if blown away by wind. The projectiles that I shoot at him disappear in the same way, deleted out of existence.

Hadwin charges the man again, and the king casually sidesteps and kicks the older man, right toward Sophie, who barely dodges. Isabella's flames disappear once again, and another projectile is shot at Sophie when she tries to manipulate him again.

Meanwhile, with [Perception], I see Tess exchanging hits with Edwal, lightning cracking around their bodies, while Min-Jae continues to shoot projectiles at the blonde warrior. When given the opportunity he also continues to make his body heavier.

The twins move quickly and with perfect sync, dodging even Edwal's quick slashes, and sometimes when Edwal hits them, they disappear, just an illusion created by their skill.

My dark yellow flames blaze into existence and in a stream as thick as my wrist hit the King, who just stands there. The flames disappear the moment they get to a certain distance from him, and I continue to track his mana. The way he moves it and uses it.

The king is absorbing them. It's as if he is taking them into some storage, and after a few seconds in this storage, they disappear totally. There seems to be a limit to that storage, but my flames don't fill it at all. The limit of his store is massive, giant, and it will be impossible to overwhelm him like this.

My heart beats, and projectiles boosted by kinetic energy disappear as well, the absorption or storage skill ignoring the speed the projectiles are moving at. Kinetic energy disappears too. Orbs filled with tricolored mana as well, and the king's ability isn't even overwhelmed at all.

The king then pulls out his sword.

I dash at him at the same moment he dashes at Isabella, and his silver sword cuts through the rare dagger I got from Beyond. My mana, my [Resonance], do not stop him at all. I hit his body with mine before he reaches the little girl and then dodge his blade. This time I also try to cut off his arms.

His eyes smile, and his sword moves like a flash, confusing me and instead of me hitting him a deep wound appears on my chest. The wound is immediately healing, yet at a much slower speed than his wounds.

He steps closer toward me.

I [Focus] and boost my body to the point it creaks under the pressure and slash against him. Then I watch, and in the black vision of the [Focus] as he blocks each of my strikes. As if teasing me, he doesn't even cut my blade made of mana; he just lets it slide along his blade, showing immense skill with a weapon in his hand.

Then he kicks me, and the moment his leg touches me, I force my skill into overdrive and absorb all of the kinetic energy of the kick. I do not move at all, absorbing all the kinetic energy of his kick. It's only as if he touched me with his leg.

A blast of kinetic energy, further strengthened by the one I was collecting, explodes the king's hand, and the sword gets separated from his body.

Before I can grab it, another kick sends me flying, breaking a few ribs. Before I crash against the floor the king's hand is already back, and he picks his sword up from the ground.

At that moment, Hadwin hits him with his shoulder, his body surrounded with [Disruption] and the king is sent flying, crashing through the remaining furniture in the room.

Before Hadwin charges again, I use a bit of kinetic energy to throw him away from the path of attack from the king, and three mana projectiles hit the ground in an explosion of debris, and a shockwave is sent toward our surroundings.

I then see Edwal jumping out of the window and flying far into the distance, golden lightning trailing him. Without any hesitation, Tess jumps in a similar way, and the [Lightning Armor] around her body surrounds her in red and white sparks as she pushes herself far ahead. Min-Jae and the twins follow her quickly.

"It's nice to see that Edwal is having some fun; it's tough for him," the king says as he fixes his clothes, his green eyes piercing, and for the first time, he looks like a ruler. Standing here proudly, surrounded by enemies, yet calm and confident.

"Hadwin, take the others and find where the saint is; Lily can kill her with her skill," I take a step toward the king to block him from getting to the others.

In deep [Focus], I take on multiple of his attacks, ignoring the wounds on my body and slowly releasing my mana more and more. It puts pressure on me; it starts hurting me, but I'm getting healed constantly.

When the king rushes at Lily in a last attempt before they get out, I do not even hesitate for a moment. I charge him, my body breaking and healing under the strengthening and my mana.

Then the king moves immensely quickly, much faster than before, and I feel a slash on my legs. Lily screams, and I see my cut-off legs flying through the air.

With a speed that is faster than I was able to reasonably manage, mana rushes through my body. It tears my circuit and hurts my brain. Then, instead of falling to the ground, I take a step and, instead of my cut-off legs, there is a replica made of translucent blue mana that I move as if I would move my body.

Not missing a moment, I kick the king with a leg made of mana and cough up some blood. My head is spinning and I feel like falling down. The king laughs and even says something, but I do not listen.

He also fires a mana projectile at Lily, who is being pulled away by Hadwin. However, a simple purple tentacle appears and effortlessly deflects it, which even surprises me. Biscuit woofs at me once and then disappears around the corner with the others.

I reach toward the ground and pick up a silver bracelet I was moving toward during the entire fight. The laugh immediately stops and he turns his full attention to me. I put the bracelet on my arm at the same moment the king rushes at me while shooting a few projectiles my way.

My [Resonance] activates, and I use the bracelet; I resonate with its mana and connect myself to the item and subsequently directly to the Saint's healing aura.

In a flash, my legs are restored and my wounds healed.

"How dare you!" he screams.

I ignore him and release my passives and constructs that were limiting my mana and the entirety of my mana pool reverberates around me. I use it to boost my body, and my limbs explode under the pressure only to be immediately restored. My brain hurts; my heart is tearing apart. But it's all regenerating instantly.

Ignoring the pain, my kick sends the king flying away, the man unable to see my attack at all.

Then I look at my hand and over my palm, an orb forms. Mana rushes inside of it, blue, light blue, and purple, swirling to the point where it starts to shine. The orb immediately fills to the brim while I disregard the wounds it causes me.

And then I do something I wanted to do for a long time. A thing I wanted to try ever since I realized that I might not use one of my skills the way it was intended to be used.

The orb fights against me, held back only by my mind that is getting healed as all of this pressure keeps wrecking it. I activate [Focus] and consolidate it. But this time I do not use it on myself. I turn it toward the mana over my hand. I grab it, I hold it, and then I [Focus] that mana to a much smaller point.

My body screams and regenerates as I do something I shouldn't be able to do at my current level.

The mana that is about to explode stops and the orb becomes even smaller.

Its color changes.

A small black orb hovers over the palm of my hand, and in that pitch-black darkness, tiny sparks shine like stars in the sky.

Chapter 174: Revival

"What have you done?" For the first time, the king's voice bears emotion in it. "How do you have that mana!" he screams. "You shouldn't be able to!"

The small black orb over the palm of my hand threatens to explode, so I force my mind into handling it, my body constantly regenerating at immense speed, allowing me to do something that would otherwise kill me.

I feel the orb start pulling mana from me on its own. I don't even send it toward it, yet it absorbs bits of my mana that leak from my body now that I have all my passives and constructs deactivated. Everything else is unaffected, and only the mana starts to get pulled toward the pitch-dark orb with beautiful sparks of multicolored light inside it.

It's not like it's sucking it in or absorbing it; it's all as if the sheer density and quality of the mana it's made of pull all the weaker mana toward it and dominate it.

I reach out, grab the orb, and force it to change; it slowly expands and extends into the shape of a short dagger, a pitch-black dagger that looks like it's absorbing the light and imprisoning it inside.

The moment I hold it it, the black mana starts pulling more and more mana from my body, as if payment just for using it. The amount it pulls is immense, and I know I will last only a few seconds, even with my

mana reserves So I take a step toward the king and slash through the air, cutting off his connection to the saint he has through his sword and crown.

Immediately, two items lose some of their shine, and the king loses his immensely fast regeneration.

"Oh," he says, shocked even as I stab the black dagger toward him; his skill fires off, the one that continued to absorb all of our attacks, yet this time the dagger made with the use of [Focus] ignores his absorption and goes right into his heart, the man still too shocked to dodge.

A weaker version of regeneration fires up, but it's not enough. I watch as the dagger pulsates and absorbs the mana from his body, slowly sucking it in. It pulls it straight from his heart and dominates it without any problem.

The king falls to his knees, unbelievably staring at me, "Please, do not hurt her," are his last words before the light disappears from his eyes.

As he dies and is rid of all of his mana, I feel the dagger start to reach toward me and my mana. I let go of the dagger and Mantle, the newest construct, activates and resists, and keeps my mana inside my body now that I'm not touching the dagger.

The pull is weak, yet I feel it trying to get more of my non-concentrated mana. I allow it and feed the dagger a bit more, and when I grab it, I find out that I'm unable to get rid of it; the mana is too dense, too powerful for me to disrupt or take under my control. I can only feed it with my mana in exchange for this dagger, this black mana listening to me.

The thing is my creation, my mana, yet I'm unable to take it back under my control, and it constantly absorbs a massive amount of mana as I touch it, no matter how much or what I do to try to stop it.

I boost my body and then throw the dagger outside of the tower, as far as I can, somewhere toward the wall.

Okay, let's finish the floor; the dagger can stay here and disappear with the third floor.

I then look at the king one more time and grab his crown, sword, as well the sword Aias had. The bracelet is still on my arm.

[Perception] encompasses as large an area of the tower as I can, and I quickly locate the others. Before moving toward them, I look out and see golden, white, and red lightning cracking in the sky and hear buildings crashing as Tess continues her fight with Edwal. I spot them moving at immense speed, jumping from roof to roof while lightning tracks their bodies and continues to shoot toward their opponents.

Two javelins constantly follow Tess and attack the blonde man, flying through the air at terrifying speed. A bit further, I see Min-Jae and the twins helping her when the opportunity arises.

They should be fine, and I think Tess wouldn't appreciate me taking the fun fight from her. So instead, I put the crown on my head, put one sword into the scabbard I take from the king and put it on my waist. Then, while holding the sword of the dead Aias, I head towards the others.

My heart is still beating wildly as I walk. Should I stop them from killing the Saint? We can spend a few more weeks here, and I will have a chance to practice using [Focus] to concentrate my mana even further.

Up until now, I didn't even dare to try it, as even using [Mana Infusion] and [Redistribution] made the mana extremely dangerous. The mana always ended up exploding, which I see more as an unintended side effect.

No, what I'm trying to do is try to imitate the effect I think a different mana attribute upgrade would have—Potency, the upgrade Lissandra picked. The only reason why I went with Amplification was that I already had a plan in mind to do it my own way: my extremely janky and roundabout way that would only continue to improve in the future.

I use kinetic energy to push myself higher and land on one of the balconies inside the elevator tunnel, then do it again to get to the others quicker.

So, what is that black mana? Did I succeed? And if I learn to control it, can I somewhat replace my mana with this black one with tiny sparks of light that shine inside? Or is it something else?

Anyway, who cares? It's dangerous as heck. It can't be that bad, even if it's not what I intended!

It's also a shame that I can't use active tempering right now. My body is healing too quickly and regenerating before I can "temper" it.

I glance at my notifications and it looks like I did get two more levels from finishing the king, and [Mana Manipulation]

Overall, it went pretty well, I would say.

"Nathaniel," Lily welcomes me the moment I step inside the room where she, Sophie, Isabella, Biscuit, and Hadwin are. There are giant silver doors that are charred, with some scratches on them, yet it's clear that they didn't get any further.

"It's fine; the king is dead and Tess will deal with Edwal. We don't have to hurry anymore," I look at them. "So get comfortable and we will open the door a bit later."

What kind of dumbass would miss such an amazing opportunity to train highly dangerous skills that would otherwise kill you?

It doesn't take that long, and Tess returns together with the remaining members of our group. She is holding Edwal's chest armor in her hand and throws it on the ground as she enters. The armor isn't damaged at all, not even scratched, and there is only blood on its surface.

Tess's face is serious, and she doesn't seem in that good a mood, "King?" she asks.

"Nat took care of him," Hadwin says as he steps a bit closer to her, glancing at all of them. Obviously, because of the healing aura, there are no wounds; they just seem to be tired. "We decided to wait a bit before opening the door. We can spend a few more days collecting supplies or even training now that we don't have to worry about wounds."

"Let me guess, Nathaniel's idea?" Tess flicks a strand of her hair off her face.

"Yes," Hadwin confirms.

I gracefully ignore them and continue to examine the items.

Crown of Eternal Vigilance (Epic): This finely crafted crown used to be seamlessly linked to a revered saint. It no longer bears a connection to its healing powers.

Bracelet of Enduring Guard (Epic): Elegantly designed bracelet with extreme durability. Seamlessly bonded with a revered saint and connected to its healing powers.

Shortsword of Perpetual Shelter (Epic):

Longsword of Lasting Refuge (Epic): Elegantly designed longsword with extreme durability. Seamlessly bonded with a revered saint and connected to its healing powers.

Nice, it looks like the rarities go like this: common, uncommon, rare, epic. As for the items, they are of the highest rarity we've seen up until now, but I think the moment we take them off the 3rd floor, they will become much less useful to the point where rare items might be better.

Sure, they will stay durable, but that's it. Without their main effect, the connection to the Saint's healing aura, they are just that: durable items.

Also, the crown and shortsword are no longer connected to the saint. I blame the black mana dagger I made, which currently lies somewhere outside, and knowing how this shitty tutorial works, it will soon awaken consciousness and try to kill us all.

Well, anyway, I can keep the bracelet and give the longsword to Tess so she can train while holding onto it and then maybe pass it to others.

"Hadwin, are you fine?" I hear Sophie's voice, and when I look up, I immediately see what she noticed with her [Manipulation].

Hadwin is holding his arm, and there is a painful expression on his face, and inside that arm, there is mana swirling.

It's not his mana.

In one quick movement, I stand up and boost myself closer, then slash with the sword in my hand, cutting off his arm at the shoulder. The look in his eyes is almost thankful, and I feel him strengthening his body. I cut again, and a bigger piece of his shoulder disappears, and I do not feel foreign mana inside his body.

I fuel my heart with my mana and constantly shoot kinetic energy at the cut-off arm that is now connected to the piece of the shoulder I cut off later.

Yet, no matter how much I try, I'm unable to destroy the arm in one attack, something I should be able to do. The arm is much tougher than it should be and regenerates much way too quickly.

I concentrate my thermal energy and dark yellow flames encompass the arm, which just refuses to burn; instead.

Then I feel a short pulse from it and the arm connects to the healing aura of the saint in the same way the items I took do.

"Fuck," is what I say as the cut off arm starts twitching and expanding, "Lily, destroy the saint as quickly as possible!" I shout at our healer and turn back to the arm.

First, the shoulder appears, and then the chest, from which the head grows quickly, followed by the second arm and two legs. The flesh continues to twitch, bend, break, and reform. The arm and figure become smaller and slimmer, and soon a woman stands here.

A young woman, around my age and slightly shorter than me. She has a slim yet athletic figure and the body of a person who is used to moving, an athlete or a fighter. The body is muscular and fit, yet not overly so, still maintaining womanly curves.

The naked woman with long gray hair opens her eyes and smiles, her gaze focused solely on me.

"What are you, a cockroach? Why don't you just die?" I rouse up my mana and turn to face her.

"That's quite a rude thing to say to a pretty young woman, little pup," even saying that, Lissandra takes a battle stance and smiles.

Chapter 175: Sub-classes

Lissandra then pauses and closes her eyes again, taking in a deep, slow breath; the smile on her face increases.

I don't feel any mana from her, none at all. It's as if her heart isn't beating and creating it. Yet the danger I feel from her is extreme. My instincts, my senses, all of them warn me and scream at me to run. The woman in front of me is much more dangerous than the people we just dealt with.

"Lissthane?" I throw at her, testingly.

She shakes her head, "I'm sorry to say that, little pup, but that part of me is gone. I improved my imprint, and when I embedded it into Hadwin's hand, I removed your influence from it and also a few mistakes I made."

"That's a shame; I kind of liked that version of you."

"No, you did not, you hated it."

"True," I carefully walk to the side, and the kinetic energy I've already collected is quite massive. I'm also extremely hard to kill with the bracelet on my hand, yet... I can't see her level or her class. As before, there isn't any info over her head. I don't see it the same way I didn't see it on the second floor or the same way I don't see it over the heads of tutorial attendees.

I don't think it's because she is as strong as before; she is weakened and terribly so without her potent mana, yet, she feels dangerous.

She knew I would burn her; she knew her imprint was imperfect, so she dealt with it.

I don't even know how, but she is standing in front of me; before I'm able to do anything, her fist hits my chest and sends me flying against the wall.

I see that she only tilts her head and grabs Tess's javelin, and with immense force, throws it back at the blonde girl. It pierces Tess's chest and pins her to the wall.

"I have shown you mercy, so do not annoy me any further," Lissandra says to Tess and her steps are light as she moves towards me.

When Lissandra appears in front of me again, I'm prepared, and all around me, kinetic energy explodes, yet she endures it and only lightly dodges to the side a few times, jumps over one attack, and then ducks slightly and twists her upper body while deflecting the rest.

Lissandra dodges it all while looking exceedingly nimble. I slash against her, boosted with the entirety of my mana and my body constantly ravaged. She matches my speed perfectly.

She is much faster, yet she slows down to my level and totally destroys me. She dodges every slash, every kick, every blast of flames or kinetic energy. She redirects mana projectiles with the back of her hand. She cancels flames with a swing of her hand.

And then she slaps me, sending me to the ground.

"Little pup, you wouldn't believe how much I wanted to do that," Beautiful, full of energy, and smiling she stares down at me.

Then we hear a scream and see Lily stagger backward, one of her arms missing and a big round hole in the silver door with her grayish mana still along the edges.

Before Lissandra moves, a stream of Sophie's mind-manipulating mana shoots at her, yet Lissandra dodges even that and Isabella's flames after. She grabs the javelin Tess again throws at her and ignores

the lightning that flickers around her body, coming from the javelin she holds. With a quick twist in the waist, she kicks me as I try to dash at her and endures the cone of kinetic energy I shoot at her.

"I'm sorry, little girl, I can't let you do that," with a quick movement she steps to the side and throws the javelin at Lily. The weapon pierces the shoulder of the black-haired girl.

Then, instead of Lily's falling to the ground, the illusion made by Aaron or Dennis disappears and the real position of Lily is revealed, already standing close to the Saint.

The Saint is an unearthly beautiful woman who lies on the bed. Her skin seems to have some warmth to it and her chest is moving up and down; the woman seemingly only sleeping peacefully.

Yet it's only a body, a shell that used to house a brilliant mind. A woman who used to be strong enough to be called Absolute, the title that Lissandra also has.

Lissandra moves and easily avoids Hadwin, Tess's, and Kim's attacks and even throws a piece of rubble at Sophie, sending her crashing against the wall while coughing out blood.

Lily is already attacking the Saint and her gray, smoke-like mana continues to crash against the dead woman's body, barely doing any damage.

Lissandra stops right before passing through the hole in the silver door; there is still Lily's [Disintegration] floating around the entrance and creating something like a net.

For the first time, Lissandra hesitates.

My eyes meet those of Lily, and she says something; at the same time, both of her legs disappear, and I feel her skill strengthening even further as it pushes against the Saint. Lily, having only a single arm, continues to shoot mana at the Saint, sacrificing her limbs to strengthen her skill.

In the end, she succeeds, and grayish mana hits the Saint's head and chest, taking a big chunk out of them.

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the 3rd floor's main quest in the fifth round of the tutorial for Hell difficulty. An entrance to the 4th floor has been created.

An entrance appears next to each of us, and I see Lily falling through hers.

"Get in!" Tess shouts, yet she stays behind and watches, making sure everyone enters.

At first, Lissandra is confused but then quickly turns around and rushes at me.

There is no entrance next to her.

Tess enters her entrance as the last one other than me, and before Lissandra reaches me, I enter it as well.

When I pass through, I turn around, expecting the entrance to close now that all the members of the tutorial have passed, yet it's still there, and I get goosebumps all over my body.

Lissandra is standing in front of the entrance and looking at me, "I can see it now," I easily read the words she mouths, and she steps a bit closer, her hand carefully touching the entrance to the fourth floor. It looks like she can't pass through; her hand only touches it, and unlike for us, it's like firm material for her, not a portal.

The entrance starts flickering, yet her eyes that look at me are confident. She seems happy, excited about what is to come, and ready to take on anything that dares to challenge her.

She looks like she found a reason to live again and unlike on the second floor, her eyes are full of life.

When the entrance flickers and finally disappears, I sigh with relief.

Logically, Lissandra should have disappeared the moment we completed the quest and left the floor, yet I can't be sure. Something tells me this is not the last time we'll see her.

For now, I ignore the notifications and only check the surroundings with [Perception]. When I don't find any monster or human, I walk towards where Lily is lying. Tess is already holding the petite brunette in her arms, and Lily is sobbing.

More than in pain, it looks like she is just scared; she is hyperventilating, and her eyes continue to tick from side to side. She also doesn't seem to hear Tess, who continues to try to calm her down while caressing her hair.

Lily currently has only a single arm, and even from that, she misses a few fingers. The arm she has is the pale one, the same paleness she shares with me. Both of her legs are gone and the second arm as well, all used though [Sacrifice] as fuel to power [Disintegration].

I know she can restore them all given enough time, yet it's not a good look.

"Tess, if she allows me, I can use my skill and help her calm down a bit, maybe even fall asleep," Sophie's voice is gentle as if soothing a small child; she is even smiling at Lily carefully while offering so.

At that moment, Lily seems to hear that, and I can see that she is inclined to accept her offer, but before she says anything, she looks around, looking for someone.

Her eyes meet mine.

She looks so pitiful, just a torso with a single arm. But, at this moment, I don't see that at all; in my mind, I only remember her face as she pushed herself to her limit, sacrificed her own limbs, and did it just to help us clear the floor. Worrying about what Lissandra will do to us.

It's weird, but I think that was the moment I felt I saw her for the first time. I remember every detail of her face, sweat running down her forehead, bangs sticking to it, her big eyes full of fear and resolution, her clenched jaw, and the movement of her mana.

At that moment, she was beautiful. In the same way, Lissandra was beautiful when she threw everything away to follow her twisted logic and destroy her fake world.

"Lily, it's okay now," I say while observing my voice. I sound calm; there is a bit of gentleness in it, yet it's still firm.

Just that short sentence seems to be enough, and it still takes a while but she slowly calms down.

"You don't have to do anything, Sophie; I will deal with it on my own," her voice is firmer, and she doesn't hesitate anymore as she says so.

Such a silly kid, a cool silly kid.

"Well, that was unexpected," Tess sits next to me, and together we look down from the cliff where we are.

We got thrown on top of a giant mountain, and a strong, cold wind constantly blows here. There are weirdly shaped mountains all around us, some of them even covered with snow. The cliff I'm sitting on offers a view of the valley below us; there is a giant lake down there with water so clear that it almost looks unreal, and we can see the tops of green trees.

The view is a killer.

"I hope you did diss Hadwin a bit," I lean back and turn my head to Tess.

"I didn't even have to; he constantly does it on his own and keeps apologizing to everyone around. At some point, I'm sure he will apologize to Biscuit as well."

Good. Everyone learns from their own mistakes, so I think we can give Hadwin a little bit of slack. It's not like he had bad intentions; he is nearly innocent.

And no, it's not like I'm defending him because I also might be partially to blame.

Nope. I did nothing wrong.

Damn it! Why doesn't she just die?! A goddamn cockroach, like Absolute. The way she clings to life is almost admirable. Plus, if things go the way they're going now, I'm sure I will do a few more similar things and break the tutorial and the system around the 7th floor.

Hmm, that does sound kind of interesting.

"Lily?" I ask Tess.

"She is sleeping now. It will take a few days or weeks before she restores her limbs, but she doesn't have to worry; we will take care of her."

"Sounds good," I answer.

The silence that ensues is interrupted only by the chilling cold wind that I ignore, even though I'm sitting here in tattered, thin clothes. My heart continuously creates energy that I transfer into thermal energy to keep myself warm. I even left a few orbs for others that they use as heaters, and little Isabella also helps by radiating some heat.

"Nat, she did play with us, right? She didn't fight seriously at all."

"Yes. What kind of adult would go all out on little kids?" I answer Tess, "But I still think she wanted to keep us there. She needs a new mana heart and to become more like us to escape the tutorial. She would sacrifice any of us to do so if we stayed there."

Lissandra tricked me. She made me think she had less mana than she actually did. She also acted as if my personality affected her more than it did, causing me to lower my guard.

In the end, she even connected to the healing aura of the Saint in a similar way items I took. The woman copied my [Resonance] to do so. Then she spent her entire or nearly entire remaining mana to recreate her body.

The scary part is that she affected the process and recreated her body to be as strong as possible, each stat other than mana probably well into the high hundreds.

She fought us with only the strength of her body.

I made a mistake and it nearly cost us. Actually, it did cost us; we couldn't take much stuff with us, only a few big bags that the twins and Kim, no, Min-Jae, shamelessly took with them to the castle and left before the throne room. They grabbed them again when they were returning from fighting Edwal, such greedy little twerps.

What I regret is not being able to train in the aura of the Saint, but that's kind of my fault, so I will deal with it as I always did. I will bear the consequences of my decisions.

Now then, the notifications.

Congratulations! You have cleared the 3rd floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial. Welcome to the 4th floor: Waning Realm.

You have acquired:

Access to the Shop

Skill upgrade token

Rare-graded gear of your choice

30 stat points

Well done! You successfully entered the 4th floor. You can now select one of the sub-classes. The classes are based on your actions and performance up until now within the Tutorial.

Pick carefully; it's difficult to change your sub-class!

Available sub-classes:

Initiate of Pride

Initiate of Patience

Initiate of Greed

Chapter 176: System Shop

As always, there are no explanations. Just a few sub-classes are offered by the system.

This will take a bit more thinking. I already have an idea of how the system works at places, so it should be better than before. Plus, I have some information from Lissandra. I also have told others to wait with their subclasses for a bit. I can tell them bits of what I learned. But, I bet there are already some impatient people who have already picked their subclass.

Anyway, I'll give myself some time to think and check out the shop in the meantime.

"System shop. " I say out loud.

The window that appears in front of me is bigger, and there are even some pictograms, hinting at the category of the shop. In the top right corner, I see the amount of currency I own: 100 shards I got as a reward from Beyond.

I quickly go through the offer, and it looks better and better the more I look; the only problem is the prices that are so damn high.

There are weapons, there are armor, food, sweets, clothes, and such stuff. There are passive skills, skill upgrade tokens, and trait-strengthening tokens. There are some options I don't even see the price of, and that are partially censored or fully censored.

Common-grade weapons are 20 shards, some of them a bit more or less. Uncommon grades are around 40, and rare are around 200. Some of them are a bit less or more.

Common passive skills are around 40, Uncommon are 80, and rare are well over 400 shards.

All the cool stuff is just way too expensive, and I don't buy anything yet. I don't know how to get more shards, and I might need more of them in the future, so again, I will have to check the shop multiple times and have others do the same before buying something.

What did catch my interest are Coordinates, Mana stones, hell, even Epic passive skills that are eight thousand shards, and more. Coordinates are even more expensive.

There seems to be a big jump going from Rare to Epic. Common, Uncommon, and Rare increase their prices gradually. Uncommon is 2x of Common, and Rare is 5x of Uncommon. But then there is Epic which is 20x of Rare.

There are also consumables, antidotes, food, and water. The highest rarity of items or passives that I can see is epic, and there are plenty of censored items that I'm either too weak or poor to see.

I get an idea and look at the longsword in my hand, "I want to sell this longsword to the shop," I say out loud, and a new window pops up.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 200 shards?

Longsword of Lasting Refuge (Epic):Elegantly designed longsword with extreme durability. Used to be bonded with a revered saint and connected to its healing powers.

Yes/No

I decline and check the other items epic items I got from the 3rd floor, and they are all for the same price.

The heck? I just went through the shop, and most of the Epic weapons are starting at 4000 shards. Is the system trying to scam me?!

"I want more shards than 200 for the item."

The notification doesn't change.

"250 shards, and I sell it right now."

Still the same.

"249?"

Nothing changes.

Dang it.

So yeah, the system is a total scammer. I don't care if it's because of some cut it takes, or because it's an epic weapon that is now only a bit hard to destroy and doesn't qualify to be sold as epic. In my mind, the system is and will be a scammer.

Even as impatient as I am, I do put off the skill upgrade while moving to where others are. As I do so, I check the rare item reward for clearing the 3rd floor.

Flaresteel Blade (rare) -Crafted from a rare metal that can absorb and channel heat, this blade can store thermal energy from fire spells. Upon command, the blade releases the stored energy, engulfing the weapon in flames and adding fire damage to the user's attacks.

Runic Ward Amulet (rare) -This amulet is adorned with ancient protective runes. When activated, it creates a temporary magical barrier that absorbs and nullifies incoming magical attacks, providing a shield against spells and enchantments.

Galewhisper Dagger (rare) -Forged from the feather of a mystical storm bird, this dagger resonates with the power of the wind. When wielded, it grants the user the ability to create gusts of wind with their attacks, knocking opponents off balance or even pushing them back.

Shadowmelder Chestplate (rare) -

Venombrand Tattoo (rare) -This tattoo depicts a coiled serpent with dripping fangs. When activated, the tattoo's venomous energy can be channeled into a weapon, temporarily infusing it with a venomous effect that poisons enemies upon contact.

I just go through them quickly, and there is nothing that seems to be interesting, nothing that I would need or that sounds stronger than what I can do. Maybe a tattoo sounds interesting, but why would I try to poison some monster instead of killing it in one hit? I didn't struggle with managing my mana just to patiently wait for my enemy to die. Sparrow Obliterator spears all the way!

So I just pick the amulet, and as I get into the cave where others are hiding from the wind, I put it near Lily, who is sleeping. Someone bought a blanket from the third floor, put it around her, and also moved her close to one of the bigger orbs filled with thermal energy I created.

The cave isn't that deep and barely blocks us from the wind, but it's better than nothing. Our bodies are much more durable, yet we still feel some cold, meaning that the air here is cold enough to affect our strengthened bodies.

"I will take over," I say to little Isabella, who just nods and stops using her fire skill to heat the surroundings.

She doesn't have as much mana as me, so it's better if I do it instead. So I start sending more mana to my Kinetic mana heart and then turn generated kinetic energy into thermal that I start releasing into our surroundings while also creating a few more orbs to light up the cave a bit more as it's getting darker outside.

It feels quite cozy and looks like it. Some of the others might not share my thoughts, but that's how it feels to me.

I look around; Hadwin is in the corner, and I can see that he is still not in a very good mood, probably blaming himself as he holds the place where his arm used to be. He will have to wait a bit for Lily to get to him.

A few others also have some wounds like broken bones or cuts, some burns, and such. To be honest, lately, I barely consider such things as wounds.

(Food?) Biscuit asks while moving closer to me, I point at Min-Jae, and Biscuit runs there, repeating the question until the boy opens one of the bags and gives him something.

Yup, Min-Jae, Aaron, and Dennis, three greedy teenagers, were able to take some bags with stuff even during all this.

Greedy little twerps, I love them.

In the bags they have, there is some water, some clothes, food, and plenty of jewelry. I find it quite funny how money-struck these three teenagers got by seeing all this gold, jewels, and delicately crafted items. I still remember them talking over them and thinking how much it would be worth on Earth and if they would be able to buy some cool, yet useless stuff.

They still live in the past and do not realize how much stuff will change if they get back on Earth. We will either end up being hunted by every country and some of us either be blackmailed or paid to do some dirty work or just work as scarecrows for other countries.

Let's say only 500 people survive each tutorial, that would mean at least 2,500 people if we, the 5th round, are in the round. If there are more of them, it could easily double.

Yes, even a few thousand people aren't that much when you take into consideration the billions that live on Earth, but how strong will we end up? Level 200? Level 300? As strong as Champions that could kill an entire continent of people or as strong as the gray-haired humanoid cockroach that destroyed an entire world?

"Nat, you said we should wait with subclass so we did. Do you have any information?" Min-Jae interrupts my thoughts, and I see everyone turn to me other than the sleeping Lily.

Especially the boys seem to be impatient to try out a new sub-class. As I look at them, I think of something else. What happened to me from the start of the first floor? The person that was ready to throw them away at any time, hurt them, beat them if needed.

Is it something I thought of only because they were strangers to me, and now it's harder as I know them a bit? Is it [Focus] that helps me make more rational decisions and decided that being in a group is safer? Another thing I will have to think about.

I truly suck at this.

I start explaining, "There are seven Radiances—Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride—and seven Blights—Chastity, Temperance, Charity, Diligence, Patience, Kindness, Humility. As for what each of them means or manifests, you should already imagine easily." I create another orb and move it closer to Lily, who seems to be shaking a bit. Tess notices it as well and moves closer, taking Lily and hugging her close to her chest. Lily in her sleep calms down a bit.

"The information I have is from Lissandra. Yup, the creepy brooch and exhibitionist naked young woman that beat our asses and made us run away from the third floor. So take it all with a grain of salt and think about it on your own and deeply," I give them a warning and then continue, "She didn't share much, probably on purpose, and as the system said, it's difficult but not impossible to change your subclass."

Biscuit comes to me, and I absentmindedly start petting him as he puts his head on my leg, "There should be four stages to each Radiance or Blight. The first one is Initiate, the second one is Adept, and the third one is Master. There is fourth one, but Lissandra refused to tell me anything about it. As for upgrades of stages for your subclass, there are two ways to level it. One of them is through the system and the second one is through hidden requirements that are different from person to person and sub-class to sub-class, so that's it."

"What subclass did Lissandra have?" Hadwin asks. I didn't even notice, but he moved closer, and there is some firm expression on his face. The man looks angry. Angry as Lissandra.

"She didn't tell me, but I would guess maybe Greed or Pride?" I answer him, and only after saying that out loud do I realize how similar she and I are in some ways.

Hadwin then nods and continues to listen.

"After picking a subclass, you will receive a single passive skill, nothing else. The skill should be called, for example, [Initiate of Greed], and that's it," I pause to let them take it in before continuing, "That passive will affect your body, your mana, your skills, and maybe some other things. It can affect one of these things or all of them. It varies from person to person. With each stage, it will get stronger. It's hard to say how it will show off." I stop as I feel my voice getting excited.

I love it; I love all this theorizing and all the options we are offered. It's fun.

"For example, Isabella, let's say she will get Gluttony," I ignore the little girl's quiet shout, "The passive she would get would be [Initiate of Gluttony], and maybe, it could make it so her flames are better at burning stuff or 'eat them up'. It could make it possible for her flames to burn metals and other materials. Or maybe they would last longer, and become stronger. Or as you all know, she has a skill that allows her to read out emotions. What if the passive would allow her to 'eat' our emotions or weaken them a bit?"

No one says anything, and I can see the gears in their heads spinning. There are so many options, and so many different ways it could affect each person.

"It's somewhat similar to a skill upgrade, with the difference being that it might affect your mana, body as well. So give it some time, theorize a lot, brainstorm with others, and only then pick one of the offered options. It will affect each one of us differently. It might not strengthen you much, as it's only the first stage, so don't be disappointed."

I then share a few more examples with them and let them think on their own. In the end, it's their decision.

When Min-Jae and a few more others come to me for advice, I only give them examples of how I think it could affect their skills, body, or mana and send them away. I don't want to pick for them, they should trust in themselves a bit more.

As for myself, I already have a favorite of mine but will go over them a bit more. I knew about subclasses from Lisssthanial, but I didn't know what ones I would get offered by the system, and all three sound fun. Patience, Greed, and Pride.

Chapter 177: Choosing Sub-class

Pride could be offered because of my own pride and confidence in myself, which sometimes borders on recklessness. Yet time and time again, I choose to trust in myself to the point that it might kill me one day.

Sounds good.

Patience could be something I got due to my willingness to endure pain and patiently work on my skills, often preferring future results instead of immediate ones. I think I've proven multiple times that I'm willing to just shut my mouth and endure whatever the tutorial or monsters throw at me.

As for Greed, that one is obvious: my greed for more mana and power, and my desire to learn all the skills, sometimes at the expense of others.

Somehow, I also feel a really strong pull to pick Greed. It's as if it's an old friend reminding me of itself. It's a really weird feeling.

I'm sure any of these would be a good enough decision, and I believe that I could reach the top even without them or with any other subclass.

So what can sub-classes offer? If I pick Pride, maybe it will improve my abilities, perhaps increase the speed at which I master them? Maybe my efficiency will improve. Maybe it will allow me to fight someone with a similar level of skill, giving me an edge because of my Pride. It could also allow me to perfect my skills or reach a deeper understanding through arrogantly trusting in myself.

As for Patience, it could help me endure—endure the strain of mana or perhaps the strain of constantly running stronger skills? Maybe my mana projectiles and weapons made of mana will become firmer too.

Greed could improve the speed at which I learn new skills, or allow me to learn them faster, maybe even steal them in the future?

There are so many options, yet as always, I come back to trusting myself and my decisions. I do believe I will do well no matter what I pick, and it's slightly annoying how Greed keeps calling out to me. As if someone or the system is trying to influence my choice. This is my decision to make. Only mine.

Pride it is. I choose, and a new passive appears.

[Initiate of Pride]

There is no level, no rarity; it just appears in my status right next to the subclass.

Immediately I try to move my mana, and it feels like there is a slight change—it moves more smoothly. I might just be imagining it, so I ignore it for now and will revisit it later. As of now, it feels like my hold over mana is better—how to put it—a bit more dominating? It's as if I don't have to expend as much energy in controlling it.

I try multiple skills, and it feels the same. It's not that the skills themselves have improved, but rather that they're easier to control. When I create armor around my body, it also becomes more intricate and firmer. Before, I didn't care much about it, but now it seems as if my Pride doesn't allow that. The armor doesn't become overly decorated, just looks more elaborate, and firmer, with some simple ornaments. It looks quite nice.

I continue to activate all the skills I have and use them for a bit, and each seems to be affected. They are easier to work with, and now I start to realize that this affects my mana as well. The effect isn't terribly strong yet, but I can feel it. I'm sure I will improve on it with time and maybe explore more of the new subclass. But for now, it's really good.

Still, I can't help but be slightly disappointed. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I had hoped it would be as strong as my attribute upgrade, but perhaps I'm wrong or haven't fully explored it yet. I will have to look into it a bit more and observe the changes after the rest of the group picks their sub-classes.

Anyway, my mana is noticeably easier to handle, and it's easy to guess what that means!

But since I'm thinking of my mana, I should upgrade my skills, shouldn't I?

The last time, I went and upgraded [Focus] instead of [Mana Manipulation], and I still think it was the right decision to go for Consolidation

It's not something I'll be able to replicate anytime soon. It was only the situation I was in last time that allowed me to do so: a healing aura that kept me alive as I released everything that held my mana at bay and used its beautiful entirety to create that small black dagger.

My answer to the Potency attribute upgrade that Lissandra chose instead of my Amplification. Mana that should be much stronger than what I usually use. Mana that seems to dominate all the surrounding mana to the point of taking it under control.

I'll need to practice with it more, but I just can't right now; I would quickly end up dead just trying to get a little bit of it. In the future, I'll do it, and I'll create a construct that will passively temper my mana into this one. I'm already excited, thinking about how it could affect my skills.

But first, I use a skill upgrade token, and the [Mana Manipulation] upgrades are the same as before.

[Mana Manipulation] (Advanced Mana Manipulation)

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

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

Mana Imprinting: Learn to leave your unique imprint on the mana you have manipulated. This can be used for tracking, marking territory, or creating unique temporal magical constructs recognizable only by you.

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

I have already upgraded [Focus] at level thirty. I'm unable to upgrade [Resonance] since it's not at level thirty yet, and it seems that upgrading it for reaching level ten won't work. This skill I acquired by

combining two different ones seems to work a bit differently or it's impossible to do a level ten upgrade for such a skill.

The [Armament] options are still quite disappointing, and [Perception] has some nice offerings, especially Mana Flow Analysis, which I also liked last time.

[Perception]

Mana Echo Reading: Enhance your skill to perceive the residual trails of mana, enabling you to track past magical events or spells.

Kinesthetic Perception: Hone your ability to perceive the movement and position of your own body, increasing agility, balance, and accuracy in combat.

Perception Shielding: Upgrades the skill to mask one's own mana perception, making it more difficult for others to detect or trace your mana-sensing activities.

Mana Flow Analysis: Develops the capacity to identify nuanced patterns and rhythms in the movement of mana, offering deeper insight into how skills are invoked and controlled.

Then I hesitate. All the upgrades feel weak right now, lacking even. The ones I really liked last time feel like something I could easily achieve and most of them I'm already using on my own. For example, Mana Flow Analysis, which I used to like so much, is something I'm sure I can mostly do on my own, even without upgrading. The same goes for Perception Shielding or most of the upgrades for [Mana Manipulation].

Should I really upgrade it? It's a shortcut that would immediately make me stronger but could also lead to a bottleneck that I won't be able to break through because I relied on mastery over the skill that the system gave me, rather than trying to learn it on my own.

Then, after thinking it over I decide to trust in my abilities, and I resolve against using the upgrade token.

From now on, I will use skill upgrades only for skills I do not consider that important. It breaks my heart not to be able to receive some juicy upgrades, but I'll be fine. In the long run, it will pay off. I'm absolutely certain of that.

Oh, wait a moment. Should I try selling it?

"I want to sell a skill upgrade token," I say out loud and a new window appears:

Do you really want to sell the following item for 2500 shards?

Skill upgrade token

Yes/No

WHAT! What the heck is that! That's straight-up daylight robbery! I saw that I can buy a skill upgrade token for five thousand, so how the heck is this even allowed?

Just wow. WOW.

Okay, whatever. Let's sell it. Starting now, no skill upgrade tokens. I will master my active skills properly and I will do it because I know it will be worth it.

I check my shard balance and it shows 2600 shards. Huhu, now then, let's find some nice rare passive skill with a healing effect.

Passive Skill: Enhanced Mana Recovery (Rare) -By attuning their body to mana's flow, the user experiences accelerated healing. The potency of this regeneration is directly proportional to their current mana levels, making their natural recovery swifter when mana is abundant.

Passive Skill: Kinetic Resurgence (Rare) - The user's connection to kinetic energy bolsters their recovery. Each movement becomes a catalyst for healing, with kinetic energy propelling the body's natural regeneration.

Passive Skill: Pyrokinetic Resurgence (Rare) - The user taps into pyrokinetic energies to fuel their regeneration. By channeling controlled bursts of heat, they expedite the healing process, using fire's transformative nature to mend their wounds.

After going through what's probably hundreds of passives, I find three that I really like. I also have to try really hard to not pick a different kind of passive.

It's time. I'm an adult so yeah, it's time to make a smart decision and finally improve my healing a bit.

Yes, my body is now super tough, but I do not believe that I won't get hurt ever again, plus Lily won't be near me forever, so yes, even a rare passive should be good enough for now.

I did check and I'm still far from buying a Unique passive skill. They are starting at eight thousand shards and I have only a bit over two thousand.

As for passives, each of them could be even a bit stronger than their rarity might suggest, as they would fit me super well, so they could end up feeling halfway to Unique or as one of the stronger Rare passives.

Enhanced Mana Recovery would use my ever-increasing mana to accelerate my healing. Nothing too difficult to understand. More mana, and faster healing to the point where rarity itself doesn't allow it to become faster. In my case, it could be instantaneous. Obviously, the system won't explain how strong rare passives are.

Kinetic Resurgence could have a bit stronger healing effect, but it's less of a passive if I can say it like that. I would need to actively use some kinetic energy to feed it to the passive for faster recovery. It's not such a problem, though.

Pyrokinetic Resurgence would rely on my thermal energy. So it's a janky way, as I always go about it. Mana into kinetic, kinetic into thermal, and then strengthen my passive; but from the description, the healing effect seems to be the strongest out of three.

There are a few more decent ones, but these three are something that seem to be fitting me the most. I also picked them on purpose in hopes that I could learn from them to heal my body. Somehow, I had no luck copying Lily's more "traditional" healing or Hadwin's, so maybe I will have more luck with these ones.

I give it a bit more thought, but in the end, I pick the most expensive one. It must be the best, right?

Do you want to buy the following Passive skill for 700 shards?

Passive Skill: Pyrokinetic Resurgence (Rare) - The user taps into pyrokinetic energies to fuel their regeneration. By channeling controlled bursts of heat, they expedite the healing process, using fire's transformative nature to mend their wounds.

Yes/No

I confirm it and buy passive skill.

So, I have 1900 more shards; should I buy one more healing passive?

It takes only a few moments, but I decide against it. Right now, I do not have a feeling that I desperately need one more, nor anything from the shop, so I decide to keep my shards. There might be a better use for them a bit later.

After checking that no one is around, I clench my teeth and break my finger and also cut my leg. Then, I start transferring kinetic energy into thermal and keeping it inside of my body, ready to be used.

Almost immediately, I feel something inside me siphoning some of that energy and transforming it into something entirely different. That new energy quickly circles my entire body and then rushes to the place I wounded. I then observe as the wound on my leg starts closing and even the broken finger starts twisting and returning back to its original place.

I try to connect to that energy and create a more intense heat inside, and the process speeds up even more and the wound quickly heals. It takes a few seconds, but I believe that I can speed it up even more if I condense thermal energy enough to the point where my flames would turn golden instead of yellow.

The effect isn't as smooth as Lily's, nor does it feel like I would be able to restore missing limbs, but overall I'm quite happy with it. The best thing is that I had a feeling that this is something I can work with. Unlike Lily's skill, it was easier for me to follow the process, and there was even a hint of understanding.

Good! I became stronger once again. Pay to win, I could say. Still, System, you are such an asshole.

Before returning to others, I open and check the floor quest.

Floor quest:

Destroy one of the four Calamities

Rewards:

Epic Passive skill

Skill upgrade token

2000 Shards

60 stat points

Access to other Communities

Chapter 178: Pairing

Interesting floor quest, to say the least. At least we have an option to pick one of the four Calamities. As for what the Calamity is, I think we will find out as time passes. As before, we could easily spend a few months here.

Another interesting thing is Community. I've joined it a few times and there are just us, the group 4.

Savant either hasn't cleared the floor yet or doesn't talk, so that's it. It also means that we can talk only to people from groups that are on the same floor, or it means that we can't talk to them because they still have their community blocked due to narrative constraints and system censorship.

We also got another hint, the name of the floor: Waning Realm.

It looks like it's yet another world close to dying or ending, similar to the second floor's Mana kingdom, which was about to get destroyed, and the third floor's Saint's Eternal Bastion, which was about to end because of Decay spread by the Saint, and that slowly overpowered the healing powers of the dying body of the Absolute. This floor, judging by the name and floor quest, seems to be similar.

I walk through the night and find the shallow cave where the others are. It's lit by my orbs, and in the surrounding dark area and snowy tops of the mountains, it feels somewhat cozy. I get in and start generating a bit more heat, which I send around me without worrying that my mana won't be able to keep up.

Lily is currently awake and her eyes examine me. "You did get a healing skill or something similar," she says after her mana touches me gently.

Being a healer she seems to be able to sense my passive which improves my regeneration because of the increased heat around me. The passive is working even though I do not need it to.

"It's a passive skill," I tell her.

She doesn't say anything, but I can see that she is overthinking once again.

"Lily," I say, and she turns to me. "I'm not going to throw you away..." I pause and use [Resonance] to block out the sound around us, "or the others. Not unless you give me a reason to do so."

"But why? You could be much better on your own or with Tess," Lily asks and her expression seems somewhat sad.

"It's more fun this way, Lily." I answer.

"Fun?" she blinks slowly, confused.

I decide to open up to her a bit. "I thought about it a lot, you know. I even lowered the effects of my [Focus] to think less logically and to understand properly what I feel," I pause. It's so hard to share feelings, yet it feels right. "I'm strong, Lily, very strong, so I want to be more honest with myself," As I continue, I get a sensation that is also my Pride, allowing me to open up and trust in my decision. Not the sub-class. My own pride.

"And since I'm strong, I will do whatever I want. And what I want right now is to give us, being a group, a chance and have some fun, and maybe... only maybe, we will slowly become friends." I say. I know this is what Tess hopes for, and I know we just got beaten by Lissandra. There are so many people stronger than me.

For now.

"This is what I honestly want to do now," I wave my hand. "Obviously I won't open up to everyone. I won't stop being myself or stop annoying you guys when you start talking too much or do not give me space. But I will try, Lily. I will do it because it's what I want."

When I reach out and pinch her small nose, I notice that she seems as if she is about to cry. This time it's not because she is sad. Still, she is such a crybaby.

"I would also like that, Nathaniel." Lily's voice sounds as if it's about to break, "So I will help you, you and Tess." The look in her eyes changes, "and if someone tries to get in the way of that, I will delete them from existence," this time I almost have a feeling as if dark grayish mana swirls in her eyes, "because this is also something I want."

She soon falls asleep after using all of her mana to continue to restore her limbs and sitting near her, I watch the others.

Min-Jae is trying to carefully watch Tess, thinking she won't notice.

Tess is talking with Maya, who nods at something, and that makes her hair fly around her head.

In the corner, there is Biscuit licking Isabella's hand to her happy laughs, and that also makes her protective sister smile gently.

Aaron and Dennis are sleeping, both close to each other, and Hadwin is sitting close to the entrance, looking into the darkness and keeping watch. His face is still hard, and I see him clenching his teeth and holding his empty sleeve where his arm that turned into Lissandra used to be.

I still don't like them all; some of them are more important to me than others. I also know that I wouldn't be that sad if some of them died. It's probably terrible to say that, but that's how I am, the result of my childhood and my not-so-normal personality.

Yet, I got to know most of them somewhat, and I didn't lie to Lily when I said they are fun to watch.

Tess told me about camaraderie, the young woman hoping to create a deep bond with others, even in this place. She just decided to give it a chance, preparing for the worst and hoping for the best.

And she is partially right; there is also a hint of a bond I feel after seeing their sometimes annoying faces for 3 floors.

I won't change easily; I won't become friendly or treat them nicely right away. If they try to kill me, I will do the same. If they treat me nicely, I will also try to do the same. That's it. Because I want to.

The future will show the rest.

I will beat up Savant, and I will find out who the third Beyond explorer is. I will win the Community tournament. I will clear this floor no matter what it throws at me and find a way to scam the system.

And then, when everything is done, I will look back at my decisions with pride.

Flashbacks - Earth, 3 weeks before Nathaniel got into the tutorial

"Cathy, just don't watch it. They keep spewing bullshit anyway," a man says to his wife, annoyed by her bothering him once again.

"But Bobby! It's really weird that out of nowhere people started disappearing! Do you think the government is behind it? Maybe they kidnap them for testing or try to cover something?" the woman called Cathy asks, her eyes still glued to the TV where the reporter continues to talk, "Look! They say this time even an entire plane disappeared! It didn't even happen somewhere without a signal. The plane flew right over the city!"

"Your brain will rot if you continue to watch that garbage, just go and..."

"Did you hear? An entire school bus disappeared, 20 kids with it! Do you think they will give us holidays?"

"That would be nice. Or they could at least give us less homework," a young boy smirks at his friend, and they both giggle.

"It's not like you do yours, Tom; you keep asking Oliver to do them for you!"

"It's fine; I pay him, and he doesn't mind. But hey, did you hear about that bear attack?"

"Sir, people started disappearing again. We are getting messages about thousands of disappearances all over the world. It's the same as a week ago. This time even a group of our soldiers disappeared along with three vehicles and a lot of supplies. Around 20 marines, sir."

“Any chance of ambush?”

“No, sir! They were constantly monitored by one of our drones. They just... disappeared. We have footage of that if you look here...”

“How the fuck can a bunch of people disappear during a simple museum tour!”

“I don't fucking know, Sam. Why don't you tell me? Maybe try calling some goddamn prophet so we can both know!”

“Oh, shut the fuck up! Better think about how we are going to explain it to the police! And don't just stand there; tell them to check the cameras once again!”

“Did you hear? Just yesterday, they saw the biggest grizzly bear ever! There was this video on the internet of this bear trying to catch the jeep. I swear even his eyes glowed!”

“Probably fake so they can sell this video to compilers for some cash.”

“But it looked so real.”

“It's easy now; even a kid can do that, Tony...”

The hunter breathes out in relief and kicks the corpse of the deer he just shot, “Damn it, do you see how big this one is? I've never seen a bigger one.”

The second man just nods knowingly while examining the deer, “I think this has to be a record; just look at these antlers. What the heck did he even eat?”

“I hope it is the biggest,” the first hunter laughs, “Do you remember that fella Donald? He is staying here for a week to hunt, and just a few days ago, he also got a really big one. I thought he was lying about how big it was, but now I think he might not have been...”

Flashback - ???, 3 weeks before Nathaniel got into the tutorial

"We have been paired again, my lord. A new planet has been added to the system. They just entered their non-attack phase, and the tutorial started. As far as we know, mana just started to awaken there, and they don't have an Absolute, nor are they part of any alliance or under the protection of any ruler."

"Good, collect all the information you can, and then we will wait. Also, find out if they have any Beyond explorers as well."

"As you order, my lord."

"When was the last time our planet got paired?"

"I think it's a bit over one hundred years."

"The cycles are getting shorter. Someone must be messing with the system."

"Do you think it's the Ruler of Greed again, my lord?"

"Possibly. But enough of that, get in contact with the Palace and spread the news that another pairing has started."

Chapter 179: Trying to find a way

A bit later Hadwin asks to talk with me and I agree.

His first question is, "She went easy on us?"

"Yes, I think she just wanted to punch me a few times. Don't ask me why; I always treated her nicely," I shrug my shoulders. "She most likely wanted to keep us on the third floor. Maybe to do some experiments. Maybe to get one of our Mana Hearts. Who knows."

"She sounded different from the brooch, and her form didn't look like her on the second floor," Hadwin says carefully. He keeps asking a lot of questions since the end of the floor. I think this was something like a wake-up call for him, and he decided to take this much more seriously.

So he is starting with collecting information to understand it better. Well, I'm still in a decently good mood, so I will answer some of his questions, but when he starts being too bothersome, I will send him to Tess.

"The brooch was slightly affected by my personality because her imprint was imperfect, and she was made from my hand. She also knew that and knew that I would destroy her. She realized it even before me, as she probably felt the healing field even earlier than Lily," I yawn and scratch the top of my head.

It's already morning, and the days and nights seem to be a similar length to Earth. It's still cold, and the wind continues to blow loudly, yet we still decided to stay here for a few more days, maybe a bit longer. Just until Lily fully heals.

"The imprint she left on you was much better, and she even separated my influence from it," quite a monster, that woman. "Then she just waited until we got closer to the Saint, connected to its healing aura, and regrew her body from your arm," before he says anything, I lift my hand, and that makes him stop. "Lissandra isn't someone who makes the same mistake twice. I don't think she is influenced by you or anything. But Haddy, do you know what's fun? She didn't have any mana or at least none I could feel. She kicked our asses only with the strength of her body."

I believe mana is still the best stat, but maybe the other ones aren't that inferior. "As she regrew her body, she influenced the process and made it as strong as possible," Again, what a monster.

"Logically, she is still from within the tutorial, so she should have disappeared after we left the floor, right? Together with it," the older man braces against the wind while looking at me.

"It's just a theory, but I think she confuses the system a bit. The imprint already passed through one floor, and that confused the system. She then remade it, and that confused the system again. Also, she was first made from my hand and then from your arm instead of trying to get the Saint's body. I think that was done on purpose. Bodies of humans from Earth that the tutorial treats differently. Heck, I would be surprised if all this stuff didn't mess up the system a little bit."

“So there is a chance she will become like us? With quests, rewards, and leveling within the tutorial? She also looked different from before.”

“I wouldn't be surprised if she were able to do so. As for her looks, I think it was how she looked like thousands of years ago, or she just made it look the way she wanted. Either way, it doesn't matter that much.”

Lissandra being a beautiful young woman might confuse our three teenage boys, but not me. I totally won't hesitate to punch her face.

“How many more questions can I ask?” Hadwin looks at me.

Oh? Isn't that quite nice of him to take my personality and growing annoyance into consideration? Good reaction, Haddy! Plus two questions.

“Five more questions, and then you can ask Tess; she knows most of what I do.”

“Thanks, Nathaniel, I appreciate that,” he nods, and I feel some honesty in his voice. In his own way, he also seems to be trying to find a way to me.

“Not five but six more questions,” I say.

To that, he laughs a bit and asks what he wants to know.

Last night, after Lily and some others fell asleep, the sky cleared. It became almost cloudless, and during that, those of us who were awake saw something surprising high in the sky.

Not exactly high in the sky, but probably on the orbit of the planet. Thousands, and maybe tens of thousands, of giant pieces of what can be debris of some old construction orbiting the planet. The white stone-like material reflecting the silver light of the moon so similar to Earth's.

I think it's debris because plenty of those things have sharp angles and are too non-naturally shaped. They just can't be rocks that are orbiting the planet like they do around Saturn.

The current theory we are running on is that it's probably some old construction that they built on the orbit. Dennis likes the theory that it used to be a massive city that someone teleported from Earth to orbit to kill all the people.

Well, I'm sure we will find out.

Also, my other theory was proven right as we got a new side quest:

Side quest: Reach level 150

Reward: Primary class upgrade/change

Tess didn't seem as impressed as I thought she would be, but that might be because I did the "I told you so" thingy.

Well, I can't have everything. The world is trying to hold us smart people down.

I'm also thinking of selling four low-value epic items I got. Tess was also able to take Edwal's chest armor with her, and now it sits inside of the cave. It's not fitting her that well, but she says it's really great for the conductivity of her lightning, so she keeps it in hopes she will be able to change it. In the worst case, she can sell it to the system shop.

As for me, I've already picked the crown, the least useful item from the bunch, and started experimenting with it. I'm doing it in a similar way to how I did with Hadwin's shield before, or with common weapons I kept picking up from side quests and tying mana stones to them.

This epic crown is without any effect now, but it's extremely durable and cool-looking, not that it helps. When Lily heals up, I plan to give her one piece and maybe she can do something with it. My theory is that she might be able to connect the item to her healing in a similar way to what the Saint did, and that would allow her to heal us over greater distances.

I'm quite happy with it, and even if I somehow destroy one of the items, it will be worth it if I learn to create something that I see as a construct, but on the item instead of inside my body.

So that's how I spend my "free time," holding the crown in my hands and consolidating my [Focus] to examine it, at first trying to find out how exactly it works as I follow the circuits that are ever-present there.

The crown is also set up to not take any energy from the user; instead, it has something like a receiver that is used to accept the Saint's healing mana and transfer it to the user. So the first goal is to change it. To make it so the crown can receive my mana instead of only the Saint's healing one. Then I will try to see if it can turn my mana into healing and heal me.

I think this won't work and I will totally render the current circuits useless if I try to do so, so I'm already preparing to make a new ones.

It's a good plan, and it's fun to tinker with it. Sure, I'm destroying the item even further, but who cares; It's just an item. It can disappear or be taken at any time. The knowledge I will get from it will stay with me forever.

I feel a presence moving closer to me and don't react, and soon Biscuit boops my leg with his nose.

(Sustenance.)

"Oh, are you bored, Biscuit?" I stop focusing on the item in my hand and jokingly put it on Biscuit's head. He lets me do it while his eyes are patient, as if I'm a small kid he has to deal with.

Not going to lie, Biscuit with a crown that's too big for him on his head is quite cute. I totally should get something more fitting for him.

But there's one more interesting thing: "Why are you wearing clothes, Biscuit?"

The cutest corgi on the fourth floor is wearing something that could be a warm-looking jacket made for a small child or baby. It's clearly not meant for a burrito-like shaped doggo, but someone did cut it a bit and fixed some places so it's more fitting for Biscuit.

So now he stands here, big crown on his head and a dark orange jacket on him. It even has small sleeves that his short legs are stuck into, and that are shortened.

This might be the first time I actually regret not having my phone anymore. Maybe there's a camera in the shop?

(Sustenance!) Biscuit brings me back to reality, and I look down at the patient doggo and pet him.

"That's Isabella's work; I saw her forcing Sophie to help her with that even inside the mansion, and they collected everything they needed," Maya steps closer and explains while squatting and extending her hand toward Biscuit.

The best dog sniffs it and then offers her his head, which she pets.

"That's surprisingly calming," Maya says after a while and then picks out a small piece of jerky from a pouch and gives it to Biscuit.

It almost looks like a transaction between them because Biscuit just takes it and moves closer to me, putting his head on my leg and holding the piece of meat with his front legs while slowly eating it.

For a moment he pauses and looks at me. (Food!) sounds in my head.

"One more and you can pet him a bit later," I say to Maya, at which Biscuit turns to her and woofs shortly.

The woman laughs and puts two more pieces in front of him, at which point I feel him sending a message even to her before turning back to his food.

"I did talk with Lily a bit, and she made me realize something," Maya starts carefully but then sighs. "I won't just walk around it; I'll be honest with you. I still remember you beating me on the first floor, probably so you could learn [Armament], and I still want to get back at you for that. You know, punch your face at least once."

"That's quite reasonable," I agree with her, to her surprise. "What, do you think I didn't realize that? I know I'm an asshole and the things I do sometimes aren't exactly nice."

"And you still have no problem with that? Throwing Ethan to the bear, beating me up and Hadwin. Acting as if you are ready to just leave everyone behind?" Maya doesn't seem to blame me, she just asks curiously.

"I long since got used to the fact that I'm not exactly normal. You could say that I do not hesitate to act on my decisions and I can set my priorities straight," this time I pause and look for the right words. "At the start of the first floor I did act quite harsh at times, and if there is a need for that, I would do it again. If there is not, I won't. Its as simple as that."

"If I were younger and more naive, I would maybe get more angry and ask you how can you talk like that. I'm still young," Maya puts emphasis on word young before continuing, "but not that young. I have a bit more experience than the most others here so I understand. But I still want to get back at you at least once."

"You are free to try anytime." I tell her.

"I didn't expect anything else," her face is serious, and before she leaves she says one more thing. "Still, Lily made me realize a few things, and one of them is that most likely most of us wouldn't be alive if it weren't for you. I don't like that fact, but I'm not hardheaded enough to not accept it. So thank you, I guess, and also thank you for helping me to improve. I know you most likely only do it because Tess asked you to, but I still wanted to say that."

Maya leaves without saying anything else.

Wow, isn't Lily a sneaky one? What is she trying to do after our conversation from last time? Is she working on boosting my public image?

I turn my attention back to Biscuit, "What do you think?" I ask him, and he also turns to me while chewing.

(Asshole.)

Dang it, Biscuit.

Chapter 180: The hole

Days have passed and the night has come. This time all of us are awake and staring up at the clear sky, at the debris that orbits the planet, reflecting the light of the moon. Some pieces are giant, probably much bigger than we think as they are so far away; other ones are much smaller and look more like dust shining when direct light lands on it in an otherwise dark room.

It's pretty, and there are so many questions that come to mind that, in my eyes, make it even more alluring as I stare up there.

"Tess, you can see really far, can you tell what it is?" Min-Jae steps closer to the blonde woman he has a crush on. I have noticed that he is calmer than before in the mansion as we are once again surrounded by unknown dangers, yet sometimes he tries to find an opportunity to talk with her.

"They are too far away even for me, but it's probably debris, as Nathaniel said. Some shapes are too perfect to be just some random rock orbiting the planet. Maybe it used to be some construction that orbited the planet long ago? Looking at the name of this floor, Waning Realm, we might end up dealing with some post-apocalyptic planet."

"The second floor was close to being destroyed in a world war, the third floor was a dying world, and the fourth one again. The system sure has some interesting ideas," Hadwin says.

"Do you think these floors are places that really exist?" This time it's Dennis who joins the conversation as we slowly move from the entrance and sit inside the cave, surrounding my orb that is as big as an orange and radiating nice heat.

I'm getting better and better at it, and they last much longer and are more stable so I can make them bigger. At first, I thought that infusing my mana with thermal or kinetic energy might be useless, but there seem to be some interesting uses for it.

"There are multiple options. The floors can be made from scratch by the system, whatever the system actually is," Hadwin turns to me. "Nathaniel, on the other hand, always thought that the floors are copies of worlds that existed millennia, maybe even millions of years ago, and the system keeps reusing them. They could even be copies of worlds that currently exist," Hadwin's voice becomes unsure. "We could spend hours theorizing, but in the end, it doesn't matter that much."

Dennis frowns, "But couldn't they be real worlds that the system sends us to?"

To that, his brother, Aaron, gently slaps the back of his head, "Don't be dumb, every group got the same world, the same floor."

"I know that, you dumbass," Dennis also pokes his brother. "I meant as if parallel universes and such stuff. It would surely be easier to just move us somewhere than create the world for each group."

Then they continue to throw multiple theories around, and I listen to them while not joining the conversation. Some of them are straight-up dumb, some are thrown there jokingly, and some of them are depressing as hell.

"I know we did talk about it on the first floor already, but I wanted to ask again. What did you hear about the disappearances back on Earth? Before the tutorial?" Hadwin changes the theme when the conversation stops getting anywhere, and I start to listen a bit more.

Even Isabella, who is sitting next to me and petting Biscuit, perks up. "Dad said it's all bullshit. Same stuff like UFOs!" she says.

"Izzy!" Sophie quickly says, "No cursing, I told you!"

"But that's what Dad said..." the little girl pouts, to which Biscuit licks her hand and she quickly forgets about that and starts to pet the doggo.

"I have mostly ignored it. Sometimes they blamed it on accidents or just threw some conspiracies around," Maya shrugs. "People always come up with some explanation."

"I have heard about it too, but it always felt like clickbait titles or something to get you to watch the news. Stuff like 'Plane disappeared in Bermuda Triangle' or 'Group of tourists lost in the mountains, you could be the next.'" Sophie pauses, opens her mouth, and then just shakes her head and doesn't say anything else.

"We didn't hear about it at all," Dennis says and Aaron nods. "News is for old people," he continues, and Aaron nods again, what makes Min-jae laugh a bit.

Still smiling, Min-Jae also says something. "I only heard from a friend that some colleagues of his brother disappeared from the office. Around twenty people and a big chunk of the building with them. They blamed it on an explosion, but there was no debris, no bodies. Now that I think about it, it's the same as the entire bus disappeared with us."

After that, silence ensues as everyone thinks on their own.

"The biggest question is what happened to other rounds? If it's as we and other community members think, and as the system hinted, it means that four rounds of the tutorial already ended. Meaning there are already probably hundreds of people with powers, some of them probably from Hell as well, and it's hard to imagine how strong they got after 5 years in Hell difficulty."

Hadwin looks around, his eyes staying on me a bit longer than on others. "I know about disappearances a bit more than you, as they are things I usually notice or had to notice when I worked as a policeman. The first disappearance started happening around four to five weeks ago. If each round of the tutorial is the same, it means there are 10 groups for each difficulty. Easy starts with 2 thousand people, normal with a thousand, hard with 500, and hell with 250. That's 3,750 people for each round, times four—as we are the fifth round—around 15,000 people disappeared before we even got into the tutorial."

The wind now blows even louder than before, and I even start absorbing some kinetic energy so it doesn't reach inside the cave, and turn that energy into heat. It's nice practice and it also makes the cave more comfortable. I even add [Resonance] to the mix and block some sound of the blowing wind, making it a bit quieter.

Hadwin continues, "To be honest, it might sound like a lot, but in the context of the entire planet, it isn't much, especially if most of these disappearances probably didn't even get mentioned in our news as they happened somewhere in smaller countries. I did talk with Lissandra," as he says her name there is a

hint of some emotion in it. Maybe anger? Hate? Disappointment? Anger at himself and not her? "It could be that all the groups get back on Earth at once because of time dilation. It's all based on the fact that the tutorial won't start a new round before the one before it has ended. There is also the possibility that each week the round starts and the system doesn't have a problem running all the rounds at once, and people will return to Earth after 5 years of Earth time and within tutorial time."

At this point, I stop listening and focus more on practicing my Mana Cycling and examining my healing passive working.

I'm obviously curious about all these questions, but it's not like they matter too much right now. I won't let them distract me from getting stronger and from the floors themselves.

I will deal with it when I get there, and meanwhile, I will hope that my sister and mom are fine. Unfortunately, Victoria is... at a place from where it's hard to take care of mom, but she is smart; she will come up with something.

So I hope for the best, but if I come back to Earth and something happens to either of them, then Lissandra will be the least of the system's problems.

I slide into [Focus] and feel these worries get pushed away, and not needing to sleep that much, I stay awake for the rest of the night, keeping watch and practicing.

"It's a hole," Min-Jae says.

"No shit. Do you know how deep it is?" Dennis answers him.

"I can see through some darkness, but this one seems to be much deeper than I can see." Tess examines the hole before taking a small step back.

"Wow," Min-Jae, ends the short conversation the three of them have.

Currently, most of us stand around it, leaving Hadwin and Aaron in the cave with Lily. The twins are constantly keeping up [Connection] in case something happens. The rest of us are here, even little Isabella and Sophie, and we stand close to the hole.

It's perfectly circular, and its diameter is as long as a small swimming pool. The sides of the hole are somewhat smooth but not to the point of feeling like they were made by a machine; there is some roughness to them. We can see a bit into it, and then there is perfect darkness.

We can't even see to the bottom. So Min-Jae throws in a stone as big as his head.

"Kim! Do not do such stuff on your own," Tess tells him, but then even she listens, and we don't hear anything. The stone doesn't hit the wall, nor does it hit the bottom we could hear.

Dennis throws in another stone, this time even bigger than the one Min-Jae threw. He throws it at an angle so we hear it hitting the walls, the sound echoing from the side and falling down.

"Fool of a Took!" Min-Jae shouts at Dennis, and both of them giggle, and even Maya seems to be smiling while Tess rolls her eyes, probably giving up on them.

"Nat, Nat, throw in one of your glowing orbs," Min-Jae pauses, "or a bomb! The one made from tricolored mana!" The boy is excited as he says it and continues to poke me. At that, even Dennis perks up and joins in, trying to make me do so.

"Min-Jae," I start, "Do you not know all the clichés? The moment I throw in something, we will awaken some ancient evil."

"It's nice that you say that, Nat, but why are you already creating one of your orbs?" Tess's tone is flat as she says so.

"You wouldn't understand that, Tess. If you are a boy and you see a hole, you either try to make it deeper or throw something inside!" Min-Jae comes to my defense.

"Exactly," Dennis says while throwing in another stone, "it's in our genes."

Seeing us do that, even little Isabella starts throwing in some smaller stones. "You too, Biscuit!" she shouts happily, and the dog, just creates a single tentacle and pushes a smaller stone over the edge into the hole. That makes Isabella even happier.

I listen to their bickering while I push more and more thermal energy into the orb. It's exactly as Min-Jae said. A need to throw stuff into any deep hole you find feels like a reflex you need to have if you want to call yourself a man.

It's a must! It's not childish! And I will pretend I do not see Tess rolling her eyes. At least Maya seems to partially understand, and Sophie is supporting any silly thing Isabella does if it means it will make the little girl happy.

Soon, I am done and throw the orb that is as big as an orange into the hole. The orb is glowing as it starts falling down and lighting its surroundings.

In the darkness of the hole, it shines especially brightly and continues to fall.

One minute.

Two minutes, and the orb starts hitting the walls and still continues to fall.

A bit longer, and only Tess sees it, and I notice some members stepping away from the edge of the hole.

One minute later, it disappears even for Tess.

"Kim, you're good at math; calculate it," Dennis nudges the other boy.

He does just that and It takes a few minutes for him to do the calculations. He asks us how long we think the object was falling and a few more questions before attempting to recalculate. In the end, he appears shocked and tries the calculations once more.

He does it a few times and then just gives up, "I think this hole is deeper than the height of Mount Everest," he says.