

Tutorial 481

Chapter 481: Puppy

We reappear in another cave deep underground, which at this point, is beginning to feel routine—me finding holes and placing anchors in them. A few of my thermal cubes surround us immediately warming our surroundings as I get to work recovering my mana.

The first thing I do is check Fracture, but the sword appears to be sealed properly in its sheath. Aside from the heavily worn inscriptions and some new cracks on the blade, it almost seems fine—as fine as something this evil can be.

My right arm is still healing slowly, like most of the injuries the sword causes. Although it looks fine on the outside, I know it's going to take days before they're back to an optimal state—maybe even weeks for some parts of my right arm.

My mana pathways are burned and they're slow to recover, throwing off my mana control like in the old days. On top of that, it's left my muscles in a weakened state and damaged my natural barrier, creating a number of vulnerabilities I'll have to deal with in the meantime.

And that's just from the side effects of holding the sword; direct contact with the blade would have been far worse.

I check on the sleeping Biscuit, confirming what I sensed, and for a moment, I push it to the back of my mind. Next, I check on the Witch. She's lying on the ground, still unconscious, and missing a few of her arms as well as an assortment of chunks from the rest of her body. Our little trio of hell difficulty enjoyers seems to have beaten her properly.

"I didn't use [Disintegration]," Lily says, watching me inspect the thylarin woman "but we had to be... rough before she started using the stone around us or did something to get in your way."

She and the twins are standing in front of me, staring at Biscuit, who still lies in my arms. It would seem I'm not seeing things after all, given the way they seem to have noticed it as well.

Biscuit is much smaller now, to the point that he looks like a puppy, two-month-old at the most. His fur is all fuzzy and incredibly soft. Even his nose is shorter, his face rounder and his legs seem shorter compared to the rest of his body.

Lily steps closer first and touches his small paw, and I sense her sending mana through him, checking his status. As she does so, I notice that unbeknownst to her, she's begun to caress and pet his tiny paw with a stray finger, her eyes widening, as her breath quickens.

"He..." her voice cracks, and she coughs. "He's fine as far as I can tell. His current stature aside, I think his mana pool probably increased rapidly in size, and there are some changes going on I can't quite follow, but they don't seem detrimental."

As she talks, her interest grows more and more, and she moves her face closer. Then Biscuit barks in his sleep, twitching his leg as he does. Lily squeaks in response, and for a moment I almost think she might snatch him right out of my hands, but she holds herself back and masks the squeak with another cough.

"Something in my throat," Lily complains before coughing once again.

"Sure," I say, pulling away from her as I form a new set of manabloc chairs, one for each of us, each modified to be the peak of comfort over the past few months. They grab them, and we sit in a circle around the flickering cube which, thanks to a clever application of empty space and a touch of kinetic energy, now emits the sound of crackling firewood.

While the Witch's unconscious body lies on the ground next to us, I start rubbing my cheek against the sleeping form of Biscuit's small body. "Is everyone ok?"

"Yes, I healed all our wounds, but yours might need a bit more time. You know I could have used [Disintegration]

"Yes, you could have probably broken a single chain, maybe two if you were to really lean on sacrifice. If I hadn't used Fracture, I would have to use black mana to get rid of her crown, and that would've caused an explosion, without really improving our situation. This way, I got rid of her crown and used up the mana inside before it could cause any trouble; it was a perfect plan."

"It didn't kill the monster," Aaron reminds me.

"I knew Biscuit was around," I say, lifting the corgi pup as I do, leaving his tiny hind legs and fluffy short tail dangling as I move him from side to side. "I probably could have pushed myself more and dealt more damage, but I trusted him." R

Pulling him back onto my chest, I give him a gentle squish, feeling the urge to squeeze him even more and give him a playful nibble.

This is getting dangerous. He's way too cute. I force myself to put him on my lap and lay my hand on his small head, which only makes things worse. That head is so small now, so soft, so fluffy.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Good.

"Of course, there were different ways to deal with the situation, but overall it went well. My only complaint is that I was deducted who knows how many levels for the assistance he gave me in killing that beast."

"You say 'it went well', but wasn't the plan to free one of the prisoners to help us escape the Astral prison?" Aaron asks, reminding me of our mission.

"That's true, but not this one," I say, sure of my words. "That thing was way too unstable to even think of cooperation and we still have three containment cells left. Tess knows about two and is currently working to find the last."

"If you think about it," Dennis begins cautiously, "aren't we going around killing tortured, and beaten up prisoners?"

"Well, when you put it that way, of course, it's going to sound wrong," I reply with a shrug. "But understand this: whether it was with Caius or this prisoner, I never went in with the intent to kill them from the start. I'm always open to freeing them through a fair deal."

"It's crazy how these Champion-level prisoners can still cause so much trouble, even with so much of their power stripped away," Aaron says, gesturing to the woman on the floor. "What about her?"

"We could just leave her here and do our own thing, but I think we can probably get something out of her as a reward for saving her life." After performing a quick check to ensure she's not just pretending to be unconscious, I add, "I want to ask her some things about challenges and using the crown. She seems to have some experience. She might also have some nice items we could take."

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"You don't want to ask her more about using mana? Just crown stuff?" Aaron asks as if suspecting me of something.

"Nah, I'm better than her when it comes to most mana-related stuff."

"Imagine how good you could be if you ditched Whitey and focused on mana alone," Dennis says, clearly trying to provoke me with a smirk.

"Imagine how completely dead I'd be if my mana got blocked, as tends to happen. Plus, this way, I can ignore my body's stats, which will ultimately lead to a greater degree of mastery over my mana."

"Imagine how good your control would be if you focused completely on mana to prevent that from happening," he pushes. Lately, he and his brother like to see how far they can get me before I punish them with harder training.

So I lean back in my chair and carefully pet the tiny corgi puppy in my hands. "Imagine thinking the conversations you have through [Connection] are private only to find out that someone was listening in."

"Imagi... what."

“Imagine talking about very... well, private stuff while walking through the tunnels behind a certain member of our expedition.”

“You’re bluffing. There’s no way you were able to resonate and join our private [Connection]. Not without us noticing.”

“Dennis, I don’t think he is. When he’s bluffing, he somehow looks more confident,” Aaron says, the more cautious of the two.

While they talk things out, I step aside, coming to a stop in front of the Witch, and say. “I know you’re awake.”

Hearing me, Melel lifts herself up, bringing herself back to her feet, and dusts herself off with the two arms she has remaining. Her wounds aren’t life-threatening, but they’re also the kind of thing Lily won’t waste mana to heal if Melel were to turn out to be an enemy.

Her yellow eyes observe me, and Biscuit cradled in my arms, before shifting her gaze to the sitting twins and Lily. Then they flicker toward the thermal orb, and her mana senses examine the cave.

She does so slowly, to avoid coming off as threatening.

Only then, without reacting to the situation or trying to say anything about the events that took place down there, she asks, “What do you want?”

Pleasantly surprised by her reaction, I nod and ask, “What do you have?”

An hour later, we find ourselves back in Hollowgate, following Melel, who’s currently leading us through the halls of her manor, which also happens to have one of the highest walls in the city. All of her arms have been restored, courtesy of Lily, who was kind enough to treat her other wounds as well.

Her manor is empty; there are no servants, no other people. Melel lives alone, secluded within a very dangerous set of defensive arrays.

The interior of the manor is simple—with no luxurious furniture or wasteful items. Everything is clean and minimalistic, with large windows to let in plenty of light. The manor itself is smaller than I expected, with thick walls enclosing most of the interior which are layered with even more defenses.

Most of the estate is dominated by a massive stone cube that towers over the actual house, taking up nearly all the available land. Its enormous bulk, easily capable of swallowing multiple mansions with room to spare, dwarfing the manor in comparison.

We pass through the cube's wall with her skill alone, the stone seeming to melt away as it creates a path for us.

Dozens of crystals line the ceiling, mimicking daylight with remarkable accuracy, and a set of inscriptions on the walls even create the illusion of wind. A large part of the space is occupied by a lush garden, filled with trees, vibrant grass, a small pond, and a cozy-looking cottage tucked into a corner.

This is where Melel has lived for the last 10 years, storing mana in her crown.

Most of the cottage's interior is lined with shelves upon shelves, filled with books and an even larger quantity of mana stones packed full of information. Then there are the items, most of them only seeming to have sentimental value, while others are clearly the results of an assortment of experiments.

It's really messy inside but not in a bad way; it's clean, lived-in, and radiates a wonderfully cozy feeling.

Without a word, Melel takes a small tray and puts five cups on it. She doesn't seem to have a complete set, so each cup is different, be it in material, shape, or size. Adding to it, she takes a bottle from one of the shelves and wordlessly heads to the terrace connected to one of the doors.

We take our seats in the chairs she brings us from the house, once again not a set, indicating once again, that she's probably not used to hosting visitors like this, and so, seeing that she's missing one, I make my own with mana, which grabs her interest as she takes a moment to examines it.

As we sit around the small table, she pours the drink into every cup, and then, in front of us, takes a sip.

Lily is the second to drink, and when she confirms it's fine, we drink as well. It tastes very nice, fruity, and slightly fizzy, and feels warm and refreshing. I quickly find myself enjoying it and take another sip while taking full advantage of the view the terrace offers, overlooking the small pond where, under a large shade tree, sits a small stack of books. It would be easy to see Melel reading there in her free time.

During this, the Witch doesn't speak, but I can only think of it as a silent form of thanks for saving her life. I doubt she'll say anything more, but this gesture speaks loud enough.

"How do you take such a small amount of mana with how much you had stored in the crown?" I ask a few minutes later.

Melel turns her eyes to me from the pond, "There are a few tricks to make it easier. I had a feeling you would know about them."

"Yes, I can do it too, but I was curious about the way you do it."

Melel tilts her head, considering her words. "Think of it like this: the mana in the crown behaves under its own set of rules, like a layered lattice. Each layer has a different response threshold, a kind of resistance coefficient, if you will. You have to tune into each specific frequency to access one layer at a time. Otherwise, you're effectively breaching the entire reservoir at once, which is wasteful and unstable."

She gestures with a hand, tracing invisible lines in the air. "It's about precision extraction. With the right modulation—and by aligning your mana with the crown's specific binding structure—you minimize the draw. It's controlled, like a harmonic oscillation. Without that tuning, you risk releasing it all at once. Think of it like plucking a single thread from a weave, using resonance instead of force."

"It's like a valve, the more you..." Dennis interjects, mocking my words with a sly grin—then abruptly stops mid-sentence, mouth stuck open, frozen in place.

"Continue," I tell Melel.

Glancing at the twins, Melel's fingers dance subtly in the air, as if illustrating a complex formula. "The crown isn't just a simple container; it's a resonant structure. When you tune into that structure precisely, you don't just take mana—you prompt it to flow willingly, at your own pace. It's a form of induced resonance, not unlike coaxing stone to vibrate at its natural frequency. The crown essentially lets its defenses down."

She pauses. "But the trick isn't just about knowing the resonance. You have to account for environmental factors, right down to the minor shifts in ambient mana density. Most of it, the crown does on its own, but adjusting for those conditions is possible from your side, and by doing so you increase your control."

A faint frown appears on her face. "And every time I draw from it, I also perform a recalibration of sorts, mapping the crown's mana fluctuations to my own."

This sounds fun, and it might take a while.

"Go play," I say, waving Lily and the twins away, and wait for them to leave, Dennis with his mouth still wide open, then I lean closer to Melel. "Repeat what you just said and imagine you are explaining it to a 5-year-old."

Chapter 482: Racist Witch

Dennis couldn't close his mouth for two days. That meant no eating and should have meant no drinking. I was ready to let go so he could at least drink, but they solved it somehow, and I decided I didn't want to know the details. I guess his pride just couldn't bear the thought of coming to me to have the effect removed.

I used those days to pull all the information I could out of Melel. Ignoring the fancy names she likes to use for everything, I quickly simplified it in my mind and immediately came up with my own ways to incorporate the new information into my training.

She hasn't even complained about her lack of sleep over the past two days, though it's no great feat of endurance for someone at her level.

Most of her knowledge is theoretical, mostly things she learned back on her home planet, her teacher apparently having been one of the oldest Champions from her planet's First Generation.

When Melel was much younger, she did something terrible, though she refused to tell me what, and I respect that. That act led to her being sent to the Astral Prison.

At some point during the years she's been here, after establishing her reputation, she ended up in Hollowgate, where she joined an expedition to explore the deep mines below.

They got lost in those dark tunnels, barely surviving the weeks of constant battle.

Melel suspects that one of the expedition's members was caught in the influence of the prisoner, who had been drawing people down into the depths in hopes of finding a talent capable of freeing it. And that's exactly what happened: after months of wandering, Melel, the only survivor, eventually stumbled onto a path close enough to the prisoner for it to speak to her.

Exhausted, wounded, and vulnerable, the less experienced and, at the time, much lower level Melel fell under the prisoner's influence—though not full control, apparently the creature wasn't capable of that, but by using subtle manipulation and trickery it managed to create a link that only grew stronger as Melel did.

I asked because I was curious—and I'm sure the only reason she answered was because she felt like she still owed me. If she hadn't, I'm sure she'd have just told me to fuck off, which I'd consider entirely reasonable. But that doesn't mean I'm not shameless enough to take advantage and ask as many questions as I can to satisfy my curiosity.

Our relationship is simple. I helped her, and now she's repaying the service by answering my questions and sharing her knowledge.

I had thought of requesting some items, but sometime over the last two days, I changed my mind. The knowledge I've acquired is more than good enough.

Melel is extremely good at handling her [Mana Crown] and manipulating stone. She can do some really fancy things with stone, but nothing of use to me. So, other than information on the crown, I listen to her lessons on theory and ask any questions I need to grasp the concepts before marking them down.

I was never the type to enjoy studying, and even now, I prefer to experience things on my own rather than getting bogged down in theory.

Then there's the things she teaches me about the kinds of challenges a person can issue once they reach the rank of Champion Candidate or similar.

As we saw back in the mine, a person under the effects of something like mind control is incapable of declaring one. You can also create some really wild challenges, but they must be accepted, and the challenged party can usually adjust the wager slightly before seeking confirmation from the challenger, then it's up to the system to acknowledge it.

You need to possess, or own, the things you are wagering. That little tidbit really drives home just how wild it is that my challenge to Whitey got approved. It's something I even mention to him as I slip into my mind for our regular training regimen and get a laugh out of it for the trouble.

I think it's even possible to wager things like traits, but you need to mean it and have a certain level of mastery over the trait in question for the system to acknowledge that you "own" it. At higher levels and for beings with the status of Champion and Absolute, these challenges get easier to make and allow for some crazy stuff. You can wager your stats, passives, and more besides.

Active skills seem to be the exception though, they're one of the very few things that just aren't possible to wager. That confirms my speculations on their importance, in fact maybe they're even more important than I thought, and I already had them quite high up.

While I'm collecting this information, Biscuit is still unconscious, and after examining him a bit more, Lily's come to the conclusion that he just needs time to "digest." His regression into a puppy is probably some kind of backlash caused by overextending himself, but of course, how could that silly corgi ever hold himself back after seeing a deer like that.

Lily and the twins spend time slacking around and training. When I give my modified evil orbs to the twins, Melel shows an interest, and I make one for her as well, which, much to the twins' frustration, she handles like a champ. When she thinks I'm not looking, she carefully places the orb into a mana cage, as if she intended to examine it later.

I want to ask her about the cage, but she looks so thrilled with the orb, almost like she's just gotten a new toy, and I don't want to ruin it out of mere curiosity. So, as a thank-you for all the information, I pretend I haven't seen anything. R

She then lies, trying to tell me that the orb she just secreted away had burst during her examinations, so I create another one, with a bit of added difficulty. She gives me a wordless nod of thanks and examines it while launching into the next lesson.

Even though this thylarin is clearly racist, I've also learned over the last two days that she's an extreme introvert, and never thought twice about locking herself away in this place for 10 years. Spending all her time training, learning, and reading. And it's something I can't help but deeply admire.

Led by some incomprehensible impulse, I even say as much.

"What do you mean?" She asks, "I'm not racist, I just don't like being around people, no matter the race."

That answer raises my respect for her more than anything else she's done so far.

Melel then continues, "I've given you all the knowledge you wanted, some of it I would've never shared under normal circumstances, and some of it I spent years trying to learn. I value my life a lot, but I value this knowledge almost as much."

Getting a hint, I stand up. "Got it, this should be enough. Consider your debt paid in full."

"Good, the exit is that way," she says, gesturing towards a stone wall that shifts and molds itself to reveal a door. Then she turns away, heading back to her cottage whereupon she peruses her collection of books, presumably looking for something to read.

As I leave I come across Dennis and finally stop using kinetic energy to hold his mouth open, and he closes it very slowly, groaning, as his jaw proceeds to make a series of intense cracking noises as it closes. Aaron watches him with clear enjoyment, likely burning the moment into his memory to tease his brother later.

“That’s it?” Lily asks, rushing over to walk by my side.

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“Yes, it took longer than I thought, but to make up for it, I’ll fly faster and teleport us further per jump. What did Tess have to say in the Community?”

“The plan’s changed a bit, and we’re heading over to meet up with Sophie and Izzy.”

“Huh? They made up?”

“It seems likely, Izzy pacified Sophie already. But I really want to get there fast enough to see the two of them reconnect.”

“So, Mindblender City it is?”

“Yes, there’s supposed to be an old fort nearby where Sophie’s planning on meeting us. Apparently, it’s dangerous to just walk into the city.”

“Well, I hope the three of you trained your mental defenses properly like we practiced. Now let’s hurry, we don’t want to be late.”

Before we leave, we make a visit to the place I sent all the materials I got from the expedition. The hammer, anvil, and chains aren’t going to be something we can take with us given their size, weight, and the mana cost to transport them. So they stay where I left them, in my underground lab, which has been heavily damaged and nearly destroyed by their arrival.

I just grab the bust and a few pieces of the most valuable and interesting metals. After leaving the lab, I also remove any Ley Lines heading there and clear away all the signs I can. The shielding of the room should take care of the rest.

After thinking it over, I create a smaller hideout far from my lab and move over a few pieces of chain and metal. This way, I can retrieve them if I need to, without leaving any trace back to the main hideout.

Then we depart using my teleportation and flight. As always, when I find myself having to move more than a few people, it's very janky, but so far, it's still the fastest method of travel.

There are a few monster attacks along the way and we have to deal with and avoid a few random groups that would otherwise ambush the average traveler; though aside from that, it's just a simple trip as we head deeper into the central region.

When we finally make our landing, the old fort Sophie mentioned is well within view, and far in the distance, we can even see the shimmering of the lake and the city with its many towers nestled on its banks.

Deactivating the Restrictive Training Emblem, the pressure on my body alleviates, and I activate one of Lily's healing marks.

Examining my body, it's still not fully healed. My muscles are weaker and they still don't feel right, my mana is much more difficult to move, and sometimes I get spasms of pain, or find that my right arm has become entirely paralyzed.

Fracture is a very powerful weapon, mid grade arcane—it's not something I expected when I set out to make it. The cost of its power is the danger inherent to its use and the fact it's constantly crumbling away, but even now, I'm still learning from it.

So now, as we head towards a tower where I sense a single mana signature lying in wait, I check my status and with it, the results of my training.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 6 - Astral Prison

Time left until forced return: 3y 120d 11h 36m 11s

Traits (2/3): Mana Circuit 2/3, Mana Wavelength Iris 1/3

Lvl 297

Strength: 164

Dexterity: 160

Constitution: 342

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1197 + 1197

Primary Class: Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (10/10):

Focus - Lvl 59

Perception - Lvl 54

Redistribution - Lvl 57

Resonance - Lvl 59

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 55

Infusion - Lvl 47

Mana Crown - Lvl 49

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 60

Ley Line - Lvl 39

Bone Knitting - Lvl 20

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Thermokinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Vortex Core (Construct)

Passive skills (5/5):

Arcane Resilience (Mid Epic)

Phoenix Embrace (Mid Epic)

Cognitive Fortress (Mid Epic)

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Tokens:

Trait strengthening token (2nd stage)

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Shards:279,936

That's close to 30 levels of free stats I've gained, mostly evenly split into Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution.

But best of all, there's also my first strengthening of Mana Wavelength Iris—something I'm quite used to at this point, but damn, the beginning hurt. The strengthened trait allows me to see mana particles and the structures of skills with even greater clarity. Though the cost is high, and I still feel like I haven't fully uncovered the trait's potential.

With the second-stage strengthening token, I could enhance it further. I just need a bit more time to fully adapt and before I do, especially before I get my Primary Class selection.

I have my hopes it will make the offerings better. Having Mana Wavelength Iris at the second stage by then could be huge.

As for my constructs, I've upgraded all of them at this point—all.

I had Lily's help for the Reinforcement construct and my Thermokinetic Mana Heart; Reinforcement is markedly better now when I decide to use it, and with my mana reserves, it was already quite powerful to begin with.

And the output of my heart has increased as well, especially when it comes to kinetic energy—something I could directly compare with Whitey and the bits of information Lily got from the pieces of his heart before they disappeared. That made the white-haired demon shut up about my weak heart for the most part, and he only really mentions it when, according to him, I do exceptionally poorly.

For any further upgrades, I'll need more to work with, 'though I have high hopes in the form of the Champion's heart Lissandra promised to get me from the pyramid. If all goes well, I could give it a good boost in strength during the tournament - if the healing field doesn't interfere again.

My mantle got the second most noticeable upgrade after the heart, the inspiration I gained from the combination of [Ley Line], [Resonance], working on Fracture, and my arcane passive. To be honest, my Mana Sovereignty Mantle might be approaching the level of an arcane passive, nicely rounding out my defenses against mental attacks and any attempts to hijack my body, mana, or otherwise interfere with my use of either.

I now have plenty of stay tokens, and there's been no change when it comes to my passive skills, but there is a good reason for it.

Shards: 279,936

I've gained over 150 thousand shards during these past few months, and I'm currently saving for a mid arcane passive, and I swear, I will sell Fracture if I need to just to get it before the Primary class upgrade, Fracture itself representing another 150 thousand shards in value.

Chapter 483: Annoying little jerks

Passing through the destroyed gate, we find ourselves on an empty street framed by equally empty buildings. If the 6th floor had more greenery, I'm sure the fort and buildings within would've been overtaken by it, but as of now, it's just a skeletal ruin. There are no signs of life other than the mana signature awaiting us amongst the streets, so we make our way in that direction.

As we walk I begin to sense an intricate web of mana hanging in the air around us, with functions I haven't seen before. After examining it for a bit I can tell that there are plenty of detection mechanisms that ring the moment I so much as touch the web. Some others seem geared towards interfering with different tracking methods, some serve as a more direct form of defense, and still others allow for the quick deployment of secondary webs among other things.

While I study it, we reach the crossroads of two streets, where Sophie sits waiting on a boulder against which a single withered tree rests. It's the only sign of any greenery as far as I can see, and the tree's branches move almost like a living being as Sophie runs her mana through it—likely as a means to pass the time.

Sophie looks the same as she did the last time I saw her. Slightly shorter than me and a bit younger. Her green eyes are noticeable even in the dusk, as is her well tanned skin.

She's luxuriously dressed in a long black robe layered over a finely embroidered tunic. The robe itself is richly adorned, trimmed in silver threads with subtle, elaborate patterns that shimmer faintly in the low light. Many of them seem to be highly mana-conductive, and I'm sure these clothes offer better defense than some of the upper epic armor I've seen.

"Please, don't mess with my web, Nat," are the first words from her mouth.

"I'm examining it, not messing with it. If you're nice, I'll show you a few ways to improve it."

"At this point, I'm sure I'm better at this than you, so if you're nice to me, I'll let you examine it and maybe explain the parts you don't understand."

"Sophie, please don't. He'll deploy some kind of array and end up bleeding his brain out of his nose just to modify it and win this challenge," Dennis sighs beside me, and I feel him adding Sophie to our link so we can all communicate telepathically if needed.

Sophie seems surprised for a moment, almost like she doesn't know what to do, but then she slowly closes her arms around Lily and hugs her back.

"I'm also glad you guys are ok. How did you do?"

"We just killed one of the prisoners held in the Containment Cells!"

"I... I see." Sophie's eyes land on me with a suspicious expression.

Feeling the need to defend myself, I hold Biscuit in front of me at arm's length. "Look, we went down there with the best intentions, but you wouldn't want a psychopathic, telepathic, super-regenerating deer running around free. And it was this little jerk who finished him off."

"Can I hold him?" Sophie asks instead of demanding details about the Containment Cell.

"No, he's mine."

Sophie continues without missing a beat as if she hadn't even asked. "What happened to him? Is he okay?"

"Yup, he's just as healthy as he could be. He seems healthier than before and stronger; he just shrunk. Lily thinks it's some form of evolution. I think it's because he overextended his abilities, Aaron thinks it's like a phoenix growing anew from his ashes, and Dennis seems to think it's my fault somehow."

"If you hand him to me, I could check..."

"No, he's mine."

"Nat, just give me that goddamn adorable corgi puppy."

"You have a really scary expression on your face right now."

Instead of answering, Sophie smiles wide and chuckles for a moment. This expression feels more real and relaxed than the one she wore before. Meeting with people after so long can be awkward. No matter how much time you spent with them before, it can still feel a bit off until things return to a semblance of normality.

"I'm glad you guys are ok. I didn't realize..." Sophie starts but then stops mid sentence and shakes her head, a smile still on her face.

Lily responds by pulling her into a seat on the boulder next to her with the twins standing nearby as the two of them exchange information. Nothing too important for now; we still need to wait for the others before we can get to that. ¶

While they talk, I return to examining Sophie's web and connect as she grants me access. Even while she's chatting with Lily and the twins, she notices whenever I start making improvements. Each time, she quickly removes my changes, restoring her original version. She clearly doesn't agree that my adjustments are improvements, but I persist, tweaking and modifying in response to her edits.

We continue like this while waiting for the others to join us.

Tess, Maya, and Min-Jae join us a few hours later. While I'm sure Tess and Min-Jae could fly if they wanted, they walk, passing through the broken gate and empty streets the same way we did.

Tess is the first to enter the crossroads, her confident stride faltering for a brief moment when she spots Sophie, but she continues forward nonetheless.

There is a white and red lightning crown floating over her head, and her golden hair is now short-ish, barely reaching her shoulders, with bangs falling to her forehead and wavy hair framing her face.

She is wearing a fitted, light metallic gray armor and five javelins float behind her back, each seemingly made of a different material. Without any gesture from her, they stab themselves into the ground and stay there.

Tess stops in front of Sophie, her expression finally changing as she takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” she says, addressing her and then also Lily and the twins. She then stops and waits.

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I’m sure she could say more—she’s good at these kinds of things. She could explain herself, make the apology longer and more heartfelt, and try to explain her behavior, yet she has chosen not to, relying on these few words to convey her feelings.

Somewhat awkwardly, Sophie looks away. “It’s fine.”

These words make Tess very happy, and for a moment, I’m sure her gray eyes are slightly wet before she blinks a few times and rushes to hug all of them.

“No apology for me?” I ask while they’re all hugging.

“Screw you, Nat,” she calls to me and continues to squeeze the life out of Lily.

When she’s done, she stops in front of me as well, a big smile on her face. The words she says to me are different from the ones she said to the others. “Thank you.” With that, she hugs me as well, careful not to squish Biscuit, who I still hold in my arms.

As she lets go, she tries to inconspicuously pull Biscuit away from me, but I don’t let go.

Tess seems disappointed as she stares at the cute pup in my arms. “What happened?”

“He ate too much.”

“Too many biscuits?” Next to her, Min-Jae laughs. But seeing no one joins, he laughs again, this time a bit more awkwardly.

He is also wearing armor similar to Tess’s—gray, light, and metallic. As always, his hair seems to be messy and a bit longer than it used to be. Underneath, his left eye is still yellow.

He notices me looking at it. “A few months ago, it became stronger, and I think I almost died.” There’s a smile on his face as he says this and continues in a whisper only I can hear, “And guess who also has Primordial energy now?”

“You?” I ask.

Maya, while hugging Sophie, shouts in my direction, with Tess already nearby. “Nat, did Kim already tell you about his new fancy primordial energy? You guys have already been talking for five seconds, so it’s highly likely.”

“He’s told me three times already. Did you start talking to me because you want to return the claymore I rented to you?”

Surprisingly, Maya becomes too busy and returns to friendly chatting with Lily. Even Maya is wearing armor similar to Tess and Min-Jae’s, and on her back is Bloodthirst, the damaged weapon mentioned. It might be just me, but the claymore looks a bit redder and less damaged.

As for Maya, I can sense something weird from her that is hard to describe. I guess I will have to try to find out later. The dagger on her waist also looks interesting, and unlike the others, there is a short leather cape on the back of her armor, barely reaching her waist.

Everyone seems to have picked up a thing or two.

“Nat, don’t your arms hurt? If you want, I can hold Biscuit for a while?” Min-Jae asks carefully.

“It’s fine.”

“Are you sure? I could...”

“It’s fine. Aren’t you taller?”

“You noticed? Just a bit more, and I’ll be taller than Maya! I’ve also put on some muscle—look!” He flexes his bicep. “I never had this much before. Maya gave me a great routine that I stick to. Did you know she was a personal trainer? And apparently, a really good one. But don’t tell her I complimented her.”

“We’ll need to do some testing to see how much working out influences strength and if there is a difference between a muscular body and a non-muscular one when the stats are the same. I’m also curious if the stats are changing our bodies and making them look more fit,” I note as the thought comes to mind.

Min-Jae hesitates for a bit but then shakes his head and smiles. “It feels like we never split. I’m glad.”

“It was just a few months.”

“That’s a pretty long time, Nat, but... I guess I’ll have to go and talk to Aaron and Dennis...” He waves off and goes to the side where the twins already awkwardly stand and wait.

To avoid being overwhelmed by all the greetings, I move in front of one of the broken houses and form a manabloc chair, sitting on it carefully. I fix the blanket around Biscuit so only his tiny head pokes out and boop his nose just once. It’s softer and smaller, but it’s the same cold and slightly wet feeling.

It seems like we don’t have to hurry yet, so everyone spends a bit of time talking to each other, and there are even some smaller gifts exchanged. The most awkward ones seem to be Tess with Sophie and the twins with Min-Jae, even after apologies and both sides wanting to get over it, but these things take time.

The first to join me is Tess, and when she lifts her eyebrows, I create a chair for her, and she sits next to me.

“Do you have to train even now?” she gestures at the evil cubes floating around me—the version that doesn’t deal with changing frequency, but the one with a smaller cube inside, and then a smaller one inside of that, continuing to the smallest degree I’m capable of.

“I’d be bored if I didn’t.” The cubes float and spin around me. “I could modify some for you to train. The twins love them.”

Tess smiles and taps the cube closest to her. “I’m sure they do. So, how did you find dealing with them, Nat? Last I remember, you were worried about having to be the responsible one.”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, please.”

“They’re annoying little jerks.”

“Are they?” Her smile grows bigger, already knowing it’s not all I have to say. That way, she probes me to say it out loud.

“Lily can be creepy at times, but she mostly listens to me... for obvious reasons. But these two? They can be super impatient and rely on me to deal with consequences. They train hard but constantly try to come up with a way to cheat training just to spite me or try to get one over on me.”

My eyes land on the twins, who still talk to Min-Jae and gesture widely, likely sharing stories from their adventures.

“Wanna hear something? I once gave them a mana-shaping exercise to keep the orb from bursting for as long as possible. The two jerks failed after an hour, but instead of coming to me, they spent half a day using [Sensory Deception] to make an orb that would look and feel like the one I made. Then they showed up in front of me.”

I pause, still remembering the feeling I got back then. I turn to Tess. "I checked it only on the surface, so I failed to notice, but got suspicious a few hours later, and only then did they reveal it was just their projection. For the following two months, they kept reminding me of it every time the tiniest opportunity showed itself. I've never seen them so happy, I swear."

"That's just like them," Tess agrees.

"Yes, exactly. They're a pain in the ass, constantly provoking me and everyone around them just to see how far they can push it. For shits and giggles and while keeping their private link going. Annoying little jerks."

"Sounds like it, Nat."

"You really want me to say it out loud, right?"

"I do," she confirms. "We're both pretty messed up, so we have to push each other to realize things like this. Just like you did for me down under the Mana Desert."

"I guess," I shrug it off and lean back, once again staring at the two blonde twins. "They're annoying little jerks, but they're my annoying little jerks, so I'll try to keep an eye on them so they don't get into trouble."

"Just like an older brother?" that silly blonde teases so I nudge one of the cubes to bump against her head.

"More like two silly disciples. And honestly, it's fun sometimes. Just a little bit. The tiniest bit. So small, you wouldn't even need..."

"I got it, Nat. I got it."

"Yeah."

"Min-Jae and Maya are also an annoying little shit sometimes." The playful jab comes out of nowhere, and when I turn to the right, surprised, she's smiling at me brightly.

Chapter 484: Mindblender City

We eventually arrange ourselves to sit in a half circle with Sophie standing in front of us underneath the half-dead tree.

She looks at the chairs I made for everyone for a moment. "Is it just me or have you made some improvements to your monobloc chair design?"

"Yes," I confirm. "I modified the structure to make them more comfortable with minimal alterations to the overall design, and the mana used for the base is... enhanced."

"You should try it, they're surprisingly comfy," Min-Jae calls.

"Maybe later," Sophie replies, waving him off. "It's about time we were heading over to the city, so I wanted to give you a few warnings before we do. First, it doesn't have a name—most people just call it the mind mages' city if not something more derogatory and they avoid the place as much as possible. Typically, when someone does visit, they're either staying a few days at most or they end up being press-ganged into one of the local factions. If they're particularly useful, one of the mind mages might even try to pacify them with mind-control."

"Nothing against you, Sophie, but if this had happened on Earth, I'm sure people would've nuked the city already."

"It's fine, Maya, no offense taken, and I agree with you. Believe it or not, they tried; just in the past ten years, there've been three large-scale attacks on the city, but as you can see, it still stands. Unfortunately. Before we even get close, I'll make sure your minds are protected and leave marks on you so everyone here knows that you belong with me."

"You make it sound like you're some kind of big shot in there, Soph," Maya states, lazily crossing her legs while the others look at Sophie, eagerly awaiting her answer.

Sophie doesn't even seem shy about it as she responds. "You could say I'm around the top 5 of the city. Given a bit more time, possibly number two and the next Archon."

"Yes, oh. There really aren't as many mind mages as one might expect. Over the past few hundred years, most of the ones who've appeared here on the Astral Prison headed to the city and either made their own group or got themselves controlled by a more powerful mind mage. As weird as it sounds, it seems to be fairly normal. As for all of you, each of you would be considered a great asset in your own right, it's highly likely that everyone would be scrambling to make you submit to them before another mind mage could beat them to it."

"How many are there in the city?" I ask.

"Fewer than 50, and most are being controlled by someone else, forming three powerful groups: Archon, he's the oldest of all of them; Beatrice, then there's his daughter with her own faction; and Namior, who got lucky and managed to seize control of a few powerful prisoners and monsters. My group is the fourth. There was a strong, independent mind mage who noticed me the moment we arrived in the city and tried to take over, but it didn't go well for him, so I replaced him as the head of his group."

"No complaints from the others?"

"None at all. It's the kind of place that only cares about individual ability, and no one weeps for the losers."

Sophie then gestures for me and the twins to stand. "I'll need your help with my web and getting everyone connected. And while we're at it we may as well use the process to make it that much more difficult for all of you to fall victim to mind control, marking, tracking, and other forms of manipulation. Doing things this way will also tie you to me so that I'll know if someone tries to take control of you, and provide me with a means of defending you. I did the same for Izzy."

"I'll just sit here and look pretty. Maya quips"

"Please, do Maya." Sophie retorts, shaking her head in exasperation, much to Maya's amusement, but in the end, she can't help but smile a bit. "Before we start, there's this thing called The Framework. It's a

mental construct centered around the palace at the heart of the city, it allows the mind mages and the people under their control to focus their calculative abilities on a single common goal.”

She looks a bit more serious now. “they’re trying to decipher the spatial locks over the Astral Prison and destroy them.”

The lesson about Mindblender City continues over the course of our approach to the place in question.

(You might be wondering why all the mind mages come here when there’s such a high chance of being taken over by someone more powerful. But it’s pretty simple when you think about it: mind mages tend to be killed on sight everywhere else. The moment you make the ability known or show even a hint, the clock starts ticking, and rumors begin to spread. Sooner or later, people form a mob to kill you off. So here, at least, you’re treated moderately well. Like a tool to be used and thrown away, but in the meantime you have a nice palace to stay, food to eat, and the only thing you have to worry about is the other mind mages and they usually defend their own kind.)

(How does Framework work?)

(I told you already, Nat, I’m not sure. I’ll know more in a few days after I join the maintenance team, and yes, I’ll tell you as much as I can.)

(This city is weird.)

(So you’ve already noticed?)

(Yup.)

(It’s exactly what you’re thinking, the entire city functions as a colossal inscription array. Each building represents a meticulously placed node within the greater structure, crafted from materials tailored to the array’s needs—some are more highly conductive to channel mana flow efficiently, while others are there to act as dampeners. The streets are lined with specialized alloys that interact with the entire mana network, creating pathways that facilitate the controlled flow of energy across districts. Throughout the city, there are many battery stations strategically positioned to provide sustained power and ensure the array’s stability, even under strain. Additionally, frequency amplification stations have

been placed at key intersections to regulate resonance frequencies while enhancing mana output and refining flow to prevent disruptions.)

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

(Don't do that, Sophie; he gets annoyed when people talk smartly like that, using all these fancy words,) Dennis warns.

(Yeah, he's always hated it,)

Aaron speaks up next, nodding seriously as he explains, (Most of the time he understands all that mana science blabber; he just gets annoyed and grumbles about how: If you truly understand something, you can explain it simply enough that a 5-year-old could understand.)

Ignoring them, I ask Sophie, (With my passive, constructs and skill, how much of a threat do these mindblenders pose to me?)

(I think you're probably safe, but at the start, you might want to weaken your defenses a bit—not enough for their manipulation to pierce, but just to make them think it's possible. They have people probing newbies, and if you come off too strong, they might send their bodyguards after you.)

(Bodyguards being powerful non-mind mages they've managed to manipulate?)

(Yes.)

(I don't think they could cause much trouble for me.)

(There are three that could,) Sophie says seriously.

At that Dennis laughs under his breath.

To stop the conversation from moving in an unwanted direction, Tess interrupts the conversation with a reminder, (As we said before. We'll be entering the city and staying in Sophie's tower with Izzy while we wait. Nat and occasionally Maya will act as her bodyguards, as the ones with the highest resistance to mind control, and Sophie will go ahead with her plan. We will do our own preparations, and then... we'll go from there.)

Everyone sends their confirmations through the link, and now, as we make our final approach to the city, everyone stops talking, their mental defenses rising in sync as we get closer.

I, on the other hand, slightly weaken my Mantle and stop using [Focus]

As we pass over the small bridge and the wide white gate opens itself to us, I feel the defensive arrays running their checks, but there seems to be some special mark on Sophie, and once they detect it they stop.

[Ley Line] seems to remain unnoticed by the automatic measures, but I'm sure someone skilled enough to notice will show up sooner or later. The question is whether or not they'll be able to mess with it. Sophie noticed but wasn't able to disrupt or otherwise manipulate it, to her annoyance and my pleasant surprise.

Inside, the Mindblender City looks unlike anything else we've seen on the 6th floor. It fits more with the style of the second, I would say. It's almost enough to make it seem like we aren't on a barren moon that serves as a prison. Well cobbled streets, clean buildings crowded with eye-catching architecture, and towers upon towers everywhere offering a stunning view of the varied styles even from the streets.

There aren't as many people as I thought there'd be, but everyone seems busy, and there's no one standing around in conversation. I guess there's just not enough trust for that. How can you call anyone a friend if the mind mage controlling them could give the order at any time for them to turn against you, and they don't have the free will to refuse?

Once again, I'm reminded just how disgusting that ability is, more so than invisibility or having "Phantom" in a class or item description.

With Sophie, I've had time to get used to it, and there is trust between us, but that hasn't stopped me from constantly developing my mental defenses—her presence and skill serving as a constant reminder of what could happen.

As we walk through the streets, an assortment of probes touch us. Some sense Sophie's mark and stop right away, while others only seem to grow more interested when they find it and they inevitably try to gauge our "power level," checking over each member of our group.

The checks tend to linger a bit when they reach Lily, who is just terrible at hiding her abilities, and do the same for Min-Jae, who honestly isn't much better.

Deploying a modified version of Sneaky Mode, the twins and I probably get the least amount of interest, the check passing over us without seeming to find us interesting enough for inspection. Even Fracture is well hidden by me.

The place Sophie is staying is a beautiful tall tower; even the yard is nice, filled with decorative columns, a small pond, and trees. It's so unfitting for this floor, I check my status just to be sure we didn't wind up somewhere else.

There are checks upon checks. As we enter, as we walk by the trees, as we meet the guards. Every person seems to have some kind of proximity-based scan they run the moment they pass another human, looking for a mark—like the one Sophie gave us so that we could enter this place.

But I guess it all makes sense. Mind mages don't generally seem to care much for direct combat; they'd rather resort to more underhanded methods. Like spying, controlling people, and overall trying to one-up each other. It all sounds so tiring.

A young woman greets Sophie, the second in command and was second in command before Sophie killed the original owner of this place. Mind mage Mila, now subject to Sophie's control.

From their interactions though, it's hard to say just how much that matters. Mila is smiling and seems very helpful to her new "master."

[Will Breaker - lvl 255]

“Mila, everyone here is to be afforded the same level of access as me and should be treated with the same degree of respect. If they give an order, treat it as if it came directly from me.” Sophie commands, her demeanor shifting noticeably in mere moments. She’s colder now and far more confident, like someone accustomed to giving orders and having them followed.

“As you command. Should I have dinner prepared?”

“Yes, for all of us. While you’re at it, have rooms prepared for them on the same floor as my sister. Starting tomorrow, only I, my guests, and my sister are permitted on that floor.”

“I will personally see to the completion of these tasks. I should also inform you that Lady Beatrice left an invitation for dinner at her place in three days. I’ve learned that only a select few were invited, mostly members of the Circle and those with significant influence.”

“Confirm my attendance; I’ll be bringing one of my guests along as a bodyguard. Arrange for a tailor tomorrow, as they’ll need new clothes promptly.”

They exchange a few more sentences, and throughout the conversation, a subtle mind battle seems to play out between Sophie and Mila—perhaps an attempt by Mila to free herself from Sophie’s influence or even take control herself.

Sophie appears accustomed to the process, showing little difficulty and, eventually, finding herself unable to gain control, Mila departs with the same friendly smile as before, bidding us adieu with a slight bow.

Chapter 485: Confronting the Tailor

Izzy is nearly twelve now, and every day she resembles her sister just a little bit more, though I can still see the ten-year-old girl in her.

She’s been here, locked away on the top floor of the tower, like a princess trapped by her evil stepmother or a damsel captured by a dragon, and surrounded by layers of defenses.

A huge smile spreads across her face as we enter, and she rushes over, hugging everyone in turn with all the strength she can muster. The inseparable Noodle is coiled around her left arm, his emerald green

eyes level with Izzy's. The sneaky snake even pretends to "kiss" or lick the members of Group 4, though I notice him subtly siphoning some of their mana as he does.

When it's my turn, Izzy shouts, "Dumbthaniel," and throws her arms around me. Her body is surprisingly warm—not from illness as far as I can tell; it seems to be related to her skill, a passive or a trait.

"It'd be nice if you stopped calling me that," I reply, returning the hug.

Noodle doesn't try to "kiss" me like he did the others, but when he looks at me questioningly and I nod slightly, he takes the mana I offer. His eyes half-close as if savoring a delicious treat, his expression oddly human.

"I don't think you've earned that right yet," she retorts, eyes flicking toward Biscuit. "I'll tell you Sophie's deepest secrets if you let me hold him for a minute."

"Izzy?!" shouts an outraged voice from elsewhere in the room.

"Sorry, Soph, one day you'll understand." Izzy taunts, flashing a mischievous smile at her sister before turning to me and whispering, "I'll even toss in Noodle to sweeten the deal."

"Not enough," I reply, feeling the weight of Biscuit's small body in my arms.

Izzy seems a bit more mature now; she doesn't protest or threaten me with childish antics. Instead, she just nods and smiles, a mischievous glint in her eyes that, for a moment, mirrors her snake's and I half expect her to flick her tongue at me.

Six months—it's been that long, and I'm already eager to see what new tricks everyone's picked up, and how many I can borrow for myself to improve my own skills.

Izzy shares some feelings with me, doing so very covertly, ensuring that Sophie doesn't pick up on it. The feelings vanish as quickly as they came, but the message is delivered.

When she looks at me, a question in her eyes, I give an affirming nod and receive another hug—this one tighter and filled with gratitude.

I wake up early in the morning and the first thing I do is check on Biscuit, still fast asleep, nestled in a luxurious armchair under a pile of cozy blankets.

Creating a line to him, I teleport over, lift him up, and teleport back into bed, balling up under the blankets with the corgi pup in my arms.

Finally, a yawn escapes my mouth, and in the new morning light, I examine my room.

One wall is made entirely out of glass, laced through with metal wire, forming a set of defensive inscriptions that should make the glass more durable than some standard walls. The design is kinda nice too. There's a lot of light, illuminating my bed, the thick carpets, a bevy of armchairs, and a door leading to a massive balcony. Then there's another door leading to a dressing room and another leading to the bathroom.

The room is already littered with an assortment of things, most of the items from backpacks I, the twins, and Lily were carrying for me—the results of my experiments and materials I've set aside for experimentation and crafting. Naturally, this includes a few of the golden chains from my lab which I've teleported over, all in all, the whole affair takes up a huge chunk of the room.

I greatly prefer this over the almost clinical sterility from before.

Turning my eyes back to Biscuit, I reach out and boop his nose. And once again, he doesn't react, so I brush his whiskers experimentally with the same lack of reaction. *Ř*

Braver now, I carefully open his mouth, grab, and pull gently on his small pink tongue. When I let go, his mouth closes, leaving his tongue poking out slightly.

"How did you do that, you silly creature? Is your primordial energy so strong? Are you the chosen one? Main character? Some kind of regressor or reincarnator?" After each question, I boop his tiny nose.

There is no answer.

“I know I helped you; I know the beast was still chained, I know it wasn’t sane, it was wounded and terribly weakened. Still, don’t you think you took things a bit too far, devouring it so seemingly easily?”

Still no answer, so I move on and grab his tiny paw, poking at the soft pink beans of his toes.

“You completely devoured it, you didn’t even leave a single bone or drop of blood behind. I wanted some of that to experiment with , you know. It would’ve been nice to get a piece of that extremely durable bone, or part of an antler, or even some of its flesh to observe the regeneration process.”

And still, the corgi decides to sleep and keep his secrets, so I reach and touch the soft fur on his neck, right under the chin, and caress it with a single finger.

“The cave is gone too, and with it, all the things I wanted to loot. I still plan to return a bit later and look into getting some of the acid; the anchor I left should last a few more weeks, so at least there’s that.”

I finally let go and lay on my back, the sunlight gradually starting to creep across my bed. I close my eyes, listening to the gentle breathing of the small creature beside me.

“I forgive you because you’re cute,” I declare in the end. “But next time, at least leave me a piece of bone.”

Only once I’ve said it out loud do I realize the absurdity of it all, and jump out of bed, content in my amusement, to throw on some clothes before heading off to meet the tailor.

This tale has been unlawfully lifted from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

After trying on the 5th set of clothes, I feel like I’m starting to get close to snapping. And the other members of Group 4 slacking around in the room aren’t exactly helping either.

“Lady Sophie, your bodyguard has a nice body and face, sure, but his taste in clothes is... unconventional.”

“Some would say he likes to dress like a homeless man,” Sophie says with a nod and a smug grin.

“I wouldn’t go that far, Lady Sophie, your bodyguard just seems to prefer a more casual style.”

“If you know, then why do you keep pushing these ridiculous clothes on me?” I lift a white shirt with a high collar and tons of buttons that serve no purpose. Even the cut is too wide, and moving my arms is a pain.

The middle-aged man, dressed in a more elaborate set of clothes than anything I’ve ever seen, looks at me like a child. “Lady Sophie holds a high position within the city. Your appearance, as her bodyguard and escort, reflects on her. You are a weapon that serves at her will, so it follows that the weapon must be an extension of herself.”

I glance at Fracture nearby and then back at the man.

“Sounds like bullshit. The only important thing is power. With enough power, I could walk in there in my underwear and they would still bow and kiss my feet if I tell them to. If I don’t have the power to back it up, not even the best clothes in the world will help me.”

The man looks like someone drank a protein shake, sealed up the leftovers, let it ferment for a few days, and reopened it by mistake.

It’s a nice look.

All this time, Sophie just sits back and seems to enjoy the situation, sitting on the sofa with Lily and Izzy, with Noodle slithering around. Lily seems to be the most excited, looking through a catalog of dresses she asked from the man, once in a while showing some to Sophie.

“Mister,” the tailor says, and his tone makes me wonder why no one’s thrown him from the top balcony of the highest tower, “you may rely on your strength, but elegance and propriety are as much a part of wielding influence as any skill. Even the finest sword deserves a polished sheath.”

Once again, I glance down at Fracture and the sheath I made for it and haphazardly wrapped a level 350 manta ray skin around. The result is... not polished.

“Hard disagree. Give me some simple clothes. Something comfortable and easy to move in; if it’s like that and not overly decorated, I won’t care.”

"I see, sir. Perhaps a minimalist approach would suit you—a fitted set of attire with clean lines made to highlight your figure, with refined stitching and subtle detailing, while still being appropriate for one in Lady Sophie’s service. I hope that will satisfy your... tastes.”

“Sure. If it’s comfy, you can make multiple sets in the same design.”

Once again, I get the same smell-of-forgotten-protein-shake expression and a giggle from Sophie.

“Do you have his measurements?” she asks the tailor.

"Indeed, Lady Sophie. By tomorrow, I shall have the attire prepared: a sleek, streamlined design in black and gray, with discreet detailing and a touch of pale blue stitching—for an air of understated refinement, should it meet your approval."

“Thank you, you can go. When you return tomorrow, I would like to ask you to take measurements for one more who will also be serving as my bodyguard and this young lady as well,” she states, gesturing at Lily, who seems very excited.

“That should be very possible,” he says, nodding towards them and giving me one last look, before leaving with a few more bows.

When the doors are closed, Sophie explains, as if she knows exactly what’s been going through my mind, “He is one of the Archon’s favorites; that’s why he’s still alive.”

"I can imagine someone pushing him off a balcony."

"I heard someone tried once and got pushed off instead, even at level 200. He somehow managed to die, all the bones in his body were broken. I would like to laugh at you a bit more, but you are mostly right; if you're powerful enough, you don't have to care about things like protocol, so you should be fine."

"It's always like that." I take a few quick steps and lift Biscuit from the armchair before Izzy can steal him as she tries to pretend she's just passing by.

Acting as if nothing happened, she makes a lap around the armchair and moves to sit next to Sophie once more. Only then does she give me that scary look of hers, about as threatening as an angry kitten.

"What should I be expecting at that dinner we're attending?" I ask.

"Mostly a wide range of people checking you out and maybe two or three bodyguards trying to test you. I'll take care of the mind manipulators, but the bodyguards are up to you. If anyone tries to do anything improper, don't be shy about it and be very direct; that's how I've presented myself up til now, and you should do the same. Don't hesitate to show off your strength."

"I quite like that."

"I knew you would," Sophie says. "I think you should also keep your crown active. You'll see a few people with rings and one or two with mantles."

At that, my interest piques, "Have you learned anything new about that class of skills?"

"Not much, to be honest. Don't quote me on this, but it should be more or less like this: Crowns for storage, rings refine and channel, and mantles resist. I read it in one of the books I found so I don't know how reliable that information is."

"That's not a lot. Lily, what about your mantle?"

She perks up and stops petting Noodle, who slithers back over to Izzy. Noodle seems even smaller than before, barely as thick as two of my fingers combined, but I'm sure the little animal is hiding something.

"My mantle is very, very mana efficient, so I can keep it up for a really long time. It uses more mana when it attacks or gets hit, but it's still much less than if I used the skill instead. It's still very low level, so I will let you know what I learn as I use it more."

Pulling Noodle's tail, Sophie thinks for a moment before speaking once more, "Didn't those two thylarin brothers imply that [Mana Mantle] could be used to power abilities based on mana and prevent others from taking control over the user's mana? Wouldn't that mean Lily's [Disintegration Mantle] is nearly useless, as I don't think Lily will be meeting many people with [Disintegration]?"

On that point, I disagree, "If the mantle can resist [Disintegration], wouldn't that make it easier to resist weaker stuff like simple mana attacks, like stone manipulation, water, and fire, not to mention a few of the more obscure things?"

"Perhaps, but wouldn't the efficiency be terrible if the mantle were used to block a different element than its own?" Sophie asks, "And wouldn't that make simple mantles like [Mana Mantle] even more powerful, and make those based on super rare skills like [Disintegration] even weaker?"

I think about it a bit and can't help but agree as I respond, "Yes, but that fits with what we know about the system's asshole methods, and I bet it's not that simple. But there's probably something else to it; otherwise, the mantle and the ring would both come up short in comparison to the crown. They need to do something extra on top of amplifying your skill."

"Your crown can store mana without you having to focus on upkeep, right?"

As we exchange our messages, Lily's eyes jump quickly between me and Sophie. Noodle notices and, for a while, watches Lily doing so before copying her and doing the same.

Then, for some reason, and with a smile, Izzy starts doing it as well.

“Yes, the requirement on me is minuscule. If [Mana Ring] helps with control, it probably adds something else to it so it’s not as simple as [Mana Manipulation]. Maybe it makes things like compression easier, or maybe it lets the system take up some of the strain of channeling mana.” I muse.

“That could slow your growth or allow you to let the ring handle that kind of mana use while you focus on a different discipline... By the way, those annoying lines you’ve been making, what are they?”

Finally, she’s asked about my [Ley Lines]; I’ve seen her struggling to resist since we got here, and as someone who likes to use and deploy mana structures, not unlike her web, it comes as no surprise. The feeling is almost like a victory in itself, after all, I haven’t asked about the things she’s made either, and she must know why.

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know, in exchange, you get to help me with this cute little thing,” I quip, gesturing at Fracture resting against a wall nearby.

Unlike Lily, Sophie shows a deep interest and I recognize in her the same slightly crazed shine I often see reflected in the mirror.

Chapter 486: Dinner

After a round of sparring, Tess and I went to the top of the tower, to have a look at the city around us. Right away I noticed a few higher towers with a better position that I felt would offer a nicer view of the lake.

“Do you think Sophie will be mad that we damaged the training hall?” Tess asks, her hair waving in the gentle breeze as she takes a seat on the bare rooftop.

I follow her example and claim a seat next to her. “Who should we blame it on?”

“The twins would rat you out in a heartbeat if you tried to blame it on them. Lily and Min-Jae would seem to be the best options.”

“I agree, also, did you just call him Min-Jae?”

She smiles. "He asked me to call him by his first name, apparently that means we're good friends. He almost asked Maya as well, but he seems kinda shy around her."

"He told me to call him by his first name months ago."

"This isn't a competition, Nat."

"Sure." Even though the sun isn't visible, because of that dust or whatever surrounding the moon, it feels a bit warmer up here, so I open up the blanket a bit so that Biscuit can enjoy it as well.

"I know, the moment you guys get your hands on him, even to pet him, you won't be able to resist trying to take him from me. That's something I can't allow. Besides, it's up to me to protect him while he's like this."

"You mean while he is in a food coma?"

"It's not a food coma. He's digesting the Champion-ranked monster's body and... cultivating or something. You know expunging impurities from his body."

"So, it's a food coma?"

"Yes..." I admit with a sigh and carefully hand him over to her, and she accepts him just as carefully, remaining mindful of the blanket as she does.

I watch as she gently touches the top of his head and pets him with the slightest brush of her fingers before using her entire palm, seeming surprised by just how small his head has become, not to mention its softness. I can see it on her face, especially in the big smile dominating her expression.

Biscuit, the sleeping pup, is defenseless, so she takes the opportunity to poke at his round, soft belly, pulls on his paws, and then, seemingly to her own surprise, leans in and sniffs the top of his head, chuckling as she does.

"Emotional Support Corgi, or ESC, is that what you called him?" she asks, the broad smile never leaving her face.

"Sometimes it feels that way. Izzy told me months ago that Biscuit feels like he has no evil in him, that you could always feel at ease around him."

"Only until the moment he decides to nom on a being approaching level 500." Tess quips.

"It was terribly weakened and almost all of its powers were suppressed." I retort in the doggo's defense.

"But he ate it." Tess continues, "A house-sized deer with bones capable of withstanding an acid that melted through Lily's arm as if it were nothing. She told me all about it."

"If you put it that way..." I demure, letting the sentence fade into the air as I lay back on the roof, allowing myself to rest, just for a while. No training, no worrying. Just for these few minutes, I allow myself to relax while I listen to Tess giggle like a child, caught up in her admiration of Biscuit.

"What happened to the other guys?" I ask after a few minutes, recreating the evil cube and reactivating my Restrictive Training Emblem.

"Famir took over the group we were leading. He and Heryd and their groups stayed with us after Sophie split off with Izzy. For the entire six months. We grew that group pretty big with their help and killed a good number of powerful sleeping monsters." She seems reminiscent for a while. "Is it weird that I thought even that was fun? Even with the other groups pushing and hunting us, the need to constantly fight off strange monsters, all while dealing with city leaders, collecting information, and exploring amazing places?" **R**

"I'm not the right person to ask."

"I guess you aren't," She admits, pulling Biscuit closer and rubbing her cheek against him, her golden hair falling around his tiny head. Then she asks, quietly, almost whisper silent, "Do you remember your apology, back in the tournament, for what you did on Earth?"

“Yes.”

“It was all forgiven long ago.”

As I look at her, she lifts Biscuit up to her face, his hind legs hanging down alongside his tiny, fluffy tail. Biscuit covers most of her face, her eyes the only things visible over his head. The wrinkles in the corners of her eyes tell me she’s smiling.

“Ah... that’s good.”

“It is, isn’t it?” I can hear the smile in her voice, but by the time she puts Biscuit back in her lap and wraps the blanket around him, it is gone.

As her face takes on a more serious expression, she turns to me “I’ll guard the fort while you’re at that dinner with Sophie and speak with Maya so she can guard Sophie when you need to be out doing your own thing. I already asked Izzy to help and we got Sophie to push back her plans a bit, so we have more time for preparations. So for the next few weeks; this will be our base, and once we return from the Beyond expedition you have scheduled for us, we can finally push to leave the 6th floor. I just think it’s better to go to Beyond while we have a safe base here on the 6th rather than leaving others alone to deal with the start of the 7th.”

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

"Let’s see how things shake out. We still have a lot to gain here, so I wouldn’t complain—but things never go as planned. Hopefully, the other floors won’t take as long. I want to clear them all."

“Me too. Now, if you’ll allow me,” she says, carefully handing Biscuit back to me, “I have to go and get that smartphone from Izzy, I really hope it’s not broken yet. Then I’ll listen to some of Earth’s music on repeat until I fall unconscious.”

Sophie walks in front, joined by her second assistant. Mila’s bringing up the rear to handle our defenses, while Tess does the same. I follow closely behind in the new clothes I’ve been forced to wear.

For some reason, they even brought in a barber, who wound up giving me a simple haircut and a quick styling, that nevertheless manages to earn a few compliments. Izzy also snapped a picture, surprising me with the idea that there should be any storage left on the device.

Heading to dinner we don't take anything as fancy as a carriage or ride some flying monster or whatever the people here are accustomed to using. Instead, we walk. There are plenty of sneaky touches reaching toward us. Attempts at mental manipulation, or leaving a mark on us, scans, and more. All of which is simply and swiftly thwarted by Sophie as she walks sharply, her posture confident and head held high. Her expression is very different too, colder, and more confident, if not just dangerous.

Whenever people reach towards us, she reaches back, causing exactly twice the damage they would have caused.

So far, she also defends me and her second assistant who is also a mind mage, even if they are weaker than herself, so I'm just enjoying the walk and the feel of my new clothes. I think they're the most comfortable I've ever had in the tutorial. Except for that shirt I bought for 10 bucks seven years ago. Even though it's bleached and has a few holes, I still used to wear it on Earth when I went to sleep. Last I knew I'd thrown it over my chair back on Earth.

I hope no one stole it.

(Now that you and Tess are here, I can push more, so I mean to do just that. It will result in more attempts on our minds. Will you be okay?) Sophie is the first to break the silence.

(Sure, go wild. It'll be more fun that way.)

(I'm confident you'd be singing a different tune if you didn't have that disgustingly powerful passive to protect your mind.)

(That's true; you know how much I love mind manipulation. I would probably end up nuking this city from orbit otherwise.) I'm sure she remembers our... clash from the first floor just as well as I do.

(I think these powers are just as disgusting as you do,) she admits, her voice growing quiet, despite the privacy afforded by our communications uplink.

To her assistant's surprise, Sophie slows her walk and points to her right. (There are 10 people in that small house there. A group of people who've been taken over by one of the weaker mind mages. I could erase his marks, his protection, and order them all to start killing each other with a thought.)

She starts walking again. (Just think about how simple it is, even here, where people have mana, levels, and stronger natural barriers. Imagine what I could do on Earth. By the time I get out of the tutorial, I should be capable of turning millions, tens of millions, into mere slaves.)

(Do you want to?)

Sophie laughs. (It's damn crazy, that would be the first thing you'd ask. I don't want to, but if it meant protecting Izzy? Protecting someone else from our group? I'd just like to think I'd at least hesitate.)

(Why would you? Isn't your sister more important than a bunch of people you don't even know?)

(I... do you realize the moral implications of that, Nat?)

(Yes, very clearly.)

(And you would... you would choose your sister over millions of people?)

(Yes.)

(...sometimes it's really easy to forget how you are.)

(I'm not saying I'd do it with pleasure, obviously. My goal is to become powerful enough to avoid ever being forced to make that choice. But want to hear a secret?)

(Please tell me, Nat.)

(No matter what you do or how much you try to prepare, there will be fuck-ups.)

(So you think I should stop worrying?)

(Nope. Just do the best you can so that even if something does fuck up, you can say there was nothing more you could do.)

(I wish I could.) She waves her hand, and a group of guards parts around us, letting us pass unchallenged. Before she starts walking again, she faces me, fully serious, with the faintest of smiles on her face. (People like me don't get happy endings, and there's a good reason I was thrown here.)

Then she turns, her steps determined as she strides forth to face the very thing she hates.

The building towering in front of us is much taller than our tower. Likely the second tallest in the city. It's pitch black, with a surface as smooth as a polished mirror.

White inscriptions coil their way across the surface of the entire tower creating an ornamental display, bathing the surroundings in a gentle light. The trees framing the pathway have their own set of matching round lights floating among the branches, moving gently like buoys resting on the waves.

As it turns out the dinner isn't actually being hosted inside the tower; instead, they've set everything up outside, in a beautiful garden framed by an assortment of trees, coiling pathways, flowers, and pillars showcasing art and inscriptions. The air hums with a strange energy, thick and charged. Shadows flit between the trees, figures pass through dressed in cloaks and fine robes, each giving off a sense of purpose and mystery. Somewhere deeper in the garden, music plays softly, adding a haunting echo that blends almost seamlessly with the whispers of the crowd around us.

There are dozens of people milling about, and Sophie's protection disappears from me as she leaves me to fend for myself.

As if they had been waiting for just that moment, dozens of careful touches brush against my mind, each one making my blood boil. And even though they don't manage to do anything, just the sheer fact that they're even trying makes me want to smash in their heads.

My mind, my freedom is very important to me, and that's a sentiment that's only grown stronger over the course of the tutorial as I've encountered the forces capable of taking that freedom away.

I make sure to remember each and every one of those signatures, especially the three that seem more powerful or sneakier than others, making more serious attempts at taking over.

After clearing my mind, I use [Focus] to strengthen my resistance and follow Sophie, aware of dozens more scrying touches reaching for her than for me. It's almost as if each step closer to the center of the garden were sharpening their interest, and drawing them in like moths to a flame.

Chapter 487: In that guest's favor

(There are only three bodyguards you need to worry about. One of them isn't here—the most powerful man in the city and someone Archon himself “caught” when that man was much younger. Archon really lucked out with him. The remaining two will be at dinner tonight. One of them is guarding a man called Namior. He's not here yet and it's not likely he'll even come. His bodyguard is a vyssari woman. She possesses primordial thermal energy, but there are rumors that she has another. The second person you need to watch out for is the man standing next to our host.)

Sophie gestures towards the gazebo where a group of people is standing in a small circle, drinking from a delicate set of glasses. Each one has a presence that sets them apart from the other groups.

Mostly, the woman with pastel pink skin and pink hair. Her eyes are a mix of blue and pink colors, seeming to move like waves slowly crashing onto each other. Her face and skin are adorned with blindingly white dots reminiscent of freckles. She's currently wearing a pale green dress with a similar pattern of white dots. Surprisingly, it doesn't look as strange as I would've thought if it had been described to me. Her pink skin and hair have taken on a pleasant pastel color, which complements it well.

Other than all of that, there is one more noticeable thing on her: a ring on the pointer finger of her right hand. The ring gleams as if it were made of white light, constantly shivering and slightly changing its shape.

[Waveshaper - lvl 265]

Behind her stands a man. He is tall and handsome, wearing a gray and white suit. He has brown hair and a short well-kept beard. His eyes never stop scanning his surroundings.

[Breaker Sentinel - lvl 251]

Over his head floats a crown. It's bigger than mine, and the design is different as well. The crown is transparent, and some kind of transparent energy seems to be swirling inside.

Sophie's voice takes on a different tone. (The man with the crown serves as mutually assured destruction. They say the crown he's wearing is either an [Impact Crown], [Shock Crown], or [Momentum Crown]. The energy stored within should be enough to blow up the entire city ten times over, and his life is bound to that of the woman he protects.)

(Yes. People say that after storing energy in that crown for so long, the man is incapable of using it normally, which reduces his capabilities. But it doesn't matter, the moment he tries to use it he will die, and the crown will release all of the stored energy.)

(That's quite disappointing. You would expect some skill from someone like that. And his level's not very high either.)

(My guess is that he was never meant to be anything more than a threat, so the Archon didn't bother "raising him". But let's greet one of the more powerful mind mages; I want to see her face. She is one of Beatrice's puppets and really didn't like it when I was invited to be a part of the Framework's maintenance.)

"Pyke, you can go for now. Greet the other attendees and collect as much information as you can. You are allowed to use my name for the sake of reassurances," Sophie says out loud.

The second assistant just bows and heads for the nearest group of people, and Sophie advances towards the smaller circle of well dressed people. They're a blend of human, thylarin, and vyssari. And I follow behind her, observing the way people turn their eyes to my crown, wondering if anyone notices the sword on my waist.

So far, most people check the crown, but barely anyone bothers to look at the sword. However, a few do seem curious as to why I would carry such a heavily "sealed" and weak-feeling weapon with me.

Especially that pink woman's bodyguard, who seems more curious about its nature and spends more time observing it than anyone else.

Sophie joins the circle with a big fake smile and greets everyone, starting with Beatrice's puppet, to whom she bows gently.

"So, you did have people outside of the city, Sophie, my dear," the woman smiles as fakely as Sophie did before. As she does I notice Beatrice glancing our way. The blue and pink colors swirling in her eyes. The white freckles on her skin and face seem even more interesting. Their shape is a bit spiky.

"You could say that, Lady Kehsi. I've shared a path with Nathaniel for a long time."

"He seems useful indeed, especially his defenses... impressive."

"It's an arcane passive," I say, joining the conversation, not minding the looks they send me for the offense. "It's there in case some fucker decides to try and mess with my mind."

Silence fills the area, and judging by the looks on the faces around me everyone seems to be questioning whether or not they heard me right.

Sophie doesn't say anything to stop me, but I can almost feel her amusement through our link as she watches the expressions of everyone in this small circle.

After a brief moment of shock, Kehsi smiles, hers even more fake than Sophie's while still containing a hint of interest and danger. "How rare it is," she begins her tone both amused and cutting, "to encounter someone with such audacious disregard for propriety. I can hardly recall the last time anyone gave us a display of such... impertinent candor. Perhaps I've grown accustomed to the practiced reverence of those who know their place." Her eyes gleam with a flicker of something unreadable. "Tell me, is this insolence an artifact of your nature, or merely a fleeting lapse in judgment?"

I shrug. "I don't even know what half of these words mean. What I do know is that this man has made three really nasty attempts to get into my mind three times. Then, when he failed, he tried to etch some orders into me on the sly." I turn and point to the man in question. "I've already memorized his mana signature and will be finding where he lives very soon. Then there's the woman to your left who keeps

trying to mess with my connection to my crown and make it explode the next time I fall asleep or something. Baldie in the corner tried to leave some kind of tracking beacon on Sophie, so I left my own mark on him."

Kehsi raises an eyebrow, her smile widening, as though my words have amused her in some darkly satisfying way. "So, beneath that coarse exterior lies a vigilance I hadn't anticipated," she replies. "You speak as though you understand the delicate intricacies of our world. And yet, here you are—bold, undeterred, and seemingly indifferent to the dangers such accusations carry."

Leaning in slightly, she lowers her voice, each word dripping with condescension and laced with curiosity. "Tell me, do you truly grasp the consequences of such... insolence? Or are you merely testing the patience of those who could end such audacious endeavors with a mere whisper?"

I keep my tone flat. "I don't care much for the 'delicate intricacies'."

Kehsi's fake smile widens. "So, you mean to say you don't understand—or rather, you simply don't care about—the consequences of your actions here?" Her voice is almost mocking, like she's daring me to slip up.

"Guess you'll find out."

For a moment, there's silence. She tilts her head, almost intrigued, before finally speaking. "Bold words for someone standing alone," she says, but her gaze shifts briefly to Sophie. "I'll remember this... boldness. Let's see if it can last."

Sophie just gives her a big smile and a short nod, after which the woman leaves, closely followed by her bodyguard.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

The man I threatened to mark does the same along with the two others who tried the mess with us the most.

(These people would be amazing at playing a group of villainous nobles in a TV show,) I note.

(Pff, more than you would think. Now watch how the others react.)

I do as I am asked, and the rest of the circle, which had treated the departed duo so well before, now turns to Sophie. They praise her, they praise me, and they immediately begin to trash-talk the people who just left.

Such shamelessness amazes me, but it quickly gets to be too much, so I let Sophie handle things while I filter it out. My eyes move across the garden to some sort of mana-based fireworks that occasionally explode in the sky, creating beautiful shapes. Sometimes it's a mystical animal, sometimes they look like simple ornamentation.

I think I should be capable of recreating them, and the longer I watch, the less difficult it seems.

Then my eyes slide to my right, meeting the gaze of the bodyguard with the transparent crown over his head.

His cold eyes meet mine, then he glances at my crown before looking away. After a while, he whispers something into Beatrice's ear, and she nods in agreement. Then they each walk towards a different group of people.

(You're not going to talk with that Beatrice woman?)

Sophie continues talking with her group of bootlickers but spares a bit of attention to answers. (We mostly avoid each other, and until I'm sure we can deal with her bodyguard, I would prefer it to stay that way for now.)

(Sounds reasonable. Any idea what race she is? I haven't seen anyone like her, even in Beyond so far.)

(She and her father are the only members of their race I've met, and as you can imagine, they aren't eager to share any details.) She also looks towards Beatrice for a moment and sighs in my mind. (You

would think she'd look silly if someone had simply described a person with pink hair and skin, but she's just so beautiful.)

(The white freckles do a lot of heavy lifting, as do the weird eyes. By the way, I think I should be able to handle the bomb guy.)

(...Are you sure?)

(How can I be sure of anything in this tutorial? In the worst case, I can teleport us all out.)

(That would destroy the Framework, so how about we leave it for later?)

(You keep mentioning the Framework, but isn't it here for quite a long time without any success?)

(Yes, but I'm sure you'd also prefer if we do it on our "own" instead of freeing a being that could squish us like bugs.)

(Well when you put it that way... it makes me curious how the others intend to clear the floor.)

(As far as I know, no Hell group has cleared the 6th floor yet, so it seems like it'll be one of the longer ones.)

(Theoretically, you could spend years on each floor. There might still be people stuck on the 3rd, unable to finish off the saint, or those who decided to spend the rest of the tutorial on the 4th. By the way, your shadow is creepy.)

(So you have noticed.)

(Right away.)

(I'll tell you more later; I need to concentrate for now and try to take over one of these mind mages.)

(Sure, good luck.)

With that, I disconnect from the conversation. While keeping an eye on Sophie, I continue to examine the bodyguards, leaving the mind mages to her.

The constant barrage of manipulation attempts is extremely irritating, but I can control myself and hold myself back, my eyes ticking between attendees I consider interesting.

The weird crown guy is the most interesting by far. Low level and who knows how long he's been storing energy in that crown. Then there's a weird guy with two slim swords that seem to vibrate constantly at a ridiculously low frequency. A thylarin with a ring made of fire, and a vyssari with a mantle made of ice.

Six months ago, I might have been cautious around them, but now they feel weak—far too weak. With all my training and breakthroughs, I could easily take them all on at once.

Even down in the mines, I didn't get a chance to use my full strength because of the situation and that cursed weapon of mine. But I can be patient when I choose to be. I'm sure soon enough I'll be able to go all out, to test myself against someone strong, and feel the satisfaction of seeing my own progress.

I cut my thoughts short, stepping back and glancing to my left, where I find a woman sitting with a creature perched on her shoulder—a monster resembling a crow, its eyes a pupilless void of blue.

[Phantom Beak - lvl 241]

Damned abomination.

Sophie and some other mind mages separate from their bodyguards, moving towards higher parts of the garden, leaving us behind.

Much like their “owners,” the bodyguards split into groups as well, and I take the opportunity to have a seat on a comfy-looking bench I saw a few minutes ago. On my way there, I take a plate from one of the servants and a glass of a rainbow-colored drink and plop down.

And just like that, I get a few minutes of relative quiet.

While I keep an eye on Sophie in the distance, a woman comes closer and sits next to me. She's dressed like the other servants but there's a vast difference in the way she holds herself and smiles.

She looks very ordinary—the kind of person you'd pass by without a second glance, neither beautiful nor plain, weak nor powerful. Just perfectly average. But the way she looks at me is anything but ordinary, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

Hello, Nathaniel," she says, her smile carrying an unsettling warmth. "I hope you don't mind me speaking to you like this."

There's a brief pause before blood begins to trickle from her nose. She dabs it away with the edge of her white sleeve, almost amused. "This body... it's proving more fragile than I anticipated. I'm no expert when it comes to this sort of interference, so we've only got a few minutes before it wears out."

"Okay?"

She raises an eyebrow, giving a faint, knowing smile. "So rude. I would've thought you'd remember me, but I suppose that's too much to ask; the version you knew was very... unlike this." Her expression softens, almost fond. "Simply put, I'm also one of those who helped make your challenge possible—and, indirectly, allowed your little guest to settle in your mind."

"I still don't get what you mean, but you're giving me the same feeling I got from that dickhead Envy. Are you one of the Rulers?"

She is nodding in a way that feels strangely genuine. "Envy can be a bit much, can't he? This time, he managed to pull a fast one on both Greed and I. Greed only wanted a light touch of interference, and Envy lent a hand. But in the end, the system twisted things just enough to work more in your guest's favor."

"Are you restricted in what you can say, or do you just like being mysterious?"

“Maybe a little of both? I have to admit, I’m glad I took an interest in this particular run of the tutorial. You’re all so unexpectedly delightful! Your sister especially—she’s got a rare spark. And that man in Beyond... he’s a treasure, so strange and fascinating. Greed likes a more hands-off approach, but I think it will be much more kind to give you at least some information.”

She leans in closer, gesturing for me to do the same as blood trails from her nose again. One of her eyes bulges, then bursts, spraying my face with blood. Her neck jerks, twisting unnaturally.

Yet she continues in a whisper, her voice now rough and rasping. “If you’re not careful, your guest might begin weaving his memories into yours, slowly replacing you. It’s possible he’s already started. That’s how the system decided to handle this little challenge, much to Envy’s satisfaction. Greed should have known the system wouldn’t take kindly to our interference—or maybe she did.”

She pauses, a strange look passing over her face. “It seems my time has run out. Until next time, Nathaniel...”

With that, her body contorts sharply, limbs twisting at unnatural angles as the sickening crack of snapping bones echoes through the air. Her face twists in a grotesque grimace, eyes wide but empty, as her frame collapses in on itself, her skin splitting under the strain. Her body crumples into a heap—a tangled, broken mess.

The servant’s remains lie there, twisted and lifeless, a bloody reminder of the cost of her presence, leaving an unsettling stillness in the air as if even the world itself were recoiling from her departure.

Looking at it, I stand up, wipe the blood from my face, and move to a different bench to keep an eye on Sophie.

Chapter 488: Craziest fucking human I ever met

The rest of the dinner is uneventful, and even though they suspect me of killing the servant, no one seems to make any serious complaints, and it ends there.

As we return to the tower with Sophie, I think about how strange that is. How would my two-years-younger self react to such a situation? And with that, I can’t help but think about what we’re doing right now. Currently, we’re planning to take over a city of mind mages. There’s no hesitation in any of us, and we’re all ready to kill just for the sake of reaching our goal.

Part of me wonders if we've gotten so comfortable with the thought of killing natives because we know they're fake, or if we'll find ourselves dealing with real people the same way. Everyone in Hell difficulty is twisted in one way or another, and I can't imagine people from lower difficulties acting like this. Everyone in Hell is wilder, more dangerous, and just... more adaptable to the world we've found ourselves in.

Are we just a bunch of sociopaths and psychopaths? Is our ability to adapt part of normal human nature, or are we just better at it? We don't hesitate to go out, hunt, and kill monsters that only want to defend their territory. If someone did something like that on Earth—went and killed all the deer in a forest, for example—they'd just be considered crazy. Yet, we don't even hesitate at the thought here. Yes, there's a difference between monsters and animals, but it's a fine line nonetheless.

For now, I think we're just taking full advantage of the opportunities granted by the tutorial, given that we still don't know what awaits us out there.

(I'll return to the tower in a bit,) I tell Sophie as we come to a stop in front of the gate.

She seems to realize what I'm about to do. (Sure, later then.)

(Yup.)

With those last words, I make sure she makes it through the gate, and only then do I head back into the city. There's still some dried blood on my hand and some on my neck, but I don't bother washing it off.

It doesn't take too long, and I reach a tower only slightly shorter than ours. I boost myself up onto the roof of a nearby house, tearing through its defenses. Before the alarms ring, I reconnect the array, stop the signal, and sit on the rooftop, with my back against the chimney.

Then I wait.

The mark moves to the top floor an hour later. The man I promised a visit after he used the most disgusting methods of manipulation. He didn't only do it to me and Sophie but to others at the dinner,

and most protected themselves from him with ease as if they were already used to it. But something about the way he targeted me and Sophie really irks me.

He made several attempts to mess with my connection to my crown and force it to release the within mana with enough force to kill me. And he tried to make a subtle change to Sophie's mark that would cause her tower's defenses to turn against her, and he did more besides...

I sigh. Yes, he was the worst of all, but at this point, it's safe to say I'm just looking for a way to vent, using this man as a scapegoat. Ever since we came to this city, I've had that feeling of gradually building anger.

As the man ascends the higher floors of his tower, I sense his attempts to remove or block my [Ley Line]—he's probably just noticed it. Every attempt fails, no matter what he tries over the next ten minutes. Meanwhile, the defenses around his tower steadily strengthen, and my trait activates as I observe the fluctuations in the defensive array.

Having had enough, I stand up, take a step off the roof, and teleport through the [Ley Line]

An immediate sense of pressure surrounds me and the main defense—a powerful, disruptive targeting field—marks me as an intruder. A piercing noise fills my ears as wave after wave of attacks slam into me, each one with the intent to disrupt my mana.

Even so, my mana seeps out, spinning itself into threads that weave themselves into the shape of a javelin, and nothing can stop it. No amount of interference has any effect.

It's one of the things I've been working on, a technique of my own that I named Mana Weaving— weaving mana into complex, resilient patterns that are extremely resistant to external manipulation and much harder to disrupt.

My javelin shoots forward, piercing through the bodyguard and the man he's protecting, completely unhindered by the barriers they've set.

Wraith Dance brings me closer, and using the same method as before, a spear forms in my hand, as a shield takes shape on my back deflecting an incoming attack. Before the mind manipulator can react, I

boost my movement further using kinetic energy and thrust the weapon into his chest, swiftly shrinking and weaving the spear into a sword to cut through the remaining bodyguard's ax and send him careening into the wall with a burst of kinetic energy.

[You have defeated Psyche Bender - lvl 258]

[You have defeated Mana Nullifier - lvl 265]

[You have defeated Breaker Knight - lvl 261]

I absorb the kinetic energy from the door to keep anyone from opening it and locate what appears to be a safe with my eyes.

[Resonance] turns the stone around it to dust, and I tie a [Ley Line] to it and teleport it along with me back to the front of our tower despite every attempt to stop me.

Once I've removed all the marks, I turn to the guards stationed outside and gesture at the safe, commanding them to "Bring this inside."

"As you command!" they quickly confirm, hauling the safe between them as I pass through the gate myself.

"Give it to Dennis and Aaron and tell them to open it without destroying it."

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

Without waiting for an answer, I cross the garden and follow the path to the door. After a few checks, the guards open it, and I step inside. A quick scan reveals the other's locations, so I head up to the top floor to find most of our group in the living room we've come to frequent.

The laptop I bought for Izzy during the tournament is playing some quiet music—emitting the sounds of a soft guitar accompanied by a soothing female voice. Even though it's late, no one seems to be

sleeping; the only people not present are Maya and Sophie who've settled in a different room with the twins.

I don't like the room's lighting, so I turn it off and replace it with a few of my thermal cubes, which float into place without a sound.

"Do parties really suck that much?" Min-Jae asks, catching a glimpse of the bits of blood stuck to my skin.

"Could've been worse," I say, sitting opposite Izzy, who I catch taking pictures of a sleeping Biscuit. She's putting a series of cute hats on his head, and I'm once again surprised there's still any space left on the smartphone.

Noodle, seemingly disappointed with his owner, slithers over to me and patiently waits for me to gesture my consent before he crawls his way up to my shoulders, his head settling next to mine and looking in the same direction, his mouth hanging open slightly as he feeds on my mana.

As he likes to do, his size is now different from the day before. It's overall very inconsistent, and it makes me question just how big he can grow.

"Do you need healing?" Lily asks, before continuing on to quip; "Also, your passive sucks."

"I think I have fewer shards than I should. Can you heal that, Lily?"

"That's a problem that can best be solved by being born rich," Tess answers before our healer can.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"You're welcome. Or, if you want, you could buy my guide to becoming as rich as me."

"How much does it cost?"

“Enough to make me rich.”

“Smart.”

I notice the looks Lily’s giving Tess, and I’m sure Tess is aware of them as well, that amused smile curling at the corner of her lips until she laughs and pulls Lily into a full on hug. “Damn, Lily, you can be so cute sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?” she demurs, pretending to sulk.

“More often than not. Want to spar tomorrow? I want to see how much you’ve improved.”

“I might hurt you if you aren’t careful, Tess.”

“You’d have to catch me with that enormous ax of yours though. But how about you make a bone javelin for me? I want to test it out.”

“Another one for your collection?”

I allow myself to listen to their banter for a while, feeling my mind relax slightly as I do. I close my eyes and calm myself. There’s a part of me that wants to use [Focus] to filter out these emotions I’m feeling, but I don’t.

Gradually, a determination builds up in me. My mind clears, and my chest feels lighter. My fists clench and unclench multiple times, and my erratic heartbeat slows until it becomes calm again.

When I open my eyes, Izzy is standing in front of me, watching me up close.

“You are so pretty,” she smiles, and I know she’s not talking about my looks.

Her small hand touches the side of my head and then moves to caress the top of it.

“There, there,” she says, still smiling. “You know you can ask for help if you feel like everything’s getting to be too much.”

These words hit harder knowing the situation she is currently in.

“It’s fine,” I say, standing up and carefully holding on to Noodle as he shrinks down to half his previous size and slithers onto Izzy’s arm.

“Good night,” I say to the room, and listen while everyone returns the sentiment behind me as I turn to leave the room, choosing to walk rather than teleport.

After entering my room, I close the door behind me, take a warm shower, put on clean clothes, and sit in the armchair I’ve set next to the large window. Surrounded by all the materials, golden chains, and items littering the room, I look out at the city before closing my eyes and retreating within my mind.

This time, it’s not a place taken from Whitey’s memories. I’m in an area that’s very familiar—a city on Earth, surrounded by a number of small apartment buildings. There are no cars, no people, and even the trees are still in the stagnant air.

I still stop before crossing the road as I have so often and look both ways before crossing. Walking between the two apartment buildings, I take a quick step to the left to avoid the pothole that I know is there.

As I reach the entrance to the building, I pull hard on the doors, remembering the way they tend to stick.

The stairway is just as dark as I remember it, and as I enter the second floor, I find the door to our apartment open and go inside.

Crossing the threshold, there’s one more door to pass—the one that leads into the room where Victoria and I grew up. And without hesitation, I open it.

Whitey sits there on my old bed.

“Yoo...,” he says with a big smile.

“Yo.” I nod and sit on Victoria’s bed, just opposite him.

“This is a really shitty room.” He gestures, “But it’s not like I can bash it too much. After all, I grew up in worse.”

Whitey takes a notepad from the table beside my bed and flips through it, looking at the silly drawings I used to make, mostly just scribbles.

He chuckles for a moment and holds it out in front of me, showing a drawing of some weird animal, most closely resembling a dog.

“Cute.” He smirks.

“I did my best. If you go to page thirty, you’ll find a much better drawing,” I say, defending myself and taking the opportunity to look around. Even though I have a lot of bad memories of this place, there were definitely some good ones too.

As tends to be the case with such things, some memories are blurrier than others, but the strong feelings will always remain.

Whitey lifts the notepad again, now open to page thirty, revealing a huge middle finger drawn on it. Even though it’s not the same gesture he’s accustomed to, he recognizes it from my frequent use over the last six months.

“Very nice,” he confirms and finally puts the notepad away. “You’re not going to ask?” he finally inquires, putting the notepad away and looking at me.

“I thought about it and there’s no need,” I respond.

His eyes haze and waver for a moment, and he observes me in that way only he can. Sensing the vibrations of movement, he watches for the slightest change in my blood flow, the most minute twitch of my muscles, the beating of my heart, and the flickering of my eyes.

I don't do anything to stop him, nor do I try to hide the signs as he works to confirm my words.

"Crazy fucker. You're the goddamn craziest and dumbest fucking human I've ever met," he growls, irritation clear in his tone.

Looking at me for just a bit longer he stands in one smooth motion and takes Victoria's old, barely-working laptop from the table. On the screen, is a scene of me using kinetic energy, as always from my POV.

"Now, let me explain what you did wrong here," he says, sitting beside me and pointing out all my mistakes directing my kinetic energy during that brief clash in the tower.

Chapter 489: Mana Weaving

"Are they your disciples now or something? You got lonely without that cute half-demon of yours, so you adopted these two twerps instead?" Maya taunts, as she paces around the living room.

Dennis and Aaron are too busy dealing with their experimental Burden Enhancement Inscriptions to answer, so I do instead. "They would probably say they're more like guinea pigs than disciples."

"In a less respectful tone, I assume?"

"Probably," I confirm.

"So, what did you do to them?"

"It's a modified version of my Burden Enhancement Inscriptions. The version Lissandra gave me blocks all my movements and only allows movements powered by kinetic energy. Since these two don't have kinetic energy, I had to modify it. They still can't move, but in this case, they need to refine their control over mana to break free."

"It's not disrupting their mana, is it? So what stops them from just powering through?"

"I thought of that, so I made some changes. If they mess up, they'll hurt themselves, after all, it takes a lot of mana to power through. It's still not as complete as I'd like, and it's one of three variations I've been working on."

Maya takes a swift step and smacks Dennis in the back of the head. Since he's sitting cross-legged on the floor, he tilts slowly and crashes to the ground, landing in a weird position.

"You know very well what that was for, Dennis," Maya declares with satisfaction.

"That was Aaron, not Dennis," I say.

For a moment, I see a flicker of surprise in Dennis's eyes, but he quickly understands and I'm sure he appreciates it.

"Huh, they're getting more and more difficult to tell apart by the day." She takes another step and delivers another smack to the innocent Aaron, who also falls onto the floor.

"Are you happy with Bloodthirst?"

"Quite a bit," Maya nods, glancing toward the claymore resting against the wall. "It's like we thought, the more blood it absorbs, the more it 'fixes' itself. And it grows sharper against opponents whose blood it has tasted. And it's already very sharp."

"I still hold to my opinion that you'd do better sticking with weapons made of mana that can change shape."

"Yes, and I agree with you. I took inspiration from you, and I've been using Bloodthirst as a tool to try to get a new skill. I'm almost there."

"And you won't tell me what it is, will you?"

"Nope. I'd rather keep it a surprise. That way it'll be something that's all mine. After all, you wouldn't want your knight taking the backseat."

"You're going with that again?"

I form an energy orb and move it toward Maya, who takes over, joining me in my mana exercises.

She then sits down to focus her concentration. "You never know, I may be more serious than you'd expect. By the way, did you also want to throw that tailor out of the balcony?"

"Multiple times."

Her orb bursts, and she waits for me to send her a replacement. "Well, I already got the clothes, and they're goddamn great, but the people here act just like arrogant nobles from some old romance or a deranged clan of vampires looking down at us peasants."

"Vampires... I wonder if they exist as a race within the system." I muse in response to Maya's fascinating implication.

"Well, we have demons, so why not? And we've met the feylith and they're like chicken-winged angels, the lynthari are straight-up catgirls, vyssari are knock-off dwarfs. The only things we're missing are elves and vampires; you said you saw those giant-looking douches in Beyond, and then there's that pink bitch Beatrice that Sophie likes to rag on."

"And more besides." I say, gesturing at the orb she balances, "You've gotten quite good at it."

"Right? I just needed a moment to get a grasp of these orbs of yours. You can increase the difficulty if you like."

I do as she says, and even then, she keeps pace like a champ.

"Will you show me what you did to your manabloc sometime?" Maya asks. "Even Sophie's still singing its praises, she says it would take a ridiculous amount of effort to disrupt. I'd love to try creating something like that," she continues.

"Why not, but don't expect quick results. It took me six months to get there, and I had [Ley Line], and [Connection] to observe, and I still had to incorporate bits of my other skills."

"Can you show me?"

With a gesture, I burst the orb beside her and use [Focus] to shape a dagger from the material I call manabloc, using my own proprietary method.

Thin, durable threads of mana extend from my body, before weaving themselves into the form of the dagger. Gaps take form between the threads, but mana rushes in to fill them—creating a small imperfection I'll address when the time comes.

The dagger made by these threads is just as sharp as it would've been if I made it normally, and even the color is the same—changing according to the density of mana, though the difficulty of its creation was much, much, much higher. But it's a process I've been able to shorten by a lot, especially if I'm not trying to make the most powerful version.

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"How long will it last?" Maya asks curiously, immediately noticing the parts that differentiate it from the "normal" version.

"The one in your hand will probably last a few months if left as is. Maybe half that if you keep using it. The version I made for Sophie should last for a year—though I still haven't had enough time to test and see, so it could be longer."

"Cool stuff." She says, waving it around a bit, as her mana rises up around it. "I can surround it with my mana, but I can't send it through."

“Yup. I’d need to work with you and devote a lot of time to matching it to your mana. Though in the future, I might find a way to make it so everyone can use it.”

Maya keeps a close watch, enveloping the dagger with more mana and refining it, using the manabloc as a foundation. Then forms her own mana weapon and strikes it against the dagger. Like most who work with mana, she can disrupt it to some extent, so she tests that as well—but it has no effect. And I’m certain the result would be the same, even if she put everything she had into the effect.

"I don't think you should make it so everyone can use your weapons. I quite like the idea of a personal weapon or armor, matched to your mana signature, that could only be used by you without simply turning into a sharp, durable item in another's hands."

That makes me pause, and I let the thought linger in my mind as I mull it over.

"I quite like that idea," I admit.

"I knew you would." Maya smiles, but that smile slowly disappears. "Nat, have you, by any chance, applied this thing to the mana mech?"

"What do you think?"

"Fuck, that thing must be terrifying. And here I thought I'd improved mine a lot... How big can you make it?" She asks with a note of competition in her voice.

"A moment." I stop her and turn away, staring at Dennis, whose mouth has begun to twitch, as he exerts an extreme amount of effort to move it.

He succeeds in the end, barely managing to get a few words through before being forced into quiet once more, "That's what she said."

His eyes are bold and filled with pride at his success.

"Anyway, I still haven't gone all out—I've been focusing on quality and maneuverability over size," I say, shifting my attention back to Maya.

"So what you're saying is that it's not the size that matters?" Maya asks.

Both of us look at Dennis and wait. His lips are twitching, chin moving as he fights the Burden Enhancement Inscriptions, but when he still fails to comment after a few seconds, we turn away once more.

"Something like that," I confirm. "I'm mostly training it on the side in case there's a huge monster I'll need to get close to, and my other skills won't work."

"There's something cool about being able to fight face-to-face with some kaiju-like monster." She replies

"I can't say it's not," I admit, agreeing with her.

"Okay, then, can you please tell me what you did to your manabloc?"

"Sure. If I were an asshole or a pretentious douche, I'd say something like this: 'The technique, of my own creation, which I've aptly named Mana Weaving, involves the precise and intricate practice of forming mana into interlocking, highly stable structures. Through a disciplined process of mana manipulation. At its core, the technique revolves around manipulating one's mana on a fundamental level to bind it into a sophisticated lattice that fortifies each strand and amplifies its resilience. This woven mana structure serves to establish a self-sustaining network, effectively enhancing its internal cohesion, rendering it far less susceptible to external interference and hostile manipulation and resulting in a reinforced mana framework that is exceptionally difficult to disrupt, and therefore presenting an exceptional challenge for anyone attempting to breach or destabilize it.'"

"Damn, do people really talk like that?"

"You'd be surprised how many do."

"I guess there are assholes everywhere. Please explain it to me like a normal human."

“You weave multiple threads of mana together. That way Instead of being able to disrupt all the mana in a construct at once, the attack has to disrupt each thread, and even if it succeeds in disrupting some of them, the others remain.”

“Much better.”

“Right?”

Sophie returns from her first session of work on the Framework’s maintenance, followed by Maya, who has been serving as her bodyguard, being the second most resilient against mental manipulation after me, thanks to our mutual skill [Focus].

Even then they still haven’t encountered Namior, leader of the city’s third most powerful group—someone I’ve been wanting to meet for a while now, though I haven’t seen him yet, despite lingering around his tower multiple times.

This time, we’re all sitting in my room. Some are sitting on my bed, some are seated in manabloc chairs, and others sit on the ground. I, for the record, am sitting on the ground, with a piece of that huge golden chain in my hand while I work on examining it, hoping to improve my insight into the system and, with my skill along with it.

“It’s just as I thought before, the Framework makes it possible to combine the calculative power of every mind mage in the city. But it’s not just them; they can also include the mental capacity of every person controlled by a mind mage and every person within the city’s inscriptions. Plus, they also have thousands of monsters with useful mind traits or skills imprisoned under the city, for the purpose of enhancing the Framework.”

“Damn.”

“Damn is right, Dennis. The amount of power it’s going to require is immense, so they can only really afford to activate it once every eight years.”

“Let me guess, it’s going to be soon?” I look up from the chain.

"Very soon - depending on how maintenance goes," Sophie confirms.

"That's perfect timing, isn't it?" Lily says excitedly. "We could clear the floor either before Beyond or right after we return."

"Yes, the activation of the Framework happens only every eight years. This floor's timing makes it almost certain that it's one of the ways we're meant to clear this floor."

"Isn't that good?"

Tess explains, stepping in for Sophie, "Try to remember how the floors we've gone through so far tend to look the closer we've gotten to clearing them."

"Oh..."

"Yes, oh," Sophie says, looking from Tess to me. "The question is if we still want to try to check on any of the remaining Containment Cells."

"That sounds like a job for the Champion-grade annihilation squad!" Dennis chimes in, excited. "We're the best at ending weakened and tortured champions, right, Nat? There are still three more to take care of."

Looking at his excited face I reply. "Count me out, I still have things I want to do before reaching level 300."

At that moment, something catches my interest, a sense I haven't felt from another member of our group until this moment, and I turn to the right, meeting Tess's eyes.

Oh my, what has she done?

"I think we should visit at least one of the Containment Cells before we go to Beyond and the Framework activation." She smiles, knowing very well what I've just sensed.

Tess has allowed her title to be felt.

She's a Champion candidate now too.

Chapter 490: Namior

"I think one of the points of this floor is to give people an opportunity to become a Champion candidate." Tess states, as all eyes focus on her, drawn by the revelation of her new status.

Maya shamelessly smirks back at me when I look at her, and Min-Jae looks a bit guilty for not telling me sooner, but I figure Tess must have asked him not to tell. She probably chose this specific moment to cause the most impact.

It's really such a silly thing to do.

I'd absolutely do the same.

Of course, there is always the chance that Tess was trying to see if she could hide it from me.

"My group located two containment cells with the team we put together. One was simple to reach, and the Champion was very different from the man we met in Mana Desert. The cell is hidden within a permanent storm on a floating island. Once inside we found a trapped vyssari woman."

Maya snorts. "Just tell them already. The storm is powerful enough that the lightning has been known to kill people as high as level 200 in a single strike, and given its propensity for striking targets more than once it could easily take out stronger individuals."

"It's true we did have some trouble reaching it," Tess admits, "but we've had plenty of time to prepare and plan, and we haven't had a single death or severe wound. As for the storm, it's made up of the excess primordial lightning energy being pulled from the prisoner and released into the area. So you can imagine why I wanted to take the risk to check things out when I sensed it."

Tess's eyes haze a bit as memories flash by, but she quickly returns to the room and smiles. "The vyssari Champion apparently wanted to be left alone and threatened to kill anyone who meant to free her."

Min-Jae also joins in, "I kinda liked her. She seemed nice."

"She said she was close to declaring Maya a candidate, but that she felt that there was still something missing and that she needed to try harder." Tess quips, flashing a quick smile.

Maya doesn't even seem hurt or disappointed, rather she shrugs it off, unbothered. "It's fine. Just having the possibility confirmed is cool in and of itself."

"So you want to visit her and have her declare the other Champion candidates?" I ask, already thinking about who might have a chance. The names that come to mind are Lily and Sophie. If Min-Jae didn't make the cut then there's a high chance the twins won't either, I feel like they're on the same level of talent. Even though I'm sure it's possible they'll reach that rank later; as we've seen, plenty of people aren't declared candidates until they reach the higher levels.

"It would be a shame not to take the opportunity while we have a somewhat reasonable Champion nearby," Tess confirms.

"Well, you guys can discuss it later," I say, waving them off and focusing my attention on Tess. "As a Champion candidate, I challenge you, a fellow Champion candidate. My wager is 10 points from my Mana stat. If I lose, they're yours. If I win, I want 10 points in Mana..."

These words stop in my throat, and I find myself unable to push them out.

So I try again. "As a Champion candidate, I challenge you, a fellow Champion candidate. My wager is 100 shards. If I lose, they're yours. If I win, I..."

The same thing happens again.

"Nat, I think the system takes these challenges a bit more seriously than you do." Tess shakes her head.

"I take them plenty seriously. As a Champion candidate, I challenge you, a fellow Champion candidate. My wager is one of the upper epic items I possess. If I lose, it's yours. If I win, I want..."

And again I get stopped.

"Do you think the system would just let you abuse challenges that way? I have [Declaration], which seems to be a bit similar, so I can tell you it's not how it works." RANÓBĚŠ

Disappointed, I sit back and reply. "Explain."

"The system probably thinks about challenges as something almost sacred. Something you can only call upon in specific situations with the right kind of 'intent', it needs to be 'in the right spirit' if you will. Can you imagine how it would look if they were that easy to abuse?"

"Tess, the system is an asshole."

"I... it's not wrong."

"Sooner or later, I will find a way."

"Got it, oh fellow Champion candidate," she snarks, flashing me a smile.

As she turns to talk to the others, a single thought comes to mind.

This can't go on. I have to get the cockroach to declare me an Absolute candidate somehow.

Walking through the city, I come to a stop in front of yet another tower. After checking the map, I confirm that this tower serves as the home of a mind mage.

As I've done dozens of times before, I use [Ley Line] and fire it off at the tower where it "anchors" itself.

And a decent chunk of my mana disappears in response.

[Ley Line - lvl 39 > Ley Line - lvl 40]

Curious, I wait a minute to observe the coming reaction.

So far, they've fallen into three camps. Some towers didn't notice. Others noticed, but after realizing I'm with Sophie, they stayed locked inside, trying to get rid of [Ley Line]. The third, and rarest, reaction was people coming out and trying to cause trouble.

If it were up to me, I'd likely teleport inside and at least purge the mind mages who were the worst at that dinner, but it seems like we might actually need them for the Framework. So I hold myself back, but I hope they come out and try to fight me.

That they'd give me an excuse I can use to justify my actions to Sophie, with all the work she's done to get where she is within the city.

But this tower isn't it, and they stay locked inside, so I leave, disappointed.

Since I started doing this, I've left twelve Ley Lines connecting me to twelve towers. But that's not all. There are five more. Of a version that even Sophie can't sense and she doesn't know about them either.

And these connect to the Framework.

POV Maya Jones

"Sophie, are you sure it's okay to let him do this?"

"Trust me this is better than letting him go around killing every mind mage that even tries to sense his mind. We need them for now."

“Is this even good for something?”

Sophie laughs, almost incredulous, “Maya, that night after the dinner, he infiltrated the tower of one of the top 10 mind mages in the city. He just passed through their defenses as if they weren’t even there. That crazy skill, that [Ley Line], is still there, and not even Beatrice has been able to remove it. The mind mages, who would’ve fought tooth and nail to occupy such a high-grade tower under any other circumstances, refuse to move in. And now that he is going around the city and casually placing the same threads within their innermost protections, they’re scared shitless.”

“Doesn’t that mean they’ll band together to take us out?”

“They won’t. Maya, trust me, I’ve set up some truly nasty surprises to prevent that. After the Archon’s, my tower is the most secure in the city, so if they try anything, I’ll take them all down—and they know it very well.”

POV Nathaniel

On my way back to our tower, a crow lands on a bench next to me as I pass.

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

[Phantom Beak - lvl 241]

It’s the abomination I saw at the dinner in the garden.

It tries to connect to my mind and initiate telepathic communication, but I stonewall it and stare it down until it caws at me.

Then it flies a bit further away and lands on another bench, looking at me, clearly gesturing for me to follow.

I do just that, and for once, there isn't a single mind mage trying to mess with my mind. That ever-present feeling of sharks circling in the water around me is gone. In this city, information spreads quickly.

Following the crow, I reach a small restaurant on the corner. This is strange in and of itself, after all, there aren't many to be found in this city, but the ones that do exist seem to be worth visiting and are heavily regulated by the Archon himself. According to Sophie, there were just too many poisonings before he did.

The restaurant is empty, other than a table occupied by a man with two women standing at his side. The moment he's within sight the crow immediately takes off and lands on the shoulder of a human woman with the same solid blue eyes as the crow.

[Spectral Sentinel - lvl 261]

But the more interesting one seems to be the second woman, this one's a vyssari. Like the rest of her race, she looks almost human, though much shorter, with legs covered in gray scales with red highlights, and her eyes framed by the brown locks of her hair match the red gray sheen of her scales.

[Primordial Warden - lvl 291]

And finally come to the leader, who seems to be the man Sophie mentioned a while back, the leader of the third faction, the man known as Namior. He's wearing the same luxurious clothes the mind mages around here tend to favor, and he has the same air of confidence around him.

[Mindsculptor - lvl 268]

Finally, I'm meeting him after trying to track him down for so long.

Without hesitation, I take a seat in the chair opposite him, under the watchful eyes of his woman protectors. The vyssari in particular seems dangerous, and the rumor that she's capable of wielding two different primordial energies does interest me to a degree, given that I have yet to meet anyone else who could.

"I thank you for accepting my invitation," The man says with a smile.

"Are you Namior?" I ask, just to confirm my suspicion.

"Yes, I am. I see my reputation precedes me."

"Just a bit—I've been looking for you."

At this point, I'm sure he's already trying to break through my mind's defenses. Despite the challenge presented by my passive, skills, and construct. And he's pretty good, to be honest. I can tell because I can't sense anything.

And Sophie hasn't noticed anything either.

"So do you think you're going to be able to break through my protections?" I ask.

The confident expression doesn't disappear from his face. "Possibly, but it seems to be more difficult than I had expected."

"You mean because Sophie doesn't control me and you can't exploit her link?"

This time, I do notice a moment of hesitation. [Focus] allows me to watch him, and kinetic energy emphasizes what I sense—a slight twitch of his eyebrow, and the shifting of his leg under the table.

He decides to keep his confident mask, buoyed by the support of his bodyguards, the dozen or so people outside the building waiting to rush in, and his connection to another place that may even allow him to escape.

"I'm honestly surprised she isn't controlling you, but I've already split your group with Beatrice, and sooner or later, you'll become one of mine. But please, tell me, how did you figure out that I'm influencing Sophie?"

“Her sister told me. Not long ago, Sophie started behaving oddly after meeting you at one of the dinners. And I think you’ve been working on it for a while, carefully and slowly, and now you can influence her without her even noticing.”

“So the princess locked in the tower noticed that,” he says, leaning back and scratching his chin, seeming to take it as feedback and thinking of ways to improve the process.

When he finally returns his attention to me, he’s just as overbearing as before. “It doesn’t change anything. What I did can’t be undone so easily, and each time I meet her, I’ll gradually strengthen it, influencing her more and more without her noticing until she becomes one of my vassals.”

“That may be true, even I can’t sense what you did to her,” I admit, standing up as I do and fixing my clothes. “Sophie kind of messed up here.”

The mood shifts as his guards, both those at his side and those waiting outside, prepare to burst in on his signal, and a preprepared array flairs into activity.

“I’m sorry, I can’t let you leave.” Namior chides, shaking his head.

That confuses me, and I tilt my head as I reply. “I wasn’t planning to leave.”

My entire right arm becomes a mess of torn flesh as I use kinetic energy to draw Fracture at incredible speed. In a single motion, I sever the connection between the man and his two bodyguards. Doing so won’t allow him to send orders, but it probably won’t change whatever he already did to their minds either.

In that same fraction of a second, I shove the sword back into its scabbard and activate two healing marks. Snapping my arm back into place, as the flesh regenerates.

The crow rushes to attack me, and its owner tries to move, but both are still standing, the crow frozen mid-air, held in place by my [Redistribution].

Golden flames explode around the Vyssari, surging toward me and effortlessly melting through my hastily formed barriers. I slide into [Focus] to push away the feeling of pain as my skin and flesh ignite and burn away in an instant. My bones are revealed, the fire attempting to burn even them, but unlike my flesh, my bones are durable.

Much more durable.

[Bone Knitting - lvl 20 > Bone Knitting - lvl 21]

[Bone Knitting - lvl 21 > Bone Knitting - lvl 22]

There are dozens of mana threads running through each bone, binding them together, filling them, covering them.

Part of my mind takes over that task, the skill keeping my bones from melting away, as [Redistribution] absorbs some of the heat. But the vyssari is better at thermal energy than me, and the flames seem impossible to stop even with the armor I'm forming around my body; it begins to sizzle and melt.

Now freed from the man's control and acting reflexively in her confusion, she attacks me without giving it her all.

Wraith Dance brings me into her space, and up close, the flames are even deadlier, burning more of me away. The muscles, the tendons, some of the less important organs. My skeleton moves, powered by kinetic energy, as my skeletal arm crashes into her head at incredible speed, sending a burst of kinetic energy flooding through it.

And just like flipping a switch, she loses consciousness.

Three healing marks activate, and my flesh and body recover. Then as I turn to face Namior, he disappears, leaving a signature behind as he teleports away.

All of that happens within a short moment and soon dozens of guards finally rush in, skills swirling around them.

I move the mana in my [Mana Crown], spinning it, faster and faster, until it reaches an incredible speed. The massive amount of mana quickly begins to move so quickly that it reaches critical speed, and with a little help from skill, a burst of disruptive energy explodes from me. Just as powerful as it would have been if I had directed it at a single target, but this one creates an area of effect that disables the skills of everyone here.

My Mana Wavelength Iris activates, and I look at the remains of his teleportation. I watch the mana track, using [Focus] to rebuild the structure of the portal, and then use [Resonance] to use the remains to teleport along the same route.

The moment I appear on the other side, dozens of attacks crash into me, stripping me down to the bone, but my mana spins in the crown again, reaching that critical limit and releasing another disruptive wave before slowing and coming to a stop.

My flesh grows back under the influence of the healing marks, and tracking Namior's presence, I use Wraith Dance to move over to the massive door dominating the room. There, I switch to Breaker Style, and a single powerful burst causes the metal door to buckle inward, as the second sends it flying through the room and embedding it in the wall of the tower.

[Mana Domain] encompasses me as I tear through all the defenses within, spinning the mana inside my crown and sending disruptive waves throughout, causing the entire tower to flicker as I make my way to the highest floor.

The guards freeze in place, only to be pinned to the walls or thrown out of the tower, while Namior keeps moving higher and higher, throwing everything he has against me.

Before I can reach him, he's gone again, and I repeat the process, resonating with his teleport, appearing in a different tower, likely belonging to one of his vassals'.

As I'm getting my bearings, rocks explode from the ground as two huge monsters burrow their way onto the surface, reminiscent of gorillas, coated in white fur with four eyes each and no mouth.

Mana seeps from my body, spinning itself into threads that weave themselves into a suit of armor that surrounds me and grows bigger and bigger until I match the size of the monsters. My heart thumps wildly, generating kinetic energy to boost my movements in this massive, heavy mana armor.

The first gorilla crashes into me, but my elbow hits the side of its head; as it wavers, I grab it and bury its head into the ground, tearing up trees and small buildings in the process.

A huge spear of mana forms in my hand, and I pierce the monster's body, boosting the spear with kinetic energy, creating a hook at the end, and pinning the gorilla to the ground.

The other one jumps at me, but I sidestep and, with a burst of kinetic energy, tackle it into the tower, which shakes at its foundations but endures nonetheless. Two of my arms hold the gorilla, and two more arms form at my shoulders, their fingers interlocking before I bring the hands down, slamming them into the monster's head.

A massive mouth opens in the monster's chest, stretching as wide as its torso, and a deafening screech erupts, assaulting my eardrums. Tattoos flare across its skin, its strength surging. But I repeat the process, striking again until its eyes cloud over. Using all four arms, I rip the monster's limbs apart and hurl them—and the creature itself—far away.

My armor disappears, the mana flooding back into my crown in a blink. I quickly realize that the first gorilla is about to break free and form a huge nail in the air, launching it at the monster to pin it once more while being careful to avoid killing it.

I land on the ground, Wraith Dance bringing me to the next door, which I destroy, finding guards and the remains of another teleport inside.

A tricolored shield blocks the incoming barrage of attacks, and I teleport myself again.

This time, I appear before the city's second-tallest tower, owned by Beatrice, the pink-skinned, pink-haired daughter of the Archon.

“Beatrice! Beatrice! Fucking help me, you can have my mind if you want, just get that man off me! Beatrice!” Namior screams, shouting at the woman standing on top of the wall surrounding her tower, her bodyguard standing next to her with his transparent crown floating over his head.

Namior shuts up and turns back, to see me standing there, and shouts, “Get the fuck away from me!”— followed by the most powerful mental attack I’ve felt so far.

But it’s all for nothing. It simply slides off my mental defenses.

And when he opens his mouth to shout again, I’m there standing by his side.

“I can be more useful alive, I can...” Before he can finish, a concentrated blast of kinetic energy detonates his head.

[You have defeated Mindsculptor - lvl 268]

Beatrice says nothing, watching as I tear the rest of his body apart with subsequent bursts of kinetic energy, then burn the remains.

Before I leave I throw one last [Ley Line] toward the inside of her tower, and when I finally teleport away, no one tries to stop me.