

Tutorial 61

Chapter 61: Skill upgrade

Okay, that might make me change my plans a little bit. At first, I wanted to go and upgrade my [Mana Manipulation], but now I'm not that sure.

Yes, there are some amazing upgrades for it, especially [Advanced Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Amplification].

BUT!

What the hell is this?

[Dual Focus]?

Is it what I think it is?

Instead of one [Focus], would I have two? Does that mean it's almost like having two brains? Does that mean I could keep up my [Oscillation] with one and use the other one for [Armament]?

Would it split my current skill into two parts or would it duplicate it? From description it sounds like it would duplicate the skill.

Up until now, I always felt as if my brain was about to melt when I used too many skills at once, and I could never give them the attention they deserved. But this?

Sure, I would miss out on better mana handling, but isn't this even better?

And maybe.

Just maybe.

I might be able to upgrade it in the future again?

I will be able to do multiple things at once.

Like...

Like a woman!

Huh?

Nevermind.

Okay, let's go over the others.

[Deep Focus] might be an improved version of the current [Focus].

[Focus Extension] doesn't sound that good in comparison to the others.

[Focus Synergy] also sounds good, but [Dual Focus] beats it for sure.

Almost all upgrades for [Mana Manipulation] are great but my eyes keep ticking back to this one upgrade.

I just chose the upgrade before I change my mind.

Congratulations! You have upgraded your skill. [Focus] > [Dual Focus]

Unable to help myself, I quickly try it out and enter the [Focus]. The weirdest feeling hits me. It's hard to describe and dizzying. It's just... weird.

I cancel the skill and breathe out.

This will need some serious training to get used to it. I also notice that my [Focus] didn't strengthen that much. I'm sure that would happen if I picked the other option, but I still like this one a lot.

Hopefully, it works the way I think it does.

Now I should check if we got new quests, right?

Floor quest:

Witness the end of the world.

Rewards:

Skill upgrade token

20 stat points

Increased daily limit of community usage

Tutorial Difficulty change token

Side quest:

Reach level 50

Rewards:

Trait strengthening token

I enter the [Focus], not activating the upgraded version, just the old one.

Okay, first.

I'm not witnessing a thing! What am I? A freaking dinosaur? I won't be witnessing the end of the freaking world.

What's with this jump? From fighting spiders you could probably find back on Earth in Australia to watching the end of the world?

Also, what the hell is Tutorial Difficulty change token? Does it mean I can change my difficulty to easy? Or does it mean more people can come to Hell difficulty? Most likely, it means just that. Hmm, that's interesting, to say the least.

Other rewards for the floor quest seem nice but not as interesting as these two.

Rewards for the side quest are quite good but level 50 is still far off.

I sigh.

Biscuit, come here; I need to relax.

As if hearing me, the best doggo of the first... of the second floor comes to me and puts his head on my leg as I am still sitting down.

(Food?)

I boop his snoot, and he lets me, only looking at me with big eyes.

Soon, okay?

I pet the corgi and feel myself calming down a bit, feeling his warm body so close to mine.

“Lily?” I get out of myself slowly, and the girl looks up at me; her eyes still look empty.

“If you want to talk, I can listen. If you want to cry, I can be here with you.”

I'm not good at these things.

Kevin died, yet my reaction is minimal. There is a hint of sadness at what could be, but that's it.

I can laugh now, and I know I won't cry.

And it's not only because of [Focus].

Lily's eyes become wet, and she finally starts crying. She hugs me, and I feel her tears wetting my chest. I awkwardly put my hand on her back and hug her back. Even my sympathy might be fake.

But does it really matter if it makes her feel better?

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 2 - Mana-Infused Kingdom

Time left until forced return: 4y 334d 21h 36m 02s

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

Lvl 24

Strength: 13

Dexterity: 12

Constitution: 38

Mana: 62

[Primary Class: Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 10

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 10

Mana Perception - Lvl 9

Oscillation - Lvl 6

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 8

Armament - Lvl 3

Mana Surge - Lvl 1

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

[Skill Points: 1]

[Stat Points: 0]

More time passes, and there are no signs of living beings, and we still stay on grassy hills. Hungry, and thirsty, yet all of us are resting.

The breeze is amazing, the temperature is perfect, not hot nor cold. The grass feels nice to sit on and is calming to look at as it moves in the wind.

Almost as nice as my stats!

Hell yeah.

"..."

Sorry.

So, should I invest my skill point? I could get my [Mana Perception]

Also, my poor mana. Why is it so low? Or why is my constitution so high? Sure, my body would complain every time I handled my mana, but it was okay. It was totally fine!

Anyway, I was also able to talk with Tess, and her class is something like this:

Storm Sentinel:

A novice class that manipulates the power of lightning through their psychokinesis, electrifying their projectiles while using farsight to maintain a constant vigil over the battlefield.

Sure, it sounds good. Maybe even really good, but did you see mine?

Hehe.

Not jealous at all!

Together, we also went over Lily's classes and picked one for her.

Harmonic Dissonance:

A novice class that draws on the power of opposing forces, utilizing rejuvenation to heal and protect, and disintegration to obliterate obstacles and enemies, demonstrating the duality of life and destruction.

Yup.

Still not jealous.

Her healing improved after getting a class, so I am already feeling much better. Hopefully, she won't use her other skill by mistake.

That would be... interesting.

Kim seems to be avoiding us. He is neither joining Hadwin and the twins nor Sophie; he just stands alone to the side, and small stones continue to fly around him as he practices.

So that's it. He is still young, a teenager; maybe he will calm down after some time. It's not like Lily did it on purpose.

But first, let's try to find some food and water.

We slowly start walking down the gently sloped hill covered in vibrant green grass, and Tess walks first, using her [Farsight] to scout for us.

While we do so, I think about the name of the second floor.

Mana-Infused Kingdom.

What does it mean? Will there be people? An entire kingdom? Medieval age style with some magic? Sci-fi style with all kinds of things running on magic? Is this kingdom destroyed, and are there only ruins? Is this kingdom made not of humans but of monsters?

I don't know, and it makes me nervous in the same way the start of the first floor did.

We did have some break after getting here, but not even for a second did I dare to forget that this is Hell difficulty. There is no way this will be easier than the first floor.

Yet, it feels different with massive clearings, pretty hills of grass, and fewer trees, making us able to see much further in comparison to the forest of the floor we just cleared.

"There is a lake nearby and a stream flowing into it," Tess says shortly, and we all start paying more attention.

My perception still hasn't picked up a single living being as we move closer and closer to the lake; soon, we see it.

It's not that big, but under the sun, the water shines beautifully, looking almost unnaturally clear. Small waves are over the surface of the lake as the wind blows gently into it.

We move towards the running water and stop in front of it.

"We don't have anything to boil it in," Hadwin says shortly.

"You should test it out; you have the high constitution."

"Fuck off, Nat," the older man says.

Hey, I tried to help.

"It looks so clear," Lily says carefully while putting her hands into the water, using it to clean her face and neck.

I kneel down and do the same; the water is nice and slightly cold. When the wind blows into us, and I feel it on the wet skin of my face and neck, I let out a quiet sigh.

Damn, this feels nice. I jump into the water, diving my entire body into it by lying down in the not-so-deep stream. When I get my head out of the water, the others are looking at me.

"I would recommend moving higher; downstream water isn't safe anymore."

"You have got to be kidding me," I hear Hadwin say, but I already dive again under the water while scrubbing my body as much as I can.

It looks like Hadwin is slowly not hiding his grumpy mood, as there aren't that many people he has to trick and pretend to be a reliable leader. Currently, only the twins tag along with him. Their opinion of me doesn't seem that good, and they seem to be avoiding Sophie's group even more.

They do have some telepathic and physical connection between themselves. So maybe they can feel her [Manipulation], or Hadwin told them?

When I get up, I continue to look down at the water and then cup my hand, taking a bit close to my mouth, and take a sip. It tastes good, but I stop. Let's see if I'm going to be okay in a few hours.

"Enemy," Tess says shortly, and I jump back onshore.

She points towards somewhere, and I send my mana in that direction. A really weak hidden mana signature comes back to me.

Around level 10 non-named monster?

We wait a bit, and soon enough, the enemy appears from behind the bushes.

[Horned Rabbit - lvl 9]

A cute white rabbit with red eyes and a horn on its head.

Chapter 62: Drifters in a Foreign Land

Everyone jumps at the defenseless-looking monster, hungry for some food.

A small stone flies at its head, and Maya dashes, I feel a pulse of Sophie's mana, but the monster blinks its eyes and dashes so quickly I can barely track it with my eyes, disappearing where it came from.

I feel its mana with my perception, but then it disappears as the monster hides its mana. Is that why I didn't feel it coming closer?

"It's gone," Tess says shortly.

Already? Tess's skill has a massive range; how fast is that rabbit?

"That was so funny," I hear.

A new voice. No one from us.

When I turn around, my mana is already flowing through my body, faster than ever before, thanks to my new class and passive skill.

Then I freeze, unable to feel any mana from the man in front of us.

[Mana-veiled Scout- lvl ?]

I guess that answers the question if there are any other humans.

"I've never seen such a pathetic attempt to hunt a horned rabbit," he lets out a quiet laugh.

Confident yet still careful, judging from his stance.

Is he from a different group of Hell difficulty people? Is he from a different round?

"Do not move closer," Hadwin says, his voice firm but not aggressive. I already feel mana around the man.

"Calm yourself, mister, it's you guys who are here hunting on Lord Blackburn's land," he smirks.

Yup, I guess he is not from Earth.

We have to witness the end of the world. What is it even?

Does it mean the system plans to destroy the world and for us to witness it? That would be weird, there are more groups; even the system can't create multiple worlds, right? Right?

Moreover, the environments appear identical; could this be some sort of virtual reality? Are we merely imagining all this?

While thinking, focusing on one part of my mind to think about it, I focus with another part to keep mana flowing through my body, ready to fight anytime.

"We didn't know it belongs to someone; we wouldn't dare to do it otherwise," Sophie smartly talks to the man. "We are lost... and hungry."

Good start. The man seems to be much higher level than us so let's be careful.

"Ha! That's some bullshit! You are in the middle of the lord's land, and yet you got lost."

Mana finally flares up from him. Only as a warning.

The difference is massive. He is on a different level. Much stronger than Cinderbear. Multiple times stronger.

Isn't he a scout? Why does he have such mana, and does the question mark mean that his level is so much higher? We were able to see level 20 when we were around level 5. So he is at least level 40 or higher?

"We just appeared here out of nowhere, through the portal! We didn't want to," Kim adds this time. "Are you also from Hell difficulty?"

"Oh," he pauses, and his mana calms down. "So you are drifters, you should have told me," he laughs a bit, ignoring the last part.

Did he not hear it?

"It's my first time finding some of your kind." His eyes move up and down, checking us out, and I feel an almost unnoticeable touch of his mana measuring us.

"Well, you guys seem pretty messed up, so it could be true. I will bring you to the boss, and if you try to run or fight, I will have to kill you," he says and this time his face seems a bit more serious.

I don't like that at all.

Can we fight?

It might be too risky right now so I gesture to Tess to calm down and do the same.

Let's wait and see if we get a better chance.

It's not like we have a choice, right? The entire time, I continued to watch him he seemed careless at times, but that can't be it.

He might be trying to lure us into attacking.

How strong is his body being the level he is? Can we even pierce his skin with our attacks? How does it work?

He is still a human, so is his body stronger than a level 26 Cinderbear?

Questions, questions, questions and no answers.

Fine, let's tread carefully for the time being.

He whistles, and a crow comes flying down, landing on a nearby tree.

[Twilight Raven - lvl 19]

The crow is pitch-dark, and its eyes are yellow-colored as it looks at us with intelligent eyes. It looks especially long at the corgi.

"Talon likes your... what is it even? Some mutated version of a battle dog? Puppy?" he pauses for a second while looking at Biscuit, "Whatever, follow me."

Without waiting, he starts walking, and I again think of running away. Who knows where the man wants to lead us and what awaits us there, it might be safer to just fight him now.

The crow caws and looks at me with its intelligent eyes. I feel its mana touch me.

What just happened?

"Talon put a mark on you all, so don't even think about running."

Huh? I scan my body, but I don't find anything even after I repeat it multiple times. He might be bluffing.

Yet, the crow's intelligent eyes make me nervous, and slowly I follow the man, together with the others.

The man is called Roland. He isn't that tall, and his build is slim. He has brown eyes and black hair.

He moves, talks, and looks like a human.

We can understand him as if he is talking in English, and he can understand us.

He moves fairly quickly, so we have to move at a similar speed to not stay behind. All under the watchful eyes of his crow.

The land we are on belongs to Lord Blackburn, and every plant, tree, and animal or monster on it also belongs to him. Lord Blackburn is also the strongest man in the area.

Hunting animals without permission is a crime, and for violating this, they can cut off a person's hand.

Roland isn't that talkative when it comes to sharing details, but we find out that there are levels as well. And classes.

The man says they are all from the gods.

We also discover that they refer to skills as "gifts."

Apparently, it's super hard to get one.

Kim asked him what his level is, and Roland slapped him. I wasn't even able to see his movement and even after 5 minutes Kim can barely walk in a straight line.

It looks like it's a super rude thing to ask.

Additionally, it seems like a wise decision not to confront him unless I am absolutely certain of defeating or surprising him. This may be even more challenging due to the crow flying alongside us, which likely has some connection to Roland.

"Sir," I move closer, trying to sound as respectful as possible. "Would you mind if I ask you a few more things?"

"Haaaa, and I thought you would leave me alone. Go ahead and ask, three questions. Let the gods not think that I don't show some mercy towards the cripples."

I pause. You...

Phew, okay, let's calm down.

"Who is the strongest person in the kingdom?"

His eyes turn to me with surprise, and then he laughs.

"That would be Champion Keiron. Sure, some people say that Champion Tristan is stronger, but everyone knows who the king calls when things go to shit!"

Champion? Is that some sort of title?

I wait a bit more, but the man doesn't continue, and I don't dare to ask about the levels.

"What should I do when talking to Lord Blackburn?"

"Yes, you guys are totally drifters," he laughs even louder than before. "You will be talking to one of the lord's men. The lord is too busy to deal with people like you," he continues to giggle.

"What are drifters?" I ask my last question.

"People send here by the gods, what else?" he pauses and looks at me with a more serious look, "Now, shut up. I don't appreciate your tone, nor the look in your eyes. It makes my skin crawl. If you don't want to get beaten, do something about it. Others won't be as nice as me."

Then he stops talking, and I don't ask him anymore.

Are drifters some setup from the system meant to help us integrate here?

Moreover, how much time do we have until the world ends? Days, months, years? Are we meant to become stronger and survive it? Run and hide somewhere?

In addition, what's the issue with the look in my eyes?

I notice that Tess is gesturing at me, so I move closer to her.

"There's something like a camp, a few dozen men, all armored, and most of them with one question mark over their head."

I guess that's it.

Now we have to hope that the system didn't send us here to die. Something tells me it didn't. In the same way, it put us in the least dangerous part of the first floor and then gradually heightened the difficulty.

I'm following the rest of the group, our steps cautious as we approach the camp. We pass a few tents set up haphazardly across the area, their outlines sharp against the night sky. Armed men cross our path at intervals, their watchful eyes, the weapons and question marks over their heads serving as silent reminders of the potential danger that surrounds us.

[Ironclad Warden - lvl ?]

[Longbow Marksman - lvl ?]

[Runebound Knight - lvl ?]

They all seem dangerous, too dangerous for me to deal with even one. Some of them look at us with interest as we walk towards the tent in the middle where the leader awaits us.

[Mystic Duelist - lvl ?]

Chapter 63: Testing Boundaries

"Roland, who did you bring here this time? And what happened to your scouting?"

The man's voice is authoritative. He is tall, muscular, and has curly black hair. His face is clearly shaven. He is dressed in comfortable-looking clothes, and at his side, there is a sword with a thin blade.

Roland only bows slightly and smiles at the man.

"Drifters, sir! I spotted them while on watch. Talon is still out there, keeping an eye on things."

"Drifters, you say," I feel a wave of mana from the man. It pushes against me, scans my body, and probes me.

I feel disgusted. Is that how others feel when I am scanning them?

I want to do the same, to look at the leader's mana, but I do not dare. I don't know if he would feel it or if it's considered rude in the same way asking for levels is.

"They are fairly weak." He puts his hand on his beard and scratches it while glancing at us for a second. "The crippled one's mana is strongest, and the creature they have with them is... weird. But they won't be of use here." He turns away, "Have Finnegan bring them to Stonehaven. It will be their problem to deal with."

Then he goes back behind his table, ignoring us.

The entire time, he barely looked at us; only his mana scanned our bodies. As if we aren't even worth his time.

"You heard Sir Sterling, kids. Now move your asses before someone moves them for you!"

We quickly follow Roland out of the tents and wobble behind him like baby ducks following their mother.

I keep my mana to myself and do not try to use [Mana Perception]. Others seem to be doing the same.

Unfortunately, Biscuit is already acting cute in front of a man who is eating some meat.

Biscuit, if you end up getting killed, it's on you!

Fortunately, the man laughs and throws a big piece to the corgi. Victorious doggo comes back to us.

His face seems even cheekier than before. He doesn't say anything in my mind but pokes me, as if gesturing for me to take some food.

"..."

Knowing how much food means to him, I can't help but feel a little bit of emotion. Just a tiny little bit.

"Just eat it."

Stupid dog, your tricks won't work on me.

He doesn't wait anymore and gobbles up the meat quickly.

[Shadowstalker - lvl ?]

Like everyone in the camp, we can't even see Finnegan's level. The man is quiet and just listens to Roland, and then nods.

It takes him a few minutes to pack his stuff, and then he gestures for us to follow him to another man who gives us some provisions after Finnegan signs some papers.

So, we've got ourselves another paperwork-ridden country, huh?

After we manage to leave the camp and walk for a few hours in total silence, the surrounding landscape keeps on showing off its amazing colors and gorgeous scenery.

We stop, and Finnegan gives us some food. Hard bread and dried meat, plus some water he made us carry.

While finally getting some food in my stomach, I carefully watch the man who is also slowly eating while staring into the distance.

The countryside around us remains stunning. Lush green grass and trees, expansive plains, and a beautiful blue sky with hardly any clouds. The weather is just perfect too. It all feels almost unnaturally picturesque.

I notice that the man holding us captive seems to be weaker than Roland. His moves aren't that agile, and even his presence is weaker. Knowing that I have to try it sometime, I slowly wake up my mana and send it towards the man after gesturing to Tess to get ready.

I didn't dare to do it with Roland because he had Mana in his class name and was a scout, probably a class that is made to be better able to feel such things.

As thin strings of mana as I can make reach out and touch the man. I try to probe him, try to guess his strength.

If he's weak, we can fight him and then run away. Some level difference won't stop me, and it's too dangerous to just do whatever they want us to do. Sure, it could all be going as the system intended, but it also doesn't have to be.

At first, he doesn't react, so I send a bit more, feeling the edges of his mana pool.

Carefully.

Slowly.

Then I realize that he is looking at me.

Deep, deep eyes as if piercing straight through my head.

"That's really rude," he just says in a quiet voice, and then everything blacks out.

POV Kim Min-Jae

As we leave the camp, the quiet man in front of me hands me a bottle of water. I take it gratefully, but when I glance up at him, his eyes send a chill down my spine. He calmly tells us what to do, but the fear in his eyes makes me wonder what we're walking into.

Running away is not allowed. We're not allowed to drink water or eat our provisions unless he gives us permission. Talking is not allowed.

We follow him quietly across the grassy plain with trees here and there. Everyone is just going with it.

Even Nathaniel, who is walking slightly to the side. His eyes are most of the time on the man leading us.

They are full of curiosity.

He is not scared; he is just watching his surroundings and waiting. I notice that he also tries to copy Finnegan's movement a few times. Light, quick steps that seem as if he is floating.

I turn away, unable to watch any longer.

I can't compare myself to him. He is not normal. No normal person would turn back to face a Cinderbear instead of just passing through the entrance. Yes, no normal person would do that.

But he won.

And then he forgot about Kevin. No word about that. No sadness in his eyes. And he doesn't even seem to be mad at Lily because of that. On the contrary, it looks like he is even closer to her now.

But it's okay; I will deal with it. As up until now, I will continue to grow stronger. I will put in the effort and improve the same way I did on the first floor.

I am stronger now.

While we sit and slowly eat the food, I hear Finnegan say something for the first time in a few hours since we left.

"That's really rude," his voice is calm and quiet.

Then something hits Nathaniel, and he falls down, defeated just like that.

"No!" I hear Lily and even Tess say something as they hurry towards the young man. Even the dog starts barking, and these weird purple tentacles appear around him.

And I am just looking at the unconscious body of a young man.

Just like that, he was defeated. Without having a chance to fight back.

Pfff.

I can't help but smile, and for the first time since leaving the first floor, I feel relief.

It's all starting over, isn't it?

We are weak once more, and even he is again at the starting point.

Okay.

Okay!

I get it; it is rude to try to probe someone's mana in the same way it's rude to ask about levels, but at least say something instead of quietly looking at me.

Dang it, my head hurts so much. What did he do? Thankfully I'm still alive and smarter than a few hours ago but I could live without the pain. Don't mess with people with a question mark over their heads.

Yup.

I don't know if it's because of that or something else, but Finnegan takes us towards the trees, and we enter a small forest soon to find an animal.

[Boar - lvl 19]

"Kill it," the man says shortly and pushes me towards the animal that isn't running at all.

The boar is massive and black in color, each of its tusks longer than my arm.

Not knowing the man's intentions, I rouse up my mana and step towards the monster.

I enter [Focus] and feel my mind split into two parts.

One of them focuses on creating a spear with my [Armament], and the other part does what I would always do.

The mana flows through my body, strengthening it, making it faster, and I take it all in, missing the feeling even after only a few hours of barely using mana.

The translucent spear in my hand becomes denser and stronger while I continue to strengthen myself.

The boar rushes at me, and I dodge to the side while stabbing the animal deep inside its neck. The animal is fast while charging but has some trouble reacting quickly. Its hide is very thick, but not too thick for my improved skill.

With another charge, I dodge to the side and attempt to stab again, but its skin becomes even tougher and turns a deeper shade of black. The spear's blade breaks, so I let it dissipate and recreate it.

When it charges me again, I stab against its head and bury the tip of the spear inside the animal's eye while calmly watching it under the influence of [Focus].

I leap to the side, release the spear, and then dash towards the creature. I form an axe with [Armament] and, using all the strength I can muster, bury it in its neck. Blood spurts everywhere, and I somewhat awkwardly repeat the process while holding the axe in one hand.

[You have defeated a Boar - lvl 19]

I look at the man with the Shadowstalker class, and he just nods shortly, his eyes piercing and watching the entire fight.

Keep watching, keep guessing. You'll see only the facade, the skills I choose to reveal.

Chapter 64: Alluring facade

So, Stonehaven? Well, it's a city, and we are currently strolling through its streets.

The medieval age-like and brimming with life. The cobblestone pathways, worn from the passage of countless feet, lead us past timber-framed houses and market stalls. Vendors continue to spew out their sales pitches, and I can smell the food they are offering: fresh baked goods and oily meat from who knows what animal. I can even hear a blacksmith's hammer.

It all feels so unreal.

Yet, the diverse crowd amazes me: armored knights, robed mages, and common folk.

I see classes such as farmer, merchant, and many more. Finally, I am also able to see their levels, many of the commoners are under level 10. Each person's class and level is displayed above their head, like floating emblems of their unique classes.

Some higher-leveled individuals gather in groups, and the highest level I can identify is 46. So that most likely means that I can see levels of people that are 20 levels higher. at most and anything beyond that is showing as a question mark.

But who the heck knows? They could be level 1000, and the system would laugh as I try to probe their mana.

I have to be honest, there are some serious problems with the UI in this godforsaken tutorial.

Also, what the heck, Biscuit? Do you want to get killed? We have no money, so don't even dare try to swipe food from the vendors!

Dang it! I saw that tentacle, hide it right away!

And when the hell did you learn to make it so transparent? I almost can't see it in daylight!

Once again, I am reminded that the best mage is going to be from the zoo, and we humans will all perish.

As we finally make our way into the old-looking stone building, we are guided through a corridor adorned with a worn carpet and a selection of rather ugly paintings hanging upon the walls. They are mainly paintings of men in military uniforms, all of them looking very serious. Continuing, we eventually reach what probably used to be a garden, now transformed into a makeshift training area.

There, we find a man around Hadwin's age accompanied by a younger, aristocratic-looking guy.

As I observe their intense sparring session, I find it difficult to keep up with the speed of their movements.

They spar within a large circle, surrounded by glowing stones that seem to mark the perimeter of their makeshift arena. I am sure they are not only doing that, but I still do not dare to probe it after my experience from some time ago.

The older man's skill is awe-inspiring; he effortlessly toys with his opponent, despite moving at a deliberately slower pace. The young noble is swift but noticeably impatient and impulsive. Their swords move with such speed and precision that they appear as blurred lines, while their feet dance across the ground.

I'm quite certain that if I tried to move so fast, my ankles would break under the strain and even without actively trying to sense it, I feel powerful mana emanating from both combatants.

Unfortunately, they stop, and I feel disappointed. Disappointed that I can't watch them longer and learn a thing or two from their swordsmanship.

The younger man bows and thanks the older one, and together they enter the circle, and the stones stop glowing.

What does it do?

What is it?

I want to know!

Once again, I feel annoyed by my inability to perceive it with my mana and try to find out. It's annoying me even more than my missing left arm; that's how much I've gotten used to it.

"Finnegan," the older man says shortly, and our prison guard just bows.

I repeat the same thing and bow in a similar way I saw him bowing.

My reward is a chuckle from the younger man, and I quickly look up at him.

[Windblade Duelist - lvl ?]

"Sir Emeric, they are drifters; obviously, they don't know our customs. It's praiseworthy that he tried to learn."

The blonde young man slowly apologizes to the older man, but I don't believe that he means a single word of his apology.

For a second, our eyes meet, and then he turns away.

The older man looks at me.

[Tempest Knight - lvl ?]

"It's okay to try to learn, but you must not be so careless. The bow you just gave me is that of a leader and his subordinate. In your case, as someone with a much lower level, position, and without any backer, you would bow much deeper while holding a hand on your chest."

"I am sorry, I will learn it quickly," I say shortly.

So the older man likes people who try to learn; I have to remember that! It's annoying to try to get into the good graces of powerful people, but hey, I don't mind if it means that I will get to learn some stuff in exchange.

I will even kiss your feet!

Dignity?

What is that? Will it teach me magic? Will it keep me alive while surrounded by people many times stronger than myself?

Yea, I thought so.

Also, how does he know that we are drifters? Did he get some information ahead of time? Did he already scan us? I didn't feel anything.

Tempest Knights answers with just a short nod, and then he starts talking to Finnegan, and I carefully listen to every word they say.

"Bring them to Henry to test them, and he will take care of the rest."

What the heck is this? Is this the famous "not my problem" style of dealing with annoying stuff? Is this because we are drifters or because we are weak and not useful?

"I will help," the young noble-looking man called Sir Emeric smiles, and his face is one I would call punchable.

Sure, girls might call him handsome, but I can see the look in his eyes. This guy is rotten to the core.

Not wanting to deal with us anymore, the Tempest Knight only waves at him with his hand, and here we go once again, leaving the training area and entering the streets.

Finnegan walks first, and after a while, Sir Emeric slows down and ends up walking by my side.

"Hey cripple, how did it taste?" his smile is bright as he looks at me, he is slightly taller than me.

"Sir?" I ask, confused by his question.

"Old man's ass. It's been a long time since I saw such an ass-kisser," his smile becomes cruel, and he moves closer to my side, now whispering so only I can hear.

"I truly despise individuals like you. You're spineless, revolting bottom-feeders who believe you're so clever. Acting so meek, always following orders, and being polite while only revealing the emotions you choose – constantly insincere and manipulative. But all the while, you just bide your time." He pats my shoulder with feigned friendliness, still smiling, "and wait. And then, when the opportunity arises, you won't hesitate to step over whoever is in your way."

He squeezes my shoulder over my missing left arm, and I feel the bone cracking.

But I do not let out a single sound, even as he squeezes harder and harder. I just look down at the ground.

"My apologies, sir. It's simply that I'm afraid." I try to add some emotion to it, to make it believable.

But he only laughs and lets go of my shoulder, slapping my back a few times in a friendly-like manner.

"There is no need for pretense. You and I are the same. I knew it the moment my eyes landed on you," he pauses and then whispers once again in a quiet voice that bears no emotion, unlike his smiling face, "That's why I will fucking kill you." He adds and then leaves, walking towards Finnegan while smiling again as if nothing happened.

He is tall and has blonde hair that nearly looks golden. His eyes are brown, but such a shade of brown that makes you want to look at them in awe of the beautiful color. His build is muscular, and he is

wearing clothes that look expensive even to me. Expensive yet comfortable, clearly showing his wealth or position.

The young man playfully says something to Finnegan.

So that's how it's going to be.

He is smiling brightly while talking to people around him, even greeting a few vendors and peasants.

People are people everywhere, be it on Earth or on the second floor.

He looks back at me and gives me one more smile. I can barely feel any hostility from his it; it just looks so real and kind.

The frustrating feeling I had up until now slowly disappears, and I feel myself calming down a little. Up until now, the second floor looked so beautiful and almost safe, as we barely felt any hostility; only a few people punished us for our mistakes with a slap on the wrist.

It left me feeling deeply uneasy. The sensation was akin to someone offering a friendly smile, all the while clutching a hidden dagger, eager to catch me off guard.

This feels much better.

In the end, this is still Hell difficulty, even if it's hidden under the alluring facade of the beautiful second floor.

Chapter 65: Unresolved matters

Henry, seemingly a battle-hardened veteran with a stern expression, carefully observes our group as we gather in the training hall. His keen gaze sweeps over each one of us, pausing briefly on Biscuit.

He shakes his head, mumbling under his breath, "What kind of monstrosity..."

His brow furrows slightly when he sees my missing arm, but he quickly moves on to assess the others.

"You're drifters, and that means you're expendable. Don't expect any special treatment or protection. You're on your own."

Nice start.

"You might have come from another world, but you're nothing more than fodder for our enemies if you can't pull your weight."

Emeric is smiling brightly, standing to the side. Finnegan is already gone.

"The weak die and the strong survive. That's the law of this land. If you can't keep up, you're better off dead."

As if to make a stronger impact with this sentence, I feel a wave of his mana hit us with an effect similar to Cinderbear's fear.

"Your background means nothing here. You're starting from scratch, so you better work twice as hard as everyone else."

I guess that means we will be forced to work for them? What about the floor quest? Will the end of the world come out of nowhere? Is it already coming, but people around here don't know about it?

Will it happen in a few years? Few days?

"Drifters often have more gifts than us, natives of this kingdom, but if you think you can coast by on your gifts, you're sorely mistaken." his walk stops in front of me, "You, I heard you are decent with manipulating your mana." His eyes turn to me. "Too talented for your own good but too dumb to take advantage of that."

He puts his hand on my shoulder, and I do not attempt to dodge.

“Defend yourself against my mana. If you hold back and try to hide your skill, you will be punished.”

Then I feel his mana entering my body in a similar way to how Lily does when she is healing. Even the amount of mana is similar; the man is most likely holding back.

My mana resists his and doesn't let it enter my body, even without me doing anything.

But out of nowhere, he starts sending mana towards multiple places.

The attacks are still weak, but they are quicker and quicker. Soon, he is pushing against my mana at a dozen places, and my automatic defense becomes confused.

How much should I show? If I show too little, I will be punished and probably thrown away as someone useless. Maybe even killed? If I show too much, it might become troublesome. The question is, even if I show him my all, how does it measure in comparison to them?

This seems to be a kingdom that is used to handling mana, and there are massive amounts of people handling it, probably for years. What is my 30-day experience in comparison to them?

So, I show it all and do not hold back at all.

I concentrate my efforts on maneuvering my mana, effectively neutralizing his attack. I not only manage to block his attacks but even exert force to push back against him. I carefully observe and mimic the way he handles his mana.

At first, it's challenging, but gradually, I grow more adept. I manage to simultaneously attack in two places, then three, five, and eventually ten. As the battle progresses, I continue to adjust and adapt my mana manipulation in response to his tactics.

He attempts to confuse me by reducing the size of his attacks, luring me into a false sense of security. I also take note that he consistently attacks in 12 places, so I strategically limit my own offensive and defensive maneuvers to match this number.

The experience is exhilarating.

I genuinely enjoy it.

Though it proves more difficult than it appears, the challenge is incredibly rewarding.

Adapting once more, the man begins to combine several attacks into one powerful strike. He executes this new strategy with impressive speed, forcing me to respond. The intensity of our confrontation escalates, yet I am determined to keep up with his every move.

Out of nowhere, he stops.

"That should be enough." The look in his eyes is hard to discern.

He continues to look at me.

"What is your level?"

Huh, can he not see it? Is he seeing a question mark because he is at a higher level, or are natives here unable to see levels?

Oh, that would explain why it's so rude to ask for levels. Knowing someone's level means that you can measure their strength and might be seen as sizing them up for a fight.

"Isn't that rude to ask?"

For the first time, he smiles. His smile shows his teeth, and he continues to shamelessly look at me.

"It is," he nods.

"Twenty-four," I say shortly.

"Hmmm," he scratches the back of his head, "get back, I will think about what to do with you later."

He then continues to repeat the test with all of us, and they also tell him their levels.

Tess is 20, Sophie is 21, Isabella is 16, Hadwin is 18, Maya is 17, Kim is level 18, and the twins are the lowest, level 13. Well, the second lowest. Lily is at 8, mostly thanks to assisting with Cinderbear.

"Now, what to do with you," he stops in front of the corgi. "You have decent mana in your body, but I've never seen such a weird breed of dog." He squats in front of the corgi and reaches his hand towards him. Biscuit only sniffs it and continues to look at the man.

The man then stands up and turns towards Emeric.

"I heard it right that you want to help?" the looks they exchange look suspicious.

"Yes, sir! I already became friends with the one with the missing arm!"

"Alright, and I would appreciate it if you could come by from time to time to share your guidance and mentor them in proper etiquette, especially the girl," he points at Lily. "She has healing powers."

For the first time, I see the honest surprise on the face of the young noble.

"That's amazing; the lord will be happy!" Immediately, his behavior changes a bit, and he gives Lily a warm smile.

Are healers rare?

"Yes, her current level is low, but we can help her improve before informing the lord. I am confident he would value a more proficient healer, and as a result, the rewards he bestows might be even greater."

"Ahhh," the blonde noble only nods.

Lily's eyes become more scared as we continue to listen to their dialogue.

In the end, even the oh-so-proud Emeric seems to be a bootlicker.

A few hours later, they escort Lily away. She remains in shock after the events on the first floor and is visibly frightened as they guide her along.

We can do nothing but observe them leading her away, silently hoping she will be alright. Based on the previous conversation, I doubt they intend to harm her.

Prior to this, we had made arrangements to use the Community for communication. I hope that she will be safe and able to join the forum at the designated time.

Considering the swiftness with which they discovered and took her before Henry and Emeric could help her improve her skills, it seems that healers might be even more highly valued than I initially believed.

A woman dressed in a black robe comes another hour later day. Her presence exudes an air of authority, which is immediately apparent to everyone in the room. Even Henry acts humbly in her presence. He bows to her respectfully and proceeds to tread cautiously in her vicinity.

The woman's attire is immaculate, and her gray robe is without any embroidery. Her posture is confident, and she moves with deliberate grace.

As she scans the room with a piercing gaze, the atmosphere becomes tense with anticipation. It is clear that her arrival is no coincidence and that she is here with a purpose.

She immediately goes to Sophie.

[Aura Manipulator - lvl ??]

The first two question marks we saw since coming here.

No words exit her mouth, but it looks like a conversation going on between them.

After that, she takes Sophie and her sister, and they leave.

Maya stays behind.

After eating simple food and cleaning ourselves with cold water, the rest of us are led to our rooms. Tess and Maya get one for themselves, and I end up with Hadwin and Biscuit, while Kim is put in the room with the twins.

The room features two four-poster beds with carved wooden headboards, exposed stone walls adorned with wrought iron candle sconces, and a handwoven tapestry.

A modest wooden table sits near a window with thick drapes and a simple carved wardrobe for storage.

The room is simple but comfortable, especially after the first floor.

The best doggo immediately jumps on the bed and puts his head on my thigh.

(Food?)

You just ate, you little twerp.

Also, I really hope you didn't mean to eat Hadwin.

Once again, recalling the beginning of the second floor, I glance towards Hadwin, who meets my gaze as well.

"I think we have some unresolved matters."

Chapter 66: You were right

What flashes through my mind are the memories of me dragging my wounded body to the second floor, and all of them waiting there like vultures for an opportunity.

On the first floor, I didn't hurt any of them too much because I needed them, and in the end, it was the right decision. It was logical, and Sophie, Hadwin, and Maya did pull their weight during the last moments of the first floor.

I was so angry, really angry at them for pulling all this on me the moment the first floor ended.

But I didn't let it get to my head. I thought it through logically and didn't hurt them; I kept them around again, and I would do it once more, even if they tried to take my life afterward.

That's what I like about myself. That's how I want to be.

But now?

I push Biscuit away and stand up.

Sure, the second floor seems to be difficult, maybe even more so than the first floor. Everyone around is of a much higher level, and pissing off the wrong person could mean death. Plus, my freedom is so restricted.

But do I need Hadwin?

Perhaps? I'm familiar with him and his skills to an extent, but how useful can he truly be? His weaknesses mirror my own. There aren't any people I need him to lead, and most importantly - he attempted to take my life. I need to show him that it's not an action he can take lightly.

I take a step closer.

"I knew I would regret not finishing you off. You're not normal in your head," he says, and his mana activates.

My fist hits his face and bounces back because of some weird field around his body, and then I feel his skill trying to disrupt my mana.

I let one part of my mind focus on analyzing this skill, and the other part takes care of the rest.

Mana flows through my body easier than ever with my new passive skill, and with increased mana, I have more of it than ever before, so I don't focus on efficiency that much. Still, I feel that my circuit is not working properly because of my missing arm, and the flow of mana is far from optimal, once again due to missing a big chunk of my mana circuit together with my left arm.

I dodge his swing, and my knee hits his belly, making him stagger back, unhurt.

His constitution is high, his skill adds to it, and he is keeping up his other skill that tries to mess with my mana. But he can't. My mana is too much for him, and my control is much better than his even in this state.

I hit his face three more times, and finally draw some blood; he is slow, and not that good at fighting humans.

He charges at me, trying to grab my waist and pull me to the ground where he would have an advantage with his higher strength and endurance, not even mentioning my missing arm.

But what welcomes him is [Kinetic Redistribution] I use to slow him down and then, with absorbed energy, I boost my kick, and my knee hits his chin, probably at least cracking it even through his tough body.

Finally, the other part of my [Focus] focuses on replicating his skill. It somewhat reminds me of how Henry attempted to infuse my body with his mana, and I've seen Hadwin use it frequently back on the first floor. I've had ample opportunities to observe him manipulate mana and experiment. He even used the skill on me two times.

Notification sounds in my mind and I ignore it and use my new skill instead. At the same time I activate [Mana Surge] and my mana burns even brighter and stronger as I put a lot of it into the skill called [Disruption].

Efficiency is terrible, the skill is only level one... oh a notification... level two, but the absurd amount of mana makes it work, and I use it against Hadwin.

The shock in his eyes is satisfying to look at, and with my perception, I feel the barrier around his skin dissipate, then my fist hits him again.

This time there is more blood, and he falls to the ground, shaken.

"Fucking monster," he lets out before I kick his head.

A painful groan escapes his mouth, and he tries to grab my leg, but I step on his hand.

Crack

I pause for a second and let him look up at me; there is still some fight in his eyes.

"Tess, you can't be serious. That guy is fucking crazy," I say. "That's what you said while trying to kill me, right?"

I control my power and kick his head.

More blood and another groan.

“Congratulations, you were right?”

Then I continue to beat him while avoiding breaking anything other than his hand or leaving lasting wounds.

I beat him for trying to kill me.

I couldn't do it before. But now it's different.

Do you think I am a joke? Did you think I am someone to mess with just because I let you go a few times?

At some point, he lets out a few words: “I get it, I get it now,” he groans. “I swear I won't try it again.” He sounds honest.

But he still sees me as someone predictable. He thinks I will only beat him to punish him and leave him alone.

People fear do not fear what they can predict. So it's better to be unreasonable, unpredictable, crazy.

So I continue to beat the hell out of him until he barely moves, only then do I let him go. His high constitution should heal him until the morning.

I don't say any threats. I just leave him on the floor and get back on the bed.

Sure, I can kill him, but what would happen then? They seem to have a use for him, and I would get punished. Sure, neither of us seems as valuable as Lily or Sophie, who were instantly taken away mostly likely because of their skills, but let's not push it too far for now.

Allowing your emotions to control you is generally not a good idea.

Now, with my skill, I should be able to destroy the construct in my mind, right? Obviously, it's a good idea, but I still feel that I can learn a lot from it.

For example, what if I learn to create a construct of my own? What if I use my [Mana Manipulation] instead of Sophie's [Manipulation]? I don't need to create it inside someone else's mind; I just need to create it inside my own body. That should be easier, right?

What if I learn a healing skill and create a construct that will use part of my mana to keep that skill permanently active, turning it into a sort of passive skill? A construct that will take my mana and store it somewhere in my body, making it some sort of mana battery and increasing my mana pool. The construct that will protect me against mental attacks or that will permanently keep a field around me that will continue to disrupt mana other than mine.

It slightly reminds me of having the [Focus]

Limits? Two? Three? Ten constructs?

So, yeah, let's study Sophie's construct for a bit longer.

The older man on the floor regains consciousness, and I stand up.

His eyes move to look at me. He looks undefeated; but his will to fight is weaker.

Good.

I kick his belly two more times and then kick his head, making him unconscious once again.

Then I get back to practicing my skills, this time I let mana hover around my missing arm and try to form it into the shape of an arm. It's incredibly difficult..

Hey, look, if a corgi could learn it, so can I! Sure, I will never be as good at it as our overlords, animals, the masters of mana, but I will try!

Oh, you're moving again?

Damn, what's with the look in your eyes?

Who told you to try to kill me?

An eye for an eye? A tooth for a tooth?

If I did that, you would be dead.

This time, I let him create a barrier around his body and then disrupt it with the same skill he has. Desperation enters his eyes as I once again make him unconscious.

Then I get back to my practice. Part of my mind focuses on [Mana Manipulation] and the other on [Armament]. Creating something in the shape that resembles an arm isn't that difficult; yes, fingers are super hard to create, but even harder is to make it move.

Obviously, I have no feeling in it, and it's still translucent, ready to dissipate when I stress it too much.

Wouldn't it be easier to learn a healing skill?

When Hadwin wakes up next time, I let him crawl towards his bed and leave him be this time.

“Hadwin, tomorrow you will tell me about your skills and class, okay?”

He pauses, and then our eyes meet.

Much better look.

The older man just nods and falls asleep with his body halfway on the bed.

Chapter 67: Separated

POV Tess Hansen

The man with a question mark instead of his level leaves us with a warning that we'll be killed if we leave the room without being asked to and I end up behind the closed door with Maya.

She is perhaps five years older than me. Her figure bears the marks of a lot of exercise. I think I heard that she was a fitness trainer back on Earth.

Her eyes turn to me, not even attempting to look friendly. She has a skill called [Focus], and Nat told me it should help her better concentrate on fighting and magic while also helping her control her emotions. It sounds fairly useful, but she doesn't seem to be that good at it.

"Great, I have to share a room with Nathaniel's dog."

Even without the skill, Nathaniel shows more control over his emotions than her.

"So why do you even listen to him? Is he your boyfriend?"

I don't answer, and she continues.

"Or are you sucking up to him to survive?"

"Yes," I agree with her.

"Phe!" she jumps on her bed and stretches out her body while still looking at me.

"Is that all you have to say?"

Should I talk to her? Should I warn her? A memory flashes through my head. A few days after we entered the first floor, I saw her talking to Lily and giving her advice, helping her a bit while smiling gently. I still remember that act of kindness, so I decide to give her a warning.

"You should be more careful around Nathaniel. From now avoid him as much as you can."

"Heh, like I don't know that. That guy is freaking crazy."

She doesn't understand.

"Be thankful you're still in one piece. He's... he's not the sort who lets things slide. If I hadn't stepped in back there, you would have been in a terrible state. Hadwin and Sophie too."

Her laugh fills the room.

"If Hadwin is still alive in the morning, watch carefully the condition he's in."

That makes her shut up, and she stares at me with a hard-to-read look.

I know I won't be able to sleep tonight, not with her around, but I still lie down and try to get some rest.

Maya doesn't say anything more, but I can see her thinking.

Finally, a day and night cycle!

One sun, as the universe intended. Even day and night seem to be of similar length to Earth's.

My roommate slowly wakes up, groaning. He is still bruised, his hand is broken, and there are bruises all over his body. I expected him to be in better shape. Does he not have as high a constitution as I thought?

Before I can ask him, our doors are unlocked and open.

"Follow me," the man with a question mark over his head says shortly after taking a second to look at the state Hadwin is in. But that's all. He just acknowledges his condition, and we leave the room, following him into a small room with a few chairs and some food on the table.

"You have five minutes."

After that, he leaves, and the others join us. A few of them seem to be really surprised by Hadwin's state, especially Maya, who looks at the man for a long time and then glances at me before turning away.

Hmm, the "he fell down the stairs" excuse might not be working.

I move to the side, and Tess sits next to me, with Biscuit impatiently waiting near my leg.

We eat in silence while I continue to pass some food to the corgi as well.

What is there to say, anyway?

After eating, we are brought in front of Henry, and he continues to examine us. There's no explanation about what's happening, and no one asks. We just follow orders.

At first, he splits us up and interrogates us, writing everything down.

Level?

Class?

Amount and names of gifts and their levels?

There isn't a single question about the tutorial or where we came from. Is it something they don't care about, or is it something the system set up?

But he doesn't ask about skill upgrades. He also doesn't ask about the class passive skill, so I keep that to myself.

Other than that, I tell him everything.

When I try to lie once and leave out my [Kinetic Redistribution], he hits me, and I nearly pass out. When I finally feel better after what feels like a few minutes, he asks again, not even bothering to tell me what will happen if I lie again.

So I tell him about [Kinetic Redistribution] as well.

While answering his questions, I think. Do they not have passive skills for classes? Can't they upgrade their skills? Why can they only sense levels while using mana?

Then he asks me about my stats. When I tell him, he looks at me and asks me to repeat it, and I do so. It seems like he thinks I'm lying, but in the end, he decides against it.

"What a dumbass,"

Huh? It's because of my high mana, right?

It has to be.

After we're done, he sends me to the corner and continues to question the others, too far for me to hear.

I let mana run through my body, manipulating it while once in a while using [Mana Surge] to get used to it. The second part of my mind continues to examine Sophie's construct.

I get a look from him, as he clearly feels me using mana, even though I can't feel his at all.

[Mana Hunter - lvl ?]

How high level is he? Is he only slightly over the range of my identification, so around 45? Or is he much higher? 100? 200?

What level are the two question marks that took away Sophie and Isabella?

Once again, I can only complain about the system that drip-feeds us information, and then info bombs us all at once after the end of the floor.

Henry then spars with us one after another. No one is able to land a single hit on him. Mana is not allowed, so we use only the strength of our bodies.

Hadwin does terribly, still wounded, so after a while, he just sends him away and calls me.

He is much harsher on me than on the older man. It looks like I did upset him by hurting Hadwin. Is either that or he is still somewhat angry that they took Lily and Sophie away from him.

I try to dodge his fist, but it's too quick, and my head flies back, making the world spin around me. I hold on and swing my fist at him.

I am feeling so terribly slow without my mana. Slow and weak. And a slightly higher constitution makes the best punching bag out of me. Our martial arts don't seem to be that different, and I'm confident I could defeat him if we had equal stats and my arm was restored.

"That's enough," he also sends me away and continues to test the others.

When I sit down on the ground, the best doggo comes to me and licks my hand. I pet him in exchange and watch the others.

Only Tess shows some knowledge of martial arts. I know that her dad is a high-end bodyguard, so it's only natural that he taught her a bit.

With her hair tied into a ponytail, she defends against the man and continues to quickly get on her feet every time he knocks her down. In the end, not even she lands a proper hit on him and is sent away.

The others are much worse. Maya's physical stats are good, but she doesn't seem to have any experience in human-versus-human combat and the remaining three, Kim and the twins, aren't even close.

For the final time, he turns towards us, his gaze lingering on each and every one of us before he abruptly exits without another word.

Right after that, we are split up. Tess and Maya are led away together, and so are the twins. Hadwin is taken away by one attendant and Kim by another.

Biscuit stays behind with one of the guys that work with Henry and before they disappear from my sight, I hear one last message in my head.

(Afraid)

I end up alone in a simple room, waiting for someone to arrive.

After an hour Emeric enters the room with a big smile on his face.

Young, dashing, and neatly dressed. His smile seems genuine as he looks me up and down.

"You're coming with me. I promised I'd help you adapt a bit before you're sent to the frontlines."

He says I am to be taken to his manor. Apparently, it's massive and has dozens of servants. The young noble is quick to point out that he is the third son of an affluent family, and this is their summer house.

While we drive there - me on a horse behind one of his men and him inside a luxurious carriage - I check the community forum.

The forum is full of people checking on each other, making sure they are safe, as even they seem to be in fairly similar situations. But I am curious about only a few:

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Everything is fine here, they are already training us. They want to send us hunting after a while.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - I'm fine, they treat me super well... I miss you guys.

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - They treat us like crap, but at least we have food, water, and beds.

I also let others know that I'm fine and spend the rest of my limit watching the forum. This time, most people ignore my questions, and only the same groups talk amongst themselves.

The manor is as massive and luxurious as the guy described. It's huge, and the gardens are beautiful and well-maintained. Emeric smiles at me as I look around, displaying an ugly grin.

The first thing he does is order me to undress completely in front of about two dozen servants and guards.

They pour cold water over me while the blonde noble complains about my odor.

They cut off my hair and shave my head, claiming it's to prevent lice.

He laughs the entire time, even as I awkwardly put on the clothes they provide, struggling with my one arm.

His laughter only intensifies after looking into my eyes.

Chapter 68: Yes

"It's a shame that you're being sent to the frontlines. Sure, they don't instantly put you in the most dangerous spots, but in the end, you're just monster fodder."

Emeric taps my shoulder; it seems friendly, but it's anything but that.

"That old man Henry said you have quite a few gifts. Actually, a lot of them for someone of your level. Unfortunately for you, you've messed up; your mana is too high, and it will break your body fairly soon. You're crippled, too."

He looks at me.

"I see that you don't understand," he says happily. "Your mana is messed up, and its flow is terrible because of your missing limb. You have way too much of it to control with your lackluster skills, and no one will bother enough to help you level up and fix your habits."

He taps my back, and this time it hurts.

"You have no idea how much regrowing your limb would cost. They are pretty selective about this kind of service. It's also unfortunate they took your friend away. She would have been able to heal you given a few months. But now she's in their hands."

He flashes me a bright smile.

"Tomorrow, I will have you spar with a few of my men. A bit with weapons and some basic mana exercises. Just in case someone comes to check up on you. The day after that, I will let you practice again. Just in case."

He then stops. We are alone in the hallway. It's not inside the manor but in a smaller house nearby, most likely housing for his servants.

"After that, I will make your life miserable. You will exercise until you pass out. They will beat you, you will be given rotten food that was about to be thrown away, and you will sleep in the pig pens."

His face still looks honest, and his smile is nearly perfect.

"All of that because of the way you look around," he quietens down, whispering now. "I hate your eyes. The calm look in them as you look around, trying to gather as much information as you can. You should be scared, you should be pissing your pants."

He straightens up.

"Before the week's end, I will challenge you to a duel. I will tell Henry that you insulted my father or something like that, and during that duel, I will kill you."

This time, he pats my cheek a few times.

"Your room is at the end of the hallway."

He walks away. His hate for me feels almost too much. Is he just that rotten, picking someone to torture every so often, or did he see something in me that he really can't stand?

I watch his back the entire time until he leaves the hallway.

Then, I stop moving the mana inside my body and start walking through the hallway. As I thought, his mana sensitivity is terrible, and unlike Henry, he wasn't able to feel my mana movement inside my body at all.

So, can I take on someone at least 20, but probably much much more levels higher? In a week?

If I surprise him, then maybe? But the chance is low, and the risk is so high.

So, should I run away? I don't think I will be able to.

Ask for help? Who?

Try to get into his good graces? Seems impossible.

Haaa.

I lay down on the bed. The clothes they gave me are simple, and the fabric it's made of isn't soft or too comfortable. But it's clean and without any holes or blood on it.

The room is also fairly simple, but after sleeping outside and inside wet caves, it feels like such luxury.

I stop my second part of the mind from focusing on practicing [Armament] and make it try to reduce my mana signature as much as I can. I try to slow down the flow of mana inside my body. My new passive skill and trait help a lot with that and I retain as much mana inside my body as possible while trying to reduce the amount of mana produced by the Mana heart.

This night, I don't sleep and practice until the morning when they come knocking on the door of the small room I'm in.

I receive a wooden sword, and then the training starts.

My opponent is a level 40 mana warrior, and the training consists of me getting more and more bruises while Emeric sits under a large parasol nearby, drinking something and snacking. His smile never leaves his lips.

Are you that bored? Go and do something useful.

Also, give me some of those sweets; they look amazing.

Thanks to my upgraded [Focus], I continue to watch the warrior's moves with one part of my mind. Even simple swordsmanship is something new to me, as up until now, I've just continued to swing any weapon in any way that I saw fitting.

Meanwhile, my opponent moves differently. Sparring while holding a sword is different than just using martial arts. His balance is different, his stance changes at different times, and his feet move in specific ways.

So, I watch him while I'm getting beaten. Still, I swing at him sometimes and keep my body strengthened to reduce wounds.

There is only a 16-level difference, but his swordsmanship is much higher, and the same goes for his stats, and he isn't even using his skill.

It's hard to compare to someone with years and years of experience after only one month of using mana.

Emeric is probably even better.

The mana warrior stabs his wooden sword at me, and I avoid it only because of reading his moves and him holding back. I boost my body with mana to twist it slightly to the side to reduce the impact and then stagger backward.

For a moment, I stop paying attention to my opponent and focus on Emeric. I try to read his expression and body language.

Is he enjoying this? Totally.

I don't have much time to think as my opponent attacks again. I keep my focus split between him and Emeric, trying to learn as much as I can from this experience.

My other trainer is useless. It's probably on purpose, but he's terrible at handling mana, so I barely focus on him and continue planning and practicing.

This time, Emeric doesn't watch us.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -everything is fine here.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - We were hunting today; there are monsters as well. Right now, mostly boars, kobolds, and also some trolls and goblins, but stronger than on the 1st floor.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -They force me to kill monsters they've imprisoned and put my stats in mana and constitution. They are still very nice and want me to learn to heal as much as I can.

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) -They are teaching us some basic orders. I think there's a war going on or something like this.

I try to get a few more pieces of information, but I get nothing useful.

Everyone is experiencing similar things, and if someone tries to say too much, it gets censored.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Emeric? Nah, we didn't even meet anyone like that.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - We think that one question mark is up to 100-200 level and two question marks are over 200. But we're not sure now. It seems like asking for a level is considered terribly rude here.

After a while, I get disconnected and close my eyes.

I don't sleep again and continue to practice.

The next day, it becomes even worse. This time, someone stronger spars with me. I learn a lot, but I also get beaten a lot.

I get a soft, nearly rotten fruit that reminds me of an apple, and I'm forced to eat it while Emeric watches.

I continue to observe him, and by now, I'm certain I can't defeat him in a fair fight. His mana sense is terrible, but his stats are high, which he demonstrated while sparring with Henry. He is incredibly fast, and his swordsmanship is sharp and beautiful.

He tells me to get on my knees and beg, saying that he will spare my life if I do so.

I do it. I don't believe him, but I kneel down and even touch the ground with my forehead.

Dignity? Isn't survival more important? It won't cost me anything to bow down to him. Sure, it annoys me a lot, but for me, it's easy to do.

He laughs and even throws me some sweets he was eating.

I eat them as he orders me to. They aren't as sweet as those from the earth, and there's some dirt on them.

Then he says he changed his mind, and I will die at the end of the week.

I watch him leave while mana continues to flow. Once again, he wasn't able to feel me using mana inside my body.

I remember him stating that we are similar, and I can't help but chuckle a bit.

You're unaware of what makes me, me.

The next day, he doesn't join to watch my training, and the guards and servants seem to be confused.

I am still forced to exercise to the point I almost pass out from exhaustion.

The day after that, the servants seem even more unsure. They start searching inside the manor and in the surrounding area, and there's a flow of people coming in and out of the manor.

They don't train me anymore, so I spend most of the time locked inside my tiny room, practicing.

They're not giving me any food, but I enjoy the peace in my room.

On the third day after his disappearance, a tall woman comes to the manor, and I'm called out of my room. When I join her, I try to check her level, but I don't see anything. There isn't even text above her head.

She appears to be 60 or more years old. Her hair is gray, and her face has wrinkles, yet she exudes an atmosphere of absolute confidence.

She's wearing a black suit that seems more suited for a male, and it only highlights her tall and slim figure.

"I've bought you," she says simply. "If you lie to me, you will die," she says just as simply, and I believe every word she says.

"Did you kill Emeric Hawthorne?"

"Yes."

Chapter 69: A Life Bought and Sold

She keeps staring at me as we sit alone in the room with only her attendant nearby. Then she turns away, and to my surprise, I am still alive.

"Why did you do it?"

"He wanted to kill me."

She pauses once more and doesn't ask more about that, as if my answer explains everything.

"Do you regret it?" There is a hint of curiosity in her voice.

I open my mouth, about to lie, but then stop myself just in time, remembering her warning. I still believe that I have no other choice, so I answer honestly.

"No."

She nods, "I see."

Is she not going to ask me how I did it?

"Why didn't you run away?"

"I thought I would get caught, and staying here would be much less suspicious. I also tried to cover it as much as possible."

She leans back on the couch with one of her legs crossed over the other and still looking at me, curiously. There is some mana at the top of her hands spinning wildly, but I do not dare to try to probe it to see what she does.

"What will you do if I try to kill you?"

Try? Don't be funny. There is no way it would be trying. I will die the moment you decide to do so. Still, I answer honestly.

"I will try to kill you too."

A small laugh escapes her mouth, and her attendant, a young redhead woman, seems to be shocked.

"What do you regret more, killing Emeric or getting caught?"

"Getting caught."

"No regrets for taking his life?"

"The moment he said he would kill me, there was none."

Mana in her hand spins faster and faster, and I realize that it's something like a fidget toy for her, maybe also an exercise. The mana continues to spin, then it stops, changes density, creates shapes, and disappears only to be summoned back. All at a terrifying speed, showing her mastery over it.

"You can ask one question."

Huh?

That makes me lose control of my mana for a second, but I quickly regain control and continue to move it in my body, ready to at least try to fight back. I am sure she knows about it. There is no way she doesn't.

Yet she looks totally unbothered by it. Is she finding that funny?

"What do I need to do to stay alive?"

"Good question. If you asked anything else, I would kill you." There isn't a single hesitation in her voice, and I am sure she would do just that. "I paid 100 gold for you. How can you pay me back?"

Is she messing with me? Why did you tell me to ask a question when you aren't even answering it? What can I even pay her back with? How much is it even worth? A lot? Not that much?

"I don't know what I can do for you, but I am good at fighting and have some talent with mana," I say slowly after a bit of consideration.

Her eyes are piercing me, and she finally stands up. Mana around her hand disappears.

She is slightly taller than me, looking to be 60 years old. Gray hair tied in a ponytail and neat black clothes remind me of a man's suit without a jacket. Only her shirt is gray. It makes her seem even slimmer and taller. She moves the way a trained warrior would. Every move seems sharp and dangerous, yet confident and slow. It's hard to explain.

"That's another reason why you are alive." She steps closer, and I realize that I'm immobilized, unable to move even a single finger. My eyes cease blinking. My lungs don't draw breath, my heart refuses to beat, and even the flow of my blood and mana comes to a standstill.

I can only stare as she stops in front of me and gently pokes my forehead with her finger. Her mana enters my body with the force of a tsunami and totally destroys my defenses. Then I feel it squeezing my mana heart and doing something with it.

She leans in closer, her eyes unwavering. I can see the glimmer of curiosity in them, mingling with a hint of amusement. The mana around her forms intricate patterns, almost beautiful if it weren't so terrifying. The blunt truth hits me and I realize that just like that, my life is likely reduced to a mere source of amusement for this woman. This realization is chilling, but I have to focus on survival so I swallow hard, forcing myself to maintain eye contact, showing her I'm not easily scared.

Immediately after that, it stops, and I can move again.

I drop to my knees, taking a breath in and shaking as I look at her. With great effort I control my mana and force myself into [Focus]

"There is something weird about you and other drifters," she looks down at me and then turns to her attendant. "Take care of him for now." When she is about to leave the room, she turns back to me for a second. "It's an interesting thing you have on your brain. Rudimentary, but interesting."

Then she leaves and her attendee finally moves.

"Oh man, that was the first time in months I saw her laugh out loud. It really shocked me, you know," the redhead woman helps me stand up.

[Phase Warden - lvl ??]

Unlike her master, she is smiling brightly now that the monster of a human being has left.

"Listen, how did you kill Emeric? I saw your papers, and you are what? Level 24? I think Emeric was close to 100 or something like that? Did you kill him in his sleep? What did you do with his body?"

Do I have to answer that? Can I lie now?

"You know, he was a distant family member of the master." She flashes me another bright smile, not even waiting for me to answer.

Ah, I see. She's one of those types - an extrovert. The sort who relishes in the sound of her own voice.

My worst enemy.

"By the way, drifters are really expensive, right? 100 gold is a looooot of money." Her tone is weird as if she is telling some joke only she understands. Then she pulls me towards the door while chirping away.

I slowly regain my calm now that I am getting my mana back under control, and it doesn't seem that I will die right away.

"Oh, but don't worry, we didn't tell anyone that you killed him. It's not like they would believe that anyway, and it seems like you did a good job with covering it."

We pass by a pigpen, and I look towards it for a second before looking back at the terrifying woman's attendant. She still continues to talk.

Actually, isn't she more scary than the woman from before?

I slowly feel my energy drain away as I am forced to listen, in case she says something important.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Oh, finally you talk. Sure, go ahead! But I won't answer most of them anyway."

Why would you... whatever.

"Why am I still alive?"

"I will answer this one because you look so pitiful," She giggles. "It's most likely because you are interesting and the master found it amusing. She won't show it, but she is super bored all the time and rarely something catches her interest. That's why!"

Huh? Is that a good enough reason to glance over the murder of your family member?

"Ask more!"

Please, leave me alone.

"How much is 100 gold?"

"I almost forgot, you are a drifter, so obviously you won't know! A level 50 soldier makes 1 gold a year! 1 gold is 100 silver, and one silver is 100 copper. Bread costs 1-3 copper. A glass of ale costs 2 to 4 coppers. Farmers make 15 silver a year? Something like that. So yeah, it's a lot of money."

Oh dang it.

"Why would they want to throw me to the frontlines if I am worth that much?"

Her laugh is the loudest I've heard from her up until now.

"Of course, you're not! Drifters are rare but not worth that much. The master is too busy to deal with little things, so I bought you instead of her! Henry sold you for 2 gold to the frontlines, and Emeric paid him 5 gold to let him take you 'under his wing'."

Then where did the 100 gold amount come from?

A strong suspicion hits me.

It can't be, right?

"The master is super rich and bad with money."

Oh no.

"I told her you would cost 100 gold!"

"..."

Yup, it's just as I thought.

"I actually paid only 8 gold for you!" Her smile is victorious and proud as she looks at me. "Oh, and it's expected for you to pay double. 100 for the money she spent and 100 more for her to have a return on investment."

She is totally shameless as she says this.

For heaven's sake.

Help.

Chapter 70: Ruby

The redhead woman's name is Ruby, or at least that's what she claims. The way she tells me makes me think it might be fake. There is a weird look on her face as she tells it to me. She doesn't tell me her master's name, nor does she tell me what will happen to me.

My suspicion is that it's because it's more fun this way.

Look, I understand it. I do. I would find it funny too if I were in her position. I would totally enjoy it.

But damn, it's annoying when it's happening to me.

"First floor, second floor, system," I say as I walk by her side, but she doesn't react at all. It's as if I didn't say anything or she didn't hear me.

Well, it seems like the system is good at censoring. It's not just based on censoring words, but also my intentions? It's probably as I thought back then. The system can read my mind.

Ruby doesn't even ask me where I came from, nor has anyone done that since we entered the second floor. Isn't that something people would be at least a little bit curious about? It's a whole different world.

Are they even human, or just something like NPCs?

If they are NPCs, they are done amazingly well. I've been here for a few days, and up until now, everyone has acted like a real human being.

Yet, I did gain experience for killing Emeric.

[You have defeated Windblade Duelist - lvl 101]

[Lvl 24 > Lvl 27]

[Mana Manipulation - Lvl 10 > Mana Manipulation - Lvl 11]

"Hey, I'm asking you something."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I refocus on Ruby.

"So, what happened to your hair? Your face is quite handsome, and you have pretty eyes; you just need to do something about your expression. But your choice of haircuts is terrible."

"It's Emeric's doing."

Hmm, maybe I should try playing on her sympathies? Slowly become the underdog in her eyes?

"Oh, is that another reason why you killed him?" she smiles.

Nevermind.

"Not really..." I try to continue and explain, but she changes the subject.

"What happened to your arm?" She moves closer and pokes the empty sleeve of my shirt. Her eyes are big and yellowish. Only now do I notice a pattern in her irises.

What is it?

"Answer my question." She moves even closer, and I can smell her perfume as she stares into my eyes.

She doesn't look more than twenty years old, and I just now notice that she is quite pretty.

I force a smile on my face, just a small one—enough to make my face look slightly friendlier.

"No," I say curtly in what I see as a bickering tone.

Let's try to become friendly with her.

Her eyes fill with surprise, and her smile changes from playful to dangerous.

Oh no.

Immediately I rush mana through my body and activate [Kinetic Redistribution] with both parts of my [Focus].

Then I feel pain in my chest, immediately followed by a sting in my jaw, and fall to my knees with my head spinning and barely maintaining consciousness.

Ruby looks down at me, still smiling.

Her hand turns into a blurry line, and I feel a hit on the side of my head. The world goes black.

Yes, it's my fault.

Only mine.

I miscalculated. I did something so foolish that even I am amazed by my own stupidity.

She seemed so playful, so easygoing. I thought I could start bickering with her as well, to become friendlier. To put her at ease and gain more information. Maybe even become friendly enough for her to take pity on me or hesitate when putting me in danger.

How was it? The risk was calculated, but damn, I'm bad at math. Exactly that.

Also, what the hell is with me getting knocked unconscious by all these jerks? I start to have a suspicion that it might be all my fault.

There's a massive blue bruise covering what seems like half of my chest, and I still have trouble chewing.

At least she was kind enough not to kill me, I guess.

The room I'm in is slightly bigger than the one I had in Emeric's mansion and is quite similar overall. Not bad, but nothing to talk about.

I was already informed that Lady Ruby would be calling for me in about an hour, so I spend it changing into my new clothes and practicing.

The material of the clothes is better than the ones I had before, and they even feel more comfortable on me.

It's a light brown shirt with long sleeves. One of the sleeves, obviously, just hangs along my body. The pants are black and nicely fitting. The shoes are simple—terribly uncomfortable compared to the ones from Earth and somehow even compared to walking around barefoot.

But what can I do?

I continue to move the mana inside my body. One part of my mind focuses on moving mana through my Mana Circuit and testing out Mana Flow. Another part continues to watch my heart.

I still have no idea what that person did to my heart, and it's frustrating.

However long I watch, I don't see anything suspicious, nor can I feel anything left behind.

The only foreign thing in my body is Sophie's construct, the one I can now destroy any time I want. Either by starving it out by letting one part of my focus cut it off and continue doing so for days or by using [Disruption].

For now, I continue to observe, trying to learn how to create something similar. I keep sending mana at it and watch it suck it off and power itself.

Oh boy, I hope I'm not strengthening it too much and digging a hole for myself.

Is this what you would call playing with fire?

Okay, let's be more careful.

I let one part of my [Focus] create a bubble around it and not let any of my mana pass through to it. That should slowly starve it out, but when I see it's about to "die," I can feed it a bit of mana so I can observe it longer.

In the worst case, I will go all in with [Disruption] boosted by [Mana Surge]. That should do it!

It's annoying to lose one part of my [Focus] for this, as I just acquired it, but I'd rather be careful.

And so what? I survived with one [Focus] up until now. I can do it a bit longer!

If someone doesn't kill me because of the look in my eyes, because I lied to them, or because I tried to make a joke.

Yup.

Easy.

The young redhead is sitting in a comfortable-looking armchair, watching me as I enter with her yellowish eyes.

The patterns she has in them make me curious, but I don't dare to examine them too deeply.

"On your knees," she says shortly, and I do as she says.

Unlike when Emeric ordered me to do so, she doesn't come off as ill-intentioned. Her demeanor feels more playful, yet serious. The best comparison I can draw is to a mom hitting her child's bottom when the child does something dangerous or foolish.

A smile slowly appears on her face.

"Now, I will tell you one thing," she pauses and pokes me with her heel a few times before pulling her leg back.

"Do not pretend anything while talking to me. You are free to act as grumpy as you want; you also don't have to talk until I tell you to do so. You can roll your eyes, sigh, complain, and ask as much as you want."

She stands up and squats in front of me, our eyes on a similar level.

"But do not dare to try to fake anything with me," she pokes my cheek with her finger, "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good," she says playfully and stands up, sitting back in her armchair.

"Now, do you want to say anything?"

"What's with your eyes?"

"Ehm?"

"You said I can act in a way that is honest to myself and ask if I want to, so what's with your eyes? The color is unusual, and there's a weird pattern in them. They don't seem too natural."

"You talk quite a lot when you want to."

"I don't like small talk and I dislike talking to more than one person at once or having multiple people around me. It's more comfortable this way."

"Ah, so you're like that," her eyes look at me as if examining me again, "Master is similar in this way." She crosses her legs and looks at me, as I'm still kneeling. "And back to my eyes, it's a secret," she winks.

That's a bummer.

Before I get a chance to ask anything else, she asks first.

"Your name is Nathaniel, right? Level 24 or a bit higher now, 7 or 8 gifts, and with a lot of points in mana," she pauses, "I think it's kind of dumb, but you do you, though. Can I call you Nat?"

"I would prefer if you didn't."

"Okay, so Nat it is."

I am not even surprised at this point.

"Why are you treating me like this and telling me to stay true to myself? You're stronger than me. I'm way below you."

"Hmm? It's more fun that way. And I hate fake people. Someone acting like an asshole is better than an asshole pretending to be nice."

Oh, I can understand that, but did I just get indirectly dissed?

"Can I get 92 gold from you, the ones you stole from your master?"

"No."

"Can I tell your master that you're scamming her?"

"Yes," her smile is bright and cheeky, and I feel shivers down my back.

Okay, totally let's not do that.

"What is your level?"

"Hey! That's quite rude!"

"I was told I'm an asshole."

She nods seriously but her eyes are smiling, "Not telling," she pauses, "now it's my turn. Why did you put so many points in mana?"

"Mana fascinates me."

She nods again, as though she understands.

"What did you do to make Emeric hate you?"

"He said he doesn't like the look in my eyes."

That makes her laugh out loud, and she covers her mouth with her hand while doing so. She seems like a child to me - a child with immense power. Playful, enjoying the little things. Still, I'm not sure if it's only a mask she put on.

"I can totally understand that. Your eyes are pretty, but you are... how to say it? There's something about your look that amuses and pisses me off at the same time," she gestures wildly as if trying to explain, "For someone weaker than you, you must seem scary and unapproachable. For your equal, you might look reliable and a bit emotionless, and for people that are stronger than you, it must look like you're looking down at them. Watching their steps and waiting for the right opportunity to step over them. As if they are just a footstep in your way and your goals are much bigger, even though they are currently so much stronger than you."

She pokes my chest.

"It's pretty funny and annoying at the same time, which makes it a blast to watch. People like you either get so strong nobody wants to mess with them, or they screw up so epically, so massively, that the gods will poop lightning and fart thunder while laughing their heads off."