

Hunter 87

Chapter 87: Dark Mana & Dark Tunnels

The darkness permeated his entire being as he sat in meditation. His regeneration was far higher than it had ever been before as the mana poured into him. Meanwhile, tendrils of dark mana spread throughout the hallway, making him look like some eldritch octopus with tiny arms.

Occasionally his entire body would turn into a shadowy ethereal figure for a few moments until it returned to being flesh and blood once more.

Three whole days had passed without Jake moving a single finger. The tendrils of dark mana were, however, more active than ever before. They wrapped themselves into different shapes and sizes as they reached further and further away from him.

Jake opened his eyes once more as he looked forward. Yes, he looked. The darkness that had blinded him now only seemed like a mist, slightly obscuring everything. At the same time, his sphere expanded back to its usual 30 meters, functioning nearly the same as outside the dungeon.

Everything had finally clicked as he began to comprehend the mana around him better. Unlike the mana he was used to, this mana was oppressive and consuming, far less accommodating to whoever or whatever resided within it.

Raising his hand, he tried gathering the mana into the shape of a ball. Strings of mana sprung up in his palm as they wrung around each other, forming his desired shape a few moments later. Throwing it at the wall, he smiled as the ball persisted even after losing contact with him. It did start fading, but it existed long enough to strike the wall and dissolve into a puff of smoke. Inspecting it further, he felt it had left a small mark, meaning it hadn't been entirely harmless.

While it was useless in combat, it did mark him passing a huge milestone. He had tried to imitate the Mana Bolt he remembered the casters making and had succeeded somewhat. Which had, in turn, helped prove his theory he could make things from mana even without a skill.

The fact that he could make dark mana wasn't to say that he couldn't make normal mana anymore. His mana was still innately the same pure mana; he had just found a way to change its affinity. And it wasn't like the transformation was seamless.

He had the tendrils of darkness active all the time because of the time-consuming process involved in changing the affinity of his mana. It wasn't as quickly done as just thinking about it. It was more akin to doing alchemy, where he had to change the energy's nature to either restore health or stamina.

Of course, there were differences, but his starting point had been that thought. And it appeared that by understanding the mana, he could better adapt his body and senses to it. Naturally, it also helped that the mana was passive, merely existing in the atmosphere.

It didn't have any intent baked into it, unlike what would happen if someone used a skill with dark mana. If, for example, someone made an area filled with dark mana like the dungeon Jake was in, it would still blind and affect him. It would be less than a few days ago, but it would still work.

As the mana was passive, it also meant that it didn't fight back when Jake tried to consume it to regenerate his mana pool faster. In fact, the dark mana was even more comfortable to absorb than the mana outside. His fastest regeneration had still been while he was in the Challenge Dungeon, though, and he was starting to suspect that it had something to do with the affinity of the atmospheric mana.

The mana in the sewers was made up nearly entirely of the dark-affinity, and whatever wasn't would quickly be consumed by it. Jake had observed the mana in his Alchemical Flame be consumed, as well as the light stones he tested out a few days prior.

It reminded him of what he had read and encountered during all his practice for alchemy. The reason why one had to use Purified Water while making potions was twofold. First of all, one purified it to eliminate any impurities, and second of all to remove whatever affinity the mana in the water held. Which, pretty much always meant removing any water mana within.

Water inherently holds water mana, and a fire had fire mana, and so on and so forth. This didn't mean all the mana in those objects was of that affinity, but some of it would often be. Most mana everywhere was still pure mana, and the mana in the air was ordinarily just pure affinity-less mana.

That the forest outside would hold mana other than just pure mana was just a logical conclusion. But it likely wasn't as pervasive as the dark mana and didn't have the nature of consuming light and other kinds of mana. But it did mean that if the mana weren't compatible with him, he wouldn't be able to absorb it, hence regenerating mana slower.

The mana outside was clearly less compatible with him than the mana in here. Luckily the vast majority was still pure making it only a slight annoyance in retrospect. If he had to guess, then he would say a lot of the mana outside was nature-affinity. It would make sense with him not able to use the Greatsword of Nature and the description he had gotten from the Nature Affinity skill.

Ultimately, this resulted in Jake concluding that he had the darkness-affinity. At least manipulating dark mana was something he could do.

Jake shook his head as he returned to the matter at hand and attached several strings of mana to the walls around him. By now, hundreds of strands of mana were flowing through the air, waving as if weightless.

He began walking down the central path as the strings stretched behind him. Every now and then, he placed one of his strings on the wall or floor. He didn't run as he still focused on maintaining his connection with the lines and feel for any changes.

After fifteen minutes, such a change occurred as one of his strings moved unexpectedly. He kept track of it as he felt it move around, suddenly appearing somewhere entirely else.

It had to be noted that the walls were solid. And when Jake said solid, he meant solid. Their thickness was more than his sphere, meaning they were at least 30 meters of solid material. In other words, dungeon-fuckery was going on – a subcategory of the almighty system-fuckery.

As he walked, he felt more and more strings move. It was the earliest ones he had placed, and it was almost like they were following him. Like the dungeon moved together with him as he moved. A suspicion that turned to all but confirmed as he continued moving forward.

When he briefly tried backtracking, the strings mana didn't move but stayed where they were. But this didn't mean he could just start walking back the way he came and end up at the entrance. He felt his strings mana not just move straight towards him but also shift slightly in height and verticality, which meant that the layout was shuffling behind him.

Did this mean that he could potentially randomly reach the exit by just wandering around? He doubted it, but he couldn't rule it out.

Along the way, he encountered several rats sitting about in the tunnel. They all fell quickly, as Jake didn't pay them much attention. He had no interest in prolonged fights, as it would only make it harder to maintain control of the mana.

He did, however, take note of one thing - the only thing that marked any real difference in the layout - the pipes. Jake peered into one with his sphere and found it continuing into the wall more than he could see. Jake stood in front of one for a while but decided to not climb in one just yet. Instead, he placed a string of mana on it as he continued onward.

Continuing onward, nothing more of interest happened until he finally felt a reaction from the string on the pipe. It suddenly started vibrating as he felt his string of mana snap as he lost connection to it.

It was as if the pipe had simply disappeared. It hadn't moved like the rest of the dungeon but simply ceased to be. Jake had an idea but decided to continue forward, and to no surprise, he found yet another pipe shortly after. This one didn't have any rats in it, a regular occurrence, but he felt something familiar.

A small vestige of his own mana was still on the pipe and had nearly been consumed by the all-encompassing dark mana around it. If it weren't because of him spending three days focusing solely on feeling his own mana, he would have missed it.

The pipe hadn't disappeared. It had moved instantly. Does this mean there's only a single pipe

? he asked himself as he stood before it.

He decided to finally just climb into the dumb pipe. It was small and dirty, and he quite frankly didn't want to, but it was the only thing that seemed to act differently than everything else. It had to be the key to continuing onwards.

Climbing into it, the first thing he noticed was the stench that seemed to be even worse within the pipe. The bottom of it was covered in a steady stream of water, with the entire thing being perfectly circular. It was difficult to move through as getting a grip on the sides was hard, and he could barely crawl on his hands and knees while within it.

But he soldiered on as he kept focus on his strings behind him. 10 meters in, and none of them had reacted, the same with 20 and 30 meters. When he was 40 meters in or so, something did happen, but not with the strings. In front of him, his sphere picked up a figure moving at him... fast.

Jake barely had time to summon his dagger before the rat reached him, mouth open and teeth aiming straight for his head.

He somehow managed to avoid it in the small enclosed space by lowering his head, smashing it into the water stream below. At the same time, he stabbed forward with his dagger at an awkward angle, hitting the rat in its shoulder, making it squeal in anger.

The blow seemed to do little more than making it angry as it snapped forward once more. However, it didn't miss as Jake felt its jaws close around his shoulder, and the teeth sink in deeper.

Relying on his instinct, he pushed a leg forward as he pushed himself upwards, pressing the beast into the top of the pipe, pinning it. Its mouth was still open and its teeth deep in his shoulder, resulting in the bite doing far more damage. But it did also mean that the beast was stuck.

Jake started stabbing the rat with the hand that wasn't hanging limp from the bite. It tried to retaliate with its claws, but they were too short and weak to land anything more than a few scratches.

He kept stabbing again and again until the notification appeared. He released the pressure on his leg as he collapsed to the side. The damn rat was still stuck in his shoulder, so he lifted it out, seeing the teeth slowly exit his deep wound.

Throwing the dead beast to the side, he winced in pain. Drinking a healing potion, he felt the calm energy enter his body as he felt his wound start healing.

He wanted to take a break badly, but he also knew it wouldn't be a good idea. If one rat could come through the pipe, who was to say there couldn't come more? In the enclosed space, he didn't even feel confident in escaping if he somehow got swarmed.

To make the situation even worse... his bow was longer than the pipe was broad. Meaning he couldn't use it in there even if he wanted to.

Climbing further, he kept notice of his strings as he moved forward as fast as he could. It was a bit hard with one of his arms still weak and healing, but he managed to suppress the pain. The damn rats also had some kind of magic imbued in their bites. It wasn't poison, but something else - Possibly a curse or some kind of dark mana spell. Either way, it was annoying but manageable.

Luckily, he wasn't attacked again before he saw the end of the pipe. He quickly exited it as he scanned the area he now found himself in.

It was identical to the sewer he had come from, but he knew there was a difference. His strings of mana were still attached on the other side of the pipe, which meant this new area wasn't merely a reshuffling of the old. It was somewhere new, which meant he had progressed.

I hate this fucking dungeon, Jake cursed as he began attaching even more strings of mana to the area around him.

Oh, how he wished this area wasn't just a damn repeat of the other one. Luckily, the wish came true after walking for a while as he noticed a change. On the ceiling ahead of him hung something. A beast with its claws imbedded deep into the stone.

Jake kept walking as if he hadn't noticed while he Identified it.

[Molerat Snatcher – lvl 71]

The level wasn't anything notable, and the aura it gave off wasn't any more substantial than any of the other rats. His shoulder still hurt, but against a single rat, he should be able to manage either way. He didn't feel like using his bow either, so he just went forward with his dagger.

As he got below the rat, it dropped down silently as it tried to bite his head off. Jake quickly reacted by raising his Venomfang, skewering the beast through its mouth.

It tried to bite down on him anyway, but he quickly stepped to the side and kicked it into the wall. A follow-up stab and repeated kicks kept the thing down until he managed to finish it off.

The rats were honestly just too weak. Jake would have to compare them to level 50 deer when it came to open combat. Of course, he had to commend their stealth skills, as he honestly would have never noticed them without his sphere.

Even with his sight partially restored, he still didn't see the rat. It was as if his mind didn't register it before his sphere picked it up. After he was aware of its presence, he could suddenly see it as if it been there all along. It likely possessed a powerful stealth skill.

And if its ambush failed, it was weak and quickly finished off.

Continuing onwards, he did find a few more Snatchers, but he didn't even bother using his melee weapons. With 30 meters between them, he could easily pick it off with his bow before it had any chance to do anything. It was easy, and it was boring.

At least another kind of beast spiced up the monotony a bit. He didn't see any new pipes even after nearly half an hour of walking. None of his strings had been moved either, which meant this part of the dungeon wasn't shuffling.

His strings still did help a lot, though, as they helped him understand the layout better. He felt like he walked straight, but he was slightly curving to the left as he walked through the long tunnel. Jake felt that he would end up curving back to where he started if he continued straight ahead, so he began correcting it by taking turns whenever possible and he felt like it made sense.

This did mean that he at least covered new ground. He did feel his first strings from beyond the pipe start snapping after a while, but it wasn't because anything had happened to him or them; he just wasn't able to maintain them due to the distance.

It wasn't a big deal as it only helped confirm to him that he was progressing. A confirmation that only got stronger as he spotted something else new ahead. A room. Yes, not just another damn tunnel. Instead, the tunnel opened up to reveal a new area.

Standing at the new area entrance, he had to revise his assessment of it being a room. It wasn't but was more akin to what had once been a water reservoir. Only a few centimeters of water remained at the bottom now, but it looked like it had once been a big basin.

At the moment, he stood at an overlooking platform with stone steps leading down into it and a path all along the wall to either side. He couldn't see the end of the room with both his eyes and sphere, which meant it was a relatively huge place.

As he moved another step forward, the tunnel behind him was cut off as a barrier of dark mana appeared. Jake turned back abruptly as he touched it. However, he was quickly interrupted as he started hearing sounds of loud clattering from the empty basin below.

Since entering the dungeon, his intuition had been annoyingly silent. He never got a feel which way was better or not, at least nothing he noticed. Yet now, it made itself known to tell him the most obvious thing:

This isn't good.