

Tutorial 101

Chapter 101: Dumb sometimes

Okay, first things first, there are a few upgrades I really like! Like, really really like.

Symbiotic Transference: Learn to transfer the stored energy directly into physical strength, endurance, or speed, increasing combat prowess.

That's some goddamn amazing options for [Redistribution].

Right now, I can absorb kinetic and thermal energy, but in the future? I could just end up standing in the middle of dozens of attacks, continuously boosting my body.

Isn't that goddamn cool?

And this one for [Perception] too, Mana Flow Analysis: Develops the capacity to identify nuanced patterns and rhythms in the movement of mana, offering deeper insight into how skills are invoked and controlled.

One of my biggest strengths is the ability to learn and nearly copy plenty of skills; this would take it to another level! Even helping me to improve my existing skills much faster.

I already have trouble deciding between these two skills.

As for [Disruption], most of the upgrades sound like something I should be able to learn on my own, hell even the other two skills have plenty of upgrades I can learn on my own.

Okay, onto the next ones!

[Armament]

Mana Materialization: Develop the skill to compact and solidify mana to a greater degree, increasing the durability and potency of the created armament.

Transient Armament: Master the skill to instantly form and de-form weapons and objects, adding an element of surprise and adaptability in combat scenarios.

Spectral Armament: Upgrades the armament skill to create semi-physical armaments that can phase through objects or attacks, adding a new layer of strategic options.

Intelligent Armament: An upgrade that enables armaments to possess a level of autonomous action, allowing them to react to changing circumstances in combat.

[Oscillation]

Oscillation Overdrive: Master the ability to overload your oscillation, creating a massive wave of force to overwhelm enemies.

Oscillation Intensity Control: Enhance your ability to control the intensity of oscillation, allowing you to vary the sharpness of your weapons as per the requirement.

Oscillation Ripple: Develop the ability to generate rippling oscillations, creating waves that propagate through objects or the environment.

Vibrational Shields: Develop the ability to generate a shield of oscillating mana, deflecting physical attacks by vibrating at ultra-high frequencies.

[Mana Surge]

Surge Amplification: Enhance your ability to generate larger, more potent surges of mana, increasing the power of your spells.

Surge Adaptation: Develop the skill to adapt your mana surges to different types of magic, providing versatility in casting.

Surge Sustainment: Learn to maintain a boosted mana circulation over longer periods, increasing the duration of enhanced skills.

Surge Resilience: Master your body's tolerance to high-speed mana circulation, reducing physical exhaustion and potential damage from a surge.

Oh my, Spectral Armament and Intelligent Armament look amazing. Especially the second one. It kinda reminds me of the way the sniper from the second floor used her mana arrows. Even now, I can imagine so many ways I could use these skills, yet I still wasn't able to replicate them.

[Oscillation] is kind of a disappointment, sure some uses are things I didn't think of that much but they again mostly sound like something I could develop on my own or even use right now with the help of [Mana Surge].

As for [Mana Surge], I like Surge Adaptation, as of now I wasn't able to use the surge for absorbed kinetic or thermal energy, the energy is somehow different from mana. That could also be a huge boost, especially if I improve the way I absorb my own kinetic energy from the orb stat I spin around myself.

Surge Sustainment could be good as well, with time and some learning it could almost work as a passive boost, but that's also something I believe I can reach on my own. Sure, it will take longer, but I will get there.

And Surge Resilience?

I am a man! I like to live dangerously.

Famous last words?

Totally.

Overall, I'm loving the upgrades, but I will need to think a bit more about them, just an hour or two to calm myself down as [Focus] isn't that good at dimming this kind of excitement.

"Hey, little brat."

I wake up Isabella, and she stands up with a quiet groan, sounding almost like an old man, "I want to sleep."

"We have to find your sister."

"Oh..."

"And the doggo."

"OH!"

"..."

Poor Sophie.

"So, how come you trust me so much?" I ask while moving over the roofs with Isabella in my arms.

"You feel safe!"

She is still just a child I guess, even though Sophie did something to her to make her better handle all this stuff. I do realize that for some people it might sound disgusting, but I think it was the right decision. Young kids aren't built for this.

"So, what did Sophie do to you?"

The little girl stops looking around with her big eyes, "She said she will make me forget some things and make me braver!"

I see.

"But she was so sad while doing so, but I trust her! Soph is kind of dumb, but she felt super serious while using her skill."

Hmm, that could mean Little Isabella has some skill that allows her to see through the intentions of people?

"You said I'm safe?"

"Yup! Soph always says to not get closer to you but Soph is dumb sometimes. You are totally safe. Even the doggo likes you."

Kids...

"So, what level is Sophie?" I get a good idea.

"I can't tell you." she giggles and hits the top of my head a few times with her small hand.

Damn, are all kids like this? Is it because of what Sophie did or is it because of her skill that tells her that I'm safe?

"I see." I force out a quiet laugh, "She must be weaker than me. There is no way she is level 30 like me!"

Huhu. Let's see now.

"She is strong!"

“Yes, yes, as if I would believe you.”

The little girl slaps the top of my head a few times and continues with a voice that sounds more cute than angry.

“Sophie is level 39! She is much stronger than you!”

Totally as planned! You are still far too young to not get tricked by Nathaniel Gwyn! Easy! No shame at all!

“Wow, she is so strong,” I add and Isabella continues to compliment her sister.

Still, she seems childish, are 10-year-old kids usually like that?

Unfortunately, I don't get more information from her and after a while I stop for a moment, looking around the city. We already moved for quite some time, yet I didn't see any monsters and not a single human or animal.

As for the [Floor Quest]

Floor quest: Put the saint to final rest.

Rewards:

Shop

Skill upgrade token

Rare graded gear of your choice

30 stat points

Well, I guess we are hired killers now? Still, the system is quite a joker sometimes, so I wouldn't be surprised if there is a surprise or two along the way.

And the rewards? The Shop is clearly the most interesting one. We already got a community so having a shop is interesting, does it mean we can sell stuff to other people? Buy from them? Will the System be selling us stuff?

Sounds quite fun.

I continue to think, to keep my mind busy as we move faster and faster. My mana easily able to handle all this expenditure.

"You are sad." the little girl says out of nowhere.

Am I sad? There is no chance, I didn't even like that granny monster, and as for Ruby, I knew her for what? A few weeks? There is no way I'm sad.

"It's okay, you can cry if you want, I won't tell anyone, not even Soph."

Silly girl, what are you even talking about?

"You are trying to forget so hard," she giggles, "old people are silly."

Oi, I am not even old.

"Even Soph tries to act so bravely. I love her, but she is so dumb sometimes." another giggle and she pats the top of my head, this time more gently.

"I cry too." she whispers as if telling a secret, "I remember crying when mom didn't allow me to pet the neighbor's huge dog..." the girl continues to chirp.

And I listen, I listen carefully, her silly chirping making me not think about useless stuff.

POV Kim Min-Jae

I dash upwards, making my body lighter with [Gravity Well] and then using [Telekinesis] on a small tower near me. As the tower is too heavy for me to pull I get pulled to it instead and quite fast because of my lighter weight.

I continue to do it over again, pulling myself towards the ground, roof, and wall of the house.

It's still not as fluid as I would like it to be but it feels amazing, almost as if I am flying, the trait I picked on the first floor finally showing some of its uses.

For a moment I stop on one of the roofs and look at the wound on my leg.

It's healing quite nicely, yet it's still bleeding a lot. A last gift from the Cinderbear we killed together while the world around us was ending. I still have the memories fresh in my mind.

The sky had that sunset-like glow, but it felt like it was about to drop on us. I remember the intense pressure, terrifying, and also my chest barely moving under all this pressure.

It was terrifying, easily something I can call the end of the world and all caused by a single man called Tristan and his [Dawn] as the red-headed woman said before the scary grandma killed her.

But before everything came to an end before we met our impending doom, something even stranger occurred. The second floor abruptly ended and the entrance to the third floor appeared. The entrance we immediately used to escape.

As for what happened afterward? We all got split.

I push open the door, stepping into a house that appears to be in considerably better shape than its neighbors. The stairs groan under my weight as I walk upstairs, eventually reaching another door. As I open it, my eyes fall upon an unconscious body, an arm missing, sprawled out on an old, dust-laden bed.

But why did I have to end up with her?

With the girl that killed my friend.

Chapter 102: Beneath the Child's Smile

"Okay, it's decided. I can't put off this any longer, and it's better to just pick the upgrade now than wait for who knows what.

Yes, Focus and Mana Manipulation might upgrade at level 30, knowing how much the system likes rounded numbers, but damn, these two skills just sound so nice.

Symbiotic Transference: Learn to transfer the stored energy directly into physical strength, endurance, or speed, increasing combat prowess.

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

But in the end, I go with Symbiotic Transference.

And while I clench my teeth against the pain, I think over my decision. It wasn't easy at all as my skill of learning other people's skills is one of my strongest points and it could even help me to improve my current ones.

Yet I think I made the right decision. With this upgrade, I should be able to ignore strength, constitution, and dexterity even more!

Yes, the reason is as silly as that. I won't need to waste my stat points and instead, I can absorb external attacks or kinetic energy from my orbs to boost the stats I need!

Hell, in the future when I learn to use [Redistribution] better and absorb more types of energy, it could become a nearly passive skill, making my body stronger the more the opponent attacks me.

Damn, it sounds cool as heck!

I excitedly test it for a bit and it's as I thought. Currently, I can only change kinetic energy to one of the stats, it's too hard to boost multiple stats at once. But that's fine, it would be too boring if it were so easy.

And yeah, Mana Flow Analysis is totally the next upgrade and heck, there better be something super, super good to make me change my mind and pick something else.

I check the community and write one sentence for the 10th time today, each having a 30-minute pause in between.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - StrongestOne, you have 5 seconds to answer.

Now, after checking the community for a bit, I'm sure that he ended up with Lily so he better not try some shit or he is done. I'm sure he knows it, but I better remind him.

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - I'm with Grumpy.

Finally, and as I thought.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - After a while, the buildings are in a better state, try heading that way.

Soph (Hell, group 4) - How is Isabella?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - We might all meet sooner or later if we all head the same way, towards what feels like middle of this city.

Soph (Hell, group 4) - Noname!

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4)

You better not try anything funny. I owe Lily too much. Having her die before I pay her back would feel way too sour.

Ciphermind (Hell, group 4) -Noname, we will meet you there too :) I'm curious about the skills of people from the hell difficulty, lol.

Frostfall (Hell, group 4) - lol, me too!

I ignore two of the three guys that got to our group from hard difficulty and send a short message to Sophie, telling her that her sister is safe. The little girl still refuses to join the community because some time ago Sophie told her not to do that.

Okay, time to check my beautiful status.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 3 - Saint's Eternal Bastion

Time left until forced return: 4y 274d 16h 31m 30s

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

Lvl 75

Strength: 20

Dexterity: 19

Constitution: 67

Mana: 229

[Primary Class: Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class: unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 28

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation

Perception - Lvl 22

Oscillation - Lvl 18

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 13

Armanent - Lvl 23

Mana Surge - Lvl 10

Disruption - Lvl 12

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

[Upgrade token: 1]

[Difficulty change token: 1]

Pretty good if I have to say so myself. Soon, I will need to create another construct to take care of my ever-growing mana as I already start feeling some push even though I invested so much in controlling it.

As for the Sub-class, I expected it to be unlocked the moment we entered the third floor, in a similar way the primary class was unlocked the moment we entered the second floor. But yes, it seems like the system has different plans.

Upgrade token? I already have plans for it, I just need to take care of a few things first.

As for the Difficulty change token, I already tried it and it seems like the only way to go is down to Hard difficulty. It doesn't allow me to go higher - as expected - and it also doesn't allow for normal or easy difficulties.

Oh, there is also a [Side Quest]

Side quest: Kill 100 enemies

Rewards:

Common gear of your choice

Food and water rations

This alone helps me to understand this floor a bit more. Up until now, I didn't find any flowing water, didn't see any animal. Just building after building stretching on forever. All of them are two stories tall, rarely some bigger ones.

As for gear, it kinda makes sense as we gained the ability to identify item rarities, so that would mean this floor will work more with them.

As for 100 enemies, does that mean that the enemies here are a bit weaker, just in bigger groups? That would be kind of logical.

Anyway, it's time to move.

"Wake up, brat," I poke Isabella and she wakes up, already complaining.

A bit longer and we finally find some signs of life. Corpses of few men. They are wearing leather armor and their bodies are mangled, torn, and pieces bitten off. Even though I tell the girl to stay away, she gets closer, not showing any reaction to the cruel sight in front of us.

I will have to check the thing Sophie put on her a bit closer.

I pick one of the weapons of one of the men, that was left behind, the enemy not caring enough to take them.

Crude Iron Mace (Common): This mace exhibits rough and hasty craftsmanship. Fashioned from crude iron, its head bears uneven edges and a lack of refinement. The wooden handle is worn and splintered, showing signs of neglect and subpar construction.

The remaining gear is mostly the same and I leave them behind.

A minute later, we find what killed the group of men. We spot a group of 20 or so rats the size of small dogs.

[Rottenfang Vermin - lvl 39]

Most of them are around this level and most of them look sick and diseased. Some have big wounds, some are missing limbs.

"Ewww," the little girl says what I am thinking.

Not having any wind to absorb, I make three orbs of mana and spin them around myself and after a while, I absorb their energy. After moving closer, I change it, and a vibrant dark yellow flame comes into existence, created from a point in front of me.

Keeping it alive by creating more orbs and absorbing more energy, I burn the entire group.

[You have defeated a Rottenfang Vermin - lvl 36]

[You have defeated a Rottenfang Vermin- lvl 38]

[You have defeated a Rottenfang Vermin - lvl 34]

"My flames are better," the cheeky little girl complains.

Pff, as if! Just wait, give me a month or two, you little brat! I'm sure that you have some fire skill, but I am a master of doing things the junky way.

My poor man's flamethrower shall win in the end!

More rats come our way and this time I absorb thermal energy from my fire that set on fire a building close by, making the yellow flame disappear, and then use the energy to boost my mana orbs, obliterating the rats.

All while holding a kid in my arms!

Easy.

We start moving again and I ask a thing I was a bit curious about.

"So, you said that I am safe, right?"

"Yup," the girl continues to pull on my shirt, bored of being just carried around, but I learned to ignore it.

Her answers might help me to understand her skill better.

"Is Sophie safe too?"

"Sophie is the safest! Even if she is super sad and trying to hide it, she is safe! Soph is..."

"...is really stupid sometimes," I finish up.

The girl giggles and nods.

She still refuses my offers to remove Sophie's construct or whatever it is from her brain but I still don't know if it's because of how Sophie set it up or because of the girl's decision.

It makes me curious. I couldn't imagine letting someone mess with my mind even if it was my closest family or a friend. The problem might be on my side but at the same time, it might be a little girl who is weird.

"But you still attacked me the moment I appeared near you, even though you said I'm safe?"

"Sorry for that! I was a bit nervous, a few bad guys attacked me before."

That makes me stagger and I stop, looking at the girl in my arms.

"They appeared out of nowhere and were super scary. They told me to come with them."

I already know where it's going.

"But Sophie told me to never leave with strangers!"

I don't know what to say.

"So I burned them!" she smiles while saying so "And only then did you appear."

There is not even a hint of regret as she says so.

A ten-year-old girl says it in a similar way to how she talked about the cute dog she met a few weeks ago.

Chapter 103: Desolate Remnants

The city is massive. It reminds me of a medieval-age set up with wood and stones used as the primary building materials. The insides of the buildings all seem as if someone left them in a hurry, with years or

months-old food on the tables. Layers and layers of dust cover everything, the floor is creaking under our steps, a result of the weather that got in through open doors or windows.

There are some entire streets that are totally destroyed, either by something resembling an explosion or by fire.

And the city just continues to stretch on and on, seemingly forever. With barely any signs of life, only diseased rats with bodies covered in pus and riddled with holes that nearly allow you to see through them.

There is no water and it doesn't seem that it is going to rain soon. So yes, the side quest seems to be the best way to get some food or water.

I watch as Isabella's flames burn another group of rats with ease. The main reason I let her fight is to observe her skill and allow her to gain rewards from side quests as well; she got the same one.

"They smell," she complains, and I can't help but agree.

While her flames dwindle, I wonder, why hasn't the city burned down yet? The buildings are fairly close together and the roofs seem pretty flammable. One would think that it would be super easy to set such a city on fire now that we don't see anyone stop the flames.

Yet, somehow, the flames flicker out from existence after a while, either a work of the system or something else.

"Who were the men that wanted to take you away?"

The girl just shrugs her shoulders and, even after further questioning, I'm not sure if they were from this floor or some people from a different difficulty.

While she continues to burn the vermin, I also think about my new construct, already preparing its base in my mind. Given a little bit of time, I'm sure I will be able to finish preparing something nice. Just in

time to take care of my once again complaining mana and its effect on my comparatively low constitution.

With how I go about things, I'm sure I will continue to have the same problem.

I pause my thoughts when my [Perception] catches a stronger monster.

"Move behind me," I say and the little girl listens, also preparing some mana.

With her standing so close to me I can't spin orbs around my body, so I make them spin a bit higher, around my head, ready to turn their energy into any form I might need.

The monster reveals itself, a misshapen figure shambling out of the shadows of the alley. It is tall and has slender, elongated limbs culminating into grotesque, clawed hands. Its flesh seems to ripple with a sickly, pulsing aura of raw mana. The glow of green light in its eyes gives off an almost tangible power.

It's repulsive, the sight of it makes my stomach churn. But it's strong. It's going to be a tough fight, I can tell, clearly tell. A "named" monster.

[Alghoul - lvl 89]

Feeling something, the girl quickly jumps backward and moves as far away as she can, focusing more mana around her body, ready to defend herself. Sophie taught her right.

With stunning speed, the monster jumps straight towards the roof we are on, silently, but with its eyes glowing even more.

Armor forms around my body and I absorb energy from one of the orbs, using it to propel myself towards the monster, destroying half of the rooftop in the process by using it as a launching pad.

The monster and I meet in the air, our bodies colliding.

I'm filled with an unnatural strength borrowed from the monster and further enhanced by my own mana, my construct, and the recent upgrade to my [Redistribution].

Another orb stops, quickly replaced by one that starts spinning, and yellow flames come into existence around my armor, burning the monster.

In response, sickly green flames surround the Alghoul that instantly start melting the armor around my body. There is no heat to them and they seem to only burn the mana.

A cone of kinetic energy fires and pushes the monster away from me, finally both of us landing on the ground and dashing at each other again.

Changing strategy, I let one [Focus] continue to spin and sling orbs at the Alghoul while another part of my mind continues to absorb energy from an orb once in a while, turning it into more speed.

A sword made of mana slashes against the monster, only to be met by flames that melt it.

[Disruption]

More orbs come into existence around my body and start spinning faster, boosted by a surge. My body starts heating up and a distant ringing sounds in my head as I [Focus] more, giving it my all.

[Oscillation] coats my blade, yet when I cut off the monster's hand it gets restored in a blaze of green flames. I'm forced to jump back, boosting my body with Symbiotic Transference. I'm getting more and more used to it.

The monster's flame shoots at me but now that they left its body, I'm able to disrupt them and they vanish from existence.

In response, my dark yellow flames appear, glowing beautifully as they roar through the air in a cone as thin as my arm, following the quickly moving monster and burning our surroundings. I absorb kinetic energy from more and more orbs, continuously creating new ones and spinning them around me at a speed that makes a loud whistling noise.

I continuously shoot the flames at the alghoul, tracking him better and better, reading his movement, and improving my use of thermal energy.

Finally, the monster dashes right at me straight through the flames, using its own green ones to fight against them.

I widen the cone, making the cone of flames much bigger and weaker to blind the monster while watching its movement with my [Perception].

When I feel it's close, I cancel the flames and my full mind goes into focusing on using absorbed energy to speed up my body and coat the sword in my hands in oscillating mana. With a speed that makes my body scream from pain and nearly tears some tendons, I slash against the monster multiple times in a split second.

I cut off its head, I split its chest, I cut off the limbs, and then cut its falling head again.

Then, while the monster is falling to the ground, I let go of the sword and [Disruption] at full power, boosted by the surge, that encompasses the area, finally stopping the monster from regenerating.

For a few more seconds, I continuously boost and use the skill, straining my brain to the point it makes me feel lightheaded, and then finally the monster dies.

[You have defeated the Alghoul - lvl 89]

[Lvl 75 > Lvl 76]

[Redistribution - lvl 13 > Redistribution - lvl 14]

[Disruption - lvl 12 > Disruption - lvl 13]

On the edge of my perception, I catch two more signatures moving at incredible speeds and a few moments later I identify them as monsters of similar strength to the ghoul I just killed.

I'm tired, my body hurts and I still feel lightheaded, yet... I burrow my feet into the ground, making orbs made of mana spin around me, this time I make them as big as baseballs, anchoring them to my body and making them spin around me. I add more and more of them until there are a dozen spinning, straining my [Focus].

The world loses even more of its colors, becoming quieter, making me only hear the now quiet sound of whistling orbs and see the glow of my mana.

Finally, after a long while, I feel like a challenge is in front of me, missing this sense of danger that sharpens my thoughts, makes me forget all useless stuff, and just lets me move my body, my mana. I bounce on my feet a few times and shake off some tension from my body while continuously watching two signatures that move straight towards me.

Three orbs slow down, quickly replaced by two more.

Yet, there isn't even a dent in my mana reserves.

Three more orbs lose their kinetic energy and I feel my body creak under the strain of all the energy I've absorbed, ready to redistribute it.

Finally, two monsters appear. One on the roof and the second one on the ground. Both are ugly, diseased-looking, covered in open wounds, and sickly. Yet their mana feels dangerous as it dances inside their bodies and on their skin.

[Gutter Gargoyle - lvl 86]

[Rampart Revenant - lvl 91]

Both of them are easily identifiable as named ones.

At last, my excitement begins to surge. My heart throbs with audible beats, my muscles tighten, and my mind becomes more focused.

I shape all the accumulated energy I possess, condensing it into a slender cone of thermal energy, which I then launch towards the monster on the ground. The cone narrows progressively, transforming into a brilliant column of thermal energy. It strikes the distant monster, several buildings away, in an instant, resembling an arm-thick laser more than a flame.

Chapter 104: Dusty Triumph

My thermal attack hits the revenant, burning its arm and completely stripping it of flesh, revealing the bones. The monster, covered in ancient-looking armor, jumps away, emitting creepy noises. The wound I've inflicted appears to be bubbling; the flesh pulsates and some liquid keeps leaking out. Yet the wound doesn't regenerate, most likely the monster is unable to.

It dodges my orbs that deal massive damage to the building behind the monster.

But I'm already close, my body boosted by my new skill upgrade, all focused on speed. My sword, coated in vibrating mana, slashes across the monster's body.

I absorb the kinetic energy of its counterattack and propel myself away, a gargoyle crashing where I used to be. Two monsters collide, letting out creepy noises, and even slashing against each other.

In that moment of confusion, another thermal attack, similar to a flamethrower, hits the monsters, and I maneuver it, making deep burns into their bodies with strongly concentrated thermal energy.

The world becomes so quiet, so unmoving as I enter an even deeper state of [Focus].

Feeling mana behind, I move to the side, just in time to avoid the revenant's attack.

Still, a shockwave or something similar hits me with terrifying power and I am sent crashing into the side of one of the houses, barely able in time to absorb some energy and convert it to make my body stronger, under my [Armament].

Another invisible attack crashes against me, sending me deeper inside the house and I taste blood in my mouth; I have a broken rib.

Even in the state I'm in, I continue to track Isabella and the monsters, and fortunately, both are focused on me.

The roof crashes and pieces of wood and stone slow down to a crawl as I absorb their energy, along with some from the gargoyle that crashes through it.

Two orbs turn into a shield and block some power of the attack while I shoot a flame against the revenant that dashes at me.

Again, I am sent flying by an invisible attack that is clearly magical, yet I'm unable to grasp it. Two orbs sling towards the revenant, dealing some damage and reading where it looks, I propel myself to the side and the floor where I stood explodes into a crater.

Another thermal attack burns into the revenant's head, melting off half of it, yet the monster seems like it didn't notice and dashes at me at the same time the gargoyle does.

[Redistribution], boosted by the surge, comes into existence and both monsters slow down while I convert absorbed energy into speed, rushing at them with a sword covered in oscillating mana.

The revenant loses its head and I cut apart its chest.

[You have defeated the Rampart Revenant - lvl 91]

Then the gargoyle grabs my arm with surprising power and speed, the tattoos glowing on its body. My arm immediately breaks, like a twig, and pain washes over me. I'm unable to move while the gargoyle prepares to hit me.

Letting my mana loose and absorbing energy from the remaining orb, I convert it into kinetic energy and explode a third of the monster's head while I start feeling lightheaded, my ears ringing.

My hand coated in [Oscillation] burrows itself deep into the monster's head and I scramble its brain.

With a last-ditch effort, the monster lets go of my arm to attack again, still somehow able to move, yet I do not stop. I push more and more mana into the monster's head and quickly, the head disappears, devoured by wildly oscillating mana.

Finally, the body falls to the ground.

[You have defeated the Gutter Gargoyle- lvl 86]

[Lvl 76 > Lvl 77]

[Oscillation - lvl 18 > Oscillation - lvl 19]

I look at my left arm that is hanging along my body and sigh. At this point, I think it's personal. I've even stopped counting how many times I've had this arm broken or blown off.

It will heal, obviously, but... damn it.

Also, thanks to Mr. Focus for letting me, well, focus on important things, pushing the pain I felt slightly to the back of my mind.

I would prefer if [Focus] would totally turn it off, but I guess it's something it doesn't want to do. Also, it's not like it's lessening the pain, no no. It's only making it easier... well, to focus.

Moreover, I did hear a bit more notifications, so what was it... oh, a new [Side quest]!

Side quest: Reach level 100

Reward: Body upgrade

Oh, isn't that interesting? I'm curious... eh? What is this sound?

I hear a cracking sound, and the house falls on my head.

Damn, I would laugh so hard if it didn't happen to me.

Barely having time, I managed to convert some energy into endurance and fortify the armor around my body. Now, laying crumbled beneath the rubble of what once was a house, I exert all my strength to push against the debris. But it's too heavy; it shifts just slightly. Layers upon layers of wood and stone weigh heavily upon me.

Okay, I agree, this is funny as heck, but my tendency to get distracted by some stuff and only track mana in my surroundings is getting pretty dangerous.

Let this be a good lesson for me.

Taking a hint from one of the options I got as a skill upgrade, I release a massive amount of mana into my surroundings, keeping it connected to me. Then I make it vibrate, adding [Oscillation] to the effect.

The mana over me starts cutting into the debris, turning it into smaller pieces.

The effect is minimal and barely helps but I push even through that, taking it as an opportunity to practice.

I release more and more mana, even boosting it with surge and the layers of vibrating mana over me turn more debris into smaller pieces and that makes some bigger pieces of the house move, giving me a chance to absorb their energy and then shoot it against the debris, also making more pieces move.

I repeat the process until finally, a bigger explosion of kinetic energy pushes enough pieces away and with my strength, I get rid of the remaining ones, finally standing up.

Easy!

Then, while dusting myself off, I ignore the quiet laugh of a small girl.

More dead decaying rats later, I finally complete the side quest:

Side quest: Kill 100 enemies

A small, almost tiny bottle of water appears next to me along with a bit of food that reminds me of dried jerky. It's not even enough to be called a snack. Well, isn't that generous from the system?

Congratulations, you have completed the side quest. You can now pick one of the following gear:

bag (Common)

warm clothes (Common)

light armor (Common)

wooden shield (Common)

firestarter (Common)

spear (Common)

emberstone (Common)

air purifier (Common)

...

And it just goes on, around 100 items available to pick, all of them in Common rarity. There is no food, there is no water.

Also, I really don't like that there are so many items that could be used to keep people warm. I take it as a warning that some parts of the day or some parts of the city might be cold.

In the end, I pick one and immediately check it through the system.

Air Purifier (Common) A small, green mana stone. Infuse with mana to cleanse the surrounding air. Effectiveness depends on mana input. Ideal for purifying toxic environments.

Interesting, isn't it? I got to learn a bit more about mana stones, they start to seem more and more useful and even back on the second floor, I saw so many uses they could be put into.

As for my decision? I still think that the offered items are items that could be useful for this floor. As for keeping myself warm, my body, even as I do not put as many points into my constitution, is strengthened and able to endure some cold. If we were on Earth, I'm sure I could ignore the coldest weather other than the most extreme one.

Purifying the air might be useful, even the monsters we fought up until now show that. All of them are decaying, close to being called undead, and nearly rotted.

The problem will be food and water. Yes, I'm sure with my strengthened body, I can endure for plenty of days of not eating, not drinking, and not sleeping, even with my increased required consumption of calories as my body strengthens.

So, a few days are okay, but the first floor took 1 month, and the second took two months, so maybe the third one will take three? Maybe longer?

So yeah, it seems like food and water will be a real problem and options like eating the monsters might be a terrible idea as eating them might cause more harm than it's worth, seeing how decayed they are.

"Isabella, try to save your water," I say as I turn to the girl and she nods and immediately puts both of her hands behind her back.

I don't even have to check to know that she already drank all of her water.

Biscuit, god damn it.

Oh, a force of habit.

As for the new side quest?

Side quest: Kill 200 enemies

Rewards:

Common gear of your choice

Food and water rations

Well, if the requirements to finish the quest will grow the way they do now, things will become... interesting.

Chapter 105: Fragments of Lost Memories

Easy difficulty: 1368/2000

Normal difficulty: 903/1000

Hard Difficulty: 293/500

Hell difficulty:54/250

Community tournament (currently unavailable)

The community's numbers look like this.

Even Hell difficulty gained some new people, although some of them died. Looking at it, around 200 people moved from easy to normal, around 60 from normal to hard, and around 10 from hard to hell.

Our group gained 3, and they seem to be pretty active in the community. To my taste, they seem to be too confident and cocky, making fun of Hell Difficulty and saying that they are the strongest ones from Hard Difficulty, not even understanding why they didn't get here instead of Hard.

But hey, you do you. If you do not bother me, feel free to do whatever makes you happy.

I sent one more message to the others. I describe to Tess and Sophie where I am, even though the city barely has any points to use as landmarks.

And I also made sure that Kim and Lily are safe before turning it off.

Now when I think about it, Sophie is with Tess and Dennis, so should I be worried about Tess getting under control of Sophie?

Pff, as if. Knowing Tess, I would be more worried about her making a harem out of Maya and Sophie. That girl is scary; it's almost funny that she asked me for help back on the first floor.

"I'm hungry," I hear a quiet voice next to me.

"Hello Hungry, I'm Nathaniel."

The girl didn't understand and only looks at me, slowly blinking.

I'm not appreciated here at all.

Now I'm hungry too and already regret poking fun at the little girl. Sure, I can handle it easily for more days but it's kind of annoying to walk around with an empty stomach.

One of my best characteristics is that I become grumpy when I'm hungry. Yup, I said the best.

Anyway, even hours later we continue to be in the same city. Just in case, I did leave a few marks here and there and it doesn't seem that we are moving in circles - hopefully.

The city is vast and no matter how many times I propel myself high into the sky, I can see no end to it, but hey, at least it makes the little girl laugh and scream with excitement.

And no, I won't do it again, the view is not even that good.

Nope, I don't know where the doggo is.

No, I don't know if he would like you.

I'm hungry too, but hold on there, a few more monsters and another reward will be here.

Yes, it's getting colder and darker.

I don't know where Sophie is. Shouldn't you be asking it a bit sooner? Maybe before asking where the doggo is?

But yes, the cloudy sky that didn't change until now is getting darker and darker and with it the air becomes colder too, making me feel it even with my strengthened body.

After finishing off more rats that are in massive numbers nearby, both of us level up and I make her pick warm clothes.

Warm Clothes (Common): A bundle of basic yet durable clothing designed for cold weather. Provides protection against cold weather but possesses no enchantments or special abilities.

Right now the usefulness of identification is questionable but it's something nice to have.

The clothes are simple but fit our figures, and I sent Isabella to one of the better-looking houses' rooms so she could change.

Surprisingly, they alleviate some of the cold and we continue to move, feeling the cold air on our faces as I move over the rooftops, orbs continuously spinning around me.

Oh, and our rations are already gone, and for a new side quest?

Side quest: Kill 300 enemies

The reward is the same

But there is one thing that makes me hopeful that I'll be able to meet others. Slowly, bit by bit, the houses start looking of higher quality builds. There is some glass here and there. More stones are used, and the roofs seem nice too.

Yes, it's all still ruined and decaying but there is some change to it so I continue to run that way, having told others to do the same.

While sitting on the floor of one of the better-looking houses, I stare at the fire that crackles in the fireplace nearby.

The weather outside is not nice at all. Mist, a strong and cold wind continues to hit the windows of the house and make it shake slightly, creating noises through it all.

And in all of that, we sit in a small dusty but otherwise somewhat nice room, watching the flames flicker on the wooden floor and furniture that we threw in there.

Bard (Hell, IDK) -No, no one from our group met Lissandra or Ruby. We saw a Phase Warded redhead once, but she quickly lost interest after talking with us once. I think she introduced herself as Petra.

With that, it makes all the people from Hell difficult. No one has met Lissandra or didn't catch her interest at all.

There is also one interesting thing.

For all groups, the end of the world was the skill called [Dawn] used by Tristan who was taken over by the mind mage emperor and forced to sacrifice his life to power his skill with "Sword of Aeons", dying after an hour or two.

In that hour or two, he wiped out most of the people living on the last livable continent of the world we were on.

Yes, it's something that can be considered the end of the world and it seems like getting entangled with Lissandra did change stuff a little bit. What she did I'm sure was much stronger than [Dawn] even if it was powered by the strongest mana capacitor in the world.

The woman prepared everything, she absorbed all the mana she could, and she turned her own body, her own mind into a construct or something resembling it. It was all a beautiful show of strong will and resolution. It's something I wouldn't be able to do.

Even if I found out that I'm fake, I would continue to fight for my life. I'm sure of that.

Yet I can't help but admire the woman, even when she killed Ruby because of her twisted logic. In the end, I feel only pity but also mockery of myself. They are only something like NPCs, and I'm here feeling... feeling something over their death.

Wouldn't it be more logical just to go on a killing spree, trying to level up as much as I can?

They are fake, aren't they?

"I'm hungry," I hear again, but this time I give her the food I was saving for later. The little girl instantly noms on it while looking at me with a smile on her face.

"Thank you!"

Yes, yes, also now I'm worried about putting you together with Biscuit. Seeing how you act now and knowing that suspiciously smart dog, I'm sure he would have a bad influence on you.

"Do you think Soph is pretty?" An atomic bomb of a question comes flying, and for a moment I can only stare at the girl.

"Ehm? What?"

"Yeah, I think shorter hair did fit her better," she continues.

What are you even going on about?

"Do you not remember me or Soph at all? Soph going to the same gym as you all the time, and long ago you even met me here waiting for her and you taught me to use the water dispenser thingy.

I can't remember at all.

The girl disappointedly shakes her head while I think over it. I do realize that I tend not to care about people or useless stuff, quickly forgetting them, but I should remember at least a bit of it. I also didn't remember Damon.

What comes to mind is that Sophie, while putting a construct on me, deleted some of my memories, probably not even knowing and by mistake.

As I think about it, cold sweat runs down my back, having nothing to do with the weather outside and the strong rain that runs along the streets.

There is one scary question that stays on my mind.

How much did she delete by messing with my mind? What did she take from me?

"You feel scary," Isabella's voice is quiet and pitiful as she says so, and I force myself to calm down while clenching my teeth.

I remember my mom and I remember my sister, these are the most important. I also remember my father but he's long dead, and I'm happy that it is that way.

Everything else doesn't matter that much.

I open the community and type.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Sset, how many family members or friends do I have? Or people that are important to me?

I'm sure she would know at least something and thankfully she is there.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -You have a mom and a sister, and I think they are both really important to you. No friend I can think of, no pet, no other family you are close to.

Slowly my beating heart calms down and murderous thoughts that flash through my mind calm down.

I do realize that I might be missing some important memories, I do realize that. But at least somewhat I trust Tess, and what she says is the same as what my current memories are.

I breathe out, noticing that my breath is shaking.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Thank you.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -No problem, hang in there.

When the community turns off, I look back at the little girl that continues to look at me with big eyes.

She still seems not scared but disturbed, "You can't hate Sophie," her voice is so soft, so quiet.

And for that, I have no answer, so I don't say anything.

Chapter 106: Most normal one

How can you seem so cold even when you're wearing warm clothes from the system? You have a powerful fire skill, can't you use it to keep yourself warm?

Sigh.

I take off the warm jacket I got from the system and put it on the little girl. She looks at me the entire time with wide eyes.

"T-thank you."

Yes, yes.

I also make a few orbs spin around, slightly altering their shape so they cut through the air easier and don't emit a whistling noise. I start converting their energy into thermal energy and carefully, gently release it into the surroundings, much like how a radiator emits heat.

The cold wind continues to blow outside and it's become really dark, only the fireplace illuminates the room with its gently flickering and crackling flames.

As I do so, I continue to examine my restored arm, well, now my broken arm. Other than that, it seems fine. The skin covering it is pale and the arm is hairless, but it's perfect. The circuit, mana flow, and even its strength are the same as my right arm.

All this only makes me feel more bitter that I'm not with Lily to repay her, but hey, Kim is somewhat reliable, and when we finally group up, I'll make sure to repay her. Such a stupid girl. Who in their right mind sacrifices their arm for some odd-looking psychopathic guy?

Actually? Arent I the most normal one here? Even the dog is weird, with his suspicious mastery over mana and telepathy.

Damn it, if I'm the most normal one, the system might have a problem.

As for Lily, I'm sure she can restore her arm. Hell, I'm certain that restoring her own arm is much easier than restoring mine. Still, that doesn't diminish what she did for me.

Silly girl.

Haaa, I'm bored.

"What are your skills?" I ask the little girl sitting across from me, only her head visible from under the jacket I gave her.

"Not telling!"

"I'll tell the doggo to play with you a lot," sorry Biscuit, I will sell you out because of my boredom.

"N-not telling!" This time there's a bit more hesitation in her voice.

"He can even talk to you telepathically and you wouldn't believe how fun it is to boop his snout," I pause, "it's surprisingly big and soft, yet when you boop it, it's cold to the touch."

"No!" she shouts.

I stop teasing her, feeling surprisingly slightly better, "I'll tell you my skills in exchange if you promise to keep away from Sophie." I can tell her about two of my skills that Sophie already knows, just giving her the names.

"I don't believe you, you already lied about your level!"

Oh, that's true! I recall my moment of victory over someone over 10 years younger, still somehow proud of myself.

Huhu.

Wait a moment? "Did you know I lied?"

"Yes! That's why I lied about what level Soph is."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Did I just get tricked by this little brat? Was I totally played by her, basking in fake glory while she giggled deviously behind my back?

Somehow I can't even get mad, I'm more amazed and... amused? Isn't this brat more dangerous than Sophie?

And in 5 years she'll be around 15 years old. A teenager sharpened inside the tutorial, and who knows at what level she'll be, and how devious? Plus, swayed by hormones?

I sense a lot of danger, a lot of danger.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -Yes, as you said. This is your family situation and you remember it right. As far as I know, these were your feelings back on earth and there doesn't seem to be any change.

BenDover (Hell, IDK) - Lol, noname, your childhood is so sad, I'm going to cry.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Obviously I don't know everything, and you are not a person to share, but your behavior up until now seemed like you from Earth, maybe a bit more calculated and controlled, but that should be thanks to the skill.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - (food gone)

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Thanks.

I feel much better now after a long talk with Tess, she confirmed a lot of things and it doesn't seem that anything important is missing. Maybe Sophie trying to make me not want to hurt her did mess with some memories of her?

That sounds somewhat probable, yet I can't be sure and Tess can't be sure either so I just use [Focus] to push my anger to the back of my mind.

Also, sorry, Biscuit, I know it's hard to not eat these decaying monsters outside, but there's nothing I can do now, so hang in there!

BenDover (Hell, IDK) - Noname, I don't know whether to pity your mom or make fun of her, lol.

You bastard.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -If I ever meet you I'll fuck you up. Start praying now so I don't meet you during the community tournament, if you're even able to survive, you piece of shit.

Unable to do anything to him through the community, I turn it off and calm down slightly after seeing that it's getting sunnier outside.

When is the community tournament even going to happen? Give it to me already.

As I stare out the window, I continue to mull over the last moments of Lissandra and the way she moved her mana to turn herself into a construct while absorbing even ambient mana and turning it into her own. A few ideas are already brewing in my mind, one of them being to use [Redistribution]

Hey, kinetic, thermal energy, seeing that the skill doesn't specify further, it's not that hard to imagine that I might be able to do it with more types of energy, it all lies in the effort I put in and my talent.

Yes, [Redistribution] relies on absorbing energy, holding it, and using it. It's a perfect counter-skill.

BUT! What if I get to the point where I can redistribute mana? What if I get to the point where I can redistribute not only external mana but my own mana? Turning it into different kinds of energy. That's one of the ideas.

Another idea is for a construct that would absorb external mana and turn it into my own. Both of these ideas seem terribly difficult, but hey, I'd better set some ambitious goals now than just aimlessly move around.

For now, I want to focus on creating a second construct instead of improving the first one. The reason being that if I improve the first one, I'll have to deal with excess mana again, so yeah, a new construct to help me handle mana, to allow me to invest more stats into it until I get to the point where I can handle more of it.

For that, another triple or quadruple focus would be amazing. Or maybe some upgrade for [Mana Manipulation].

Damn it, even upgrading my class or getting a subclass could help.

I haven't forgotten about my upgrade token, but I have plans for it and am worried that upgrading the class or upgrading the mana stat would spend it, I just don't test it and save it for now. There's something I need to take care of first before using it.

"What do you like?"

Huh, that's a weird question out of nowhere. I turn back to the girl and sit down. While both parts of my [Focus] continue to train moving mana and to shape it, I look at her.

"I like to stay up late. When everyone is already sleeping and it's really quiet outside." I answer her honestly, and somehow I miss the feeling of being able to do that. The feeling of just laying in my bed and not wanting to go to sleep.

"That's what old people do!"

Oi, listen here you brat!

"I like cute animals!" She says simply and looks at me as if expecting me to continue.

Haa, fine.

"I like to drink a glass of perfectly cold water during hot summer days."

She giggles and nods as if agreeing with me, "I like when Sophie caresses my hair."

"I like going to sleep after a shower and into freshly washed sheets."

"I like my mom!" Isabella says, and I can't help but feel some amusement over her childish energy and excitement. There's something amazing about the simple innocence of little kids.

"I like my mom too," I say in response and continue to listen to her chatter until the weather clears outside.

We get out, finding out that it's already warmer now that it's day. The monsters start appearing again, and I can feel their mana signatures all around us.

I also realize one thing: the monsters are getting stronger the better the houses around us look like.

Rats, Gargoyles, Alghouls. All of them are a tiny bit stronger than at the place where we appeared.

Then I feel a touch of mana on myself, someone probing me, sensing my signature. Only when another group of monsters starts moving towards us from the edge of my perception, do I realize that now the monsters able to locate us have started appearing as well.

Chapter 107: Dumber than Soph

We burn the first group that reaches us. Even Isabella helps, as there are just so many of them. Tens of rats led by some weird, bipedal monster.

[Parasitic Wererat - lvl 76]

It's not a named monster, but somehow it's controlling all the rats and even using some probing skill, able to detect either our mana or our presence. Obviously, I kill it first, but the scanning still continues and one of the rats screeches, turning into a wererat.

[Parasitic Wererat - lvl 75]

I kill it again, and the same thing repeats. The decaying rat monster screeches and its body bulges. I feel a lot of mana as its body enlarges, the monster getting on two legs, and its face and tail lengthening.

[Parasitic Wererat - lvl 74]

I see how it is.

This time, I put more time into creating a mana orb, and then I throw it at the group. It enlarges into tendrils of mana coated in [Oscillation]. The wererat dies again, and plenty of monsters too, the remaining ones burned by Isabella's flames. Hmm, there sure is room for improvement. Making an orb so it unfolds into oscillating tendrils of mana takes too long, and the skill doesn't even damage that big an area.

Feeling a lot of presence from all around us, I jump high in the air while holding the little girl in my arms. I continue to absorb the kinetic energy of my orbs and propel us higher and higher, and then in the air, I continue to propel myself ahead and up to keep us in the air.

It's junky it's difficult, and I'm barely able to do it while we continue to jump up and down and being propelled ahead and to the sides.

I let us fall on the roof while absorbing the kinetic energy of our fall, and multiple orbs shoot against a group of gargoyles flying at us. Some of them end up with destroyed wings and fall down, continuing to rush us on their feet, while others dodge and continue to charge.

I boost orbs orbiting around me and sling them again, this time aiming carefully and boosting them with a surge.

More of them die and a blue flame slithers around us, rushing at the gargoyles that are moving on their feet.

Then we move again, this time I jump from roof to roof, only using [Redistribution]

Isabella lets out excited screaming noises as we continue to run at a speed that feels fast and exciting even to me, jumping from roof to roof.

One of the orbs turns into a small shield and blocks a projectile attack that flies at me, and I avoid to the side, avoiding another one.

[Disruption] fires up and cancels the attack that comes at me from the shadow of one of the chimneys. An attack reminding me of a weird tendril made of dark black mana. Three projectiles sling at the monster that I can't see, but I can feel its presence and it dies, revealing a body that reminds me of a bat.

[Chameleon Bat - lvl 66]

And it doesn't stop. There are more and more monsters coming at us from all sides and I constantly feel waves of mana that continue to track our presence. Another tendril made of black mana reaches me, but this time I'm too slow and end up with a deep cut on my leg, at the last moment moving my body a bit so it hits me instead of the little girl in my arms.

I absorb more energy and turn it into even more speed, feeling my body heating even more, the sweat already running down my back.

My breathing is rough, and I feel my head pulsating as I continue to use skill after skill.

Yet, there is no sign of my mana depleting.

I use more of it, it rushes through my circuit, through my pathways, it fills my body making my mana heart beat wildly, so much that I can hear it in my ears. The world becomes quieter and quieter, only some noises passing to me and the colors totally drain off, just black and white with mana glowing beautifully.

I [Focus] and more mana enters my body, exits it, forms orbs around me, dozens of them spinning wildly while letting out noises that sound scary even to me.

I know that if I reach out my hand and get it in the way of the orbs, it will get obliterated, torn by orbs made of mana that are moving at terrifying speed.

I absorb all the energy at once, putting both of my focuses on handling it. I hold it, and I redistribute it.

The entire building in front of me explodes, torn apart by kinetic energy. The building disappears from top to ground along with the monsters on the roof and in front of it.

The force of my attack throws me backwards, threatening to splat me and Isabella against another house, but I absorb even that energy and immediately propel us up, avoiding another series of attacks.

Orbs appear around me again, and I feel the blood flowing from my nose. I feel it on my lips, I feel it on my chin as I absorb the energy once again and a brilliant yellow flame roars in front of me, burning another wave of monsters with ease, leaving cobblestones glowing from heat and the wooden houses burning.

I propel myself up and rush again, noticing that the girl is leaving some sort of trap behind us, traps that explode into the blue fire when monsters get closer.

And we continue to run, and I continue to ignore the monsters that are scanning me and detecting us, sending other monsters after us. Monsters that I can kill and make it much easier to run.

But hey, where is the fun in that?

Another wave of kinetic energy enters my body, and I [Focus] again.

[Lvl 77 > Lvl 79]

[Focus - lvl 28 > Focus - lvl 29]

[Redistribution - lvl 14 > Redistribution - lvl 16]

[Mana Surge - lvl 10 > Mana Surge - lvl 12]

Okay, maybe I need to be a bit less excited to fight next time?

I take another step with a groan, still a day, and Isabella on my chest held by my unbroken arm, while the left one just hangs along my body, bleeding. At this point, I might think that the system and the monster have some personal unresolved issues with my left arm.

My head is spinning slightly as I continue to jump from roof to roof, but now much slower and carefully.

I did end up killing their scouts, but it did cost me. Every step I take hurts and when I move mana through my body I feel my pathways burning and my hand continues to shake from how tired I am. Hunger is also back, even after finishing the side quest and eating and drinking all the food.

The new side quest is this.

Side quest: Kill 400 enemies

Rewards:

Common gear of your choice

Food and water rations

Look similar?

Yeah? Because it goddamn is! Only the number grew bigger. What the heck? How many monsters will I have to kill in a few days to get some food? Thousands?

Then there is also another side quest:

Side quest:

Reach level 100

Get 3 skills over level 30

Rewards:

Skill upgrade token

So is this skill upgrade token different, allowing me to upgrade my already upgraded skills? Will completing this side quest allow me to upgrade my level 30 skills? Or is it just a normal skill upgrade token and I can't upgrade already upgraded skills?

Currently, from my experience with the system, I think that to upgrade an already upgraded skill it needs to reach level 30. I can be wrong, obviously, but the system likes rounded numbers and I wasn't able to upgrade them at level 20 something. Plus there is a side quest now, similar to the one I got so long time ago. That's why I believe that I'm right.

I slow down and sit on the roof, letting the girl out of my arms. For a moment, I just rest while still keeping my [Perception] running. Just a little bit of rest.

"You are also dumb, maybe even dumber than Soph." I hear from Isabella.

Here we go again, dissed by a 10-year-old.

"Just a few minutes and we can move again," I say to her.

I filter out her words because I catch something with the edge of my perception. A mana signature, but this time it doesn't feel like any of the rotted and decaying monsters, it feels like a human.

Chapter 108: The trio from Hard Difficulty

There are three of them, two men and one woman, all of them around my age. I quickly identify them as people from Hard difficulty, the main reason being my inability to see their levels.

Well, either I can't see them because they are also from the Tutorial, or their strength is at a similar level to that of Lissandra. Seeing them fight, I'm more inclined to believe that they are from the Hard difficulty.

They aren't doing badly at all, and small groups of rats are dealt with by them. Yet, I can see that they are weaker than everyone from the Hell difficulty, even Isabella could probably take them on.

Still, I watch curiously, wanting to see the difference between Hell and Hard difficulty.

From the mana I feel from them or seeing their movement, it doesn't seem to be that the stat points are the main difference. Their bodies, and their mana, seem to be on a similar level to some of the weaker people from our Group 4.

What differentiates them the most is their poor use of skills and mana.

How to say it? It feels super amateurish if I can say it that way. They rely on their skills to do the heavy lifting without trying to understand them properly or try to help them, expand them. So it ends up with them using them in a basic way.

One of the men is using spears he creates from ice, they don't seem to be that strong but he can create them fairly quickly, replacing the broken ones while keeping rats away from them. Sometimes even throwing them. He also seems to be somewhat strengthening his body. But every time he does so he loses balance a bit, totally unable to properly control it.

The woman does something that stops monsters from using their skills or mana and then uses a bow to shoot them, creating projectiles out of her mana. The projectiles are weak and some of them even dissipate in the air before reaching their target. Her accuracy is terrible and she repositions every time monsters move even slightly closer to them.

The last one is the most interesting. He continues to watch and I feel his something similar to my [Perception] with the difference that he doesn't seem to be able to perceive mana.

But there is something that makes him super precious in my eyes.

The man uses some water-based attack. It takes a lot of mana from him, I can see and the total amount of his mana isn't that big, but he creates small blasts that he calculatingly shoots at the monsters, hitting their eyes as he is predicting their movement.

Well, well, well, isn't that great?

Wanting to make the best possible impression I continue to observe them from a distance, moving carefully so they do not notice me, only luring a bit more monsters towards them.

More and more rats rush them and the trio seems to slowly become more and more nervous at the sight of the neverending wave of monsters.

When I feel stronger ones moving towards them I dash against them, finishing them before they get into the range of their detection.

We don't want some pesky Alghoul to hurt my water dispense... ehm ehm... hurt my future colleagues.

I will let them fight more and more rats until everything seems desperate and only then, at the last possible moment, and with mighty mana around his shoulder the man will appear.

Nathaniel Gwyn! The man, the myth, the legend!

Plus my slightly psychotic little sidekick girl with a brain messed up by her sister.

But now on a more serious note. I don't trust people, especially not after seeing the way these three did talk in the forum, making fun of the Hell difficulty.

So yes, I'll show them a bit from it and then save them. I'll give them a little chance and instead of just forcing them to work with me I will try to make them thankful to me.

And hey, if they refuse we can try it the old-school way. But I'd rather not, having someone able to create even a little bit of water could be the difference between life and death here, but I can't let him know, he might become too cocky.

While keeping an eye on them I continue to scroll through the community, checking the history and their old messages. In all of them, they seem to act cocky and make fun of this difficulty, most likely being one of the strongest people from hard and expecting it to be the same here.

Seeing how much trouble they have with just a small group of Rottenfang Vermin - rats as I call them with love, I kinda guess that they will wake up pretty fast to the dangers of this difficulty.

Hell, they didn't even get to fight Alghoul, Gargoyles, or Wererats.

Wanting to make a strong impression I start charging my mana and unlike my usual use, I do it more wastefully, letting a lot more of it leak from my body, wasted on something that might seem strong aura but to me is more like wasted mana.

Like a koala, Isabella already puts her small arms around my neck and clings to my chest, damn. That seems like the novice body pillow class is still on the menu.

I propel myself high in the air and then land in the middle of a group of monsters.

For a second they become surprised, the same as three humans but then my mana fires up even more, absorbing their kinetic energy and slowing them down to the stop, a monster with weaker mana than me and not that strong bodies unable to move and allowing me to absorb all of this energy.

I add it to the energy I absorbed before jumping here and then release it, obliterating almost the entire group of monsters, together with the wall of the nearby house.

The remaining ones get shot by projectiles made out of mana. This time I make them bigger, looking like arrows instead of my usual orbs, knowing that this will look more impressive.

Nice start! The trio is looking at me with big eyes, their bodies showing caution.

“Ciphermind, Frostfall, and Goldie?” I ask, saying their aliases from the forum.

Finally, realizing that I'm just another tutorial attendee they calm down slightly, but only slightly.

“Yes, and who are you?” the man that did use water-based attack asks but I feel him collecting mana in the palm of his hand.

“Noname, Hell Difficulty right from the start, this is Isabella, she is also from our Group 4.”

“Oh, the one who blew off his arm...” he cuts off.

Oi, what asshole is still spreading it around, even to rookies? Savant? I bet it's Savant!

Whatever, we better hurry.

“Let's leave first, stronger monsters always appear if you kill enough rats,” I say and it's not even a lie. It always happens. Usually, Alghoul and Gargoyles appear and then if you deal even with them Chameleon bats and Wererats.

“S-stronger than this?” the guy that used weapons made out of ice asks nervously.

Is he dumb? Did he think this is all?

“Obviously they would be stronger, don't forget where we are,” the man with water-based skill tells him impatiently, “you can call me Cipher, he can be Frost and she is Goldie,” he says, not using real names but the ones people use in the community.

Nearly everyone does that and people don't give out their real names. Some of them like me for a reason that the system offered it, even while knowing our real names so there might be a reason for that.

"Follow me, then." I start slowly running and they quickly join.

Huhu! I did pretty well, didn't I? The first impression is always important! From their POV, I'm super strong and even saved their lives. Still, I don't mind even if they only want to use me, I want to do the same.

Seeing that they are able to follow I speed up a bit more while continuously watching our surrounding and people following me.

Their physical stats seem to be nice. Surely even higher than mine if I'm not using mana or [Redistribution] to strengthen my speed or strength.

So is the difference only in skills? I can't wait to find out!

The system always was a mystery and other difficulties too. What floors are they getting, and what rewards? What are their levels, and how many groups do they have? And much more.

Finally reaching one of the higher buildings I open the door and enter, quickly closing it as they get inside. Isabella, as a few times before, creates a small orb of blue flame that hovers in the air and creates some light.

A bit more training and she will be able to use it to heat the room. All thanks to my mentorship and boredom!

So yeah, my portable heater... little girl gets off my hands and sits on the sketchy-looking chair that creaks under her and then I turn to my portable water dispenser... man with water skill.

"Show me your skill," I say, impatient and super curious. Hey, I did hold back for a pretty long time, right?

"What?" the man says and takes a step back, mana already swirling around the trio.

Uh? Did I say something wrong?

Chapter 109: Poker face

Flames flare up around Isabella, the girl most likely acting on her own or under the influence of Sophie's skill, assuming she's in danger. Without any hesitation, the flames intensify to the point where we can feel the heat, and then she attacks the three newcomers.

My [Disruption] skill, boosted by a surge, activates, and her flames die off before reaching the trio. Then, before she has a chance to try it again, I smack the back of her head without saying anything.

The little girl looks at me with a hurt look on her tiny face, "I have to burn them, they tried to attack me!" she complains.

God damn it, Izzy. I don't know if it's funny or scary, it's kind of hard to judge it properly while having my [Focus] continuously run in the background ever since the end of the second floor.

"They did not try to attack you, so calm down, okay?"

She pouts, looking somewhat cute while doing so, and without a word, she stops charging her mana. My [Disruption] activates again and it cancels out the tiny flames that flicker around, slowly burning the dusty furniture.

"Soo..." I stop after seeing their cautious faces and turn towards the girl who's completely ignoring me. It's all your fault!

"You want me to use my skill to get you water, that's why you saved us."

Oh! Finally someone at least slightly smart.

The man who named himself Cipher continues, "There were more monsters back then, did you..."

Ouch, maybe too smart. Poker face time!

"Looks like you did," he says.

God damn it.

"How do you want me to trust you now?" he continues.

"We don't have to trust each other. I just need you to create water for us, maybe your icy friend can make some ice we can melt too. In exchange, I'll protect you." I say.

"I know people like you, if we don't agree you will beat us into submission."

Is something wrong with my face? How did he get it so quickly? Some skill?

"Yes." I just agree, and that gets a reaction from the icy man and the woman who named herself Goldie. Cipher, on the other hand, seems calm, much calmer than when he was dealing with monsters. Is he someone comfortable in such situations?

"My "icy" friend's ice isn't able to melt into water. It will only disappear into mana after a while. I'm the only one able to create water," the look in his eyes is firm and he turns towards me, more confident than at the start.

"Continue," I tell him.

"Just protection won't be enough, I know how valuable my skill is, especially after some time passes. We saw the side quests too."

Aren't you a cheeky one?

"I want you to help us to level up and protect us, in exchange, I'll create water for you." he continues.

Hmm, that much is reasonable. I don't like the way he talks as if he holds all the cards but there is no need to like him or be friends, I just need him to create water for me.

“Deal. Now water.” I throw a small bottle I got from the system at him and he catches it. For a moment, annoyance flashes across his face, and I quickly identify him as the proud type. Damn, from the way he looks I bet he would be stepping all over me if I seemed weaker. But he's smart too, so he opens the bottle, and I feel mana move towards the tip of his finger. An amount of mana feels like half of his reserves, and in difficult patterns, the mana slowly turns into water that drips into the bottle. Of course, the skill is difficult for me to grasp, similar to how Lily's skill was difficult. Dang it.

Cipher's efficiency seems terrible, and I can see how difficult it is for him, but after half a minute, the small bottle is half full and he stops.

I realize that he didn't spend his entire mana, probably to hide some of his skill, but I do not complain and grab the bottle from him.

Now then, how am I sure that it isn't poisonous? That would be a dumb move from him now after they saw how dangerous it is here, also considering his skills, it might not be something he is able to do.

I can give the water to someone from their party to drink but I can't do it all the time.

“Isabella?” I say while taking a small sip and then putting the bottle away.

“What?” the girl complains.

“If something happens to me, you can burn them, okay?”

She nods, a happier look on her face. It's something I feel bad about asking from a child, but if they poison me or something, she would be safer alone than with them.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - Noname, are you here?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -yes, so you finally woke up, is everything fine?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -yes, StrongestOne is protecting me, it's scary here.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -just stay close to him and get to me. After we meet again, I'll take care of everything and keep you safe, okay?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - okay! <>

Please, don't use such emoticons, people will misunderstand.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Noname, so cool, please protect me too!

Oi, listen here, you little shit.

Bard (Hell, IDK) -me too! Protect me, Noname, keep me safe!

Soph (Hell, group 4) - how is Izzy?

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - omg I would blush so hard if he wrote it to me! Protect me too!

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - take care of everything, take care of me!

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -

I close the community, what a bunch of jerks, I'll deal with them when given the chance. I turn to the trio and they avert their glances, Goldie even giggling under her nose.

Oh? You're laughing at me?

For the next ten minutes, I let more vermin get to her and she has to work hard to deal with them all, sweat covering her forehead and her hands shaking as she continues to shoot at them from her bow with her weak mana projectiles.

Laugh now, you jerk.

After dealing with the Alghoul, I move to the group that is under the protection of the tiny girl who burns the stronger monsters before they get to them. Somehow, it's kind of funny seeing how she complains to them that they are taking too long to deal with the monsters.

"We should move, it's getting darker and there will be stronger monsters soon."

I notice Cipher's calculating look. The man is quieter than before, but his eyes continue to observe everything as if taking in all the information. I also notice that he is pretty often collecting mana in his eyes, and that makes me curious about his skill.

Yet, I decide not to push him about it and ask. We currently have a deal that helps both of us, so with my logic, there is no need to be exceedingly greedy and ruin it.

The building I find seems to be the most luxurious around, and I open the door, which creaks and thuds loudly as I close them after us. The wind has already started ramping up outside, and inside the house it's dark, lit only by Isabella's orbs that float around, generating a little bit of heat and some light.

As few times before, I get to sniffing around, looking for anything useful. Thanks to my curiosity, it's something I really enjoy, opening drawers, and checking out the rooms. Inspecting all the stuff in hopes of finding something nice. It almost feels like a treasure hunt.

Rusty Sword (Common) - A weathered, dulled blade bearing the signs of time and neglect. Notably aged but still capable of holding an edge.

Disappointed, I throw the sword away and continue to look. One day I will surely find some legendary weapon! Totally.

The trio and the little girl already sit around the fireplace, feeding it with wooden furniture, the room only lit by the light from the cracking fire while the building continues to creak as we hear the strong wind hitting it.

I open another door and pause for a moment, feeling a weak hint of mana from inside of it. [Perception] encompasses the room a few times, and then I enter, carefully and wary of possible traps.

The mana comes from one of the drawers close to the bed in the corner of the room, and I create a tentacle made of mana that reaches towards it, slowly opening it.

Nothing happens.

I step a bit closer and there is a tiny crystal inside the drawer.

Mana Stone (Common) -A simple transparent crystal, nearly void of any visible power or energy. This common item once held magical energy, but now waits to be refilled.

Oh! With excitement, I grab the mana stone and start studying it. Sending my mana inside it. Even though the item is of common rarity, I'm excited. I saw what was possible with such stones back on the second floor. People turned them into stones able to heat a room. They were used to make things lighter temporarily, they are imbued into weapons to make them handle mana better.

My mind continues to study it, sending mana towards it while the world around me becomes quieter. My curiosity, my enjoyment of learning anything new related to mana, taking over.

Only after a long while, do I take my eyes off the stone that is now partially filled with my mana that slowly leaks out and dissipates into the air. Then I realize that hours have passed and I got lost in all of it.

A quick check tells me that only one of the people in the next room is awake, the rest of them sleeping, and I put the stone away.

Now then, it's time to upgrade my construct and create the second one.

Chapter 110: Heartbeats

For one more time, I check our surroundings and the room next to the one I'm in, and then I close my eyes, focusing on the flow of my mana and my body as I sit down.

I cast a glance over the room again, taking in the sparse furniture and worn rug underfoot. It becomes quiet and I stop feeling the cold of the room as I delve deep into myself. Slowly, carefully, I reach out and start deeply inspecting the construct I made before. Now, after some time has passed, I realize even more how terrible and inefficient it is.

When I inspect the construct, I can't help but see its shortcomings glaring back at me. It's like I used a stone tool when a scalpel was needed, making it rough around the edges, the energy moving in jagged jerks rather than smooth waves.

The Reinforcement construct is sucking up around thirty percent of my mana and strengthening my body, amounting to what I would be able to do with 10% instead of 30%.

But hey, it's not like I had a perfect situation while creating it.

Drawing inwards, I anchor my senses to the mana coursing through my veins. It's a familiar sensation, a rippling wave of power beneath my skin. It's not just energy, it's a part of me - a soft, consistent hum, warm like a blanket.

I [Focus] and cautiously make changes to the web of pathways I had created. I examine my bones, into which I etched it, I observe how it flows and once again, with the help of [Mana Manipulation] and [Oscillation], I make changes.

I add a pathway here, and I change a turn there, slowly, carefully feeling my body and my mana while I do so, and the world outside becomes a distant memory.

It's like I'm sculpting a detailed statue out of a coarse block of stone, each chip revealing a new twist to the construct. The process isn't smooth. I stumble and make errors, but each mistake helps me to improve. The pathways start to reflect my adjustments, a bit smoother here, a bit narrower there.

Okay, this pathway should go away - I scratch it with [Oscillation], leaving deep wounds on my muscles and bones. It's painful, it's terribly painful and my mana flares up a few times as I remove the twisted pathway, but I endure it. My body will heal, the pain will disappear, so I [Focus].

I know that every drop of sweat, every gasp of pain, is just a milestone in a way to my goal. The process is painful but also somehow fun, it makes me feel good knowing that I'm improving something, that I am creating something that is mine and the result of all my testing, all my observations.

The result of my hard work.

After what feels like hours, I stop and with a satisfied feeling, check out my construct. The flow is better, the mana flows faster, and, to my current knowledge, it looks amazing.

I know I'll find some mistakes as I improve, but right now, this is the best I can do and I'm happy with that.

The construct's name didn't change, even the effect didn't change, only the efficiency improved. It's still using nearly a third of my mana but instead of feeling like I'm actually using 10% to strengthen my body, it feels like a bit over 20%.

A little, but significant result.

Now then, the second construct, right?

I take a short break, calming my breathing and excitedly beating heart. I calm my curiosity, I dim my impatience and for a minute, just focus on breathing slowly.

Breathe in.

Hold it.

Slow breath out.

Repeat.

I repeat the rhythmic cycle, allowing it to ground me, to anchor me to the present. The steady rhythm sets the pace for my thoughts, calming me. As I breathe, I visualize my goal, the second construct taking shape in my mind.

Finally, I enter an even deeper [Focus] and get to work, using all I learned from my testing, all I learned from watching Lissandra etch the pathways into her body and move her mana. I remembered all I could. I perceived all I could. Yet, I can't understand it all, not yet. But, I'll do what I can.

I reach out to my heart and extremely carefully start creating an intricate web of circuits around it. At first, I do not connect it to my mana, I just continue to use my skills and create this web, this construct around my heart while being more careful and focused than before.

While doing this, I realize how big of a mistake it was to pick the Dual Focus upgrade. I went against what the skill is intended for.

[Focus]

Instead of improving on it, I split it and weakened its effect instead of strengthening it. I do understand the system a bit better now and the skills as well. [Focus] should help me focus my mind on a single thing, to delve deeper, to understand more, yet I foolishly split it instead of strengthening it. It's something I'll have to deal with in the future, but now, I push it to the back of my mind and continue.

This time it takes me even longer and I take short pauses, rewinding what feels like distant memories from the end of the second floor but I get to the point where I pause, keeping the intricate web alive with my [Mana Manipulation] before activating it.

First, I connect it to a thin pathway and the construct slowly starts sipping on mana, activating, collecting it and gently shrinking and tying itself around my heart, partially merging with it.

Good.

Another pathway connects to it and while my Mana Heart beats, the construct moves too.

I connect the few final pathways and the heart beats strongly, sending vibrations through my body. Notification sounds.

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

Kinetic Mana Heart - a construct that leverages the rhythm of the heart to generate kinetic energy. Operating in sync with the mana heart, it doesn't contribute to magic directly. Instead, with every heartbeat, it sends a surge of kinetic energy coursing through the user's body.

Woah, isn't that super good?

One heartbeat.

I feel kinetic energy enter my body in a similar way it does when I absorb it from my orbs. My excitement grows bigger.

Second heartbeat.

Even more energy is sent through my body, slowly filling the reservoir I can control.

Third heartbeat.

I observe the construct around my heart that uses another 30% of my mana to amplify the kinetic energy of my heartbeats and then sends this kinetic energy through my body.

Fourth heartbeat.

It's beautiful. My heart still generates mana but now also with every heartbeat, I get kinetic energy I can use, not having to rely on external sources or my orbs.

Fifth heartbeat.

Oh, that's quite a lot, isn't it?

Sixth heartbeat.

Okay, that's a lot of kinetic energy.

Seventh heartbeat.

The amount of kinetic energy I can control reaches the maximum and I grab hold of it. Eh? What now? I didn't think that through.

Eighth heartbeat.

I groan, feeling the pressure of this energy coursing through my body. My heart, being closer to my left arm, sends more energy through it.

Ninth heartbeat.

This is the most kinetic energy I've ever held and I slowly move it to my left arm that is closer to my heart. Not again! I swear, if my left arm explodes again, I'll be pissed off. What the hell is it even? Is my left arm cursed?

Tenth heartbeat.

I use all the energy I can with my upgrade of [Redistribution] to strengthen my endurance and the remaining energy explodes into front of me, destroying the wall in front of me and shaking the house.

The roar of the outside wind hits the house even harder and I feel it on my skin. At the same moment, I hear the screams of the people from the room next to the one I'm in.

Oh, I totally forgot about them. Quickly, I check my arm that seems to be fine, thanks to my quick converting of some of the energy into endurance with Symbiotic Transference.

Huhu, not today!

One heartbeat.

The energy starts filling up again. God damn it, okay, it seems like testing can wait. Let's turn off the construct first.

Second heartbeat.

Let's turn off the construct.

Third heartbeat.

I said let's turn off the construct.

Fourth heartbeat.

Fuck.

Fifth heartbeat.

Now I really start to panic. What did I mess up?

Sixth heartbeat.

I release all the kinetic energy through the hole in the wall and think.

"What the hell is happening?" someone from the trio screams from behind the door. I filter him out and it starts again.

First heartbeat.

Why on earth won't it shut down?