

Tutorial 111

Chapter 111: Victoria

Once again, I release the kinetic energy before it builds up, and clashes against the wind outside. My heart continues to beat, building more and more kinetic energy. For the first time, I feel my mana reserves depleting. Really slowly but surely.

The construct works differently than I thought. It doesn't only use 30% of my generated mana. Well, it does, but it also starts reaching for more as time passes. Currently around 35% of my mana?

Interesting. So, what did I screw up?

Forcing myself to calm down, I examine my construct and my heart, but I can't find anything that should be stopping me from turning off the construct out of my mana flow. Is the mana heart much more delicate than I thought? Is it difficult to work around it and does it mess up my construct?

Another wave of kinetic energy explodes outside of the hole inside the room, and I ignore the roaring wind that blows into the room and hits my body strong enough to push it. The wind is just a distant sound in the back of my mind as I examine the mess I've made.

A few minutes pass and once again the construct ramps up, taking a bit more mana than intended. Now I have to release the energy every few beats and my massive mana pool depletes a bit more.

Will it turn off when I'm out of mana? Probably, but it could also be dangerous so let's not allow that to happen.

Maybe I can cut off the construct's access to my mana... Oh, I can't. It's now closely hugging my heart, an intricate web of mana circuits that touches the surface of my heart and beats together with it.

Okay. Mistakes were made. Let's calmly think over the solution.

Using [Disruption] so close to my heart doesn't sound like a good idea.

I can use an upgrade token for my [Mana Manipulation], but I would like to keep it as the last choice.

"..."

Okay, I have a genius idea! I'll create another construct!

"..."

I'm not dumb, I swear! I'll create a construct to control my construct. Easy, isn't it?

Quickly, I dive in, and another web of intricate circuits starts to form around my heart.

More time passes, and now I have to release absorbed kinetic energy every two heartbeats, continuously shooting wave after wave of kinetic energy outside. The room I'm in is shaking.

Cautiously, and more carefully than before, I create small points, small dense points of circuits that I plaster to three places where my web of Kinetic mana heart connects to my mana pathways that feed it with mana. I blend them, taking some damage as I do so, as I'm not able to fully focus on everything.

After a long time, I once again feel like being on the first floor when I was unable to control my mana as it now once again thrashes my body, creating bruises, cuts, and pummeling my muscles all over. But I do not let it get in the way of what I have to do.

Both parts of my [Focus] work on creating and implementing my third construct and I start to have to release the kinetic energy after each heartbeat when I finally hear the notification.

Congratulations, you have created your third 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!

Mana Regulator - A mana flow controller acting as an integral safeguard for the Kinetic Mana Heart and other constructs. It precisely manages mana transfer rates to prevent excessive energy build-up, maintaining a consistent and controlled energy output.

With my body shaking and sweat drenching my clothes, I quickly use the Mana Regulator to set the mana input to a minimum, and then silence ensues.

My heartbeat sounds quieter, there is no energy buildup and the construct does just what I wanted it to do. It's a derivative of something I thought I built up into the Kinetic Mana Heart construct, but it got messed up by my mana heart.

With a tired sigh, I lean back and lie with my back on the ground, my chest moving up and down, my breath ragged, and my body sending pulses of pain to me.

Hahaha.

That was so royally dumb.

Hahaha.

I feel a smile crawling on my lips, more amused by my screw-up than scared. And I feel so alive, even though my body screams in pain, my head is spinning, and I'm taking in every single sip of breath.

Let's be more careful next time.

That was so goddamn dumb.

Hahaha.

I barely crawl back into the room with the fireplace while being on all fours and close the door behind myself, currently using a bit of mana to keep my body strengthened to help me endure my injuries.

I ignore the looks the trio and little girl give me and lay down, close to the fireplace, taking in some heat into my pummeled body. Only now I remember that I almost lost my left arm, again. It's almost funny.

I look around once more and then sigh.

“Isabella, if you stay up for a night and keep an eye on them, I promise that I'll get the doggo to play with you a lot.” I look towards her, and I really mean it, “If they try to attack you or me, you can burn them.” I add without any hesitation, being sure that they very well know how powerful the little girl's flames are.

Isabella, probably feeling my honesty, smiles brightly at me and nods. Two small fire orbs form near her and slowly start to spin around the kid.

Only then do I close my eyes, too tired to stay up any longer, and fall asleep.

What wakes me up is small touches on my face and when I open my eyes, Isabella quickly jumps back, hiding something behind her back. Something that I identify as a small piece of charcoal from the fireplace.

Haaa. She did draw something on my face, didn't she? But seeing how happy she seems to be and feeling that I owe her a bit, I decide not to clean it off my face.

God damn it.

“Thank you,” I say to the girl and ruffle her hair.

Right away, I realize how hungry and thirsty I am. My body still hurts and even the little mana I use moves slowly and painfully through my pathways.

Damn it, who knew that the most dangerous thing in the tutorial isn't extroverts but my own dumbness? Won't I get to kill myself faster than the tutorial can at this point? Too much mana, misused skills, my greed, my what can be called the best experiments on my own body?

I also don't like how often I have to rely on other people after messing up.

I inspect my body once more. Okay, this will take a good day or two to calm down, and even then my body will be hurt, but I should be able to use my mana a little bit.

Feeling Cipher's eyes on me, I turn to him and for a moment I do not avert my eyes, just look straight into his. I hope you are not getting any funny ideas. Even in the state I'm in, I can mess you up, all three of you.

His response is a small calculating smile and he moves closer, giving me a small bottle filled with water.

"I was able to create it while you were sleeping."

Taking it from his hands, I slowly drink it while still looking at him. I know the man. He is calculating. He is someone who will step over you, who will bully you, and who will enjoy doing it.

But only if he judges he is stronger than you or that he has something he can use against you.

Obviously, he is not showing it, he may even think I don't know it yet. But I'm sure, the man is a wolf that cares about himself only and attacks when he smells blood. But only if it will benefit him.

Smart, calculating, ruthless. Yet, somehow it feels more comfortable than the kindness others show me.

Flashback - Nathaniel Gwyn (10 years old)

A small boy with black hair and eyes of two differently colored eyes carefully opens the door and enters the room. He is in a small apartment that even though it's clean is showing clear signs of being worn off. The apartment you would find in poorer parts of any small city.

"Vic, Victoria" he whispers and enters the room, being met with the firm gaze of a 15-year-old girl that sits behind the table, giving all of her attention to the book in front of her and notes she is taking.

"Nat, how many times did I tell you to knock?" she sighs and turns to the boy, knowing that she won't be able to focus now that he is here.

"Do not call me Nat." the boy complains, yet he still smiles. Even though acting annoyed, he seems to enjoy the small teasing of his sister. He jumps on the bed, "This is also my room so I don't have to knock."

The girl nods and turns around in her chair. The black hair is so similar in color to her brother, yet her behavior is more composed. A weird look for someone so young.

"I won everything I competed in today," he says, his face smiling, happy to share it with his sister.

"Well, that's not unexpected, you are talented when it comes to this, Nat."

The boy shakes his head, "That's not true, Vic. John is faster, Thomas is stronger, Ben is bigger, and Liam is much more talented."

Slightly intrigued, his sister shows a bit more interest, "So how come you always win, Nathaniel?" She is examining him, honestly curious about his answer.

"Do not call me Nathaniel," he complains automatically, not even realizing his mix-up and not noticing a small smirk on the face of his sister, "They are just lazy. They never train as hard as me, they don't put so much work into it or practice after school. They..." he pauses looking for the right words.

"They don't put enough effort into it?" the girl called Vic, or Victoria offers the answer.

The boy nods, this time a bit more seriously, "They are scared to get hurt, they don't like to sweat while exercising, they always complain when their bodies are sore." he pauses, "They're weaker even when they're stronger" he finishes.

Chapter 112: Natives

Oh boy, I swear I spend most of my time here complaining and trying not to lose my left arm. I look at the aforementioned arm; even days after restoring it, it remains pale up to the shoulder.

The light here isn't exactly made for sunbathing and I'm wearing warm clothes, but I expected at least some hint of a tan? At least on my hand. Maybe it's not as perfect as I thought it would be? Lily's skill level might not be high enough, so the arm is pale because of this.

It's a pretty mild aftereffect, I must say.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Grumpy, is everything fine?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - Yes! Some food would be nice, but StrongestOne is doing what he can, even sharing it with me! So be nice to him the next time we meet.

Lily. Why are you even defending him now when he spent some time not even telling us that you are with him? Who knows what thoughts are going through his head. Silly girl.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Your arm?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - It's growing nicely! Already close to the elbow. I might try to make it more muscular than the other one >:) I wonder if it's possible?

The heck? Why would you... wait... that's a pretty good idea, isn't it?

Lily, are you maybe a genius?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -That's smart! You should try that.

Maybe I can cut off my arm again and she will regrow it but stronger than before?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Noname, what the hell. Don't mess up with young girls. Grumpy, you are pretty the way you are, don't listen to this armless mana maniac.

Savant (Hell, Alone) -I bet he wants her to train to then regrow his limbs and make them stronger.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -lol, that sounds like him.

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

The heck Biscuit? When did you learn to use emoticons?

"Kitty man..." I hear a small voice next to me and with a sigh, I turn off the Community, turning to Isabella.

Yup, that's me. The whiskers drawn with charcoal onto my cheeks are still on my face. I'm a kitty man.

Dang it, if Hadwin or Tess see me like this...

"Are you hungry?" I lower myself a bit, my body still complaining with every move I make. Isabella nods and I send her to Cipher to get water from him, it should at least help her a bit. I still need at least a few hours to be able to fight, at least somehow.

Sure, the trio and the girl could go and hunt without me but that would also be dangerous, to them - in case some stronger named monster appears and to me - in case some stronger monster finds me alone.

As always, nothing ever goes according to plan.

While we are sitting here and hiding, I continue to examine my new constructs using tiny bits of mana to do so. I do it while remembering the troubles it gave me.

Yet I'm still happy with the result, nothing good is for free, isn't it? And some pain never stopped me before.

The most annoying part of this all is probably the fact that I have to sit there, unable to test it out. After all this effort I put in, all this theorizing and coming up with the structure in my head while remembering the end of the second floor.

Kinetic Mana Heart could become one of my strongest assets. Strengthening my heartbeats with my mana, absorbing kinetic energy from them - hopefully not stopping my heart - and then using it.

I can use the energy with Symbiotic Transference and boost my physical stats. I can shoot out kinetic energy. I can turn it into thermal energy. It all allows me to skip the annoying part of absorbing it from external sources.

Yup, it's kind of a janky way, all messy and with a lot of steps that are here to cover my weaknesses but that's how I roll.

Not even a few minutes have passed since Isabella went to Cipher and I feel a touch of perceiving mana on me and our group. Something I worried about and tried to counter by putting a small amount of disruptive mana into the room we are in. Yet they still found us.

Well, this is going to hurt.

I stagger and pause, leaning against the side of the house, my mana burning through my body even though I'm using so little of it. It makes me twitch every time I use a bit more of it and too quickly. Only good thing is that after running for a bit my body warmed up slightly and hurts a bit less than my circuits.

[Perception] encompasses our area and once again I navigate our group and we continue to run through the streets.

"On this wall," I say shortly to Isabella and point with my finger so her flames roar and burn the invisible monster on the wall - a Chameleon Bat.

A few rats get closer and The trio from Hard difficulty starts fighting them before Isabella joins them and they quickly dispose of the group.

I set up my Mana Regulator to 10 percent of my mana and my heart starts to send kinetic energy through my body with every beat.

First heartbeat.

I use the energy, transfer and strengthen my pummeled body.

Second heartbeat

I shoot a thin cone of kinetic energy.

[You have defeated a Chameleon Bat - lvl 49]

I absorb a few more beats and then create a tiny mana orb, immediately using the energy to boost it to dizzying speed. With a loud whistling noise the orb flies through the air and literally obliterates the head of one of the monsters.

[You have defeated a Wererat - lvl 71]

Immediately the perceiving touch on us disappears and I cut off mana going to my construct - Kinetic Mana Heart. [Perception] continues to scan our surroundings and feeling another mana signature I focus on the place more.

Oh, so that's how it is.

I gesture to others and they quietly follow me, Isabella walking close to my side. Slowly, carefully we walk through the eerily empty city, only surrounded by noises of our quiet steps on the cobbled streets and the soft wind that blows into us.

It's hard to describe, but even just a city, without any monsters around, feels creepy. Rows after rows of empty buildings in a city too massive to make any sense to exist.

When we reach the place I pointed to, I boost my body with mana and with one kick destroy the locked door of one of the houses. My [Perception] continues to watch a weak presence under one of the floors

while I stop right over it. Only Cipher is looking around curiously, some mana in his eyes as he watches around.

"This room is weird," he says shortly, probably catching some details I can't see. But it doesn't matter, I don't need to know much.

Slowly, carefully I create a sword made of mana, a bit paler than usual, and then I stab it into the floor, sending a bit of oscillating mana through the blade and cutting through a hinge hidden under the carpet.

A small door falls into the room under the floor and a few short screams sound from beneath us.

Human voices.

[Initiate Ranger - lvl 12]

[Storm Hunter - lvl 29]

[Disciple of Elements - lvl 34]

Man, woman, and a level 12 girl that seems to be their daughter.

I step back watching as Cipher and Goldie deal with them. The man is careful, trying to get as much information as he can from them while carefully watching his behavior and his smart eyes seem as if trying to look right through them. Goldie is here, awkwardly trying to make some funny faces to make the girl stop sobbing and in the process calm down her parents.

After a while, when they are not getting anywhere, I just poke Isabella and nod towards the other girl, "Why don't you try to make a friend with her?"

The girl, probably bored as well, just nods and runs there on her short legs while smiling brightly and immediately hugging the other girl who freezes, and then Isabella starts chirping away.

A bit more time passes and the girl and her parents calm down enough to give more information to Cipher who is asking the right questions.

They got split from their group because of monsters while they were scavenging around, checking the houses for useful stuff.

They are careful not to tell us how big the group is or where it is, also asking us where we are from, to which Cipher without hesitation says that we are also in a similar situation, but already on our own for a few weeks, our group killed by Alghouls.

The lie is pretty believable and he lies easily. Yet, even though the parents didn't notice it, I see some smile in his eyes, as if he is making fun of the people, laughing at their situation and their naivety.

Chapter 113: Rage

Isabella comes closer, her eyes wide as she stays nearby while looking up at me.

"I spoke with Alie," she begins, referring to the girl who still shyly glances towards us, "I told her about Biscuit."

Ah, I see. The first conversation with a different civilization is about the gluttonous telepathic dog. Nice. Nothing to worry about.

"At first she didn't understand what is doggo, but then I described Biscuit to her a bit more," she pauses dramatically for a second, ensuring I'm listening and with a serious look on her face, "Alie then became happy and... and," another pause as if she still can't comprehend it.

What then? I know it's probably something super silly, but you are making me curious. Tell me already.

"She said that we can eat him!" she says, deep outrage clear in her voice, even jumping up a pitch.

Oh, that kind of makes sense. They must have a similar problem with food as we do, right? I wonder how they deal with it. This is the information we need to get from them first.

Also, I would like to see them try to eat Biscuit. The little beast is more dangerous than it seems.

"It's fine, we won't eat Biscuit," I assure Isabella, who seems to have already given up on befriending the other girl.

I continue to listen to their conversation with Cipher. The man seems to be asking the right questions, so I don't step in. Instead, I only listen to it while circulating mana through my body, bit by bit, and still carefully sending perceiving impulses to our surroundings.

"We should move quite soon," I say out loud, just in case, and Cipher immediately nods, only to ask them if they have any hideout or know how to get back to their group.

They lie about the group, but they tell us about a hideout a few streets away. They are too scared to move there on their own because they see a few monsters around, so they hide here. But with us not giving them another chance, we start moving there.

While we walk through the streets, with Isabella and me probably being the calmest ones, I continue to scan for us, my skills most likely much better than those of their scout. Cipher still continues to ask carefully, avoiding some questions to not seem like someone who hasn't lived here his entire life. But I wonder, does it really matter?

"How do you get your water?" I stop and turn to them, "How do you get your food?" I remind myself that they are most likely not really the same way people on the second floor weren't real, no matter how real they seem.

The moment I ask them these questions, they fall silent and their eyes widen. They even take a few steps backward and, instead, start asking questions, surprised that we don't know something that seems to be basic here. Well, it's not like I didn't expect that.

"Answer my question, or we will leave you here," I interrupt their questions, and I send a strong pulse of mana into our surroundings, this time not for perception, but to make us easier to find. Like a glowing beacon pointing right at our position.

"You're crazy," Cipher says, and I see that his opinion of me has changed. He probably understands me better now. The man then turns to them and repeats my questions, holding them so they won't run away.

"We get it from tunnels under the city! Food is mostly from sparrows and mice!" he blurts out, nervous and scared, shielding his daughter behind him. I think his name was Oliver?

"Okay, continue to the hideout. Isabella and I will take care of the monsters."

"You're weird," the girl says to me after they leave.

Let's just say that no one in hell difficulty is normal. Okay? Also, why did I do that? Am I that frustrated? Is [Focus] not working properly? Or Am I just that dumb? There are so many different and better ways to get the information from them.

The monsters are getting closer and closer, Rottenfang Vermin, a lot of them, two Wererats, one Gargoyle. The group is pretty big, but not something impossible to deal with.

Why did I do that? Why am I getting so frustrated lately and continually slipping out of [Focus]?

Well, I'll deal with that later. Now, there's something else I have to do.

I release my Mana Regulator a bit and it starts sucking on 20% of my generated mana, and my heart starts beating even stronger, almost feeling as if it should send small shockwaves into our surroundings.

Five heartbeats and I release the energy in front of me, obliterating the group of vermin that I let come close.

[You have defeated a Rottenfang Vermin - lvl 19]

[You have defeated a Rottenfang Vermin - lvl 23]

[You have defeated a Rottenfang Vermin - lvl 31]

[You have defeated a Rottenfang Vermin - lvl 29]

...

[Redistribution - lvl 17 > Redistribution - lvl 18]

[Lvl 80 > Lvl 81]

Oh nice, more mana, I guess.

I step back and let Isabella release her flames. A blue flame melts the cobblestone in some places and sets wooden pieces of the houses around us ablaze. They coil around us, reminding me of a serpent that then hungrily attacks and burns the monsters surrounding us.

Vermin, Chameleon Bats, and weaker monsters get burned nearly immediately, sometimes not leaving anything behind.

I grab Isabella in my arms and use kinetic energy generated by my heart to propel us away quickly before the Gargoyle with glowing tattoos all over its body smashes into the ground.

Two perceiving touches of the Wererats reach me and they continue calling for more and more vermin to attack me while using some sort of mental attack that I get rid of by activating my mana more and entering deeper [Focus].

Blue flames roar once again, following the Gargoyle that continues to run, jump, and fly to avoid them, all in spectacular order, sending shockwaves into the surroundings from all the power it is using to strengthen its body. Flames melt and burn the monsters that get in the way, yet are still unable to catch the monster that now dashes at us and forces Isabella to create a bubble of flames around us, in an attempt to stop the monster.

A mistake that would have cost her life if it weren't for me.

I send disruptive mana towards one side and jump out from her defensive flame shield and at the same moment, the Gargoyle passes through the opposite side, ignoring the flames brightly burning on its skin and smashing the place where we stood before.

A cone of kinetic energy hits its head, unfortunately only making it stagger backward with a terrible wound on its face. Then without any hesitation, it dashes right towards us.

I continue to push against the air, buildings, and streets to dodge its strong swiping attacks that partially destroy houses, crack the ground, and obliterate a few vermin that are dumb enough to get close.

Another surge of flames comes out of the little girl's hand, this time weaker than before, her reserves already dwindling. The monster dodges them easily only to be hit by my dark yellow flame, its strength still weaker than Isabella's.

Detecting presence behind, I turn around, my flames burning two Chameleon Bats sneaking up on us, giving the Gargoyle time to move closer only to miss us as I use kinetic energy to push against the monster, propelling us away and slowing down the monster.

It charges again, and I reach out, absorbing its kinetic energy to slow it down before dashing away once again.

Then I make a mistake, a small silly mistake.

As I jump away, mana slips out of my control because of a sharp pain hitting my side, the aftereffect of creating my construct, and my weakened body staggers, for a moment not strengthened by mana. The Gargoyle reaches us in that short moment, its massive hand swinging right at the center of my balance, the place where Isabella is.

A kid. Small, young, innocent kid.

Damn, this is going to hurt, isn't it?

I throw Isabella away from me, even using some energy to gently push her with my kinetic energy. Still, she screams as she rolls on the ground, probably gaining plenty of bruises.

My eyes stay focused on the center of the balance of the Gargoyle and with my peripheral vision, I see the fist moving closer and closer, barely having time to reach with [Redistribution] to absorb some of this energy and to boost my endurance through Symbiotic transference.

My body screams in pain even before the fist hits me, throwing me against the side wall of a house, a few of my ribs surely cracked.

But instead of pain, something else goes through my mind as I get back on my feet.

Rage.

A wild rage that is kept at bay by [Focus] since the end of the second floor. My feeling of powerlessness during the last moments of Ruby and the second floor, rage at Sophie for deleting who knows what memories of mine, rage at the system that always feels like messing with us.

Rage at this damn monster that continues to attack me like it's some hot stuff. And rage at me for making so many mistakes and hurting my body because of my impatience.

So, I let go, and [Focus], which keeps running almost permanently, always being fed by some mana to help me concentrate and forget useless stuff, weakens. I don't completely turn it off; I just slightly weaken its hold on my emotions, loosening some of my logical thinking.

The monster dashes again, while a few rats already attack Isabella, and wererats continuously call for more monsters while keeping their disgusting probing on me.

This time I do not dodge and face the gargoyle.

The third of my mana should be fine, right? I change the setting of Mana regulator and my heart thumps wildly as my eyes sharply follow the gargoyle.

You are so dead.

Chapter 114: Saint's Eternal Bastion

First heartbeat.

Armor made of mana appears on my body. As always it's super simple and not very intricate.

Second heartbeat.

The Gargoyle reaches me and I use all this kinetic energy to strengthen my body, but this time not only my endurance but also my speed while my head rings and my body continues to complain.

Before the fist reaches me, I grab it and, using the energy of the monster's swing, I throw it over my shoulder, against the wall of the house. The monster is sent flying through the wall and into the room. Without even turning around, two cones of absorbed kinetic energy shoot behind me, obliterating two invisible monsters sneaking up on Isabella.

Another heartbeat and I dash inside the room, punching the gargoyle right in its face, making it stagger backwards before dodging under its swing and hitting its bottom chin. Then I use the force of its attack to throw it on the ground, stepping on its neck.

What now you asshole? Did you have fun?

Mana explodes from the gargoyle and I get pushed away, crashing through the wall and as I stand up, the monster is already in front of me, throwing another hit at me.

I watch its stance, its shoulder, and its movement, and more mana and kinetic energy flow through my body and this time I do not dodge, I slightly shift my body, letting the monster hit my strengthened arm, only so I can follow with my knee burrowing into its chest, throwing it against the wall.

Then I dash against it and boost my strength, hitting the middle of its face and sending it crashing through the house, and back on the streets.

I absorb the kinetic energy from the falling house and use it to strengthen my body even further, again reaching the gargoyle and I burrow my feet into the ground, twist my body, and with as much strength I can muster, kick the Gargoyle that crashes deep inside another house.

I ignore the screams of my logical mind and my body in pain.

Sword? Oscillation? Disruption?

That wouldn't feel so satisfying. I need to move my body, I need to feel my fist hitting something. I need to vent and tear this guy apart.

I lift two stones as big as my fist and throw them towards where I feel these annoying probing touches, only to boost them with a massive amount of kinetic energy. Two stones fly as a rocket and in a split second both of them reach their target. Two notifications and disgusting touches on my presence disappear.

The gargoyle is back once again and this time I reach out and [Redistribution] explodes at full power, slowing the monster to a crawl, and at the same time, I release that same energy inside my body, strengthening it, boosting my speed, increasing my endurance so it won't break apart.

One quick step and my fist hit its chest and before it's thrown crashing into another house, I grab its arm and pull. The monster flies away and the arm stays in my hand.

This time I get to the monster and before it reacts, I swing with its arm in my hand against its head, sending it staggering backwards before another hit smashes its skull, denting it inside. I let go of the arm and using the power of my body hit its head, literally tearing it from its neck and sending it flying away.

[You have defeated the Battle Gargoyle- lvl 99]

Okay, quickly back to 5% of Mana Regulator and continue to use all this absorbed energy to keep my body strengthened, I don't even want to know what will happen if it stops increasing my endurance.

Hmm, let's rather increase it to 10%.

Damn, that was dumb. So goddamn dumb. Extremely dumb. But it felt so good. I finally feel like I let go of some steam building inside me. Now I need to continue to use kinetic energy to keep my body stronger until it heals or until I find Lily. Let's also ignore the burning mana circuit, yup. Easy.

Totally worth it.

"Are you fine?" I ask while inspecting Isabella and she nods, scratched with some bruises from the fall but otherwise uninjured, only maybe slightly light-headed because of mana usage.

I keep forgetting that other people's mana pools are usually much smaller than mine. Most of them put much fewer stat points into the stat.

Actually, if I think about it, isn't it possible that Isabella's strength stat is much higher than my base one? Dang it, this is more than possible. I'm also totally sure of that. Yet, something stops me from asking. I don't want to know for sure.

I want to continue to tell myself that it doesn't have to be so, a 10-year-old girl's strength is more than mine. If I ever lose my mana I'll get wrecked. Obliterated.

Maybe even by Lily?

Okay, let's focus a bit more on developing techniques that will allow me to endure skills that would block my mana or make it unusable.

"You don't seem fine." the strong little girl says.

"I'm fine." Little kids shouldn't be worried about such stuff. Yet I know that she probably felt my lie, her skill allowing her to do so and me still unable to track it.

Thankfully she doesn't say anything and for a few minutes, we just sit there, surrounded by destroyed houses and the corpses of the monsters. We sit there while I, with my eyes closed, try to catch my breath and push the pain to the back of my mind.

Am I that untalented when it comes to skills that would help me regenerate my body or heal it? I think as I continue to try, remembering the feeling of Lily's warm mana and its movement and even try to copy Hadwin's weaker self-healing skill.

Yet there are no results, none at all. In the same way, I can't use Tess's skill or Sophie's skill, I can't even boost my healing.

My theory is that it's something very difficult to do and maybe it's something I'm not good at. In the same way, it's impossible for others to learn as many skills as me and use them so quickly. Our talents are just different.

But I'll get there, I won't stop until a regenerative skill lands in my hands! I already missed out on a few passive skills that would slightly boost my regeneration. For some weird reason. I don't even know why.

What dumbass would pick skills to improve their mana, heh.

Adaptive Physiology, I miss you. I even miss the traits I was offered, Regenerative Tissue, Adaptive Resistance and always, there is always only one person to blame.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - BenDover? I'll fuck you up if we meet in the tournament.

BenDover (Hell, IDK) -

I close the community again, feeling slightly better.

The story goes like this. Once, tens, maybe hundreds of years ago, a beautiful kingdom existed. Not unlike the kingdom or empire from the second floor. A kingdom full of gifted people. Mages, warriors, healers, they were everywhere.

Kingdom full of wonders. Beautiful building, tools powered by mana, healers able to restore limbs.

Oliver, his wife, and his kid don't know what happened - in the end they live far from the center of the city where most of the knowledge is, but they know something happened. Something bad.

Something that created Decay. The variant of mana that takes over the monsters and sometimes even people only to make them seemingly undead, dangerous, mutate them, and twist their being.

Billions of people died to it, unable to fight Decay and getting infected. Just a simple exposure for a long enough time could be dangerous, just having too weak mana would get you infected. So billions of people got infected, farmers, workers, and most of the people that didn't handle mana got infected first, totally ruining the food supply and sending panic through the continent.

And slowly the Decay grew in power, after a few months infecting even people that used to be able fight with mana.

So under the iron rule of the king, they collected all the uninfected people and grouped around him, his three warriors, and the Saint. The saint created a field that covers a huge area and doesn't allow Decay to infect people within that and that's where the city started.

Years passed and every single human still alive that got this information moved to this city that expanded well beyond its intended size.

We are currently in the outskirts of it, slums if you will, where the most unlucky collect, and the deeper you go into the city and closer to the saint and the last king the safer it is.

But not everything is okay, tens of years, and generations passed and even the center of the city has to deal with Decay that even changed the weather. There is no rain, food is scarce and the monsters are moving closer and closer, either through weakening the field made by the Saint or the Decay getting stronger.

On the outskirts, no one knows what's happening deep in the city, but it seems that the stronger monsters are able to push even deeper than where we currently are and there is no leadership, no help coming anymore, not for years.

Everyone left on their own in this dying world.

The last city on the planet.

Saint's Eternal Bastion.

Chapter 115: Don't worry

POV Aaron Dalton

Damn, why me? Why did I have to end up with these two psychos? Once again, I have to watch as Tess and Sophie stand against each other, their mana flaring ominously.

"It has nothing to do with logic. People don't think logically in situations like this. It's you and him that are not normal!" Sophie screams at Tess.

Their confrontation scares me. Tess is terrifyingly powerful, and Sophie is too. But maybe it's good if they talk this out like this?

"You don't need to worry. If he said he will protect her, he will do it," Tess answers calmly.

Sophie paces nervously, "Look, Tess, I know you understand him better than me. I realize that, but I just can't... She's my sister. She won't even join the community. How do I know she is fine? I only have his word."

"Yes, but there's nothing you can do. So bursts of emotions like this won't help you much."

I feel pressure on my mind as Sophie turns to Tess, her eyes deep as the ocean.

"If you try something on my mind, I'll... I'll react appropriately," Tess smiles, remaining calm even under Sophie's disturbing glare. "We don't have to fight, Sophie. It won't help me, it won't help you, and it surely won't help your sister."

Tess finally stands up and takes a few short steps towards the other young woman. Both of them stand against each other, their mana forcing me to take a few steps back and making the house creak.

“Think about this: let's say you're able to control me, what do you think he would do if you finally meet without me being there, or if he finds something in my mind?”

Tess steps even closer, her face almost touching Sophie's.

“You don't realize how lucky you are. I know what you did to him, to his mind back on the first floor. Sophie, you don't know how much he values his own mind, his freedom. At the moment, only your current or maybe future usefulness keeps you alive,” her voice drops to a whisper, “But don't worry, Nathaniel and I have a deal, we work together. So Sophie, work with me too, work with him. We don't have to fight.”

Finally, Sophie pushes the blonde away, and despite having a much higher physical stat, allows herself to be pushed back.

“I like you, Sophie, I do. So I'll help you a bit and I'll put in a good word for you. So don't worry, okay? You and your sister will both be safe.”

Throughout this entire time, Tess seems like the one with the ability to manipulate others.

The most amazing fact is that Sophie knows it. She knows that Tess is saying the words she thinks Sophie needs to hear. Yet, even when Tess simply says what she thinks we want to hear, Sophie and I can't help but be moved by her words.

She's scary.

Do I have to put more stats into my constitution? The inferior stat that pales in comparison to glorious mana? Probably. It's the right thing to do, the smart thing to do. Yet all the stat points from the level up went into mana.

Must be a bug or something. I blame the system.

Anyway, I'll endure it. It hurts, it's risky, but I trust in myself and my decisions. To become stronger in the future, I will risk it now. I gave it some thought, and part of me is worried about what awaits us on the later floors, especially back on Earth.

If every other tutorial is the same as ours, it means that 4 tutorials have already ended and these people are most likely back on Earth. People who also went through Hell Difficulty.

I was given an opportunity and something that finally made me feel some sort of excitement and need, so I won't go through all of this only to find out that I didn't put enough effort into it and get stepped over by someone else from Hell difficulty tutorial.

Yet, I wonder, what made me think that mana is the way? Was it my fascination with it, this weird force that I can control with my mind? Was it the feeling of its strength flowing through my body and seeing what is possible with it?

Partially? There is also some logic I follow. Mana is used to activate and feed skills. It can be used to strengthen the body, burn things, manipulate people, or levitate things. Everything relies on mana.

So isn't having a lot of mana and skills the best combination?

Yes, I could go for a more physical stats-oriented build, and I'm sure I would excel there, as I'm talented when it comes to moving my body. Not the most talented, I never was, but I always went a step further than others, and always pushed harder. But, I hate to say it, it never made me as happy as I thought it would and right now, even in the terrible situations we are going through, I feel real.

I feel like everything I do matters.

Okay?

Okay.

Let's keep it up.

I stand up, continuously strengthening my body by transforming the kinetic energy of my heart into endurance. A few minutes ago, I made the mistake of stopping, and I almost lost consciousness.

Oh, and I also fell to the ground. It can't be the fault of my stats, right?

[Name:

Difficulty:Hell

Floor:3 - Saint's Eternal Bastion

Time left until forced return:4y 270d 21h 03m 31s

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

Lvl 82

Strength: 24

Dexterity: 22

Constitution: 72

Mana: 251

[Primary Class:Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 29

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 29

Perception - Lvl 23

Oscillation - Lvl 20

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 19

Armament - Lvl 23

Mana Surge - Lvl 12

Disruption - Lvl 13

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Kinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

[Upgrade token: 1]

[Difficulty change token: 1]

Unsurprisingly, even my other stats grow even though I'm not investing stat points into them. A tiny bit, but it's something, right?

My constitution is growing because of all the pressure I put on it. Strength and dexterity, too, as they are trying to catch up to me almost permanently strengthening my body with mana. It's not significant, just a stat point here and there, but hey, it's free.

I let out a yawn and lean against the wall. All of us are currently in an underground room, and its walls are imbued with some weird material that blocks the perception of mana from wererats on the outside.

Even I wasn't able to find it. Only Cipher opening the door allowed me to find them and join them, along with Isabella.

As for the little girl, she's already asleep, sitting on the ground nearby. I'm jealous, I want to sleep too, but I can't because that would mean no strengthening of my body, which equals a lot of pain. So yup, looks like I'll have to stay awake for a few more days.

"What?" I ask Cipher, who just continues to look towards me the entire time we are in.

He and his group are sitting close to each other, and the opposite of them sits the family of natives from this floor. They seem to be calmer now, but still far from being friendly or trusting.

The room we are in is quite cold and underground, heated by the thermal energy that I release into the room deep under the ground.

“Why would you do that?” Cipher finally asks.

Oh, so that's what's bothering you. You don't like that you don't understand me properly, right? I can see that it pisses you off, no matter how hard you try to hide it from me. Even though I like to stay on my own, I'm pretty good at reading people's faces.

Something I had to learn as a kid or get beaten. Good old times, right?

I don't answer him and just close my eyes and filter them out while continuing to send heat into the room and keeping my body strengthened. My eyes land on the small body of a little girl sleeping and laying with her back against the cold wall.

Ha, little kids shouldn't go through this.

I change the way I release the heat to start releasing it only from one side and a bit further away from me, and move closer to Isabella, pulling her away from the wall and letting her lean against me.

I send some gentle heat towards her small body and notice that she relaxes in her sleep, not waking up at all during my actions. Only then do I remember that I had her guard me during the night while I slept. Her, a small 10-year-old girl. At that time, the thought of her age didn't even cross my mind.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Isabella is sleeping. Don't worry, she is fine and I will take care of her.

I answer Sophie in the community and lean back with a sigh.

Being alone is simpler, isn't it?

Chapter 116: Rumor

"So, my best friend Samantha did go play outside without me. Even Elie was there and they didn't even call me! They also took Elie's cute cat with them, I always wanted to see it!"

"Wow, that isn't very nice of them."

"Right? I didn't even see Elie's cat because we all got to Hell."

"Wow, that sucks... that's too bad." I react automatically and little Isabella continues to talk and talk while I answer her once in a while.

Help.

Help me.

"I'll tell Doggo to play with you if you stay quiet for a while. Maybe practice your skills a bit or something."

"Oh, okay! That's already 9 times you have to tell Doggo to play with me!" Isabella chirps happily.

You're counting that?!

Also, please forgive me Biscuit, it's all for the greater good. My good.

I look at Isabella, little devil, she isn't doing it on purpose, right? It can't be.

"Nathaniel," I lift up my head to look at Cipher then comes closer, mana focused in his eyes as he looks at me, "Can I talk with you? It's important."

Hmm, let's see what he wants, "Go ahead."

"I need you to help me level more, I want to improve my skill so I can create more water."

Huh, it's kind of logical, but somehow I don't like the way he says it. He's right, but somehow it feels like he came to me already knowing how I will answer as if it's only a formality for him and I'm a tool for him to reach his goals.

Quite cheeky these people from Hard Difficulty, aren't they?

In answer, I just nod, pushing my annoyance to the back of my mind with the help of [Focus]. He leaves to join his group and I notice Isabella looking at me with her big eyes.

"I don't think it's good if you push all the emotions away," she says quietly.

What would you know? People are stupid, annoying, arrogant, and sometimes too dumb or smart for their own good. To deal with them, to increase my chance of survival I have to push some emotions away. So isn't it better to think logically? To not get swayed by useless feelings?

[Focus] is great for that and close to level 30 I'm slowly being able to isolate certain feelings. I also run it continuously, worried that the situation with the gargoyle will repeat or useless emotions will appear again.

Yes, I'm a coward.

I ruffle her hair, "Don't worry about it, just practice, okay?" I stand up, my kinetic mana heart still sending energy through my body that I use to ignore my wounds and I join the natives we met and Cipher, Freeze, and Goldie.

"So how can we catch these sparrows you guys here eat? And what about water?" Cipher is asking natives about sparrows they mentioned when we asked them about food.

"Sparrows are really hard to catch, they are fast and can ignore some magic. We have special traps for them, but only in bigger groups, we got split from. Water can be collected from temporal springs in the tunnels under the city," he stops, looking around for a moment, "They are hard to find and no one knows the exact timing or place."

Only now I notice how thin all three of them are. But there is nothing we can do. The food we have is almost nonexistent and the water Cipher can create is quite limited his skill is quite difficult and I don't think I'll be able to replicate it anytime soon.

On the second floor, I saw Lissandra connecting to Ruby's skill, powering it and using it. But that's not something current me is able to do. Somehow it is even more difficult than learning the skill from scratch.

With my [Perception] I feel Isabella messing up her skill and the blue ball of flame that hovers in front of her is about to explode, again.

With a sigh, I send a wave of disrupting mana towards her, dissipating her skill and stopping the explosion that would most likely kill the natives and maybe some people from hard difficulty.

"Sorry!" she says cheerily.

"So you have no maps and don't even know where your group is?" Cipher continues after a while, probably not even realizing what happened, only surprised by Isabella apologizing.

"It's hard to find them, everyone is hiding." this time it's the woman who says, "If monsters detect you you need to run away. If you kill the monsters you can only kill 10 at most or more of them will start appearing. And never leave a house during the night, there are even stronger monsters lurking around.

Oh? Finally some new information. Should I have a nice nighttime walk sometime?

"So how did you find the hideout if you don't know where you even are?" there is some hostility in his voice as he says so.

"There are marks! Hideouts are all over the city, you just need to find a mark that will lead you to one. There are hundreds, thousands of them!" the man quickly says.

He then starts showing us what kind of marks we need to follow and what they mean and I make sure to memorize it all, even calling Isabella here and having him repeat it.

The entire time he feels honest and even the little girl confirms it to me a bit later.

He also tells us the most interesting thing. A rumor. The closer you are to the center of the city, the stronger the monsters are, but also your healing speed is sped up to the point that there are rumors that people in the middle of the city are immortal.

Hadwin (Hell, group 4) -Yes, food is and will be a problem.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, TheGuild) -We met a few natives and it looks like they need much less food and water than we do. One of our members thinks it's because through the years their bodies adapted, maybe with the help of the field that covers the city.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) -

Savant (Hell, Alone) - I'm sure I've traveled over 100 miles since I got here, yet the city still goes on.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -The hell, that's insane.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - There could be some weird magic at work, sensory confusion, some sort of space magic - I wouldn't be surprised if something like this did exist.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Did anyone leave the houses at night? I heard there are some strong monsters lurking around.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Yes, your sister is safe, do not spam the chat.

Soph (Hell, group 4) -Oh

Savant (Hell, Alone) - Only one question mark monsters. There are a few named ones one question mark in between them. Do you still put everything into mana?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -What do you think?

Savant (Hell, Alone) - Heh

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Food!

Oh, you found some food? Good job, Biscuit!

Hadwin (Hell, group 4) -Noname, we are passing by some area that is covered in toxic mist. If you pass by it try to look around, we will leave some marks.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Understood, will do the same.

"So what's the level of your skill?" I ask Cipher directly and I can immediately see that he doesn't like the question. But it's not like he has reason to keep it for himself in this context.

He requires my help and he knows I will help as I'm someone who thinks about this kind of stuff logically.

"Level 11," he says in the end and his group looks at him with surprise.

"Already level 11? Wow, that's really high, isn't it?" a woman called Goldie says.

"Way to go!" another man adds. All while I just look at them with a big feeling of surprise.

That's it? Level 11 and they are surprised?

"Yeah, I did work pretty hard on it," Cipher smiles, seemingly proud of his skill.

Hmm, is it as I thought? The biggest difference between Hell and Hard difficulty people will be in their skill levels and experience?

"And level?" This time he pauses for even longer so I add, "I need to know how much mana you can have so you can use your skill more." I add, knowing that the way he is trying to act now doesn't allow it to keep it for himself.

The man trapped himself by asking me for help.

"60," he says shortly.

The heck? How is he that weak with so mana stats? I was stronger than him at around level 10-20? Is it the difference in difficulty?

"What is your level?" he asks in exchange and I notice the curious looks both of his partners give me.

"Not telling," I say shortly, feeling some amusement in the looks they give me.

My attention is brought to the three natives we met. Taking care of them will be annoying but they also possess some useful information so it's not like I can ditch them before they show us how to hunt for food or how to find water.

"Can you deal with the three of them?" I turn to Cipher and the man nods.

Let's do what I do best and ditch the annoying responsibilities on other people.

Chapter 117: Sparrow

"So, your first floor was to survive in the forest for one month, but there was no deadly rain, no nights without the sun, and in the end, you only had to fight against groups of strong monsters or continue to run away from them."

"Yes, that's it."

Damn it, isn't it more like easy difficulty?

"And the second floor?"

"A mana-infused kingdom and the floor quest was to witness the destruction of the capital. It was really terrifying. They called him Paragon, and he totally destroyed it in a few minutes, a city with probably millions of people" this time it's Goldie who says it, a young woman with blonde hair.

Oh? So they even nerfed paragons? And what the heck? They call this Hard?

Then one option hits me. Is it possible that people in our difficulty were nerfed as well? Did they weaken Lissandra, the Champions, Paragons, and the emperor?

That... is a scary thought.

Taking a moment, I send perceiving mana as far as I can and when I don't detect anything other than vermin, I decide to stay here a bit longer and hunt.

My way of going about leveling Cipher and his skill is to force him to use it and to fight the monsters on his own while I help only when really needed to not take experience from him. Yes, that also makes him unable to create water for us as he continues to spend his mana but if he levels up the skill, it should be worth it.

An interesting thing is the way the trio of Natives looks at him as he uses water to fight the monsters. Their eyes are big and excitement is clearly visible in their sporadic movement and their voices as they talk between themselves. Cipher noticed it as well and there is a shine in his eyes as the man surely puts his worth even higher.

Another thing is that Goldie and the icy guy wanted to join more direct power-leveling but I quickly refused and they have to look for monsters and hunt on their own. I help them only if it's really dangerous, a small request from Cipher.

He sure is a greedy one, isn't he? He really knows the worth of his skill. I push the annoying feeling to the back of my mind with the help of [Focus]. Again.

I sense Isabella moving closer and soon she pulls my sleeve and when I turn to her she hesitates for a second and in the end, only shakes her head and leaves.

Okay?

Now then, what should I do to the Alghoul that is moving closer to our position?

After saying a few words of warning, I jump on the roofs with a small help of boost of kinetic energy and then send a bit more mana into my kinetic mana heart, collecting the kinetic energy it generates. I move towards the monster until it senses me and looks up at me on the roofs.

[Alghoul - lvl 86]

Soon enough green flames start glowing around the monster, flames able to corrode mana and regenerate its decaying body parts.

I jump down on the street and the monster instantly dashes at me, its flames illuminating the street in sickly green light and the cobblestones under its feet cracking under the pressure. My heart thumps, generating even more energy and I step towards the monster, releasing it all in a thin cone that goes right through its middle, separating its upper and lower body.

Unsurprisingly, the monster doesn't even slow down and the upper body continues to move towards me, using only its hands, while the lower body twitches with its legs, trying to move closer.

Two more heartbeats and I release a cone of dark yellow flame that hits the monster's head. I continue to generate more energy, turning it into thermal energy, and then powering the flame that continuously roars and slowly starts melting the monster as its green flame slowly loses some of its power.

I continue to shoot them for over a minute, slowly improving them, reducing the cone slightly, and speeding up the process of transferring the energy. I reduce the waste and notification rings and I use [Mana Surge] to boost the mana going into my kinetic heart.

[Mana Surge - lvl 12 > Mana Surge - lvl 13]

Finally, the monster dies and even its legs stop moving, leaving only charred small pieces behind.

[You have defeated an Alghoul - lvl 86]

[Lvl 82 > Lvl 83]

Huh? Not a named one? That's interesting? Is it because we are getting closer to the center of the city?

I cut off the flames, not fully satisfied with the result. I tried to boost thermal energy with [Mana Surge] but I wasn't able to, so I boosted mana going into my heart - something I could do with my Mana Regulator

Thermal and Kinetic energy is somehow different from mana even though they are using some mana to activate them. So either it's impossible to boost the results with surge or it only means that I'm unable to do so at the moment.

When I get back, Isabella comes running with a big smile on her face.

"I did catch 2 invisible ones! I was finally able to feel their heat and burned them!"

Am I, not the greatest one? I should start charging for my advice, for my mentorship. I am carrying this group so hard that my back hurts.

Isabella is still looking at me as if expecting something. What does she want? Why is she looking at me so impatiently? Say something.

She doesn't say anything and then it hits me, oh I see.

"Good job," I say and even these two simple words make her face light up and she nods, her hair flying around as she does it so wildly.

Her black hair somehow reminds me of my sister. Isabella looks so happy and innocent it somehow makes me want to bully her slightly, to make her shout at me in her small voice that is more cute than angry, reminding me of a screaming little kitten.

Victoria, my dear sister, you were never so cute when you were younger and I was the teased one, having to get revenge by being super petty when the chance offered.

Sparrow me... sparrows. Hehe. I hate them. These little assholes are slightly bigger than a sparrow you would see on Earth, maybe around the size of a big pigeon.

That's all good, finally some meat you would think, right?

Little assholes disappear the moment the tiniest whiff of my perceiving mana touches them. They fly away so quickly I'm barely able to track them.

The second sparrow we find disappears even without it. We just watch it from a distance, hidden inside one of the houses, not even using mana. The sparrow then turns to us and disappears quickly, as if feeling us looking at it.

Like what the heck is this even?

Oliver tells us that they usually catch them by using traps that are tens of years old, maybe hundreds, and with difficult enchantings on them that no one from their group knew how to decipher or replicate.

Well, not on my watch! Traps? Pfft, I'll catch it easily and finally, after a few days, I'll eat a decent amount of food. Others can look, it will make the food taste even better.

Oh, I could also use thermal energy to try to cook it. A lot of practice is a good amount of practice!

So prepare, I create a small mana orb, carefully not to leak a lot of mana, and I make it dense and firm. When we, after a few hours and a few more fights, spot another sparrow, I'm ready.

The orb flies at the bird at a speed that is comparable to it. Creating a beautiful line of blurred blue mana behind it as it pierces through the air, missing a few houses, and accurately aiming at the sparrow.

And it misses.

Huh?

The sparrow lazily shakes its wings and its head turns towards me. It's too far for me to hear but it opens its beak and lets out some noise. Then it gets ready to fly away.

Are you making fun of me?

I stop hiding and 5 more orbs spin around me and then fly at the bird, boosted by [Mana Surge] and [Redistribution].

All of them miss.

"..."

The sparrow then lifts up and flies a bit closer, its tiny black eyes looking right towards me from the distance of a few football stadium fields.

You.

I release more of my mana and the bird doesn't move at all, even after feeling it all, I only get confused looks from people with me. The orb I create now is as big as a smaller watermelon and it spins around

me, already letting out a whistling noise as it pierces the air, continuously boosted by my skills to higher and higher speed.

[Armanent - lvl 23 > Armanent - lvl 24]

[Mana Surge - lvl 13 > Mana Surge - lvl 14]

The orb is perfectly round and barely visible to the naked eye, instead of it looking like a blue hoop around my waist. With one last push, I release it, swinging it straight towards the animal.

The orb obliterates a few broken walls in its way and in a split second reaches the sparrow, missing it by the length of my palm while the sparrow doesn't move at all.

Okay.

Okay!

This is getting personal.

Under the influence of my emotions I feel my [Focus] weaken and I change the setting of my Mana Regulator to give my Kinetic Mana Heart 30% of my mana. Then I quickly transform all the energy into propulsion, propelling myself towards where the bird is.

Chapter 118: Food

Here I am, alone in the desolate city, a noble human on his graceful hunt. Only my prey isn't a powerful beast, a majestic dragon, or a sneaky griffin.

No, it's a goddamn sparrow. A bird not much bigger than the oversized pigeon, and apparently blessed with the agility of Biscuit when he is trying to steal some food.

I stalk my nemesis with inhuman determination... well, let's call it a determination of a bulldozer, as I'm currently crashing into walls here and there, unable to fully control my speed.

I can't help but see the irony: A mighty me reduced to a maniac chasing down a bird. Yet as I plow through the city and the walls, I think how absurdly ridiculous it all is.

But! I can't give up. At this point this is personal! I swear this little asshole did laugh after I missed the last attack.

I swear this sparrow did laugh at me! I'm not crazy.

I boost my body more and then push to the side to dodge one of the houses while my [Perception] tracks the animal that continues to fly in between houses at dizzying speeds while all the orbs I threw at it miss.

Surely either something's confusing my vision, my perception, or some sort of field is redirecting my attacks slightly.

In just a short moment after the start, we pass a lot of distance and I'm leaving craters behind me as I continue to pump more and more kinetic energy to propel myself to the point you could call it flying.

The bird flies inside the house and I brace myself against the impact as I come crashing inside while sending waves of perception into the surroundings to track it.

It flies outside and I follow it only to stop a moment later after the bird out of nowhere doubles its speed to stop a few seconds later, looking back at me.

Haaaaaaa.

Haaa.

I stomp once, releasing all the kinetic energy I hold, making my surroundings crack and sending a shockwave into the street that breaks all the windows and cracks some walls.

Then I activate Mana regulator once more and lower amount of mana going to my Kinetic Heart.

My return is shameful as I run back through the streets that I bulldozed through while following the sparrow. The houses I hit, and the cobblestones I destroyed. I have lost and somehow I'm sure I feel the bird's gaze on me as I move back to the group.

"Where is the bird?" the icy guy asks the moment I come back only to be poked by Cipher who just looks at me and shrugs his shoulders.

"I already ate it." I say and Cipher stops him once more before the man says something else.

"You are lying!"

Oh no, Isabella, please don't make it worse.

"You didn't catch it at all! It ran away!"

You can't break a man's pride like that. That's just pure evil.

"I think it only wanted to play with you,"

Help.

"It didn't even see you as danger, I think it was... how was the word? Amused?"

Please Help.

Somehow it was decided that the little girl will be keeping a watch, having to stay quiet. It's all pure coincidence and it will help her train her skills. She doesn't like it, saying it's not fun, but we are a team, aren't we?

It was decided by me.

The icy guy somehow ended up having to fight with more monsters than he was used to. Unfortunately, I was unable to stop them in time. There are too many of them, you know, poor me, hungry, still beaten was unable to stop them all.

But why is he complaining so much? They wounded him only a few times, barely more than scratches, there is no need to be such a prima donna about it.

“So, how many did you get?” I ask Isabella after jumping on the roof next to her.

“Three invisible ones! They almost got to them and they didn't even notice, “ she points her small hand at the trio down there fighting with vermin, “they are weak!” the little girl adds.

I can't help but to agree. Well, I'm sure they are hiding useful skill or two but even with similar levels and stats they are lacking.

“About the bird...” before Isabella finishes her sentence I reach with my right hand and pinch and pull her cheek. It's soft and it stretches out slightly, “ouch” she mumbles, hitting my arm with her tiny hands and after a while I let go and she grabs her slightly red cheek.

“You are mean!” her pouting face is somehow cute and it makes me want to bully her even more. But I hold back and instead of that, I check my skills, especially the one that I have trouble getting to level 20.

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 19

I'll have to push a bit harder, maybe I can go outside during the night? That dumbass savant said that there are some strong monsters lurking around so it could be a good practice.

Another thing is that I'm hungry and I already noticed that I started losing some weight, all of us did. We do a lot of fighting, moving around and the food we are getting is minimal. Maybe even the food we are getting isn't as calorie dense? It's annoying. Well, one of the problems is that I'm giving half of my food to Isabella, my weakness showing once again.

I just can't leave her alone as there is no one to take care of her and she is just a kid. Little cheeky girl in a fucked-up situation.

Damn, when she grows up she better take care of Grandpa Nathaniel in the way I did care about her now.

To make myself feel better I pull her cheek again, watching her pout afterward while checking the new side quest.

Side quest: Kill 500 enemies

Rewards:

Common gear of your choice

Food and water rations

Well, it's as expected, also as the reward for the last one I did pick a bag. Somehow I expected it to be a bag with some magic on it. Maybe it's super durable or bigger inside than it looks from the outside.

Nope, it's just a normal ugly bag.

So yeah, I got scammed by the system once more.

Another thing is Cipher. The man is slowly pushing me more and more. He is asking for bigger things, using his water skill as a trade card.

At some point I almost feel like just grabbing him by the neck and forcing him to become my personal water dispenser, but I decide against it. Yes he is annoying but he is useful too, he is already dealing with the trio of natives, taking care of his group and only asking somewhat reasonable things.

He knows the moment I find a better way to get water he is out and probably with a few bruises so he is milking it as much as he can, always careful to not step over the line.

So I just push my growing annoyance to the back of my mind.

Oh, he also keeps using some weird skill. It shows itself by collecting his mana in his eyes. At first, I thought it might be some sort of manipulation skill, maybe hypnosis so I kept my Reinforcement construct running and focusing on defense against mental attacks, but later after watching the movement of his mana and the man I think it's not it.

My suspicion is that it's some skill similar to [Perception], collecting information, maybe doing something else. He always uses it when dealing with me so it also might be something similar to Isabella's skills that allows her to know my intentions and partially my feelings.

I could try to ask him, even force him to tell me but I find it fun trying to find it out on my own.

I stop my thoughts right there, catching a similar mana signature on the edge of my [Perception].

Not waiting a moment later I grab the girl and jump high into the air and while being high up I push against the air, propelling us even further in a weak imitation of flying.

When we reach the place where I felt a signature one word sounds in my mind.

(Asshole!)

Goddamnit, you silly dog, how the hell did you get here?

Biscuit runs towards me, his pink tongue sticking out and his short legs making his body wobble from side to side, the doggo seemingly shaking his butt and it wags its short tail.

I ignore Isabella's excited screams and caress the best doggo of the second... of the third floor.

He continues to shout in my head and it takes a while for him to calm down and then when I expectantly look at him, his head turns to a group of people, all of them looking similar to the trio of natives we met. There is some fear in their eyes and they look towards me, their eyes ticking in between me and Biscuit.

“What is it, Biscuit, your friends?” What did this silly dog do this time?

(Food.)

Huh?

His voice in my head somehow sounds proud and one massive purple tentacle appears from his back pointing at the group of scared people.

(Food!) he repeats happily.

Biscuit?

Chapter 119: Templar Revenant

My eyes keep going between the group of people and the doggo that proudly shouts (Food) while pointing at them with his tentacle.

While I try not to think about what it might mean, Isabella continues to pull my sleeve, reminding me that I promised her she could play with Biscuit 13 times even though I know for sure that I promised it 12 times and she added one, perhaps thinking that I wouldn't notice.

But enough of that, there's more important stuff going on! Did the little dog hoard a bunch of people to eat them? It certainly looks like it, but the longer I observe them, the more I notice that they are not scared of him at all. And damn it, you would be scared if there was some dog herding you like a sheep and using you as food!

Biscuit, you will give me a heart attack one day!

I grab him and lift him up, his hind legs dangling. He still looks like he's smiling as he stares at me while slowly blinking. I shake him slightly and he only woofs at me, seemingly enjoying it.

You silly creature. I sigh and put him on the ground, finally turning to the people.

"What's your relationship with him," I ask simply while pointing at Biscuit who stays by my side. How can a dog look so proud?

Finally, a woman steps in front of the others, seemingly a bit calmer now, "Are you also under the protection of the divine beast?"

Ehm. What?

Biscuit? What did you do?

So it goes like this. Biscuit, alone and desperate for more food, appeared on the third floor, separated from Lily whom he was protecting for me. So he started looking around, not finding anyone from us and not finding any food - this is the part she didn't tell me, but I think it was like this, but it continues.

One day he found them, surrounded by a bunch of monsters, after their hideout lost its ability to hide, probably damaged without them realizing.

Unsurprisingly, the best doggo of the third floor helped them. He heroically smashed them with dozens of mana tentacles.

The group at that point expected to die, being a prize for the great doggo after it destroyed them, but the doggo only said one thing.

(Food)

So they understood, they remembered the legends from their parents. The legends about divine beasts that helped people, always in exchange for something. Some beasts asked for mana, others asked for enchanted items, some maybe asked for sacrifice in form of living beings.

Biscuit asked for food.

So they gave it to him, a pigeon they had hunted with the help of their ancient trap. The divine beast - Biscuit was very happy with that and since then they took him as their protector. The beast protecting them in exchange for food.

They said that he even defeated an weaker Alghoul on his own and I'm just listening to all of it, stupefied.

Are they making fun of me? Are they trolling me?

They don't seem to be, and even little Isabella confirms it, already kneeling and hugging Biscuit who licks her face once in a while, making the girl laugh out loudly from happiness.

The people are horrified, staring as their noble divine beast is reduced to this.

"You can't treat a divine beast like this," the young woman continues to say quietly towards Isabella while the girl continues to pull Biscuit's ears. Isabella also boops his snout and immediately after tells me I was right and it's amazing.

I told you so. So I boop his snout too. Biscuit doesn't seem to mind it that much but the native woman becomes even more horrified.

Her group consists of 8 people, all of them thin and adults, there are no kids in her group and they have only one trap, somehow able to survive on one sparrow every other day. So either their bodies adapted super well or sparrows are super calorie-dense.

Or maybe it's because of the field made by Saint that covers the entire city. They don't know.

So I do what I do best, I ignore their questions and continue to boop Biscuit's snout to the point where he woofs at me.

Don't woof at me! I boop his snout again.

(Asshole!) sounds.

Wow, this time it sounds like he really meant to use the word and didn't just shout it randomly because he likes the sound of it.

We can't have our cute doggo shout such words in the presence of a little girl, right? I ruffle the top of his head and even touch his whiskers, bullying a small creature makes me feel more relaxed.

When we rejoin Cipher, Icy guy, and Goldie and our 3 natives we caught before, I dump them all on Cipher, deciding to get some information from him later, instead of talking to so many people.

My social batteries are almost empty.

At first, the group that seems to think that Biscuit is some sort of divine beast complains, but he barks at them a few times and they quiet down.

Such a good boy, isn't he? He even brought us some food!

He also takes some attention off Isabella from me. The kid now not leaving Biscuit at all and continuously petting him and hugging him and being a good boy as he is Biscuit lets her while enduring it all patiently.

(Assh...) he pauses the moment I turn to him, (Food?) he continues.

Just how smart are you, you rascal? And yes, try to limit the usage of that word while around Isabella.

Yes, she went through... worse... to be bothered by some words but hey, it just doesn't feel right in the same way as being a kid inside Hell Difficulty.

I also reach out with my mana towards the corgi only to find out that he is stronger than before, which isn't such a surprise. His mana feels dense, dangerous, and the burrito-like corgi shows surprising mastery over it, overly motivated by his love of food.

Well, not like I mind it. If he becomes stronger, I can learn a thing or two from him.

But before that, "We should move, quickly," I rejoin the group and tell it to Cipher who just looks at me.

"How quickly?" he asks.

"Very quickly," mana is already flowing through my body when I turn to Isabella and Biscuit, "Be careful, this time a few stronger ones might pass by me."

Not waiting for their answer, I jump on the roof of the house only to move towards the presence I felt.

Did they follow Biscuit's group? Are we now so much easier to detect and even without me noticing and because we are a bigger group now?

I allow a bigger flow of mana towards my Kinetic Mana Heart

The monster appears, alone.

[Templar Revenant - lvl ?]

I can feel its named monster as it moves towards me, ancient-looking armor covering its body and creaking with every step it takes, and under it, a deceased body and bones that move it. It's strong, I can feel that.

The armor on its body starts glowing and a sword made of mana appears in its hand and to my surprise, the monster takes a battle stance, holding the sword in front of it, the tip pointing right towards me with wisps of greenish mana flowing around the blade.

Yeah, nope, thank you, that doesn't look nice, this time I'll be skipping close quarter combat, my body is a mess you know.

Still, I create armor around my body and continue to track the monster with my [Perception] only.

I also create two small shields made out of my mana that float around me while I use my Mana Regulator to pump more mana into the Kinetic heart, now then, let's start with some ranged thermal attack.

The monster moves at the same time I start transferring kinetic energy into thermal one and takes a single step towards me, sending a massive wave of mana into the surrounding. The mana reaches me in a split second, surrounding the roof where I am and my body.

At that moment my hold over mana stumbles and the transfer of kinetic energy into thermal stops, sending a wave of pain through my body from the shock, even the armor flickers.

Even before going through all of that, I immediately jump backwards and start running away, for a moment unable to use any skills and barely controlling my mana.

The roof behind me explodes and from the dust, Templar Revenant steps out, and after few seconds sends another wave of mana at me, a wave of mana so similar to [Disruption] yet weirdly different.

The activation of my skill fails again and one of the shields hovering around me disappears as I lose hold over my [Armament] creation.

The monster's eyes are glowing as it stands there and lifts its sword made of green mana high into the air, the tip pointing towards the sky.

My mana activates at the same time as the monster's and I push against the skills only to get overwhelmed for a moment and mana that I keep using to strengthen my battered and wounded body disappears for a second and the pain goes through me, a sharp reminder of my previous battles.

As if feeling it the monster's head looks towards me, barely a skull and some flesh under the helmet that sometimes could be considered beautiful and elegant.

Few more second pass and another attack containing weirdly disruptive mana reaches me, again targeting my mana strengthening my body.

Is this targeting that on purpose?

Chapter 120: Hunted

Okay, I knew one day I'd have to pay for my excessive reliance on mana and ignoring physical stats as much as possible.

I jump from the roof and barely absorb the energy of my fall, trying to use it to propel myself. The skill fails, and I continue to run on my two legs, hearing the monster crash on the ground behind me.

I grab hold of my mana and focus more, finally able to boost my body for half of a second before losing control over mana.

But even that is something, and I create some distance between me and the monster.

I feel another wave targeting me and roll to the side, collecting a few more bruises but partially dodging the skill. This propels me further ahead, again avoiding the monster.

The entire time I continue to try to enter [Focus] as deeply as I can. The skill at least partially ignores the monster's skill, and my [Mana Manipulation] keeps on running.

Thankfully, my Constructs are still up and running unaffected by the monster and keeping 30% of my mana used for Reinforcement and another 20% for the Kinetic Heart.

The problem is that my heart keeps generating kinetic energy that is currently hard to deal with. But even in the situation I'm in, I stay calm. I always expected something like this to happen, so it's not like I didn't practice.

Before the monster's mana reaches me again, I propel myself as far ahead as I can and then use all the energy my heart generated to propel myself even further, flying through the air and then crashing through the roof.

Here, far enough from the monster, I stop and force myself to calm down more.

Deep breath. Hold. Breathe out.

I reach out inside my body and towards my mana. I grab it, I force it to move and to stay inside my body. I flow it through my circuits and my pathways. My heart beats wildly, each thump sending mana through my body and kinetic energy too.

I deepen my connection with my mana thanks to my passive Cerebral Harmony and then [Focus] on it.

When the monster's skill reaches me again, it crashes against my natural protective barrier that usually doesn't allow others to mess with the mana inside other people's bodies. I strengthen it and push against the attack, decoding how the attack moves, what it does, how it disrupts my skills.

I pump even more of my mana outside of my body, even to the point of turning off the Reinforcement construct, and the entirety of it flares up, stopping the attack at the same moment the monster comes crashing down through the roof and swinging its sword at me.

At that moment, I release all the kinetic energy created by my heart and the house we are standing in explodes in a wave of energy with me in the center that even throws the Revenant far away and crashing against another house.

I quickly Regulate the mana going to my Kinetic Mana Heart and activate my Reinforcement again before dashing away from it while forcing myself to ignore the state my body is in.

I feel the monster start moving again and run to the side, barely avoiding another wave of its weirdly disruptive mana. The way it targets me works so differently than my [Disruption]. It's as if it's trying to pause the movement of my mana for a short moment, which also causes it to ruin my concentration and hold over it.

It's annoying, and I don't like it at all, and it's not only because I'm getting my ass beaten while trying to gain some distance and switch to a ranged attack.

This is another mistake in a massive pile of mistakes I made. Not the fact that I didn't invest stats into physical stats - I long since knew that it's dumb and decided to risk it for my future development.

No, it was a mistake thinking that I'm prepared and I could counter it. I experimented with [Disruption] a lot and even had Hadwin to use his version against me, and I thought I knew what to expect. But the Templar Revenant is different. The best I can describe it is that the monster specialized at hunting mages, people overly relying on mana.

For a test, I shoot one mana orb towards the monster, and it just disappears before even reaching it. It untangles and disappears into fine particles even before reaching it as the monster targets it.

The thermal attack ends up the same, turning into hot air that just glazes close by the monster.

When I shoot my [Disruption] against it, it uses its weird skill, and our skills collide, and mine gets canceled out.

So I just continue to strengthen my body, but I'm unable to do it constantly. Its attacks are fast and nearly impossible to dodge, reaching me in a split second and pausing my hold over mana strengthening my body, so I can only run away, using it in short bursts to keep some distance between us.

I can't even strengthen my body to the point where I could fight it in melee combat as it would only cancel it out, and one hit would be enough to kill me.

Okay, let's take it back to the group, even if they will have their skills disrupted, they should be able to distract it, and I'll kill it before it hurts anyone important.

Sounds good. Let's do just that and quickly before this second presence reaches me.

Ehm, why is it moving so quickly?

The presence reaches two of us in what feels like a few seconds at most from the edge of my perception, and it turns towards me. Standing between me and where the group is. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if it's on purpose.

[Rogue Revenant - lvl ?]

The monster wears remains of leather armor, and its body is much slimmer, with each of its limbs uncharacteristically long. It also holds two daggers, rusted and of crescent shape.

Another named jerk.

Sorry, Izzie, Biscuit, you are on your own for a while.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 29 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 31]

[Focus - lvl 29 > Focus - lvl 30]

[Mana Surge - lvl 14 > Mana Surge - lvl 16]

Who knew that bottlenecks are so easy to break through? Simple, isn't it? You just need two question mark monsters going after you like and push your body and brain to the point they break.

Easy.

I continue to run and push towards where I think the middle of the city is located. Partially because of the hope that it's as natives said, and there is some sort of healing aura in the air the closer you are to the King and his Saint.

Another hope is that I'll meet someone else from our Group 4.

I also don't lie to myself anymore as to why I didn't bring two monsters back to Isabella and Biscuit. One monster should be okay, I would be able to protect them, but two? I don't care too much about Cipher and others - I don't even know them and mostly used them for water, but Biscuit and Isabella? They kind of grew on me even in such a short time, I can't let them die because of this two jerks.

So yeah, it's up to me.

I dodge under another swing with the dagger and propel myself to the side, partially dodging the Templar Revenant's attack, but still, it disrupts my skill, and I barely use a short impulse of my mana through my body to strengthen myself and dodge another stab of the dagger.

The Rogue Revenant is quick, its reach is longer than expected - proof of that being a stab wound in my left arm that I turned towards it, rather wounding the still broken arm even further than injuring my right one.

My heart beats once, and I throw all kinetic energy against the revenant, throwing it against the side of the house, and as a few times before, the monsters slow down in the air and nearly elegantly land with its legs against the wall, immediately jumping towards me.

Another short burst of mana and I jump high in the air, grabbing the edge of the roof with my right arm and pulling myself up only to roll to the side, but the disruptive mana still hits me, and the pain washes through my body again, making me fall to my knees.

With my teeth clenched, I send another wave of mana inside my body and start running and jumping from roof to roof, already feeling both of the monsters following me.

A disruptive wave of mana reaches me, and I rouse my mana as much as I can in my current state and [Focus] on my control over it.

It's my goddamn mana! You won't take it away from me!

Not caring about it at all, my control over mana disappears once again, and all the mana I collected inside my body goes wild once again, hurting me even more before disruption disappears, then I grab control over it again, using it to put more distance between me and the revenants that continue to track me hungrily.