

Tutorial 141

Chapter 141: Two question mark monsters

Tess receives five javelins made from my mana. I made them a bit denser this time so they should last around twenty minutes. She says they're a bit harder to control because they're made of mana that isn't hers, but it's not that bad.

I also give around a hundred small orbs to Kim, which are also made of my mana, and Hadwin gets a mace. That's how we reach the wall and stop in front of it.

I can feel mana all over its surface and it's towering like a skyscraper over us, all around the horizon. There are no holes, no gate, the wall is smooth and it doesn't even seem like it was made from bricks. It's just a single massive piece of... something. To test it out, I create and shoot one javelin at it and it burrows itself into the wall, yet the damage is minimal.

“Okay, as we said before. Nathaniel and I go first, Tess will support us. Kim, if you will.” Hadwin says.

For the last time, he checks if everyone is ready and then we stand on the massive piece of iron platform that Tess and Hadwin did twist and connect from multiple iron doors, pieces of the roof, and materials we found.

Kim then uses his [Gravity Well] and everyone gets affected by it, feeling lighter as well as the platform that he now starts moving slowly up, controlling it so no one will lose balance.

I grab Hadwin and propel us far high into the air, much quicker than the platform. Transforming the kinetic energy of my heart, I propel us a few more times until we reach the top of the wall where I lower the output and we land softly. Quickly joined by Tess further away from us who did something similar with her [Psychokinesis].

Then I look at what lies behind the wall.

Down there are beautiful vast fields full of flowers and with white trees that have almost golden-like leaves. There are no houses as far as I can see and in the distance, yet another wall towers towards the sky. This one is of a beautiful blue and intertwined by veins of lighter blue, seemingly all of this creating some patterns.

There is also something a bit more interesting. A shallow stream of water that flows through vibrant green fields full of colorful flowers and golden leafed trees. But there might be a problem.

[Undead Deer- lvl ??]

[Undead Bear - lvl ??]

[Undead Wolf - lvl ?]

[Undead Wolf - lvl ?]

[Undead Boar - lvl ?]

Damned system.

"I can take them," I say.

"You just said two of them seem to be around level 150, Nat."

"Yup, I can take them."

All of us are already on top of the wall, looking deep down at beautiful fields and immensely strong undead monsters that continue to walk around in the distance, some of them powerful enough to kill all of us if caught unprepared.

"Can't we just jump down, get some water and run away?" Hadwin asks.

"Where is the fun in that?" I ask.

“Nathaniel, we came here to get some water and maybe some food,” the older man ads.

Oh, that's true, isn't it. My eyes move towards Lily and her parched lips. Out of all of us, she drinks the least of our remaining water. The silly girl probably feels that it might be because of her that we lost our source of water.

“One question mark shouldn't be a problem for me and Nat. Or maybe we can have Sophie controlling them and send them to distract the two question marks while we get some water,” Tess says.

Is Tess maybe a genius?

“I should be able to control the wolves for a bit, but I'm not sure about the boar. And there is no chance for me to control two question marks. At most i can stop them for a second or two.” Sophie adds.

There are five monsters in the area we can see. Closest to us are two Undead wolves, the boar is a bit more to our left and closest to the stream and then two question mark Deer and Bear are further in the distance, each of them as big as a house and similarly strong to the undead aberrant weredeer.

“How about we have Sophie manipulate the wolves and have them ready in case the two question marks come closer. Meanwhile, we will kill the boar and get some water before climbing back on the wall?” Hadwin offers.

“I wouldn't rely on the wolves being able to stop the Bear or Deer. Maybe for a few seconds, but not much longer.” I say.

“Well, that complicates things...” the older man sighs while I continue to observe the Deer and Bear.

How strong they are, I want to hunt them. I want to trick them in a similar way I did before and I want them to push me even more than the undead aberrant deer did.

Should I try to snipe them from up here? I'm far enough and if I create an attack strong enough I might be able to one-shot them. But in such a case, how would the remaining two question marks react?

Would they rush at us? Climb the wall? Would I be able to fight back, probably tired after killing the first one?

Others become too noisy as they start talking and brainstorming ideas, so I stand up and move a bit further away from them. I sit on the the wall, my legs hanging from the edge, and I swing them a bit while I observe the monsters far in the distance and the beautiful fields down there.

A few minutes pass, and they're still going on, so I filter out the background noise and only focus on observing my body after the upgrade, especially my left arm. There's something weird with it, some disruption in mana flow in the palm of my restored hand. I've felt it ever since the start of the third floor but mostly ignored it because I thought it was a tiny mistake that happened because of the low level of Lily's skill.

It also doesn't affect me or my mana at all, so I didn't pay much attention to it and only came to observe it once in a while. But now, after the body upgrade, it becomes worse. It's still not affecting my body at all; it's just this weird feeling, as if the palm of my left hand is itching slightly. It's weird and hard to describe.

Anyway, I can cut off my hand if it becomes weird or dangerous. I can have Lily slowly regrow it in the worst case. For now, I'll continue to observe it.

I stop filtering out the background noise, and they're still brainstorming, worried about the monsters or unexpected situations. Even though they all are getting weaker as time passes. Most of us are thin, lips parched as we go without much water for days. I even notice that Lily is barely keeping herself awake and is trying to hide her suffering by constantly using some of her mana to heal her body.

The heck, why are all of you so careful? You need to be a bit more adventurous. You're in Hell Difficulty. A strong will and decisiveness to take risks are a must.

I stand up, and a javelin appears over my head, and I start feeding it with mana. The first one to notice is Sophie, and she immediately pokes Tess, and both of them turn to me.

"Nathaniel?" Tess asks.

The javelin is already getting denser and longer, easily twice my length, "Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

Wisps of light blue mana start flowing through the weapon as I infuse more and more mana into it, "Sparrow Obliterator 4000."

"..."

Wisps of purple mana appear, and I feel the javelin becoming heavier, the weapon as thick as my upper arm and longer than ever before. I [Focus] a bit more and twist it, shape it a bit so when it flies through the air, it will start spinning, the spinning stabilizing its trajectory. I also add a bit more weight to the middle to balance it better.

"It's easy, get ready to jump off the wall to get back behind us, Mrs. Mindblender will control the wolves in case they all rush us and somehow climb the wall. Twin jerks can use their skill to create some illusions to our right in case the monsters get up top," I say.

"That's not a very detailed plan," Hadwin joins, but I see him stretching slightly.

"Nothing ever goes according to plan, Haddy, just get ready to bullshit our way out of it if something happens."

"Haddy..." the older man shakes his head.

The javelin starts humming, and I put all of my attention to holding its shape and stop the mana from exploding while I redistribute and infuse more into it. The tricolored mana wildly swirls inside the weapon, and I realize that I've reached my current limit, so I release my Mana Regulator a bit more, and my heart beats loudly.

I control both, the kinetic energy flowing through my body as well as the javelin that threatens to explode and probably kill us all.

"They don't seem to feel your mana," Tess says.

"That's quite good, isn't it?" Now then, slowly breathe in, infuse a bit more, a tiny bit more. Good.

Ignore the notification. Good.

Grab all the kinetic energy. Good.

And this time, don't push the javelin from behind, try to apply all the energy to the front of the javelin where it's heaviest to make the kinetic energy pull it instead of pushing and wasting so much of it. No, tot like this, this is way too inefficient. I quickly correct the way I do it. Now anchor it, let the mana flow.

Oh, and control the mana a bit more, the weapon almost exploded. Good.

NOW.

The javelin disappears, and I get thrown to the side almost falling down from the edge of the wall because of the shockwave from shooting the weapon. Hadwin grabs me and helps me stop, and while changing my regulator again, I look towards the javelin that is already stabbed inside the deer's hind leg, glowing white and about to explode.

The undead deer's antlers start glowing too and his eyes turn towards the top of the wall where we are, and then he takes a step and disappears into his own shadow. That leaves the javelin behind to explode in the place where the deer used to stand.

My eyes immediately turn to my own shadow, and it starts growing bigger, much bigger. Inside of the shadow one of the Undead deer's giant eyes appears

Chapter 142: Undead Deer - Lvl ??

"Stay on the wall," I shout and propel myself far away from the others, right over the edge of the wall, and I start falling to the place in the city where we came from. Right in between ruined houses and empty streets.

The deer's mana starts to swirl around me, and I feel my shadow expand more and more, and soon enough the deer steps out of it and starts falling towards the ground together with me.

In quick succession, Tess's javelin filled with lightning stabs itself into its back, followed by even stronger lightning that uses the javelin as a lightning rod.

The monster roars, certainly feeling the attack, and for a moment ignores me, turning its eyes towards the top of the wall. I feel its mana move and before it can jump into Tess's shadow, my mana explodes.

[Disruption] boosted by [Mana Surge] hits the monster with the full power I can muster, and it cancels out its "jump", the monster once again turning to me.

Then we finally reach the ground, and both of us land somehow elegantly, without taking any damage.

The deer's mana shines from its antlers and the houses around us start to crumble, only for its debris to be lifted up into the air, floating around the deer. The debris is thrown at me in quantity and with a speed of a terrifying level, and to counter it I create a shield in front of me. The shield is shaped as an oval to make it as small as possible, I also make the front of it thinner and sharper, reaching a bit in front of me and cutting all the debris while thinner sides of the shield let the debris pass by me without the shield taking too much damage.

Debris just keeps coming and getting smashed against my shield I continue to strengthen with tricolored mana.

I feel a few more of Tess's attacks land on the deer and even Sophie's mana reaches towards the monster, stopping its attack for a few seconds, giving me a bit more time to fill my shield with mana.

Then, not unexpectedly, I feel my shadow swell and grow bigger, and to answer that I ignore it. Instead, I push even more mana inside my shield, and it starts vibrating, getting harder and harder to stop it from exploding.

When my shadow expands and the monster appears right next to me, I brace myself, strengthening my body through Symbiotic Transference, and propel myself with more force than before, making me send flying through the debris and smashing them apart with my strengthened body.

I propel myself a few more times in the split second, even hitting a few roofs and houses in my way.

Meanwhile, the tricolored shield behind me I created starts shining brightly, about to explode right after the deer fully steps out of what used to be my shadow.

Good, now let's see how you will tank this.

The mana inside the shield starts to turn into a shining white color and then the shield disappears.

Huh?

Instead of exploding next to the deer, the attack appears right behind me, in my shadow, transported there by the deer's skill.

I see, so that's how we play. I clench my teeth and rouse up my entire mana and then instead of running away, I reach out towards my shield that's about to explode and force it back under my control. A groan escapes my mouth, and my head feels like it's about to explode together with constant grinding that sounds in my ears.

My skills activate one after another, trying to force this monstrous mana back under my control, and I continue to squeeze the shield into a more manageable shape, an orb as big as my fist.

I force all of this mana into the shape that continues to fight against me and threatens to explode at any second, the tricolored mana swirling wildly inside the orb and shining brighter than before while letting out an audible hum.

Meanwhile, the monster's antlers shine once again and the houses around it crumble only to be lifted up and thrown at me and then halfway to be redirected to the sides as if a wave splitting in front of the wall.

A wall that is a young blonde woman.

Tess stands there, lightning cracking along her body while her mana continues to feed her [Psychokinesis] that doesn't push against the monster's much stronger skill, she just redirects it slightly, making it pass by our sides and hit the houses behind us.

Then a rain of dark blue orbs that I made for Kim hits the monster's head, barely doing any serious damage, but clearly pissing it off.

As I continue to try to stop my mana from exploding, I don't have time to feel the deer's mana, but it's easy to guess that it will try to jump into Kim's shadow. But before it does that, Tess's javelin stabs itself deep into its neck and then explodes with lightning mana that tears apart pieces of its Undead neck and that's enough to stop it from jumping away.

The monster turns to Tess and the world around us explodes. Entire streets and dozens of houses crumble in a split of second, hitting our bodies and throwing us rolling on the ground, and then they continue to fly high in the air, almost as high as the wall is.

At the same time, the monster's telekinesis reaches towards us and glues our bodies to the spot. The deer uses enough mana to ignore our bodies' natural barrier which should make something like this extremely hard to do.

With another pulse of mana, all the debris that cover a massive piece of the sky starts falling too, speeding up the entire time, pulled to the ground with the massive force of the monster's skill.

I elongate the orb hovering over the palm of my hand into a long, sharp shape, a javelin that's smaller than the one before, just that much denser.

At the same time, multiple things happen.

Another rain of orbs hits the monster.

Tess's mana explodes around her, and I feel her pushing against the pressure around and reaching towards the debris that is flying where we are.

And I also feel Sophie's mana reach towards the deer, and then the deer's eyes jump from me to Tess. As if the deer forgot about my existence.

My javelin flies at the monster, leaving a trail of mana in its path and then stabbing itself deep into its head without the monster even noticing it, its eyes still on Tess. Then I release my Mana Regulator to fifty percent and my heart thumps, sending vibrations of kinetic energy through my body, pushing it to its current limit and pummeling it.

First heartbeat.

Kinetic energy around me explodes and I propel myself towards Tess, immediately grabbing her.

Second heartbeat.

I use all the energy to propel us high in the air.

Third heartbeat.

The debris in our way gets pushed again and redirected by Tess, just enough force to change its trajectory and not hit us, and I use another wave of kinetic energy to propel us even faster, feeling the mana behind us expand.

We land on the wall, and I again activate my Mana Regulator at the same time as I start creating a shield of tricolored mana in front of all of us.

Then the javelin stabbed deep into the deer's head explodes, threads of tricolored mana untangling and slashing around, cutting apart the deer, and then an explosion follows. A ring of shockwaves immediately followed by a ring of fire expands in a split second into the massive area under the wall.

The shockwave destroys some of the buildings and the following heat melts the stones and any iron plating it reaches, and as the wave hits the walls it quickly follows its force and flickering waves climb on

the side of the wall, until they reach the top and flames and vibrations continue higher, the side effect of it hitting us and pushing us a bit further from the edge.

I notice Isabella weakening the heat, and everyone endures the shockwave on their own.

For a fleeting moment, silence ensues, and immediately after there is an immense sucking force as the air rushes to fill up the void left after the explosion. The now-dead body after its head exploded gets folded and squeezed and pulled to the place where the javelin used to be, followed by more and more debris, flames, and air that rush back in.

As before, all of this takes just a second, explosion quickly followed by implosion. The only difference is that this one was even stronger than the one I used against the Undead Aberrant Deer, not being left with any other reasonable choice after my attack got flung against me.

"What a shitshow," I sigh. It doesn't matter what I do, it almost never goes as we would like it to go, and in the end, it all comes down to improvisation. But there is no point in complaining, I don't think it will change.

I cancel out the barrier of my mana and for the last time, I look down at where the explosion started, then I turn around to check on the others. A few of them are shaken and barely standing, either because of their help during the fight or the aftereffects of it.

Izzy is smiling, and I nod at Sophie. This time the mind manipulator missy really did help. But what's with them? Why do you have to look at me like this? It was just a small explosion. Everyone should be capable of something like this at around level 100.

As my eyes skim by them, I notice a weird movement on the edge of the wall behind them. Something flickers there, and then a massive paw with each claw as long as Isabella reaches up and grabs the edge of the wall.

My mana starts to move again when a giant head pokes over the top of the wall.

The head of a giant bear with one eye missing and terrible scars across its decaying body.

[Undead Bear - lvl ??]

Chapter 143: Undead Bear - Lvl ??

The monster pulls itself higher, and finally, even others notice it, a few shouts sounding into the surrounding.

Kinetic energy turned into flames hits the head in the form of a bright yellow flame that I continue to strengthen with each passing second as my heart pumps more energy through my body. Soon after even Isabella's blue flames join them and start to burn the monster, the disgusting smell of burned fur and flesh hitting our noses.

Tess also used her lightning attacks, Kim activates his gravity skill, and I know he is applying it on the monster in hopes it will lose its grip and fall down.

But nothing helps and the bear climbs over the walls and a shockwave hits all of us, pushing us away from him and stopping our attacks on the monster.

When the flames and smoke disappears the beast's head is revealed, only a skull barely with any fur and muscles. Yet it still continues to look towards us, calmly as if not seeing us as a danger.

Maya, already in full armament and with a spear in her hand, stands in front of it with Hadwin by her side as the bear tilts its head and swings its paw at a speed that seems nearly impossible judging by its size.

Both of them are thrown away and sent flying over the wall.

But we can't give them any more thought as another attack hits us. Another simple yet strong shockwave throws Sophie and Isabella over the wall and pushes others even closer to the edge, and I barely catch Kim and Lily before they fly over.

Seeing Sophie fall over, the last remaining member of Hard Difficulty jumps over the wall as well, seemingly about to help them.

In that short time between the attacks, I make my decision and put Lily into Kim's arms and push them both over the edge, leaving only me, Tess, and the twins on top. The twins are already much further on the wall, both of them boosted by their skill [Haste].

(We will try to use [Sensory Deception] at the right moment!)

One of them sends into my head and only then I remember Biscuit, making me look around with a hint of panic. Thankfully the corgi is fine and dangling from the edge of the wall by one massive purple tentacle that continues to stretch, slowly lowering him down.

(Gone) he sends me and continues to lower himself faster.

Good boy.

Another shockwave hits us and I absorb most of the kinetic energy of the attack and throw it behind myself to propel myself ahead.

Tess endures as well, the lightning armor around her body crackling in red and white colors.

"Lure it away and run?" she shoots me a question.

"It will follow others," I say while dozens of mana projectiles pop into existence and shoot towards the bear only to be shrugged off as nothing together with Tess's lightning-imbued javelin.

The monster takes another step towards us and this time I feel Tess push against the shockwave and even weaken it enough to have almost no effect.

Again the bear tilts its head, a skull with empty eye sockets, and an even stronger shockwave hits us, strong enough to render my projectiles flying at it useless and even blow off the flame I try to throw at it.

Okay!

Fine!

Thrown over the edge of the wall I push myself back only for armor to appear around my body and then a helmet with a smooth front and without any holes for eyes. [Perception] encompasses the area and I [Focus] more.

Then I release my Mana Regulator a bit more and kinetic energy starts pummeling my body from inside only to be immediately turned into physical strengthening through my Symbiotic Transference.

When another shockwave hits me I absorb most of its energy to strengthen myself even further and immediately start infusing my body and my muscles with mana with the help of [Mana Infusion], which allows me to release my Mana Regulator even more and strengthen my body further.

The armor around my body is still transparent but in a darker shade of blue, and a sword appears in my hand, made of dark blue mana that I infuse with more and more of it until light blue and purple wisps of mana start flowing through the blade.

I did not put every available stat point into mana to fight melee! Damn it.

I dash at the bear my body strong as never before and my sword glowing with wisps of mana flowing inside of it. I absorb another shockwave only to immediately throw it at the monster and it just dissipates on the surface of its fur, causing no harm at all.

Reading the monster's movements I duck under the paw that barely misses me and cut against it with as much force as I can.

The sword just bounces off and I absorb another shockwave, using it to further speed up my body while oscillating mana coats the blade and I slash again, this time leaving a deep groove on the bear's paw.

I avoid the bite and watch its movements to dodge another two swings and step to the side, letting a shockwave pass me by while I angle my sword and slash again.

The blade, even coated in oscillation, bounces off, doing damage only to decaying muscles and bouncing off the bones.

Needing to release some energy generated by my Kinetic Mana Heart, a bright yellow flame explodes around me in a similar shockwave to the bear's and burns its fur and muscles.

[Disruption] then fires up and I immediately follow it by slashing against the paw I used disruptive mana on. The sword bounces again and I push myself far away from the monster as I feel it collecting even more mana.

A strong shockwave hits me even in the distance and throws me from the wall only for me to propel myself back up.

Such a tough asshole, I groan.

The monster doesn't seem that dangerous or strong, at least not to me, but its defense is annoyingly strong.

A shockwave that works like attack and defense at the same time. High physical stats and then the bones that seem to be impossible to destroy yet the monster still reacts carefully every time I get too close to its chest and probably its heart while totally ignoring attacks on its head where the brain should be.

For a moment, we just stand there: me, the bear, the twins far in the distance, and then Tess jumps back onto the wall.

"Others are safe," she says before turning her attention back to the bear.

Hearing that my sword flies in the air only to be stretched and pressed into the shape of a javelin I start feeding with more mana. Let's see how you will endure this.

I notice the twins start running even further and even Tess is getting ready to jump down from the wall.

The bear tilts its head again, looking at me. He looks at my chest where my Kinetic Mana heart beats. And then, out of nowhere, its own heart beats loudly, loud enough for us to hear.

One heartbeat.

The bear widens its stance and opens its maw.

The bear's second heartbeat sounds deafening.

A massive wave of kinetic energy is thrown at us and I know if it touches us, it will tear our bodies apart. It's an attack and energy I know that well.

So, for that moment, I let go of my control over the javelin and instead, my dual [Focus] combines into one and I put my full attention into absorbing the kinetic energy thrown at us. There is so much of it, much more than I can output with my currently regulated Kinetic Heart.

Yet, I do not hesitate. It's the energy that I know so well, the energy I handle so often.

I reach towards it all. Not to weaken it, I reach out and grab it in its entirety and using some of it to further strengthen my mana-infused body and shoot the remainder in a thin cone of kinetic energy towards the bear, tearing apart the muscles and fur on its chest and revealing its ribs and its shining giant heart.

Its heart is covered in green mana and each thump strengthens it, generating kinetic energy in a similar way to my construct.

The monster somehow copied me.

Another heartbeat and the bear uses another shockwave combined with kinetic energy.

This time Tess helps and her [Psychokinesis] pushes against the shockwave while I absorb kinetic energy and use it to propel the already white glowing javelin that pierces the monster's chest, barely missing a

rib, it stabs its heart and while tearing it apart flies outside of it and further in the distance where it explodes without affecting us at all.

Finally, the monster shows some reaction, and more of its mana rushes into its chest while I stagger a bit.

When I reach out and check my mana reserves, I do realize that I have barely ten percent of my mana left. Because of my massive mana pool, I didn't even think about limiting my mana and didn't limit it at all, using so much of it for my attacks.

Slowly, the bear takes another step towards us and its heart starts healing, covered in green mana. Then it beats strongly and I can hear its bones vibrate under the kinetic energy the heart sends through the bear's body.

Another heartbeat reverberates through its body and the monster stops, once again tilting its head as if in a confused manner.

With another heartbeat the bear's kinetic energy rages through its body, tearing apart muscles and revealing more of its pearl-white bones.

I start forming another javelin when I feel Tess's hand touch my shoulder.

"We should run while we can," the blonde says and it makes me stop, realizing that I barely have any mana left.

The heartbeat sounds into the surrounding and the bear opens its mouth in a soundless growl. Kinetic energy flowing through its body tears more and more of it apart, every beat audibly shaking and vibrating the bones that absorb some of this energy. The kinetic energy does more damage to the monster than we did.

I give the bear one last look and together with Tess, we jump over the wall.

Chapter 144: Peacemaker

Down below, we find the others, most of them in a terrible state and herded to one place by Hadwin who doesn't seem that hurt even after falling from such a height; his [Strengthening] is probably good enough to help him endure.

Sophie and Isabella are also fine, but the last member of Hard Difficulty, the Icy guy, is really hurt. Both of his legs are broken, an arm twisted and one of his eyes is blind.

Maya is in a similar state with bones poking out of both of her broken shins and sweat on her forehead as she clenches her teeth in pain while Lily heals her.

"Kim went to get the twins, they connected with him," Hadwin says, and I now see that he is missing a few of his teeth and is bruised all over, with also a broken arm and probably multiple ribs.

Well, that's dumb if I have to say so myself, but it's Kim's decision.

To make matters even worse, Lily heals one of Maya's legs and then passes out, her breathing short and weak and the petite girl shaking and sweating. Malnourished, dehydrated, overtaxing herself.

Biscuit moves closer to her and a few tentacles appear over him as he protectively stands in front of her after licking her hand a few times. The dog whimpers and looks towards me.

(Gone?)

Immediately after he whimpers again and steps a bit further, taking his eyes off me.

I quickly control myself and force my mana and mind to calm down.

As I step closer, I reach out and let Biscuit lick my hand, and after that, I pet his tiny head. "Sorry for that, I didn't want to scare you, it's just that I'm not in a very good mood right now."

From atop the wall, I can still feel waves of kinetic energy as the bear's heart continues to thump and generate it and trying to take it all under its control.

I'll be back for you, you can be sure of that. How dare you try to copy my construct.

Goddamned bear.

Now then, back to this silly girl. When I lift her up she feels so light and weak.

(We will go over the wall on the opposite side, the bear seems to be busy right now and we can avoid the others!) Sounds in my head and after that, the silence ensues.

Well, I guess we don't have to bother waiting for Kim anymore.

Just a few minutes have passed since we entered one of the hideouts and I made sure it's working, and I'm already impatient to leave and go back outside.

I keep opening and clenching my fist while watching my mana fill up bit by bit. It's quick, probably much faster than for others, but for me, it feels as if too slow. I've already gotten used to not having trouble with lacking mana at all.

Another annoying thing is the Icy man, Cipher's old companion. Unlike others that left me alone, feeling or seeing my bad mood, the man crawled to me. Using only one arm to pull himself closer.

His legs are broken, one of his arms is also broken and he is missing one of his eyes. Yet there is still some will in him and I even notice that his wounds are covered in ice a bit. I don't know how much it helps but the man still does it.

For a long moment, he looks at me and I look at him. I do not know him, I never bothered knowing him. Out of the trio, he was probably the least memorable and I didn't even bother with the other two.

Yet here he is and he is crying.

"I'm scared," he says, and his voice is audibly shaken. A man a bit older than me sobs quietly and I do believe him, I can hear the fear in his voice.

"That girl... that woman is doing something to me," he says, "I don't know what and I can't even fight against it, but I know she does something," he pulls himself even closer, groaning from pain, "I almost died and maybe will die because of her. I do not know her yet I did jump over the wall and even wanted to sacrifice myself to keep her sister and her alive."

He then pauses.

"It's terrifying, I don't even know if I'm me anymore," his hand touches me and his voice becomes full of pleading, "Please, I beg you, stop her."

"Did you know about what Cipher and Goldie did to Lily?" I ask.

His silence is all the answer I need.

"So why should I even bother?" I hear that my voice bears some annoyance in it, "You are lucky to be alive."

"This is not life if I'm not myself!" he screams and more heads turn to us, "Do you think she won't control all of you if given a chance? I thought Goldie was scary with her hypnosis, but this woman," he points his shaking hand at Sophie, "she is much worse!"

"I see, should I help you then?" I stand up and a sword forms in my hand, "Just one word and I'll end it all." His eyes become full of fear and it makes me almost smile, "Just one word and you are free." As I say it, I keep poking his body with the tip of my sword and he doesn't say anything.

Unsurprisingly he is not like Lissandra that destroyed her world and herself the moment she got a suspicion someone is controlling her.

"Now then, to make it clear and not beat around the bush and say it out loud," I say loudly enough for everyone in the hideout to hear it. Sophie, Isabella, Tess, Hadwin, Maya, and even barely conscious Lily are listening.

"I swear on the life of my mother and on the life of my sister, the most precious things in this world to me." A short pause is filled with deafening silence, "Sophie, if you ever try to control me or people I care about again, I'll kill you. I'll do it without hesitation and I won't care if it happens in front of your sister."

The silence becomes even deeper, and now everyone is looking at Sophie, who is also looking at me. She seems to understand, but if not, she can ask Isabella. I'm sure the little girl can tell her how serious I am.

After saying that out loud I feel much better. There is still a lot of anger at Sophie and her meddling with my mind, but saying these things feels as if I can't now take a step back in case she does something like this. I won't be able to pressure myself into thinking logically, I'll just have to do what I said I would do.

"Okay, now that we are all on the same wavelength, there are a few things we have to do. First, Sophie, go and infuse Lily with your mana, keep her strengthened. Hadwin, you go out and use that trap to get us some sparrows. Tess, you will protect them just in case. If Lily tries to use even a speck of her mana to heal someone, you can zap her and make her unconscious until I come back with water or send Kim and the twins back with it."

My eyes glance around the room and no one seems to be complaining, no one other than Lily.

"You!" I point a finger at Lily, "Stay put. Maya will heal on her own and if her bones don't fix themselves normally we can break them again and then you will heal her."

Lily doesn't seem to like it. She exchanges looks with Tess. The young blonde woman smiles at Lily but her eyes remain somewhat cold, clearly indicating she will zap her if needed.

I ignore Maya's terrified look and I do not even mention the icy guy.

Then I leave the hideout. As many times before, even this seems to be my fault. I shouldn't have killed Cipher and I should be more careful when attacking the deer. But at the same time, things could be much worse if I did not do these things.

But consequences are here and the best thing I can do now is to help Kim and maybe these two little brats, get some water and beat up some copycat bear.

And there is one more thing.

I quickly put some distance between me and the hideout, once again under the wall and when I send my mana towards the top, I still can feel waves of kinetic energy. Is the bear trying to learn how to control it? Goddamned monsters in hell difficulty.

But first things first. I open up my left hand and look at the palm that has continued to bother me ever since the start of the floor. The weird feeling of itching is now even worse and for the first time, I can feel intricate patterns of mana inside of it. Circuits I'm barely able to perceive, yet I know they are there, and on the skin of my palm, a pattern appears.

A pattern looking exactly like a Peacemaker, the strongest defensive item in the world of the second floor. An item that I got from Lissandra and that I held with my left hand, exactly as the pattern is etched into my skin.

Interesting isn't it, but this much is enough.

I coat my right arm in an oscillating mana and cut off my left hand.

Chapter 145: Envy

I glance at my severed left hand and burn the stump with thermal energy to stop the bleeding, immediately after I form a hand made of mana. Testingly, I move the fingers and increase the density of the mana.

For now, this should do. I can't have Lily restore my arm in the state she is in now.

Now then, since I've calmed down a bit, I should pick my rewards, right?

The kill of the level 159 deer got me a whopping 2 levels and I also completed my Side Quest that required me to get all of my skills over level twenty.

It's time to get my rewards before I start moving.

Congratulations, you have completed your Side Quest. You can now select one of the offered Passive skills, which have been determined based on your performance so far in the tutorial.

Passive Skill: Kinetic Momentum (Rare)

The user's manipulation of kinetic energy becomes fluid and seamless, allowing them to effortlessly transfer kinetic force between their body, weapons, and projectiles, increasing overall impact and damage.

Passive Skill: Mana-Fortified Resilience (Rare)

The user's resilience strengthens with their current mana reserves, boosting resistance to physical strain, and also enhancing resistance to various energies.

Passive Skill: Mana Convergence (Rare)

The user's mana manipulation abilities allow them to merge multiple streams of mana into a concentrated form, amplifying the potency and efficiency of their mana-based attacks and defenses.

Passive Skill: Swift Recovery (Uncommon)

The user's natural healing rate is slightly accelerated, allowing them to recover from injuries and wounds more quickly, particularly when their mana levels are high.

Passive Skill: Thermal Conversion Mastery (Uncommon)

The user's expertise in converting kinetic energy to thermal energy expands, allowing them to efficiently convert a higher percentage of kinetic energy into intense heat, resulting in more potent thermal-based attacks.

Passive Skill: Thermal Channeling (Uncommon)

The user can channel thermal energy into their mana-infused weapons or constructs, imbuing them with scorching heat that increases their damage potential.

Passive Skill: Mana Forge (Uncommon)

The user's mastery of mana manipulation enables them to shape and mold mana into slightly more intricate and powerful constructs, granting their creations enhanced durability and destructive capabilities.

Passive Skill: Mana Overload Absorption (Rare)

The user's mana pathways have the capacity to absorb excess mana, mitigating the negative effects of mana overloads and preventing potential mana instability or backlash.

Passive Skill: Energy Channeling (Rare)

The user has mastered the art of channeling various energies into their mana-infused weapons or constructs, achieving a seamless integration of different energy types.

As often, the options are beautiful, but is there a need to think? I know what I need right now.

I pick Passive Skill: Mana-Fortified Resilience (Rare) and close my eyes to endure the pain.

There was only one option that made me hesitate. Passive Skill: Energy Channeling (Rare). It's something that could give me an immediate and massive boost, but it's also something I know I'll solve on my own and improve on my own.

Mana Forge sounds good, but I'll learn it on my own, I'm already halfway there.

Mana Overload? That's for weaklings. I'll control my mana, I won't allow it to go wild. A bit of danger spices things up a little and forces me to improve my hold over my mana much faster.

And as many times, something tells me that in the long run, it's better to learn stuff on my own rather than just rely on the system and automatic usage of skills. I saw the difference between me and people from Hard Difficulty.

After the pain stops, I squat and look down at my cut-off hand. The changes going on in it are now much faster now that my mana doesn't passively fight against them and the hand closes its fist and is now shrinking. With [Perception] I can barely feel anything no matter how I look at it and as before, even now, [Disruption] doesn't seem to have any effect on it. None at all.

Is this some delayed hidden reward for finishing the second floor on a higher difficulty? Is this an aftereffect of using the strongest defensive item on the planet, an item whose rarity is way beyond "rare"?

Well, I'll deal with it later. I grab the cut-off hand and throw it inside one of the houses, making sure to remember which one it is and then I release my Mana Regulator and observe my body.

Good, the new passive seems to work beautifully and I release the Mana Regulator even more and my heart pumps massive amounts of kinetic energy through my body. Yet even then the body seems to be okay with that much strain.

My current passive is a weird one. The higher my mana levels are the better it works, but if I use 30% of my mana to create another javelin or orb full of tricolored mana, the efficiency will dramatically reduce, surely enough for it to feel like a lower rarity than "rare". But, me being me and having massive amounts of mana, the passive feels much stronger than it should be.

I breathe in deeply and then slip into [Focus], making the world lose its colors as I propel myself high in the air with only one push. The acceleration strains my body; a huge burst of kinetic energy accumulates as well, but it's okay, the new passive deals with all of it.

When I land on top of the wall, a wave of kinetic energy is thrown at me. I absorb and hold it as I slowly walk towards the bear still at the top of the wall with its heart tearing and healing constantly as it produces kinetic energy the bear isn't able to hold.

That energy is shot into the surroundings or reverberates its bones that audibly vibrate.

The bear now barely has some fur on. A giant monster has half of its body covered in decaying muscles, with no fur, and its head is just one massive white skull with its face melted from before. Its mouth is open in a soundless roar.

I absorb two more waves and then shoot all that energy at the monster, my wave piercing through its defense and pushing it backwards.

My heart beats in the same rhythm as the bear's and I throw more kinetic energy at it, stripping it even more of its flesh and damaging its heart.

The green flames roar into existence, covering its entire chest and blocking my next attack that pushes the bear even further, the monster tilts its head and shoots kinetic energy at me in a similar way, only for me to totally absorb it and shoot it back at him, finally throwing him off the wall.

As he is falling down I jump off and follow him, transferring energy generated by my heart into bright yellow flames that are hotter than ever before, tunneled into a thin stream that heats the air as it roars through it, engulfing the bear in flames.

At the same time, a mana projectile forms behind me, and I start [Redistributing] and infusing mana into it, helping myself with surge as much as I can, my body able to endure it all now.

When the burning bear falls down, creating a small crater, the projectile flies at him while I propel myself higher and immediately after hitting him it explodes in a massive heatwave followed by a shockwave and then a terrifying implosion that pulls even the bear's massive body closer to where the center of my projectile used to be.

I let myself fall down and with a push of kinetic energy, I send away all the dust and reveal the bear that is still there, green mana glowing around his body, restoring its muscles, its fur, even his eyes reappear.

Then its heart beats and all of this is destroyed again by rampant kinetic energy and then the bear ignores me, putting his attention back to his heart.

[Disruption] levels up as I shoot it at the monster. [Mana Surge] levels up as I continue to boost my weapons coated in oscillating mana.

I shoot projectiles at its chest, I burn its body.

The bear continues to ignore me the entire time while all of his attention is on his heart.

POV Kim Min-Jae

(What the hell is that guy doing?) Aaron complains in my head.

(Usual stuff, exploding people, nuking the city, raising eldritch abominations. You know, typical psycho stuff.) Dennis adds and I can't help but agree. Nathaniel isn't exactly normal.

(We should hurry while he's got the attention of the bear and wolves.) I send as well through their [Connection] that they joined me to. It doesn't feel that bad, the wordless communication is nice, and listening to the two of them it's easy to guess how used to it they got.

(At this point I'm more scared of that guy than the bear.) Aaron says

(Don't forget the dog, he can interrupt and join our [Connection].) Dennis adds.

We quickly move through the area, especially fast now that I've lowered our weight with my skill. Far away from us, I feel Nathaniel's mana constantly exploding after he fell from the wall together with the bear, his flames burning the monster even while he was falling down.

That was the moment we decided to jump down and quickly went to get water as it also meant that the two one-question mark wolves moved to check what was happening.

Still, I can't help but feel a hint of envy, hearing the way the twins talk about Nathaniel. Even cheeky as they are, I can hear reverence and admiration in their voice.

I want that. I want people to admire me, to talk about me in the way they talk about Nathaniel. I want them to compare other people to me.

It's silly, I know, but I can't do anything about it. Ever since the start of the floor, I can't help but keep comparing myself to him.

I thought it would be different here, but in the end, it's the same. I keep comparing myself to others the same way I kept comparing myself to my siblings back on Earth.

So when the one question mark Boar appears in between us and the stream of water, I do not hesitate.

I try to imitate the stance Nathaniel likes to take every time he gets serious and look towards the boar as even my mana flares up in a similar way.

I won't run away.

Chapter 146: Lesson

So, what now?

I move mana through my body and strengthen the pulses of my Kinetic Mana Heart. The bear tilts its head and tries to copy me. It fails, and energy continues to destroy its body while green mana continues to restore it.

It's now confirmed that the bear will die on its own after its mana runs out.

But we can't have that! What about my experience points? You won't take them away from me!

But one thing is interesting, the bear learns, slowly but surely. So, I keep showing him how I handle the kinetic energy my heart creates, and it tries to copy me. I sit there and observe it all.

It's all very interesting. The bear, maybe because it's created by the system, maybe because it's undead, or maybe because it's an animal, continues to try to handle kinetic energy in a much different way. So, I continue to watch it.

Oh! This one was nice. I like the way it lets the energy vibrate its bones, then absorbs a tiny bit of that energy. It feels a bit more high frequency than the one generated by my heart. Good job, undead Winnie! Try it again!

But he fails, and his body gets torn apart. The monster opens its mouth even wider and slams them shut, sending a vibrating wave of kinetic energy into its surroundings.

I absorb it, mold it, and shoot it high in the air.

Why was I even scared before? The monster is weak; its only strong point is its high defense, and it made a terrible mistake.

You tried to copy the wrong thing! My Kinetic Mana Heart is not something a chump like you can handle.

Hehe.

Finally, Kim and the twins come from behind me, all having bags filled to the brim with water. They move extremely carefully and pause for a second, their gazes on the corpses of two one-question-mark wolves.

Well, what remains of them.

"Did you kill them?" Kim points at the wolves, and I see that once again, he is getting into a bad mood. The kid is still comparing himself to me.

That's dumb. I'm not exactly normal, so don't do that.

"They were weak," a few concentrated blasts of kinetic energy were enough to deal with them.

"Your hand..." Kim says out of nowhere, and the twins look at each other.

"It's fine, nothing to worry about. Oh, and you, two little jerks. I can feel you talk behind my back. I feel your connection. If you want to talk, say it out loud, okay?"

That makes them instantly shut up, and the connection between them cuts off.

The bear fails again, and a massive wave of kinetic energy explodes from him at the epicenter, destroying the land around him and deepening the crater he is in. When it reaches me, I absorb it, and not even the trio behind me gets affected.

Now then, the system offered me a passive skill:

Passive Skill: Energy Channeling (Rare) - The user has mastered the art of channeling various energies into their mana-infused weapons or constructs, achieving a seamless integration of different energy types.

It's something I have already tried before, but now I can try a bit harder with my Mana-Fortified Resilience allowing me to push my body further and handle a little bit of misuse.

A sword appears in my hand, and I transfer the kinetic energy into thermal, then try to infuse it into the sword instead of shooting it outside of my body. Carefully, I consolidate both parts of [Focus] and put it all into this task. I slowly move it outside of the body, then through the handle and towards the blade.

Oh, it almost broke; let's change the mana a bit, make it denser. Leave some space for thermal energy.

Good!

Oh, it almost exploded. Better put it more under control.

The bear shoots another wave of kinetic energy and I absorb it and shoot back. A thin cone of energy piercing touches its chest and obliterates its heart only for it to be restored by green flame-like mana.

I put my [Focus] back on thermal energy and lead it a bit more carefully. Then when the blade explodes after a small mistake, I absorb the thermal energy of the explosion and, after reforming the blade, I continue to try to fill it again.

Kim says something but I can't hear him as I delve deeper into what I'm trying to do. Putting my entire [Focus] makes it feel as if the world around me has slowed down and I watch it with my entire being.

Then, as if by a snap of a finger, I come to a realization and change the way I do it a even more. I use [Mana Infusion] as a inspiration but make slight modifications to it, then I switch from thermal to kinetic energy.

[Redistribution - lvl 26 > Redistribution - lvl 27]

[Redistribution - lvl 27 > Redistribution - lvl 28]

Yeah, who needs passives offered by the system anyway?

Now then, what about this? I slash the sword against the tree that is some distance away from me and release the kinetic energy and the tree gets slashed diagonally, the cut being extremely clean.

Well, that's disappointing. I could do something similar with [Oscillation]. I reform the sword into a javelin and fill it with kinetic energy and throw it at the bear. The moment the javelin hits the bear, a thin cone of kinetic energy shoots at the point of contact, piercing the bear and allowing the javelin to dig deeper.

That's it? A little bit more piercing damage? I could do that by boosting the javelin more or not even bothering with that and shooting kinetic energy directly. It wouldn't be as concentrated but it would do a lot of damage.

“Nat, are you sure it's fine to attack it like this?” Finally, I hear Kim and it reminds me that we need to get back with the water.

“You guys go back, I'll join you soon. Oh, and a moment, Kim, how would you fight this bear?”

“I wouldn't? I would run away.”

Smart guy.

“If you had to?” I ask and he pauses.

“I would try to destroy its head and heart at the same time. Stuff like that often happen in games.”

“Oh?”

“I'll go then, okay?” He glances at me while leaving.

“Good job with the boar, I watched how you guys killed it.” I say before they leave and then turn back to the boar, unable to look at Kim much longer.

I did watch them the entire time, and Kim better not think I didn't notice him trying to copy me. What is he? A cosplayer?

But they did well, the three of them against a boar that seemed to be only a bit over or under level one hundred.

Kim slowed it down with his [Gravity Well], the twins continued to confuse it with their skill, and then they slowly destroyed the monster, piece by piece. The poor boar only showed some lightning attack that Tess would laugh at, and then the trio easily dodged, fighting like matadors dealing with a bull.

What I said to Kim was just a simple compliment, so why was he so damn happy?

Oh boy, it's so bad. I'm glad I decided not to go with this passive. The idea of infusing thermal or kinetic energy into my weapons sounds good but they all pale in comparison to my tricolored projectiles that remind me of mini-nukes.

If my projectiles were weaker I think I would be happy. Long-range projectile infused with thermal energy for some extra damage? Sounds good!

Projectile with extra piercing power. Very nice.

While bombarding the bear for a bit longer, I came up with a few ideas that could be super interesting to use, but are currently way out of my reach.

What if I infuse my projectiles with kinetic energy and make it so this kinetic energy activates once in a while, boosting the projectile. With a bit of work and some marking on my target that would allow the projectile to follow, I could be able to make homed projectiles.

I could also infuse kinetic energy into my armor, making it explode towards my attacker if I get hit. I think some tanks have it, it's called Reactive Armor or something like that. Or I can use it to do a similar effect to [Oscillation].

For thermal maybe I can create a mana orb that would constantly radiate some heat and heat up the room while I sleep or I'm not there? I could set stuff on fire from a long distance? Flame sword? Flame armor?

I'll have to think a bit more. Overall, it's not terrible but it's also far from good. The best thing about it is that it will allow me to infuse energies I get in the future and that might work better with my mana projectiles.

Well, now back to Undead Winnie. Even after such a long time, the bear wasn't able to control kinetic energy and I can feel his mana reserves dwindling, so I just try MY new idea.

I'll try to destroy its head and heart at the same time!

Yup, that's quite a good idea I say. I might be a genius or something.

So I shoot two orbs, one passes through the bear's eye socket and into its brain and the other one hits its chest. Tricolored mana explodes and implodes as many times before while I watch from the distance and the nearly manaless bear finally dies.

[You have defeated the Undead Bear - lvl 158]

[Lvl 109 > Lvl 111]

That was kind of underwhelming. Let that be a lesson for all the monsters not to try to copy me!

After I invest my stats I glimpse at them. Not bad at all.

Lvl 111

Strength: 33

Dexterity: 31

Constitution: 92

Mana: 327

Before leaving I also fill my bag with water and wash my face and entire head in it. I can't even explain how refreshing it all feels. I also take a small sip and decide to wait a bit longer to see if it's safe. Tess will surely tell others to do the same. We will see how well the water will do in this world under the Decay.

After climbing the wall I pass by a few houses and enter the one I remembered. The one where I left my cut-off left arm. The arm is gone and instead of it, there is a Peacemaker. But there is one huge difference from the defensive item from before.

This one is totally made from my flesh and bones. The item doesn't radiate any mana I could perceive, yet I can feel an edge of mana circuits that are so complicated it makes my head spin just to try to perceive the tiniest part of them.

When I try to inspect it, no text appears, and the item just lies there, looking extremely creepy.

Should I burn it?

The item moves as if it's breathing, and I notice veins and short hair on its surface as it pulsates.

I totally should burn it.

Chapter 147: Shall we talk?

Okay, this is creepier the more I observe it. The thing, the item, is covered with my skin, veins are all over its surface and in a few places, I can see my bones poking out. The entire thing is covered in circuits, as well as the inside of the item.

It's oval, similarly shaped to the original Peacemaker, and its size is the same as well. When I look closer, I notice that it's moving slightly, breathing.

Damn, should I burn it? I ask myself again.

I totally should burn it.

What the heck is it, even?

Unable to hold back my curiosity, I observe it for a while, yet I can't even come close to finding out what it is.

Okay, it's staying here. There's no way I'm touching it. I'll come back to check on it a few hours later, and who knows, it might become less creepy or start devouring the third floor.

I glance at it one more time and shudder before leaving it as it is. When I get to the hideout, everyone is inside. The water is nearly gone and I notice that some faces are a bit cleaner than before. A waste of water someone might say, but it's not like I blame them. But there is something I do blame them for.

"You drank the water," I say to Tess and she just nods.

"That's...dumb," I can't help but say. I'm sure they realize it as well.

"Nat, not everyone got an upgrade like you, I think you're underestimating how thirsty everyone was," she pauses, "Lily used her skill to try to get rid of anything that could be harmful and we boiled it a bit."

Well, I know it's most likely safe, but the system is kind of a joker sometimes so I wouldn't be surprised. Even though I don't think there was any problem with water up until now. Whatever, I guess, we will see.

"How is Lily?" I ask.

"She did get to sleep after we gave her most of the meat from the sparrow that Hadwin brought back and she also got some water. Not too quickly and not too much, but it did help a lot. Also, what happened to your hand?"

"Not sure yet, I'll let you know in a few hours," I answer mysteriously. I still have to find out what kind of abomination lies on the floor of that house.

Did I screw up something? Is it a reward? Is it the effect of a strong item trying to keep itself alive? Or is it... it can't be, right?

"Haaa, Lily will be angry," Tess sighs and I can't help but agree. But that's a future problem for future Nathaniel, screw that guy!

So, I grab a bit of food and some water and get to the corner of the room to nibble on it slowly. Obviously, Biscuit immediately smells the opportunity and comes closer, just sitting on his bum and staring at me, trying to look cute.

I swear he knows! He knows that I don't need that much food anymore, so he uses every opportunity to beg for some food from me.

(I require sustenance.) He says, and I shudder.

Okay, maybe I shouldn't have taught him to say that. It sounded like an idea back then and Hadwin's face was fun to look at, but now, in the dark room we are in, and sounding in my head a bit after my hand turned into some fleshy abomination.

Plus he also uses eight human mana arms that grow from his back to keep him standing like some sort of giant spider while his short legs hang in the air.

The doggo is smart. He's indirectly telling me that he will cancel his eight human arms if I give him food. He also challenges me to disrupt them so he can learn to counter my skill.

Aren't you a cheeky one? Do you think I'll give up that easily? Take this!

I grab him and pull him closer while I continue to boop his nose. At first, he seems shocked and then tries to get away, but I strengthen my body as the corgi is surprisingly strong, and continue to boop his nose which gets woofs from him.

But I do not stop.

10 boops.

20 boops.

50 boops.

He tries to bite me and I flick his nose and gently pull his whiskers, continuing.

As if feeling the opportunity, Isabella appears and starts poking Biscuit, laughing as the doggo, unable to resist, gives up. The mana arms disappear and he pretends to be dead. I then give him to Isabella, who hugs him and sits next to me while holding the corpse of what used to be a mighty divine beast.

But I can see him sniff every time I take a bite of my food.

"Didn't your sister tell you not to come near me?" I ask a bit curiously. I'm sure the girl remembers my words from before.

"I love her, but Soph is dumb," Isabella giggles, "She just needs to become friends with you and everything will be solved." The little kid shrugs her shoulders and continues to pet Biscuit.

"It's not that easy."

"It's easy," Isabella snorts, "It's just that you old people are super dumb."

Well, it's not that surprising a kid would think that.

"She's scared all the time, scared for me, scared of this place, scared of you. So she does all this dumb stuff and you are... well, you're safe if you're a friend. You're friends with Lily, Tess, and even Kim now, I think. So why not make more friends?"

I just shake my head and she giggles again.

"...dumb," she mumbles under her breath, stands up, and slowly walks towards Sophie, holding the body of the corgi. She wobbles slowly, trying not to hurt him, unwilling to let go of her prey.

To not think about useless stuff, I focus on my translucent mana hand on my left hand and continue to move the fingers and close them into a fist. The movement is so much better than before and I'm even

able to create some super basic mana pathways through it, reducing the effect of my missing hand on my mana flow. It's not perfect, but I'm at the point where missing some part of my body won't cause me much trouble.

Then, as if waiting until I'm the busiest, Kim also comes to me. Why am I so popular lately?

"Nat," he starts carefully and I look at him. He seems serious, yet his eyes are firm, "Please tell me how to practice," he says, and I can see that it takes a lot of him to ask that so soon after the last time.

The fifteen-year-old boy is really proud and I also think that asking for help is not something he is used to, judging from what he told me about his family.

At first, I want to send him away by just telling him to practice his skills as he did up until now, but then I notice his trembling hand.

Don't look up to me, it's... unpleasant.

As for his request, I saw him fighting multiple times. He's doing well, his usage of his [Telekinesis] is nice and intricate. It doesn't have as much power as Tess's skill but it's more nimble and he's good at controlling a lot of smaller projectiles.

It's not something I could help him much with and I think he's on a good path. No, the problem is that he doesn't use [Gravity Well] much.

"Okay," I grab a stone from the ground and throw it towards him while standing up.

The boy grabs it with his skill instead of reaching with his hand, and the stone starts to hover in front of him. Just this little interaction shows me how much all of us got used to using skills. For some of us, it becomes even more natural than using our bodies.

"Make that stone as heavy as possible while keeping it afloat with [Telekinesis],"

“But that's constantly using two skills at once. For a while, it's fine, but...”

I don't say anything and he falls silent,

“I...” he starts, and shakes his head, “Okay. OKAY,” he shouts and immediately leaves, the stone following him.

Now then, I should go out and have a talk, shouldn't I? I inform Tess that I'll be staying outside overnight so she won't worry about me, and I leave.

My steps are heavy and my mind wavers the closer I get to the house where I left what used to be my left hand. As I get nearby, my heartbeat speeds up. I open the door and then close it. The sound of the lock clicking almost sounds deafening.

Then I look at the fleshy item on the ground. It's still the same and still in the same spot.

“Lissandra, I assume?” I say.

Then the surface of the item vibrates, creating vibrations that are transferred into sound and form words, “You assume correctly, shall we talk, little pup?”

Well, if this doesn't complicate things.

Chapter 148: Imprint

I did have my suspicions, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I did hope it won't be like this.

Obviously, I ended up being right.

"How much do you know?" First, I need to find out how much she knows, and how much she is under the influence of the system.

"Little pup, I'm Absolute of my planet. Obviously, I know a lot," she answers once again. This time I observe it a bit more and find out how terrifyingly difficult what she does is. She uses the tiniest amount of mana to vibrate the air to create soundwaves; she is even skilled enough to make them mimic her original voice.

Who the heck would even bother with that?

"System, tutorial, second floor, floor quests, third floor, repeat that."

"I do not appreciate your tone," she says before continuing, "System, tutorial, second floor, floor quests, third floor," she just repeats it all.

Oh boy, this is getting fun. I move closer and sit in front of the thing that used to be my left hand. Just from a few sentences we exchanged I notice that she is a bit different from the Lissandra I knew. How to say it, her personality is a bit off?

"Could you explain it to me?" I say.

"I could, but first, I have to say that I'm quite disappointed by your usage of mana, little pup. I find it really inadequate."

"I find your lack of an actual body more inadequate."

"..."

"Go on, try to poke me again, granny, you are not so scary any..."

Before I finish, a small pulse of mana can be felt from the fleshy item on the ground. The amount is so ridiculously small that I almost do not bother defending against it. It just feels like someone blowing a little bit of air from their nose. That's how minuscule the amount is.

Yet, I do remember who Lissandra was and send disruptive mana at it, even creating a shield in front of it.

The whiff of mana sent at me then absorbs the disruptive mana and reflects it at me. That mana then proceeds to delete my shield from existence and engulfs my entire body, totally breaking my hold over my mana. Then it hits me, sending sharp pain through my entire body.

It's as if someone kicked my crotch, just the pain repeating all over the entirety of my body. The pain disappears as quickly as it came, but the feeling lingers behind.

"My usage of mana is trash," I groan quietly.

The item lets out something resembling a laugh, and Lissandra continues, "You were always fun to observe, little pup."

The Lissandra I knew on the second floor is dead, like actually dead, and the thing in front of me is something more akin to a fingerprint or imprint, as it calls itself.

So yeah, she did try to transfer her mind to me during her last moments but wasn't able to do so; the system is just set up that way. It doesn't want natives of the floor to mess with our minds. Destroying out minds is fine, taking over them is a no-no.

So she came up with a plan after being unable to escape from under the influence of the system. She left her imprint, the fingerprint of her mind inside the Peacemaker she gave me and set it up to try to infuse me when the item breaks.

She did hope I would observe her as long as possible, in hopes that her [Singularity] might disrupt the system a bit, she also threw the Peacemaker in a way that I would use my left hand to grab it. All for a tiny chance that the hand created within the tutorial might help with all of this.

The entire plan then relied on me staying as long as possible and the Peacemaker

And yes, the woman partially knew about the system, before the end she learned a bit about it without letting it know. She did it all under the influence of the system that kept messing with her head.

The woman is a monster, absolute and terrifying. Even as a copy, a much weaker version of her original self, she was able to mess with the system and show it a massive middle finger.

So in the end her plan did work and did not work. It did work because she was able to leave her imprint on the palm of my left hand, bearing a tiny amount of her mana.

The problem, for her, not for me, is that she wasn't able to leave my left hand and rewrite my mind. She also wasn't able to absorb my mana to slowly restore herself either.

She says it without hesitation, easily revealing that she would have deleted my mind and replaced it with hers if she could've.

Probably thanks to the system still somehow limiting her or imprint being imperfect, she is unable to do so and unable to get more mana, having to rely on the tiny amount she has now.

"So how did you even listen up until now?"

"I simply translated vibrations as you talked into words, and I often used a small amount of mana to observe a bit more. It's all basics."

Only someone like her could call things like this basics.

"Should I burn you? I don't think you can do much more than cause me some pain. The system won't allow you to rewrite my mind. Plus if you use up all of your mana, you will disappear."

"Both of us know you won't do that."

The storm already starts to rage outside. Strong wind, ever-reaching mist, and it's dark inside. Yet I don't care and continue to observe the thing in front of me. How much I can learn from being like her? How dangerous it even is to keep this thing near me.

"Now then, shall we make a deal?" she says.

I move even closer and infuse one of my orbs with thermal energy, making it glow and radiate heat while it floats in the air, creating flickering shadows as the house I'm in continues to creak under the strong wind.

"It is most likely impossible for me to get a new body or continue to exist after I spend all the mana within the imprint. The system won't allow that. So, little pup, to make it worth your time I'll teach you and I will help you fix some of your terrible habits. Just enough to strengthen you a bit and share some knowledge, but not so much that it makes things too easy for you. Doing so would hinder your growth," she pauses and then continues, "and for that, I want a simple thing."

This time even though its voice is made only with the help of mana, I can hear deep anger and hate in it.

"I'll give you coordinates of my world, of a most likely dead world where only I'm still alive. When you are strong enough, you will get there and pass to me the message I will leave you."

Even though the item contains only a tiny amount of mana, I can almost feel the terrifying pressure of someone strong enough to be called Absolute. Being way beyond any logic and someone even the system was unable to replicate or contain fully.

"And then, when the original me learns that this cheeky system dared to copy her, she will go and find it," her words are full of despise, "And when she finds the system or being responsible behind it, she will fuck it up."

I'm not going to lie, Lissandra is scary, like goddamn. Who creates a copy of her consciousness just to try to screw over someone who pissed her off and dared to use her for the tutorial. Talk about holding a grudge.

I would totally do the same.

The thing is that I believe that she might just try to do that. The second floor showed us the end of her world, which was caused by the Mind Mage Emperor manipulating Champion Tristan into sacrificing his life and using [Dawn]. I believe she would survive that if that's how her world ended.

It doesn't matter if everyone on the planet died or if the system copied it thousands of years ago. I'm sure she would still be alive.

“First, we will do something about your body. From watching you, I understand how you like to go about things, but to be honest, it's inadequate. Having mana keep threatening your own body is good, but it stops being funny when you keep getting wrecked by it.”

Oi, there is no need to be such a douche about that.

“Putting stats into mana is good, it's just amazing that you didn't use it to temper your body actively and only let the passive strain of your mana temper it.”

Temper what? Active tempering? Passive tempering? Why does it all sound so interesting?

“You have to talk, I won't be wasting my mana just because it's bothersome for you to open your mouth.”

Ouch, that did sting a little.

“Tell me more about active tempering,” I say.

“I still dislike your tone, even now it somewhat pisses me off. Your eyes were the same,” even as she is saying it, I can hear a hint of amusement in her words, “That's what made it so fun to watch. But enough nonsense, there are multiple ways to go about it, but the easiest would be to do what you were doing up until now, just more actively.”

Why do I have a feeling that this is going to hurt?

“There is no need to wait. We can start right away. We will use the thing you created around your heart to send strong waves of kinetic energy through your body and pummel it until it either breaks or becomes stronger.”

I knew it.

Chapter 149: Active tempering

Lissandra is built differently, oh, I don't mean her current state she is in right now. Nope, the woman shares with me multiple ways to manipulate my mana to be able to go through what she called active tempering.

I don't understand at all.

She continues to dumb it down more and more to the point where she complains that even animals could do it.

I won't refute that. I know multiple deer, bears, and one corgi that would totally be able to do that. I've long known that the most dangerous mages will be from the zoo.

Lissandra then tries to explain and I can hear her getting more and more annoyed. I would expect her to be a lot more patient, being as old as she is and as powerful, but she has absolutely no patience with her students.

She is impossibly powerful and talented beyond belief so for her something like moving mana on a subatomic level sounds like basics.

“Okay, I'll dumb it down even more, little pup. You will activate the thing you call Kinetic Mana Heart, then you need to use the thing you call Mana Regulator to feed it as much mana as you can handle. After that I want you to weaken your passive skill otherwise it will weaken the effect of tempering. First, we will temper your body with kinetic energy. You will have to change output a bit, frequency should be like,” she says some mumbo jumbo difficult terms I do not understand, “Then you will use different frequency on your bones, but at the same time you have to temper your muscles too, also with different frequency.”

It all sounds reasonable and the results she promises are all amazing. Nothing too excessive for first active tempering, but I can continue to improve on it.

“You will have to keep infusing your body with your mana, but not as you usually do. That's what amateurs do, you need to be more precise and not just throw it around uselessly. You are wasting so much of it.”

It's all good, but damn, somehow she pisses me off. Is it because we are so similar?

“Your tone pisses me off,” I say out loud.

Short silence.

“Would you say that to me when I had my body?” she asks, annoyance clear in her voice.

“No, you would beat me up.”

“... I would.”

It takes half a night and enough testing to make my head spin, but I've somewhat taken a grasp of that and we will try it on my arm first before going at it with my entire body.

So now, I'm taking a short break to relax and calm down before we get to it. All while the air still rages outside and the room continues to be lit with a mana orb filled with thermal energy that I made a bit bigger.

From past experience, I know that there are barely any monsters so close to the wall, even during the night we didn't meet any so the entire process shouldn't be interrupted.

“Why are you so slow? Move your mana faster.”

Yeah, the mighty used-to-be-absolute-but-is-now-creepy-brooch-made-from-flesh-and-bones continues to complain.

“Again, you are controlling it like a kid doing its first mana exercises. Be more delicate and do not waste so much of it.”

Are all the geniuses like this? Is it because she is a grumpy old grandma? Actually, is she even a grandma? Ruby was close to one hundred and she did look barely over twenty. Could even Lissandra look to be twenty years old if she wanted to?

“Actually, I might even have seen kids better at handling mana than you,” the brooch made of flesh and bones continues.

Is she not going to stop? I'm staying quiet in hopes that she will stop, but unsuccessfully.

“This is better, now make it a bit more dense and even. You can start sending kinetic energy through your body, do not forget about the frequency.”

How could I when you keep reminding me every five seconds?!

“You are thinking something rude, aren't you?”

“Your personality seems to be different from yourself I met on the second floor,” I say and I mean it. This version of Lissandra, the imprint as she calls it seems to be a bit more talkative and less dignified.

“That much is to be expected, it was the first time for me to create an imprint of my mind,” Lissandra answers.

“What?”

“I knew only a bit of theory and logic behind it, it's not like I had any want or need to duplicate my mind before.”

That monster. The imprint she did leave on peacemaker and that got transferred to the palm of my hand is so delicate, infinite amount of thin mana circuits. Working with a tiny amount of mana, yet was able to copy her thinking and keep so much of her skill. A skill so close to creation.

And no matter how hard I try I can't get to observe it properly. Even when I perceive the tiniest edge of the imprint my head starts hurting in between my eyes.

“But, now focus or you will lose your arm again. From what I heard it's something you are used to at this point, but it's kind of pathetic.”

She also really knows where to hit to make it hurt.

I breathe in and filter out the noises from outside after checking my stats one more time.

Lvl 111

Strength: 33

Dexterity: 31

Constitution:92

Mana: 327

[Focus] activates and I consolidate it through the newest upgrade and the world becomes black and white, even feeling as if the time somehow slows down. Lissandra says something but I don't listen to her anymore.

From this point, it's up to me.

I calm my beating heart and then set Mana Regulator to 20 percent and start sending kinetic energy through my body.

While my heart beats audibly and the energy flows through me, I move my mana in the way Lissandra showed me and start sending it everywhere. I infuse my bones and muscles, I infuse my ligaments and nervous system, and my veins. As always when I focus a lot, my head starts hurting and I hear ringing in my ears that also quickly gets ignored by my [Focus].

Taking another deep breath, I release that energy tentatively into our surroundings. I change the frequency beforehand and unlike when I'm normally using it, the waves are smaller and the noise it makes is more pitched.

That seems good so far.

In the next step, I weaken my newest passive that helps me to endure strain on my body. Then I also turn off the Reinforcement construct and make sure I'm not using Symbiotic Transference. Lissandra, after observing me for a bit, said that setting my Mana Regulator to 20 percent of the output of Kinetic Mana Heart should be fine and that I should try to temper only my left hand to get used to it.

But, how about 30 percent?

My regulator setting changes and thirty percent of my mana starts flowing into the Kinetic Mana Heart, sending waves of kinetic energy through a nearly as weak as possible body.

Left arm? How about if I try it on my entire body? I delve deeper and the voice of Lissandra gets filtered out as well as the wind outside and the creaking of the house.

Right now, only me and my body exist.

Deep breath in. Hold. Deep breath out.

Let's go with 40 percent.

I change the regulator once again and focus on infusing my body with mana in ways I just learned, while also grabbing hold of kinetic energy and collecting it in my body, which starts to react to the pressure much stronger now that I'm not strengthened by reinforcement and the passive is weakened.

As soon as I feel my body is infused properly, I grab hold of the kinetic energy and start sending it, this time not out of my body, but through my body. I adjust the kinetic energy slightly and also alter its frequency.

Immediately, I feel as if someone started pummeling my body with a massive hammer while shaking it impossibly quickly. It's getting hard to focus, and the pain feels omnipresent and constant, and I get bruised even in the parts where I feel I'm doing it perfectly. The energy just continues to pummel, to temper my body, putting a lot of strain on it. Only thanks to my body being properly infused with mana and thanks to the special frequency of kinetic energy, my body absorbs some strain so I do not get torn apart. Yet, it hurts, it hurts so much.

I keep getting more and more wounds every time I lose my focus even for a split second, but I force myself and continue.

A minute passes.

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

One of my eyes explodes because of me losing my focus and the frequency of the thread of kinetic energy changes for a second.

Four minutes.

Five minutes.

Lissandra said five minutes is a good start and the maximum I should do on my first try.

Six minutes.

Seven minutes.

Another wound that feels somewhat serious, but I continue.

Eight minutes.

I change the setting on my Mana Regulator again, but this time I'm not even sure to what percentage. The world for me becomes just my body and two energies I have to handle - the kinetic energy that can kill me at any second and the mana that I use to infuse my body with.

At some point, I notice some imperfections and change the frequency a bit, and use a bit less mana to infuse my body.

The pain strengthens but the efficiency improves.

Good.

Then, who knows how much later, I stop. Right after, I set up my regulator again and at the same time turn back on Reinforcement and the passive, as well as start to strengthen my body with Symbiotic Transference.

I open my eyes... my single eye, and turn it to the fleshy brooch still lying there, on the ground in front of me.

This time Lissandra doesn't say anything.

Chapter 150: Four conditions fulfilled

Did I lose consciousness?

NOPE!

Am I happy? Yup. That's kind of rare. Also, my left arm didn't explode. Sure, there are some massive bruises, a few cracked bones, and a missing pinkie on my leg. One missing eye. An ear that nearly tore off. Plenty of hurt inner organs. Nothing Lily wouldn't be able to handle.

But! Look at this.

Lvl 111

Strength: 43

Dexterity: 41

Constitution: 112

Mana: 327

Strength, Dexterity went up by 10 points each, and Constitution increased by 20 points! That's like getting 13 levels worth of stats, just by trying a little bit. That sounds all too good. I'll have to get Lily to heal me and try again, maybe I can improve on the process.

A few skills also leveled up.

[Mana Infusion - lvl 21 > Mana Infusion - lvl 22]

[Mana Infusion - lvl 22 > Mana Infusion - lvl 23]

[Mana Infusion - lvl 23 > Mana Infusion - lvl 24]

[Focus - lvl 33 > Focus - lvl 34]

Good, very good! My body hurts like hell and I will most likely get killed by Lily, but right now I'm happy.

"How are you even alive?" the creepy thing on the floor asks and I ignore it.

Not even a rude talking brooch will dampen my good mood.

"Well, anyways, there are still some parts where you are seriously lacking. It's called active tempering, not active ruiningyourbody."

"Huh, It's not the same?" I answer.

Also, isn't she too similar to me? Is it because of imprint imperfections or was she somehow affected by me? Being made from my hand and stuff.

Lissandra then continues to diss the entire process I did. She calls me dumb multiple times and calls my mana manipulations barely better than that of a 5-year-old child. But I sit there and listen. Even though she is rude, she gives some really good pointers and now that I went through it there is a bit more I can understand.

I find that I'm already getting used to this grumpy and high-standard imprint of terrifyingly powerful Absolute. Yet, she is so different from the fake I met on the second floor. It's hard for me to bring myself to hate her for killing Ruby. Another reason is [Focus] that keeps all these emotions at bay and my knowing that Ruby would have died anyway.

Still, I need to be careful. I know for sure that she is willing to take over my body and mind the moment an opportunity arrives. She would do it without a moment of hesitation.

Then, the more we talk, the more I realize that its personality is really not perfect, as it also said. The imprint is not as dignified, it's missing some memories that Lissandra probably didn't want to share even with the imprint as she probably thought of the imprint as a different being from her. So she just gave it basics to make sure it would do what she wanted and have some skill to maybe take over someone from the tutorial and get out and then use coordinates to get to her original self.

Yet, the system messed with her plans a bit, either actively or passively.

Well, it's not like it matters that much, I just need to get said coordinates as it's something that interests me as well and then I also need to learn as much as possible from it before it spends all of its mana.

"So, little pup, you can't do it too often. I remind you of it once again. Even if you can handle it, your circuit and your pathways won't be able to. Also, the next time you will have to use even stronger energy to temper your body, or the result will be minimal, if it works at all."

It's as I expected, but it doesn't matter. Getting a way to permanently strengthen my body without having to spend stat points on useless, inferior stats is good enough. I'm curious about what else she is hiding from me.

Give me, give me all the information and the secrets and hidden techniques! I need to know!

"Why did you look like a grandma back then?" I ask.

The brooch silences.

"Even Ruby did look young, there is no way you wouldn't be able to."

It's still quiet and I can nearly hear it thinking about using its precious mana to torture me once again. I bet Lissandra is not used to people talking to her like this. Hell, just a single sneeze from her fake original self could probably kill me if she was not careful.

Then the brooch sighs, it's so weird that it almost makes me laugh, "There was no need to. And yes, just having your body at a certain level and strengthened with stats or mana is enough to keep your youthful appearance or even make some older people look younger."

"Were you hot, when you were young?" I can't help but ask. Seeing her being so unsure about what to do now that she is a brooch somehow makes me want to bully her. To pay back for all the bullshit she did to me in this way.

But then a tiny bit of mana flies at me and I jump up, sending a few shields towards it. The mana passes through them as if they do not exist. It nearly looks like some weird version of [Disruption] that ignores my mana.

Then it continues to track me slowly before speeding up and hitting me.

Nothing happens.

“Uh?” I scan my body multiple times, not finding anything at all. Not a speck of mana, not what she did. She is probably just pretending to attack me and trying to throw me off.

I still start getting nervous.

“Silly little pup, you know what people fear the most?” the fleshy brooch says darkly while laying there unmoving in the middle of the room that is barely lit by my mana orb filled with thermal energy.

It's creepy.

“People fear the most things they don't understand, they fear the unexpected. Because when you don't know something and don't expect something you can't prepare yourself to defend against it.” Lissandra continues.

The wind rages outside and the creaking of the house now becomes louder.

“Now then, little pup, keep thinking about what I did, keep expecting my revenge. It might even take some time and you forget about it, but I promise when you expect it the least you will get your lesson for your potty mouth. Or maybe not. Maybe I'm trying to trick you and didn't want to waste more of my mana.”

Then the silence fills the room and the brooch looks somehow satisfied. Yup, this imprint really differs from Lissandra.

“So that means you weren't hot?” I can't help but say.

“Motherfuc...”

Lissandra went to sleep, or whatever brooches do when they are tired. What an asshole and petty grandma. She refuses it but now I'm sure she got somewhat similar to me. She probably just doesn't want to accept the fact that her imprint was imperfect to the point where it got affected by me. I swear when I meet her original self, I'll have my revenge.

But for now, before the night ends, I can look into two of my skills.

[Disruption] and [Oscillation].

These are the skills I've been thinking about a lot lately. Now that I have a better idea of how the system works and after talking to Lissandra, something seems amiss.

[Disruption] is what I use to disrupt mana, but from its name, it should be used to disrupt everything. It's not called [Mana Disruption]

Then there is [Oscillation] that I mostly use to oscillate mana. To vibrate it, to make it more, and then I use it to increase the cutting force of my weapons. Once again, it's not called [Mana Oscillation].

After observing some monsters and watching Lissandra's weird mana just pass through my shields, something about them feels off. It's almost as if they should be just one skill and they haven't been growing as much as I would like them to. Is it a problem caused by having two skills with somewhat similar effects?

I don't know, but I asked Lissandra for a few hints and got some. So now, I'll try to combine them.

It's totally possible to combine two skills into one. If they are similar it's easier, but if their effects are too different it's almost impossible. That's where I think there might be a skill combination token in the future.

The system likes its tokens.

But enough of that. I enter [Focus] once again, ignore my wounds, and start using both of these skills at once.

[Disruption] is more intangible while [Oscillation] is more physical, but I try to use the second one on a piece of wood in my hand while attempting to apply the first one. The feeling is weird, so different, yet so similar. There's something both of the skills have in common.

At first, I try to use both skills at once, but after hours of feeling like it leads to nothing, I just use one of them while trying to use it as the other one.

Even the creepy brooch wakes up and surprisingly gives me a few pointers. I continue, and hours pass as I keep failing, only to receive a few more tips mixed with complaints about my terrible mana handling. But this time I don't filter her voice out and listen as her voice guides me through the process.

Lissandra easily identifies what I'm trying to do and even knows where I should go to get a good result, so she guides me there.

She doesn't give me everything on a silver platter, not at all. She makes me practice, try, and fail, all while leading me to the point where I come up with ideas and questions on my own.

I dislike her but she is extremely skilled.

Then, the night passes and the day comes. I once again lose track of time and multiple hours pass when finally the notification sounds.

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill by combining [Disruption] and [Oscillation].

You have acquired a new skill: [Resonance]

[Resonance - lvl 0 > Resonance - lvl 9]

Haaa... my levels... why am I even surprised?

Congratulations, you have fulfilled four out of four conditions required to use the Beyond difficulty entrance token!

You can now enter Beyond once every four months.

Ehm, what?