

Tutorial 81

Chapter 81: Scary blonde

POV Maya Jones

I slip into [Focus], and everything goes too quiet for comfort. My senses go into overdrive, picking up details that make my head pound. Unsettling feelings, like fear, weaken. Yet I hate it, every time I use this skill, it feels like I'm leaving a piece of myself behind.

I notice the monster's left leg twitch and I dart to the left, quick and instinctive. The monster mirrors me, springing my way with its left leg as the launch pad.

The world around me dulls down, and all sounds not needed for my focus just quiet down.

I'm face-to-face with the monster now. Its ugly mug is all snarls and drool, revealing jagged teeth. I can hear its harsh breaths, and then its blood spills as I drive my spear into it.

My [Armament] flickers around my chest, but I just [Focus] more to keep it up.

[Focus - lvl 6 > Focus - lvl 7]

I lash out with my spear again as the monster's claw scrapes against my armor, and it finally drops.

[You have defeated a goblin - lvl 22]

When I check my notifications and see a level up for [Focus], my mood sours. I don't want to level up this skill anymore. Unlike some of my other skills, it's extremely difficult to level up, and I dislike it despite its usefulness. It's scary.

I let out a breath as I exit [Focus] and survey the area. We're nearly done here. A mana signal from one of our leaders reads "Get back" and I start back towards our camp.

Halfway there, Tess joins me, greeting me with a small smile which I return.

"You look off, something happen?" she asks.

I sigh. Damn, she's good at reading people. Been that way since we hit this floor. She's got a knack for it, not unlike Nathaniel. But she's different, she doesn't mind getting up close and personal after reading them.

"This goddamn skill creeps me out."

"Oh, the [Focus]?"

"What else? Why the hell did I even get it?"

"Don't you like our theory that everyone got two starting skills that fit them best? One rare skill and one a bit more common and easier to level? I still think your skill suits you."

The young blonde nimbly jumps over a log in her way and lands so softly that I suspect she used her skill to soften the impact.

Great, now I'm being comforted by someone six years younger.

"Forget about it, Tess. I'll deal with it on my own."

"Sure! You can ask me for help if you feel like it," she smiles. "I'll at least listen to you if not anything else."

She's so different from how she was at the end of the first floor, so different from when she was around Nathaniel. Tess is friendly, smiling, and helpful. It's unnerving.

Nathaniel, at least, didn't pretend. He just continued to walk around with his emotionless face, avoiding people as much as he could while carefully watching everything with eyes that made you feel like an interesting animal he was observing.

But Tess? She's like a cat toying with a mouse. She can act, pretend, smile, and charm with her innocent face. Like a chameleon, she adapts her behavior to survive different situations.

With Nathaniel, she mirrored his demeanor, handling annoying people on his behalf while showing them a different side. Now, she does the same with me.

And I can't help but be drawn in by her flawless performance, how easy it would be to forget. Swiftly and without hesitation, she changes her expressions and behavior to gain the upper hand.

She plays her part so well that I don't even know who the real Tess is.

Is she the cheerful, innocent girl beside me, or the formidable young woman who never left Nathaniel's side?

She's scary.

A week passed, and I finally did it! An arm made out of translucent light blue mana is attached to my body, but damn, it's difficult to move it. I even have to use a large part of my [Focus] to maneuver it and use it to grab stuff.

All while Biscuit looks at me with his cheeky eyes.

(Lazy) I hear.

"No food for you."

For a moment, he stops breathing, and even his tongue seems to be stuck out. He seems lost, and his usually cheeky face changes.

Yeah, what are you going to do now, you little twerp?

He just turns around and runs away, towards the place where Ruby is staying. From his shoulders, two tentacles made out of mana reach out and immediately turn into human arms, even the fingers move nimbly, all as if he is making fun of me.

Then he adds two more arms and uses them all to move faster.

God damn it.

You will pay for this, Biscuit!

Anyway, enough about future archmages. My [Mana Manipulation] has improved a lot.

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 16

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 18

Mana Perception - Lvl 15

Oscillation - Lvl 11

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 11

Armament - Lvl 12

Mana Surge - Lvl 7

Disruption - Lvl 7

Right now, I can only laugh at my past self who thought creating an arm made out of mana would be easy.

Such a dumbass. I want to hit him.

I detect a presence with my [Mana Perception], and immediately an orb made out of mana forms near me. It starts growing until it's as big as my fist, then begins to orbit around me. It spins faster and faster until it lets out a whistling noise as it cuts through the air, circling around me at a dizzying speed.

I check the mana signature and sling it in that direction.

The mana ball has a firm texture and is a darker shade of blue than before. As it's released from my orbit, it flies terrifyingly fast, traversing a distance well over several football fields long.

Then I get the notification.

[You have defeated a Razorwing - lvl 56]

[Lvl 44 > Lvl 45]

As many times before, it almost feels like cheating. The birds don't have too much defense, so my projectile practically obliterates them, flying at them too fast for them to react. At the start, they were able to react, but then I took some inspiration from the sniper who tried to kill me.

I made the projectiles as dense as possible and tried to reduce their mana signature as well. Throwing them just by boosting them with mana doesn't make them travel that fast, but after orbiting them around myself a bit and then slinging?

So much faster.

I like it even though the preparation takes longer.

I detect another three presences, and this time they're flying right towards me after a detection washes over me.

Oh, it's these guys.

Five balls made out of mana appear around me and start emitting a humming noise as I begin spinning them around my body.

The first monster dies before it can try to dodge.

[You have defeated an Ironbeak - lvl 53]

The second one dodges my balla and charges at me. The bird, larger than me with a massive beak that's glowing and covered in mana, hurls some mental skill at me, trying to stun me. But I [Focus] more and push against its mana.

I absorb the kinetic energy of one of the balls orbiting around me and use it to propel myself away. The ball, now devoid of kinetic energy, hovers in the air, and as the monster reaches the spot where I was, it expands. Tens of thin threads made out of mana reach out towards the monster and entangle it, causing it to halt. Immediately they start tearing even without the monster using much force.

Before it has a chance to break free, another ball flies in and explodes its head.

[You have defeated an Ironbeak - lvl 52]

The last one just flies in the air and caws at me, so I make my projectiles spin around me even faster. The two remaining projectiles start emitting a whistling noise as they tear through the air, and I boost them with [Mana Surge], immediately making them smaller and denser, and release one at the monster.

It barely dodges it, but while doing so, I absorb kinetic energy and propel myself high in the air, right towards the monster.

Is it reckless? Yep.

Is it fun? Totally.

I reach it in a split second and slap the poor monster, probably making me the first human to ever do that.

The consciousness disappears from its eyes, and I grab its neck with my arm made of mana, and both of us fall down. Before we hit the ground, I absorb the kinetic energy of both of our bodies, and we slowly land. The excess energy explodes into the surroundings.

"That was so freaking fabulous," I immediately hear from Ruby, even before I can congratulate myself, "Another one for your testing?"

"Yes. Lately, they've barely shown up, so I'm glad I was able to get this one."

I pull the bird behind me while boosting my body with a bit of mana.

"Yo, did you do something to make Biscuit come and complain to me?"

Who? Me? No way!

"Don't look at me like that, Nat, he's only copying your behavior and learning from you," the redheaded woman just sighs.

"Anyway, Master is here, and she wants to talk to you."

Chapter 82: In the Darkness

She radiates absolute confidence as always, even while sitting in a cheap wooden chair in the middle of the small, simple room.

The moment I enter, her eyes land on me. I don't even feel her mana, yet I know I am being probed.

[You have defeated an Ironbeak - lvl 54]

A notification sounds in my mind, and I realize that she just killed the monster I left outside. Without a single move. Without any trace of mana from her.

"Are you satisfied with your growth?" she blatantly asks, and I immediately know that there is only one answer I can give her.

But why is she asking me that? I am growing nicely, improving my skills, and even gaining some levels. Actually, quite a few levels. I am safe, I have food, and even someone to talk to if I wish to do so. The view is goddamn amazing and there's even this silly dog I can bully and learn from. The bed is comfortable and I can take warm baths.

"I am not."

It sucks.

Even though I am safe, I feel like a prisoner, unable to get away from Ruby and she doesn't let me go far. My growth is slower and in the back of my mind, I start worrying about whether I will be strong enough to survive the end of this floor.

"Not at all."

The monsters here, even ones higher leveled than me, are easy to kill. There's no challenge, no risk. Nothing to make my blood flow. Nothing to push me hard enough.

"Good."

Her mana hits me like an avalanche and I feel her doing something to me, something I can't even track. It makes me curious and annoyed at the same time. She then turns to Ruby.

"Your gift," she says simply, and immediately the redheaded woman activates her skill, the one she used to teleport us through vast distances, making space in front of her shrink, and bend.

And then, I feel the gray-haired woman do something I didn't know was possible. She connects to Ruby's skill with an ease I can't fathom and she feeds it mana, she takes over it and supercharges it, making it much stronger than it should be. She also does something else that I can only explain as changing coordinates. Her immense mana that makes my body shiver engulfs the room and then I feel a push from behind my back.

Soft, almost gentle.

"It was annoying to watch you hunting here so safely," she says.

Watch me?

"Do your best to survive, little pup," the older woman's voice is uncharacteristically gentle and I enter the darkness, then the portal behind me disappears with a last pulse of mana.

The light disappears as it closes behind me and I'm left in the darkness. I look around, but I can't see anything. The darkness is absolute. The air feels cold and humid and when I reach out with my hand, I touch a wall that is slightly wet and rocky.

A tunnel?

I take a step and my shoulder hits the wall. The hallway or tunnel I'm in is really not that wide. My [Mana Perception] fires up, but I don't feel any mana and the skill doesn't help me to map my surroundings.

So, I use [Armament] to create armor around my body. Even my [Kinetic Redistribution] is ready as I start slowly walking through the darkness, carefully touching the wall with my fingers and stepping lightly.

My heart is beating faster than usual and my body feels warmer. My breathing isn't as calm as it usually is, but I still do not enter the [Focus]. I am enjoying this feeling as much as I can.

Getting an idea, I send out a few thin threads of mana ahead of me, using them to probe my surroundings, getting a signal from them when they touch the wall. It's all inspired by the sniper's traps who tried to kill me back then.

Perception continues to fire up more and more often as I'm trying to sense the mana that must be hiding somewhere. I finally enter [Focus] and continue to walk for what feels like minutes when what I expected finally happens.

An attack tears through my [Armament] and stabs deep inside my thigh. It's something extremely sharp and thin, like a needle, and there's almost no blood flowing out of the wound.

Immediately, I activate redistribution, trying to slow the attacker's escape while my hand, coated in wildly oscillating mana, swings down, trying to cut into whatever attacked me. I hit nothing and something stabs me again, in the same place. Perception doesn't sense anything, threads of mana don't touch anything, and redistribution isn't absorbing any energy.

So, I jump back, hitting the wall with the back of my head covered in ethereal armor, but no other attack comes. Only then do I realize a weird feeling of warmth that spreads through my leg.

A poison.

The poison doesn't seem to be dangerous, at least not in the usual way a poison is dangerous. Even after 30 minutes, I only have a minor fever. The problem is what it does to my mana. As time passes, it makes my mana less and less controllable. It just messes it up somehow and makes it difficult to control. My mana continues to flow freely, not being held at bay by my [Focus]. It's fascinating. It's dangerous.

There are already a few wounds all over my body, inside and out, from my mana clashing against it, but I continue to try to control it, using the full power of my [Dual Focus] and my [Mana Manipulation].

One thing is for sure.

I had no idea that I had so much mana. I underestimated it, and only now do I realize how much I held it back, my body unable to bear more of it so unconsciously I controlled the amount.

But now? It continues to clash against my body, tear through the mana circuit, and flow quickly thanks to my passive skill, Mana Flow. The monster didn't come back anymore, so I suspect that it's a hit-and-run tactic, probably waiting for me to die.

Just wait, you fucker, just wait.

Okay, my [Focus] and [Mana Manipulation] did level up as I just continue to use them, not even being able to use [Mana Perception]

Well, it's not like I'm not in it right now.

I've already walked quite a distance and there's still only pitch-black darkness, not a single speck of light. It's cold, it's wet, and I'm careful with every step, continuously reaching out with my hand to avoid hitting the wall. I continue to force myself to breathe slowly and deeply to not panic. It's harder now that I can't use [Focus].

For the first time in a long time, I start feeling some fear.

But it's bearable. I've been through worse.

What the fuck! It's already been like ten hours?

No sign of the monster and my mana is getting worse and worse every time I get better at handling it.

[Focus - lvl 17 > Focus - lvl 18]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 19 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 20]

I've leveled up my skills again, but it just doesn't stop. It's getting worse. Every level-up only increases the time I can hold on but is unable to stop the poison. Still, I did learn a lot and improved my control and my handling of mana. I can now more easily make it flow the way I want, hold it at bay, and direct it to places inside my body.

But can I level up fast enough to stop it or will I need to try something else?

Yep, I can't hold on.

Another 10 hours pass and I stop moving, putting my entire mind into handling my mana. Thankfully, the monster doesn't attack me but I still keep a small part of my mind ready to fight back when it happens. When it attacks again, I will tackle it and take hold of my mana for a second, strengthen my body, and quickly finish it. That will teach him.

The main problem now is my almost uncontrollable mana. For the first time, I feel a hint of fear from it, realizing how dangerous it is. There might even be some regret for not putting more points into constitution. But I won't give up.

It's MY mana.

It's MY body.

I will push through as I always have.

Okay, screw it. I don't think I can hold on much longer. Let's risk it.

Let's finally create a construct.

Chapter 83: The First Construct

First, I forcefully take control of my mana, straining my brain to do so. But I already know what to do. I tried it on the man who wanted to kill me; I also tested it on so many monsters. I gave it a lot of thought and testing. So, it's time to do it for real.

I take a wisp of my mana and use it to etch the construct inside my body. Then I add more and more skills to do it.

I use [Mana Manipulation]

I use a super weak version of oscillation [Oscillation]

Then, [Mana Surge] fires up, boosting my [Mana Manipulation] as I am creating the construct.

It's not exactly like Sophie's; it has similarities to my trait, and mana circuit as well.

While doing so, the world outside of my mind becomes distant thanks to my deep [Focus] and I feel a few more stabs at my body, the monster delivering the poison again.

But I ignore it, and I ignore the mana that starts tearing through my body as I have to focus on creating the construct.

Every fiber of my being screams against the onslaught of mana, yet I grit my teeth and endure. I've always known that this would be no easy task. It feels like a maelstrom is raging inside me, wreaking havoc on my internal organs and threatening to consume me. The raw, wild energy of mana refuses to be tamed.

Yet as the world around me fades into the background and my existence narrows down to this singular task, there's a sense of calm that permeates my consciousness. Like the eye of a storm, calm amidst the chaos. The sensation is surreal like I'm observing myself from outside, detached from the pain. The harshness of my environment, the cold stones under my battered body, cold air, it all become secondary, put to the back of my mind.

I can almost visualize the intricate patterns of the construct, its complexity resonating with the very essence of my being. The inelegant yet beautiful pathways. In the end it's not only about surviving and taming my raging mana, it's about creating something new. Something mine. I'm just pulling strings of energy, shaping it, crafting it. It's a task that pushes me to my limits, a constant struggle against the raw, untamed force that is mana.

My arm twists and cracks, blood starts flowing from my nose and ears, one of my ribs breaks, and bruises start appearing all over my body. But I do not let it bother me. I continue to focus and slowly, carefully etch the pathways for the construct on my bones, connecting them to my circuit as well.

The construct slowly comes into existence and I make it stronger and more resistant against skills such as [Disruption]. I cover it in my mana, I hide it under my circuit.

My ears ring and I feel lightheaded. The pain of creating the construct is even worse than the pain of my body being ravaged by my own mana. It takes a lot of time - it feels like days, but in the end, I succeed.

A notification lights up. My first construct is as simple as this - the maximum I can do right now.

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

You have acquired Reinforcement (Construct)

The versatile enhancement that uses mana to bolster the user's physical, and mental abilities. By infusing specific aspects of their being with mana, it can improve strength, agility, defenses and mental resilience, providing overall support and stability for the user

Immediately, I feel the pressure of my mana lessen, and quite a bit of the amount starts flowing inside the construct and through the pathways I created. I feel my body strengthening up, almost the same amount as when I'm strengthening it actively.

The efficiency is not that good and it's wasting a lot of mana, and it's running the entire time instead of how I liked to use it - by sending pulses of mana through my body to strengthen the parts I wanted.

But it's a start. I am sure I can improve it in the future. I like that it's boosting multiple things.

Physically, thanks to my experience with boosting my body.

Mentally, thanks to my [Focus] and the fact that I wanted it to give me some resistance against mental attacks and the testing I did on all those Razorwings that had some sort of mental attacks.

But finally, some pain alleviates and the mana I have to deal with right now lessens. Maybe 20-30% of it flows into the construct.

The efficiency is terrible. I could get the same results with 10% of my mana if I used it actively.

But there is a huge advantage. It's passive. I don't have to use my mind to do it and anyways, I can't use all of my mana right now. And as I found out, the amount of mana I have is much higher than I thought.

There's also another advantage. I can turn it off and on any time I want to.

One part of my [Focus] immediately uses [Mana Perception] and I start sending threads of mana along with it into my surroundings. I also send pulses of mana, using it as a sonar, trying to calculate the room I am in and to find the monster.

I stop controlling my mana that's not such a problem now as the Construct sucks it up and uses it, and at the same time, my strengthened body handles it better.

I am excited. This opens up so many roads in front of me.

Your skill [Mana Perception] has evolved into [Perception].

[Mana Perception - lvl 15 > Perception - lvl 10]

My levels!

Give them back!

The heck!

What the hell?

Did I just “upgrade” my skill? Judging from the name, it's not it. So have I acquired a skill that's a higher version of my [Mana Perception] and they combined? That would confirm my theory that every skill has a tier or something like this. For example, Lily's [Disintegration] should be an exceedingly high-tiered skill as it allowed her at such a low level to hurt Cinderbear.

Good!

I fire up [Perception] and much more information comes back to me this time. I can still track mana but there's more of it. I can create a map of my surroundings in my head. It's all mostly visual as there is no sound feedback and the area is smaller than before, much smaller.

But I love it? The reason?

This little shit glued on the wall right over my head.

The monster immediately starts running away but I send even more mana inside my body to strengthen it together with my construct and dash at it.

My speed is higher than I thought so I crash against the wall but I ignore it and dash again after landing on the ground, quickly reaching the monster.

I still can't sense any mana from it, even as I grab it by the neck. Suddenly, a tiny flame flares up from the monster's mouth, lightly illuminating our surroundings. Now, I can see the text hovering over its head.

[Venomous Needle Imp - lvl 40]

Another little asshole that gave me so much trouble. Once again I am reminded that even someone much higher level can be fucked over by having a bad matchup.

Through my [Perception], I continue to observe the monster after tearing off one of its arms, that has a stinger on it.

It's similar to a goblin, just smaller and even thinner. Its skin is red and its ears sharp and big. Also, its eyes are massive; they continue to look at me while the monster screeches, trying to kick me.

What are your skills? Show me. This can't be all. You are level 40.

Slowly a fire starts glowing around the monster. Just a few wisps of flames here and there around it but soon it's set ablaze.

Before they can burn me, [Disruption]

The monster screeches and tries to do it again.

And I watch.

[Disruption]

I watch.

[Disruption]

I track the flow of its mana, following it carefully. Watching as fires come into existence.

[Disruption]

Unfortunately, the monster stops after a while, totally out of mana and not even screeching anymore.

So I grab its leg and swing the monster against the wall.

Crack

And again.

Crack. Splat.

[You have defeated a Venomous Needle Imp - lvl 40]

I wait for a bit, but nothing happens. I'm still here, and there's no portal. Okay, Granny, let me show you what I am capable of.

[Perception] fires off, and I start walking deeper inside the web of tunnels.

POV Maya Jones

"He has a sister?!"

"Yes, she's five years older than him."

"Damn, it's hard to imagine that guy having an elder sibling."

"I know where you're coming from, but just imagine a female version of him, only more sociable and significantly less forgiving." The young blonde silences.

“That sounds terrifying.”

“More than you think.”

Chapter 84: Tunnels

Venomous Needle Imps? They're super easy to deal with.

Weaklings.

Fodder.

Trash!

Yup. Easy.

[Perception] locates them pretty easily, and in the encompassing darkness inside the tunnels, I can fight them without much trouble, even when they start using their fire skills. I dislike narrow corridors that don't allow me to move as much as I would like, but it's doable.

After what feels like another day, the poison from the monster finally disappears, and it feels as if someone lifted a massive weight off my shoulders. Moving mana is now so much easier.

So, I let another imp stab me with its stinger.

Yes. I did that.

And then two more imps.

Oh.

One more after that.

Construct helping me to keep my mana under control? Well, I can turn it off if I want to, right?

So yeah, I did that too.

Darwin's awards? I have a full room of them at this point.

Obviously, I'm not that suicidal, so I turn it back on if it feels like too much, but I improve more and more. Once again, I am confirmed that I improve the most under pressure, under life and death situations where I have no other choice but to get my shit together or die.

Partly, I blame it on my greed for more power, for more mana, for my goal to get to the level of people such as Champion Keiron who can stop an entire empire from attacking the kingdom just by existing.

From his vantage point, what does he see? What does this world look like when you've got that kind of power coursing through your veins? And mana, that elusive, powerful force – what does it feel like for him? Is it a wild river he's tamed or a familiar old friend? I want to know. More than anything, I want to stand where he stands, where he and the most powerful of this world stand. I want to see the world through their eyes. I crave that knowledge, that power. The very thought is like a fire in my veins, pushing me on.

Another reason is also my need for survival. It sounds counterproductive, risking my life to survive, but the stronger I become with an acceptable risk - judged by me - the higher chance for survival.

That's why I do it.

[You have defeated a Crimson Imp - lvl 54]

[Lvl 46 > Lvl 47]

[Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - lvl 21 > Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - lvl 22]

More mana!

Good.

Once again, I activate my construct to help me handle my mana which is becoming unstable because of the poison, and after a long while, I check the quests.

Floor quest:

Witness the end of the world.

Rewards:

Skill upgrade token

20 stat points

Increased daily limit of community usage

Tutorial Difficulty change token

Ok, this one is still the same, what about side quests?

Side quest:

Reach level 50

Rewards:

Trait strengthening token

This one is close enough, and I am already curious about the strengthening of my trait. It's called strengthening and not upgrade, does it mean I won't be able to pick an additional effect for it?

Probably?

Oh, and the new side quest I just acquired also seems nice.

Side quest:

Get 3 skills over level 20

Rewards:

Passive skill of your choice

To be honest, it kind of hypes me up.

I open my status:

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 2 - Mana Infused Kingdom

Time left until forced return: 4y 309d 020h 48m 43s

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

Lvl 47

Strength: 16

Dexterity: 17

Constitution: 52

Mana:

[Primary Class: Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 19

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 22

Perception - Lvl 11

Oscillation - Lvl 12

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 11

Armament - Lvl 12

Mana Surge - Lvl 7

Disruption - Lvl 8

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

[Skill Points: 0]

[Stat Points: 0]

Focus is almost there and then there are multiple skills that can end up there, so let's wait and see. As with all things inside the tutorial, this should also be based on my performance up until now inside the tutorial, right?

And as I found out, passive skills have rarities, so the harder I try, the better rarity I get offered?

Oh, and the system? Please explain the rarities to me. How many are there? What is the highest and what is the difference between them?

...

Nothing?

Okay.

Screw you.

Anyway, back to my dinner.

I enter a deeper [Focus] as I continue chewing on a piece of raw meat from the body of an imp next to me.

It's already been days, and the darkness continues to make me feel uneasy. The constant battles and the oppressive atmosphere are taking their toll on me. Yet, somehow, I find solace in my progress, in the knowledge that I am growing stronger with every challenge I overcome.

As I chew on the raw meat, my thoughts wander to Ruby's master. What kind of person is she? How powerful is she?

I've encountered beings with one or two question marks next to their levels, but is there a higher level of power that even goes beyond that? Is she a Champion of the Kingdom, a Paragon of the Empire, or something else entirely?

I want answers to these questions.

The mystery surrounding her strength only fuels my desire to grow stronger, and to be able to stand on equal footing with such powerful individuals. My ambition and my instinct for survival drive me forward, pushing me to take risks and challenge myself to reach that place.

One of my goals is to complete the side quest. I am particularly excited about the potential rewards - trait-strengthening token and the chance to get a new passive skill.

The thought of strengthening my abilities is incredibly appealing, and I can't help but wonder how much stronger I could become with the right combination of skills.

As I ponder my goals and my growing abilities, I can't help but feel a sense of pride in my progress.

My mana has increased significantly, and my constitution has improved as well. My skills are leveling up, and I can feel myself becoming stronger with each passing moment.

But I know there's still a long way to go, and I won't stop until... until... I don't know.

I'll think of it when I get there.

Meanwhile all this time, I've been trying to come up with a way to punch Ruby's master right in her face. Unfortunately, I can't even imagine such a situation. She's just that powerful.

Up until now, I've met...

Oh, an imp.

An orb made of mana appears near me, and I boost it with [Mana Surge] and [Mana Manipulation]. It accurately hits the monster.

[You have defeated an Imp - lvl 59]

So, up until now, I've met people who were one or two question marks. One question mark meant that they were at least 20 levels higher, but at what point do they turn into two question marks?

The questions!

It bothers me not knowing.

Tell me, spoil everything.

I need to know!

...

Nothing? Okay.

Another thing, can't these tunnels become wider? I don't like the feeling they summon in me. I've never had claustrophobia, but damn, at this point, I might get it, and probably only thanks to [Focus] do I function properly.

I take back every complaint I had about the skill. At this point, I'm nearly sure that it's most likely one of the most OP skills I could get.

Lily's [Disintegration]? Screw that. Mr. [Focus] all the way!

That reminds me of the community and in the chilling darkness of the tunnel, I open the community feed, my heart skipping a beat. A sense of loneliness hits me, reminding me of the isolation. As I stare at the list of messages, I feel the overwhelming silence of the tunnels close in around me. But in this isolation, I find some calm as well. It allows me to focus solely on my personal growth, on my own journey.

I tap out a short message on the screen.

Noname (Hell, group 4)- I am fine.

Immediately after, I close it. Reading messages from others while I'm trapped in the tunnels doesn't feel that good.

[Lvl 47 > Lvl 49]

After a bit more time passed my mana increased by three points just from struggling alone and then 6 more from level-ups.

Constitution also went up by two points without even leveling it up. That just shows how much pressure it all put on my body.

As for skills

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

[Focus - lvl 19 > Focus - lvl 20]

[Perception - lvl 11 > Perception - lvl 13]

[Armament - lvl 12 > Armament - lvl 14]

At this point, I started to get a feeling that that's all I can get from here.

I activated my [Perception], sending out invisible waves through the dark, damp tunnel. As the waves returned, I sensed the chilling presence of a serpent-like creature nearby. I could feel the outline of its massive body coiling around itself, and the hardness of its iron-like scales. The shape of its fangs, seemingly dripping with venom, emitted a sinister aura as I felt the creature's overwhelming mana.

Oh boy, I was wrong.

Chapter 85: Serpents and Imps

I hope that the imps I killed weren't the serpent's pets.

The monster slithers through the tunnels that are now wider, proceeding to gobble up a few detected imps.

Never mind.

My [Perception] is now terribly limited, and I send smaller and smaller pulses of mana, hoping that the serpent won't be able to detect me. It's as if I've swapped from using a flashlight to using a smartwatch display to light a massive room. But I don't despair; my senses sharpen, and I make threads of mana even smaller and thinner.

[Perception - lvl 13 > Perception - lvl 14]

Slowly, I control the mana inside my body, slowing its flow and the amount I'm generating. Carefully, in a similar way to how I did when I killed Emeric.

Breathe in slowly.

Breathe out.

Carefully. Gently.

I barely sense movement in my surroundings and this time I hear a massive body moving in the darkness around me. I feel a presence within arm's reach, and I feel the pressure it makes as its body slithers next to me.

More. Hide it more. Control it more.

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

The movement stops, and for a long moment, I just stand there, ready to fire up the entirety of my mana if I get attacked.

But nothing happens, and slowly the body next to me starts moving again.

At some point, parts of its body hit me, and I stagger and almost fall, with my nerves on edge and ready to fight. But the monster doesn't notice, and it slowly disappears deep into the tunnels.

And I slowly follow it.

A few hours pass, and I continue to slowly walk behind the monster. My [Perception] improves more and more, yet without any level up as I continue to feel through it how the massive serpent deals with other monsters in the tunnels. I'm still hiding my mana, getting even better at it.

The serpent is savage; it's fast and doesn't hold back at all. Every attack feels as if it's using the full power of its body and mana, and it easily tanks every counter-attack.

Currently, I have no idea what the monster is called or how high its level is as I still can't see because there is no light, but from watching it and sensing its mana, I guess it's a question mark.

Yet, I still track it while hiding my mana and limiting my [Perception]. Everything else doesn't matter. Right now, I need to find its weaknesses, to learn its patterns and how it reacts to this or that attack.

And then, when I think I am ready, I will hunt it.

Slowly, I start collecting mana inside my body, in my mouth, on my tongue. The same way I did with Emeric. A small bead of mana forms right over my tongue, and I continue to feed it mana, making it denser and denser without increasing its size. One part of my [Focus] isolates it from the rest of my body, making sure there is an area around the bead that won't let any mana signature pass. The second part of [Focus] continues to feed it more and more mana, making it denser.

Meanwhile, I'm sticking close behind the monster, trying to speed up. Even though I'm dumping a ton of mana into the bead, there's still a lot left. Some of it's being sucked up by a construct and sent back into me. But it can't hide it all. Soon, some is going to leak out, and that's when the monster's gonna sniff me out.

Carefully, I speed up, moving closer and closer to the serpent and preparing to attack, preparing for the fight that might follow. My heart is beating wildly and calming feeling of mana moving through my body washes over me.

It's time.

Out of nowhere, I feel a sharp mana and turn towards it at the same time the serpent does, and fire flares up in the surroundings.

[Ironscale Serpent - lvl ?]

And

[Scorching Imp - lvl ?]

I see scales on the serpent's head melt, and then a figure much smaller than the serpent lands on its head and fire flares up around its body. With a terrible hiss and while thrashing around, the serpent flails, hitting me as well, and I roll on the ground, getting back on my feet as quickly as possible.

When I stand up, the serpent is already dead, falling to the ground while a small creature still holds onto its head.

Something like a laugh echoes through the surroundings, and the flames slowly die, and the tunnels slowly return to darkness.

Before the light disappears, I see small yellow eyes looking straight at me.

[Focus] and [Perception] activate with full power. Then I open my mouth and the bead I kept making starts to orbit around me. I immediately boost it with [Mana Surge].

On top of my body strengthening by construct, I boost it with mana and dash to the side, dodging the first attack.

Somewhere behind me, flames flare up again, and the monster screeches, unhappy that it missed me, my detection better than that of the serpent.

The mana orb starts spinning faster and faster, and I [Focus]

I dodge again, and this time I absorb some kinetic energy from the attack and shoot it back at the monster.

The mana bead spinning around me becomes as big as my fist, and I make it rotate and spin. My head starts hurting, and I feel mana flowing inside my body without any control now that I can't take care of it with [Focus] as I'm still slightly affected by the poison.

Flames start to flare up around the monster's body, making it easier to locate, but quickly I start feeling the heat.

[Disruption] flares up, and I use [Mana Surge] to boost it, trying to cancel the monster's skill. It doesn't help much, so I just dash backward, putting more distance between me and the monster.

Finally, I stop using other skills and focus on the orb spinning around me at a dizzying speed. I add [Oscillation] on the threads the orb is made of, and unable to hold it anymore, I sling it at the monster.

The orb hurtles through the air, its surface buzzing with vibrating mana. It's so fast, it's almost impossible to track. In a split second, it reaches the monster, which instinctively forms a fiery armor around its body. Even at my distance, I can feel the intense heat.

The monster evades, but not fully. As the orb, slightly diminished by the heat, reaches it, it performs an unexpected maneuver. Instead of simply striking, it unfurls in a surprising display of [Oscillation]. Sharp tendrils of mana, vibrating intensely, span out from it, forming a deadly pattern, as wide as I am tall.

In a heartbeat, too brief to fully comprehend, the oscillating tendrils slice through the imp. The creature is rendered into a gruesome assortment of body parts, an outcry of mana echoing through the space.

Just as abruptly, the tendrils of mana dissipate, the oscillating energy vanishing. All that remains are small particles of light, twinkling blue in the aftermath.

[You have defeated the Scorching Imp - 79]

[Lvl 49 > Lvl 50]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 24 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 25]

[Oscillation - lvl 12 > Oscillation - lvl 14]

[Armament - lvl 14 > Armament - lvl 16]

Congratulations! You have successfully completed a side quest. You have acquired a trait-strengthening token.

With a loud sigh, I step back and lean against the side of the tunnel.

Where the hell did this little fucker come from?

My heartbeat slowly slows down as I calm bit by bit, only now realizing how close I was to death. While on guard, I invest my stat points and then start to think.

Should I strengthen my trait? What will happen if I strengthen Mana Circuit now when I am missing part of it? What will happen after I get my arm back, and the strengthened circuit doesn't apply to it? What will happen if I get my arm and it doesn't have a circuit at all?

Okay, let's wait a bit with using it. There is also an option to use it for another trait that I might get, and that might be even better than the current one. As the system said, I can have three of them.

I wait a bit longer, but there are no signs of Ruby or her master. I guess she is not done with me yet.

But hey, at least I now have a snake to eat. Should be better than imp.

More time passes. A few more days in the darkness of the tunnels. Each day seems longer than the one before, and the tunnels somehow feel even darker and more confined.

[Lvl 50 > Lvl 53]

[Perception - lvl 14 > Perception - lvl 15]

[Armament - lvl 16 > Armament - lvl 19]

[Oscillation - lvl 14 > Oscillation - lvl 15]

A few more imps died in my hands, some even higher leveled than the one that killed the serpent. It took what feels like a few days, but it's hard to guess.

I can use the countdown to forced return to measure the time? I call bullshit; there's no way I am here that short. It feels much longer!

Currently, my [Armament] is stuck at level 19, probably another bottleneck, but not as massive as from level 9 to 10. Some other skills leveled up as well as I continued to try to use them only and as much as possible, making me a step closer to acquiring a new passive skill.

Damn, I really hope for something super nice. Taking a step to continue to walk through the tunnels, I feel the well-known mana behind me and stop, quickly closing my eyes as the light blinds me for a second.

I recognize Ruby's mana, and there is a small crystal floating near her, letting out a soft, yellowish light.

“Well, you still look like shit,” her voice is soft, and I can hear a hint of a smile in it, not laughing at me, just teasing me a bit. At this point, it seems like she uses the same greeting every time she meets me.

Mana flares up from her body, and both of us are moved somewhere else, a place I quickly recognize as the place where Ruby's master sent me. She is sitting in a chair nearby, her carefully controlled mana signature barely letting out some presence.

There is something in the atmosphere that stops me from saying anything.

"Are you and the others really drifters?" she asks.

Chapter 86: Beyond Human Comprehension

I sigh heavily and sink slowly into the chair, my eyes shut tight against the light I'm not accustomed to, while I use [Perception] to examine my surroundings. She doesn't seem to mind.

"I'm not sure, that's just what you guys call us," I respond truthfully.

"And what do you call yourselves?" she scrutinizes me, and I can't help but think she's using her mana to probe me without me even realizing it.

I begin to gradually open my eyes, carefully adjusting to the light.

I repeat a phrase I've said many times before to numerous people, The test I did to see their reaction, "We're from Earth and we got stuck in the Tutorial. This world, your world, seems to be part of that tutorial. You are either being manipulated by the tutorial or more likely, you're not real at all - just copied over and over again for a purpose that's unclear."

Just like before, her reaction mirrors others' - it's as if she doesn't hear or can't understand what I've just said.

Well, I guess that's it, let's try...

"You said something, but I couldn't make it out. Repeat it."

Chills run down my spine, and despite the blinding light I'm not used to, I force my eyes open and gaze at the elderly woman before me. For the first time, her brow furrows, and I can sense her mana slowly intensifying. It's as if I'm sitting next to a nuclear reactor.

Slowly but surely, I can feel more of her mana, applying pressure, and studying me. It expands into the world around us, creating an eerie silence that engulfs a larger area than I can comprehend. The entire kingdom? The whole continent?

Her mana, released now, radiating an intense pressure that was steadily growing. The room trembling in the wake of her raw power, each vibration chilling and reminding me of the force she holds. The world around us responds to her, terrified tremors echoing beneath our feet.

I feel as if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, one misstep away from sure death.

"Repeat it," her voice is firm and leaves no room for refusal.

As I repeat my earlier words, her mana pressure increases. The ground beneath me starts to tremble more, and I hear a loud, cracking noise from the outside. The air becomes heavy, making it hard to breathe.

"Again."

I repeat it once more. The sounds from outside give the impression of a collapsing mountain, and it's noticeably darker than before. The noise of a cracking stone is almost deafening, and the whole house shakes. This continues until she intervenes, seemingly isolating whatever is happening outside from the events within the house.

After all this noise, the silence is almost deafening as she speaks, "I can't hear it," she whispers, her voice more for herself than for me, evident confusion in her tone.

"Miss..." I begin cautiously, and the formidable presence disguised in human form in front of me slowly redirects her attention towards me.

Slowly, delicately, I utter what I intended to say, "Have you met other drifters besides me and my group?"

"Of course, I have, drifters are..." she trails off.

Her eyes widen and she falls into silent contemplation, the world around us starts to shake again. A trace of annoyance crosses her face and everything comes to a halt. The world falls silent and the air grows stale.

From her reaction, it seems like my suspicion was correct. This world, this duplicate of a world that once existed and was copied by the system, has never known drifters. It's merely a mechanic employed by the system to introduce us, the people from the tutorial, into this world.

She looks at me one final time before standing up. In a split second, her mana flares up and a long tear in space appears in front of her. She steps through it and vanishes.

The tear has an effect similar to Ruby's skills. But where Ruby's skills feel like she's negotiating with the world using her mana to teleport, this master simply tears through it by the sheer force of her mana, disregarding efficiency.

"Damn, that was terrifying. What on earth did you say?"

Ruby slowly approaches me, but I'm already opening the door, eager to see what caused the noises I heard.

Stepping outside, I'm rooted to the spot because of the sight in front of me, overwhelmed, unable to comprehend what I see. The once majestic mountains, their peaks reaching higher than the highest on Earth, are now nothing but wreckage.

Decimated. Shattered.

What lies before me is an expanse of destruction that seemingly goes on forever, as vast as a sea stretching beyond the horizon.

The mountains are fragmented, and the earth beneath is fractured. And there, suspended in mid-air, are huge pieces of these mountains, as large as skyscrapers, as large as mountains themselves. These gigantic chunks hover, gradually descending towards the shattered ground below, gravity reclaiming its hold on them.

This destruction extends as far as I can see, devastation repeating itself over and over.

For a long moment, I'm completely at a loss for words and don't even know what to think.

Ruby quickly guides both me and Biscuit away, just before a huge chunk of what was once a mountain crashes down near us.

As we arrive in a new room, I can't help but replay the events that just unfolded in the back of my mind. I can't ignore it. The raw power needed to cause such destruction is beyond my comprehension.

"Is your master a Champion?" I boldly ask Ruby, hoping for answers.

"She... she is unique, ancient. I don't know much more than you," this time she replies without her usual smirk or playful banter. "I've been with her for over 40 years and I still don't fully understand what she's capable of."

Hmm? Another indirect answer to my question. It seems that reaching a certain level of power can halt, slow, or even reverse the aging process.

"Is she stronger than them?"

"I can't say for sure, and you shouldn't underestimate Champions and Paragons. They are more than capable of doing what the master did. Even I can say that she held back considerably."

This is holding back? I pull Biscuit closer and begin to stroke his tiny head to calm myself a bit. No words echo in my head, and for that, I'm grateful.

It seems I drastically underestimated the power level of some people here. Survive the end of the world? At this rate, I'll consider myself lucky if there aren't many more people like her.

"Just get some rest and I'll wake you in a few hours, okay?" the redhead leaves the room, leaving me alone with my always-hungry friend. Time to sleep.

I lay down on the bed and slowly close my eyes. Recalling the darkness of long tunnels filled with unseen monsters, I decide to leave the lights on and gradually drift off to sleep, comforted by the warm body beside me.

POV Hadwin Harper

The woman standing before me appears to be in her fifties, maybe even sixties. She has gray hair and is dressed in a black and white suit that, in my opinion, would be more suited to a man.

Despite her age, she moves with surprising agility, exuding an unwavering aura of confidence. However, I notice a tiny crack in that confidence as I recount my journey here.

Just like the others I've attempted to explain my situation to, she seems unable to grasp the concept of the tutorial and everything it entails.

For a fleeting moment, fear grips me as I consider how she might react and what she wants from me.

"Harper, what the hell did I tell you? Turn off the light and go to sleep!" my commander bursts into the tent. He freezes in the middle of his step after spotting the woman.

"Who, the fu--"

In an instant, he's reduced to a bloody mess on the floor, his life extinguished before he can finish his sentence.

"Repeat it," the woman commands, and I quickly comply.

Her annoyance is more apparent this time, but she finally speaks after I've finished. "Go through the tear," she orders, slashing the air with her hand.

It's as if she's torn open the fabric of reality itself, revealing a different place on the other side - a simple, cozy-looking room.

Quickly to not agitate her more, I step through. The tear closes behind me, leaving me alone in this new place, with the crazy gray-haired woman nowhere in sight.

Soon, I hear footsteps approaching from behind the door. It swings open to reveal a young woman dressed in a white, long-sleeved shirt and black pants. Her hair is a vibrant shade of red, and her eyes have a peculiar yellowish hue.

"God damn it, Master. You always make me do such annoying things," she sighs as she sizes me up, "Well, I'm sure Nathaniel will be happy," she says, her smile growing wider.

Oh no.

Chapter 87: Hadwin Harper

POV Hadwin Harper

It's hard to wrap my head around it.

A telepathic corgi, a psychopathic armless young man, and a mysterious redheaded woman all sit around a simple table.

The corgi persistently begs for food, while four purple arms made of mana hover around him, attempting to snag any unattended food.

The young woman eats slowly, continually teasing the young man without a hint of concern for his silent resentment, which is visible in his eyes despite his unchanging expression.

Nathaniel just sits there. From the place where his arm used to be, a new one grows, made of mana. Its pale blue light shines, and he moves it around, bending it at the elbow, twisting the wrist. Even the fingers move, making it all look incredibly difficult.

They all seem accustomed to each other's company, looking almost like a group of siblings. And I'm just sitting there awkwardly.

Occasionally, Nathaniel glances at me for a moment but doesn't say anything.

"Nat! You suck at this. Look, it's simple!" The young woman continues to tease him while two mana arms float around her, behaving exactly as normal arms would.

And she does it with such ease.

(Asshole!) The corgi continues to shout his new favorite word. Even though his mana arms aren't as perfect as the woman's, they come close.

They both continue to tease the young man, who watches them quietly with curious eyes.

At this moment, he doesn't seem like the homicidal man I've always taken him for. He appears more like an older, patient brother being teased by his younger siblings.

Biscuit, you're a good boy, but enough is enough. No more of your favorite snacks.

Also, move your mana arms a bit slower so I can observe them better. They're not as good as Ruby's, but it's easier to learn from slightly worse versions than from her nearly perfect ones.

And Ruby, just wait. I swear I'll steal the entire batch of sweets you're hiding in the living room. I know you're saving them for later and that they were super expensive.

My revenge will be terrifying.

I notice Hadwin watching me, but I don't acknowledge him and let him continue observing.

Right now, I don't know what to do with him. He seems to have been sent here by Ruby's master, so hurting him is out of the question. I'll just wait and see.

I have time; there's no need to rush.

The afternoon slowly turns into the night. At some point, Ruby brings some alcohol and encourages us all to drink it. It tastes like a mix of strawberry and basil. It's cold, and I really enjoy the taste. As I continue to sip it, I observe the people around me as time passes.

At some point, the corgi falls asleep, and Ruby leaves.

I end up in the room with Hadwin and Biscuit's head on my thigh. I continue to caress him while my mana arm clumsily holds the glass of alcohol, and I drink.

"Will you hear me out?" Hadwin asks.

Our eyes meet for a second. He's serious. I nod and wait curiously for him to continue.

"It's about the deal I want to make with you."

Interesting, does he think that I would be interested?

"Allow me to explain."

I remain silent, so he continues.

"I used to be a policeman," he pauses, and seeing no reaction, continues, "damn, you're not making this easy." He sighs, "I met people like you." Another pause, "Let me correct that. I met people that I thought were like you."

I caress Biscuit's head and slowly sip from the glass held by my mana arm.

"But you're different, and I'm still not sure how to categorize you right now. Trying to kill you was probably a mistake on my part, still, I want to make you an offer that would benefit both of us."

He takes a big gulp of his drink and looks at me.

"Until the end of this floor and for the entire duration of the next one, I will work with you. I will deal with people for you, and help you so you can focus on your training and leveling as much as you can. I have a lot of experience in this kind of stuff, so you wouldn't be on the losing side. You could see it on the first floor. I'll also share all the information I have with you."

I notice that he hasn't specified what he wants from me in exchange, likely to make the offer sound even more appealing. He's probably predicting that I'll behave similarly to how I did on the first floor, allowing him to extract some use from me as well.

It's a tempting offer. All I have to do is give up my revenge.

Well, it was a pathetic attempt on my life, and up until then, he was more helpful than annoying. I also already beaten him what made me feeling better.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

I nod.

"Okay," he repeats, then laughs helplessly.

"Now, tell me about these 500-year-old healers."

What the heck are they? This is the first time I've heard of them.

It sounds so cool!

The older man just sighs quietly before he explains.

I enter the room next to the one where we were drinking. Ruby sits there, close to the fireplace, sipping from a bottle next to her. The bottle is beautiful, like a brilliant diamond cut into a stunning shape, with a small amount of red-colored alcohol inside.

"That was nice of you, to forgive the poor old man," she smiles at me as I sit down next to her in front of the fireplace.

She offers me the alcohol, and I take a small sip.

I've never tasted anything better in my life.

"I see you like alchemical wine," she smiles as she retrieves the bottle and continues to sip from it, looking at me.

"I don't even want to know the price," I reach out, and she hands me the bottle while smiling playfully.

"Yes, you don't want to know." After I take a sip, she grabs it back and stares at the fire inside the fireplace.

For that moment, she looks so lonely, so weak.

But then the moment passes, and a smile forms on her face - a smile that often seems so fake.

Then she moves closer and lays down with her head on my thigh. She looks up at me, and this time her smile seems more genuine and cheeky.

"I think I understand why Biscuit likes lying down like this so often. It's surprisingly comfortable."

I sigh. At this point, I might get offered a class called 'Novice Body Pillow'.

"Tell me, Nat. Do you want to know my real name?"

Please, don't call me Nat.

"Not really."

She's still smiling, but I see it's not as genuine as before.

"That's so like you." She lifts her hand and pokes my nose, similar to how I boop Biscuit's nose.

It doesn't matter what her real name is. I will always remember her as Ruby. A poor woman imprisoned and used by the system or maybe not even real. Just one of the multiple copies of Ruby. One of many.

"You have a scary look on your face."

I guess? Somehow it doesn't feel good. I don't like it.

"Nat, don't ever become like my master, please," she says after a short pause for thought. Her face is serious as she looks at me, holding my head with both her hands while laying down on my lap.

She makes me look at her, “Don't let yourself be seduced by her power, by her mana. She's so lonely, so cold, so scary. I wouldn't like for you to become like that.” She pinches my cheeks, “Just stay the way you are now. Maybe try to smile a bit and show your affection to other people more.”

That just doesn't sound like me.

She pinches harder.

Oi, that hurts.

I try to grab her hand, to move it away, but I can't budge it an inch. She is so much stronger.

I sigh and let her continue to pinch my cheeks, and she smiles victoriously. After a while, she stops, bored by my lack of reaction.

A quiet laugh emanates from her.

“We have an entire room free. There are so many places to sit at, yet we are so close to each other.”

You're the one to blame.

“It feels comfortable, you know.” She adjusts herself, making herself more comfortable while the fire continues to crackle in the fireplace. She picks up the bottle, takes a sip, and spills a tiny bit of alcohol. She then laughs a bit. “Oops, I just spilled alcohol worth one gold.”

Cold sweat starts running down my back. Worth how much?

“You're a good listener,” she closes her eyes after putting away the bottle and her voice becomes quieter and softer, “I know you won't tell anyone, and your presence is so calming. You're so incredibly weak, yet you always seem to know what you want and what to do. I'm jealous of you.”

She pauses and out of nowhere says: "Pet my head the way you do with Biscuit, and I'll subtract 10 gold from your debt."

I immediately start doing so, gently caressing her red hair. She shudders under the first touch, but then a small smile appears on her lips.

I like this smile. It feels much more honest than any smile she's shown up until now. She's like a small child pretending to be strong, but I know the truth after spending some time together. Deep inside, she's just another unhappy soul, too weak to be true to herself.

Lately, she's been nice to me and even taught me a few things, so let's give her a little extra. I lean closer to her ear and whisper, "I will never forget you."

She freezes, her eyes opening wide, almost scared, surprised and not knowing how to react. I burn that view into my memory and cover her eyes with my hand.

I will never forget this lonely young woman who likes to pretend she's brave.

Not even if she's just another fake, one of the many.

Chapter 88: Strengthened Trait

Behold! My strengthened Mana Circuit!

Congratulations, your trait has been strengthened.

Mana Circuit (Passive)

This integrates a network of mana channels throughout the user's body, optimizing the distribution of mana and amplifying the power of their mana-based abilities without additional mana consumption. This enhancement allows the user to draw upon their mana more efficiently, resulting in more potent spells and abilities while reducing overall mana expenditure.

Increased Mana Density: The Mana Circuit can now hold a greater density of mana, effectively increasing the user's mana capacity and the power of their mana-based abilities.

There were no options, and it just straightforwardly strengthened my Mana Circuit. The effect seems nice, so I don't complain.

What made me change my mind and use it?

Perhaps it was Ruby's lonely figure as she sat in front of the fireplace. Or maybe it was the realization that things never go the way I want them to. I just want to be as prepared as possible, even if it means making a mistake or two in the process. As of now, everything seems fine. My body feels more composed and my mana puts less strain on me as my enhanced circuit alleviates some of the effects.

But as I lay in bed, barely holding back screams of pain as my trait continued to strengthen, I think. What are the limits of the system and how far can it change my body? As many times before, it all feels just like a start. A small step towards a bigger goal.

And the journey to that point is mine to make.

I wave a piece of meat in front of Biscuit while he continues to try to grab it with his four mana arms. Every time he is close to grabbing it, I use [Disruption]

The corgi doesn't seem happy with that and barks a few times while trying to jump and grab it.

I am teaching him, right?

Yup, totally teaching.

I'm not being petty and taking revenge for last night when he continued to create mana arms to make fun of me while I tried to practice creating my own.

Totally teaching him.

I don't know what kind of system he got, but he better learn to put some stats into physical attributes!

After a few more minutes, I just throw it at him and he grabs it, instantly running behind the couch to hide and eat it.

You little twerp, I won't steal it from you now.

Then I turn back to Hadwin and he sighs and starts using [Disruption] on me while I defend against it.

We already had some talk and I learned about his skills. They are [Disruption] and [Detection]. That explains why he did so well while scouting back on the first floor. His other skills are [Strengthening] which he can use to fortify his body, his skin, his bones, or weapons in his hand. It makes nearly anything he touches more durable and stronger.

Quite an interesting skill. I might try to learn it later.

Another skill he has is [Wound Contraction] and that's it. At this point, I am not too surprised. Lately, I have come to confirm my suspicion that I might be overly talented at learning new skills.

Is it my talent, something I am good at? Is it thanks to a combination of my skills [Focus]

I don't know, but that's not so important right now! What's important is Hadwin's skill! A quasi-healing skill! If I learn it, it might give me some hints on how to learn Lily's skill, and damn, that would be amazing.

Once again, I come to be satisfied with my decision to not let my feelings take over and get rid of him. Sure, it might be hard to get along with him, and I am not too keen on forming friendships, but hey, I will use him to the fullest and might help him here and there, as thanks.

And then, maybe sometime in the future, I can try to create a Construct for him. He is quite durable, and it might strengthen him a lot, and it would help me learn a lot.

Okay?

Okay!

It's the first time I am actually spending some time with Hadwin. I am not counting the time when we had to sneak through the forest and meet to exchange a few words and then I went with Tess to scout.

Ruby is gone again so there are only two of us and the doggo. The older man seems to have some sense so he is not talking too much, and there is no annoying small talk.

It's slowly making me more comfortable and while I continue to observe his skills, I also observe him.

Even after all we went through, he seems to have some sort of confidence in himself and doesn't twitch every time I move as the kids did after seeing me fight. He is a realist, and now that we have a deal that's good for both of us and I have no reason to hurt him, he seems calmer and a bit more friendly.

He tells me about his experience with Ruby's master who kidnapped him.

He tells me about an army he was sold to, an army that is fighting against the Empire led by a Mind Manipulation Emperor.

And I listen quietly, only asking more questions here and there, creating an idea about the situation in this world. I don't have to do that much as the man gives me the most important information, briefly, clearly, and understandably. Out of curiosity, I ask him once again why he wanted to kill me so much, not fully believing it was only because of what he told me about last time.

He gives me an evasive answer, something about someone close to him being hurt by someone who reminded him of me and I don't ask more.

I understand, but it's still not easy to fully "understand". I am not a person to be easily swayed by my feelings and usually, when I am, it's only because I decided that it's safe and it won't go against my own good. People aren't usually like that.

Talking to Hadwin right now, after we almost fought to the death not so long ago, feels weird. Not weird in a way that I am uncomfortable, I already moved my feelings aside so it's okay. It's weird in a way how quickly things could change after sharing a conversation or two.

As for things he did to survive?

Who am I to judge? I still remember the weight of pieces of Emeric's body. I still remember the sight of Ethan, who I had thrown, flying through the air towards the Cinderbear.

People are difficult to deal with. Emotions are difficult to deal with.

So, as the newest member of our small group, it's up to Hadwin to cook. I decided it, and the man just looks at me, and I am sure he sighs somewhere deep inside, but then he just cooks.

Ruby sometimes disappears for a day or two and eats outside, but we have some food here. And that's good because we are once again in the middle of nowhere. The cottage we are staying at is nice and well-equipped, but on every side, there is nothing, just plains of grass that sway in the wind.

No monsters, no humans. I blame Ruby's master. Her behavior became all weird after the last time we talked and when she destroyed an entire mountain range.

So I do what I can when I can't level up. I try and try to improve my skills.

My mana arm is coming along nicely, and I can move it in the elbow pretty well and the fingers are getting there as well. I can already grab some things. Yes, I do not have any feeling in the arm and have to continue to watch it, but I am getting used to it quickly.

Now that I strengthened my trait, controlling my mana becomes easier and I don't have to put my entire [Focus] into handling it. Currently, I am using one [Focus] to handle my mana and control the arm made thanks to [Armament] and [Mana Manipulation] while the remaining part of [Focus] is free to do anything I want.

So I observe my Construct but I do not dare to make any changes to it. Now, that I am out of the tunnels, I have a feeling that I was a little bit too reckless or brave to do it, and as I observe the result, I come to realize how a little mistake could have killed me.

But hey, it worked out pretty well. Yup, the construct is kind of wasteful and not that efficient when it comes to turning my mana into some kind of effect, but my mana pool is big enough to handle it without me even realizing it. Plus, it's a passive effect that boosts my body in a similar way to boosting my stats.

And if I ever need more mana I can turn off the construct.

I like it. I like it a lot.

Already I am coming up with ways to improve my current construct and increase efficiency and can't help but feel some excitement while imagining what I can do in the future.

The goal for the future is to have multiple constructs I can turn on and off and have them run in the background. I can prepare a construct for many different situations or types of opponents and then use the ones that will be needed and have them run passively.

Finally, I found one of the uses for my ever-increasing mana!

I also come to realize that my construct bears a little bit of similarity to my [Focus]. Just instead of part of my mind taking care of it, it's the circuit I etched into my body.

This is something I have to think about.

But now I need to practice a bit more. I'm really close to finishing the side quest, and the reward - a new passive skill - is within reach.

Chapter 89: New Passive skill

Okay, one question first: why is Hadwin such an exceptional cook? I mean, seriously good. Yes, I understand the stereotype of American dads being grillmasters, handling barbecues for multiple families while casually sipping cheap beer, and Hadwin seems to fit that image perfectly.

But honestly, his cooking skills astound me.

Soup? He's got it covered. Main dish? His grilling skills are top-notch, always serving up tender and juicy meat. He can even whip up a dessert, spending just one or two hours each day experimenting to get accustomed to the kitchen appliances here that run on glowing stones imbued with mana.

Currently, I'm even more pleased with my decision and am considering letting him take over cooking duties.

As for the mana stones so commonly used here? I tried examining one, and Ruby laughed at me for several minutes as I continued to scrutinize it. She explained that even she can't discern their structure or the intricate mana pathways etched inside each stone, similar to circuits.

She mentioned that many stone manufacturers incorporate fail-safes and traps to prevent their competition from replicating them.

To put it bluntly, I can't make heads or tails of it with my current skills and decided to give up. Just to be safe, I took a few of them, and Ruby added their cost to my running tab. Right now, though, it's mostly an inside joke between us; I don't think anyone really cares about the gold anymore.

Finally, I lift the corgi into the air using both hands, one normal, and the other formed from pale blue mana. It's solid and lacks sensation, but its mobility is vastly improved.

The corgi looks at me, surprised, mouth slightly agape, tongue lolling out. Oddly, he seems to be enjoying the experience, his tail swinging side to side, and his free-hanging hind legs flailing slightly.

He also forms two arms from purple mana, which reach out to gently pet my head, similar to how I pet him.

(Good)

Hey, you little rascal, just how intelligent are you? Are you mocking me? Making fun of me?

His face seems too innocent, and I'm in too good a mood due to my success to argue. I let him down and put him on the ground. Immediately, he turns and dashes towards Hadwin, who's once again busy cooking something.

(Asshole!) he sends towards the older man.

"How many times did I tell you not to call me that? You're smart enough to stop it by now..."

I tune out the rest of his grumbling.

Who do you think taught our precious Biscuit to continue calling you like that?

Yes, it was me! Nathaniel Gwyn!

"..."

Yes, I am aware that I'm being petty. But back to more important matters. By successfully creating an almost human-like arm made of mana, two of my skills leveled up.

[Focus - lvl 20 > Focus - lvl 21]

[Armament - lvl 19 > Armament - lvl 20]

I even managed to break through the bottleneck in [Armament], which is a significant accomplishment. As if to reward me, I completed my side quest!

Side quest:

Get 3 skills over level 20

Rewards:

Passive skill of your choice

Excitedly, I open the window to check the passive skills:

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: Innate Resilience (Common) - The user's physical durability benefits from their high mana levels.

Passive Skill: Wound Closure (Uncommon) - The user's natural healing rate improves when their mana is above a certain threshold.

Passive Skill: Adaptive Physiology (Rare) - The user's body adapts to various physical and energetic strains, enhancing overall resilience.

Passive Skill: Mana Veil (Uncommon) - The user's mana emits a subtle veil, making it more difficult for others to perceive and analyze their magical presence.

Passive Skill: Mana Momentum (Uncommon) - The user's mana intertwines with kinetic energy, allowing them to harness and redirect kinetic forces with increased efficiency.

Passive Skill: Mana Conduit (Uncommon) - The user's body acts as a better conduit for mana, enhancing the speed at which they can channel mana.

Passive Skill: Chaotic Pulse (Rare) - The rhythm of the user's heartbeat passively disrupts nearby mana, causing interference in the abilities of others.

Passive Skill: Cerebral Harmony (Rare) - The user's mind and mana harmonize, boosting their ability to shape and manipulate mana.

Passive Skill: Parallel Processing (Common) - The user's capacity to handle multiple streams of information increases.

Passive Skill: Solid Manifestation (Common) - The user's ability to solidify their mana improves, enhancing the strength and stability of their creations.

Oh boy, here we go again.

Common, Uncommon, Rare — these are the skill rarities. Judging by their names, I suppose I should ignore anything below 'Rare,' even though some of them sound quite appealing. For instance, Parallel Processing, Wound Closure, and even Mana Conduit all sound tempting.

I've also noticed that the system allows me to upgrade skills using skill upgrade tokens. I wonder if there will be tokens specifically for passive skills?

I check the quest list, but there's no new information, only the existing floor quest:

Floor quest:

Witness the end of the world.

Rewards:

Skill upgrade token

20 stat points

Increased daily limit of community usage

Tutorial Difficulty change token

No new side quests appear. I have a feeling that I shouldn't gamble. Passive skills seem different from active ones because they have rarities assigned to them, so perhaps they can't be upgraded.

This likely leaves me with three rare skills to choose from, all of which sound fantastic.

Adaptive Physiology is probably a result of enduring absorbed kinetic energy and my excessively high mana. Selecting it could improve my pain tolerance, allow me to absorb more kinetic energy, and even use more mana.

It sounds brilliant.

The next option is Chaotic Pulse, likely tied to [Disruption]

There's also a potential downside to Chaotic Pulse. What if I can't turn it off like my construct? What if it prevents me from receiving healing from Lily or disrupts others fighting by my side?

Sure, it could enhance my abilities, but it might hurt me just as much. Plus, I already have [Disruption], so do I really need a passive version?

The final option is Cerebral Harmony, which might be my favorite. It's definitely linked to [Mana Manipulation] and possibly [Focus].

Right now, I don't have many issues with my mana thanks to upgrading [Mana Manipulation] and the construct I've created. But in the future, this could allow me to infuse more mana into my stats without worry, and even help me utilize my skills faster.

It could speed up my skill-learning process, improve multiple skills, and even let me work better with Constructs, which is probably the most significant boost I could receive at this point.

However, Adaptive Physiology also sounds promising. It too could enhance my handling of Constructs and simplify their creation.

With too many good choices, first-world problems strike once more! But who am I kidding, it's obvious which one I will pick

I select Cerebral Harmony (Rare), close my eyes, and brace myself for the impending pain.

And oh boy, does it come.

It feels like red-hot nails are being hammered into my brain. I feel as if I might break my teeth from how tightly I'm clenching them. Sweat pours down my body as the system alters me, fortifying me and better attuning me to mana in preparation for the passive skill. Gradually after what feels like too long, the pain subsides, and I exhale deeply, opening my eyes.

I see my shaking hand, wet with sweat, pressed against my forehead, and I begin to calm down.

Sensing my distress, the dog runs over and nudges my leg a few times. He continues doing this until I pet his small head, then he looks up at me, his smart eyes slowly blinking.

I pet him again, gradually coming to the realization that I have a soft spot for animals or people that show me affection. It makes me feel warm inside, albeit slightly uncomfortable, unsure of how to react.

It compromises my ability to make rational decisions. Yet, there's nothing I can do. I am vulnerable when faced with unconditional affection.

I acknowledge this. I understand that it's a weakness, one I should perhaps overcome, but at the same time, it feels precious to me.

To my amusement, one word sounds in my mind.

(Asshole)

Yet, it sounds soft, almost gentle.

God damn it, you little jerk.

I ruffle his head gently while internally smiling, even though it's likely, not noticeable on my face.

Once more, the corgi slowly blinks at me before scampering back to Hadwin. I recline, laying down and looking at the ceiling.

My mana is even less of a concern now, and I release some of the [Focus] that kept it at bay. It feels as if I can move it more easily, as if before there was some delay, some lag, and high latency. Now it's smoother, and the mana moves almost exactly as I will it to move and does what I want it to do.

I conjure a translucent arm at the stump of my left arm and reach out towards the ceiling. The mana fingers move skillfully, almost exactly like real fingers would.

Yes, I still have to maintain one [Focus] just to use the mana arm, but the difference is significant. The arm even looks more human-like and is shaped very similarly to my right one.

I will it to extend, and the length of my arm increases. I concentrate, and the fingers become longer with something resembling blades at the tips. The hand becomes bigger, and the arm more muscular—though it doesn't actually change its strength.

Then I let it dissipate and create a small orb of mana, which I let hover above me. I condense it further and further, start shaping it, dividing it into many smaller ones, and causing them to spin.

For a while, I just lay there and practise.

Chapter 90: A View from Above

Noname (Hell, Group 4) - I'm fine.

Sset (Hell, Group 4) - Same here.

StrongestOne (Hell, Group 4) - I'm trying to level up as much as I can.

Grumpy (Hell, Group 4) - Noname, I yinked some gold for you! It was easier than I thought.

I don't have the heart to tell Lily that I probably won't be needing it anymore, and just praise her for the good job.

While reading other messages and hoping for some useful information, I think about Sophie. Up until now, I haven't seen her in the forum, not even the twins or her sister.

Are they all unable to do so, or they just don't want to and continue to watch what others write? The second option is something I think is more probable.

I close the forum and look at the five orbs orbiting me. They are now bigger, almost like a golf balls, and their shade of blue is darker than before as they spin around me.

Every orb has its own orbit, and some of them spin clockwise, and some counterclockwise.

Sometimes, I focus on one of them and absorb its kinetic energy, which I then use to boost the spinning of other orbs that are anchored to me and orbiting around me.

What should I do with Sophie in case both of us survive the second floor? Will I even meet her on this floor or have to wait until the third one? If yes, what then?

Should I take revenge right there? I could; I can put her sister to sleep and then do it so the little girl doesn't have to watch it. Sure, she would hate me then and stay nearly alone, relying on herself and the unreliable help of some strangers. It would make me feel sour, but I can do it if I decide to.

Another option is keeping her alive because of her questionable usefulness, but in that case, it's something that could continue to be used as an excuse until the end of my life. I just think that her skills are just that useful and she is worth keeping alive.

Can I forgive her?

I think so. As always, strong feelings slowly dissipate with time, especially now that I haven't seen her for so long. And from the start, it wasn't that she actively wanted me dead, she just put herself and her sister first and proceeded accordingly.

That's something I can understand.

So, it is risky to keep her alive? Absolutely.

On this floor, the emperor of Solaris Empire is a Mind Mage, manipulating people who are strong enough to be compared to an atomic bomb back on Earth, hell, they might even be much stronger.

A single man able to manipulate the masses and control such powerful people. It's extremely dangerous.

I can't trust her; because in a way, she is similar to me. Her life and her sister's are the most important to her, and that's why she didn't have trouble manipulating others. I would do the same, and maybe even in more cruel ways.

So, what now? I like how we solved things with Hadwin. We will work together for some time and then it will be forgiven. His cooperation was used as payment for trying to take my life.

Sure, it's not like we totally trust each other, but the man knows that I will become unreasonable the moment he goes back on our deal. At the moment I am stronger than him and just need to keep it that way. I could do something similar with Sophie, maybe by threatening to hurt her sister?

I need to talk with her, I need to hear her honest thoughts. Seeing how she acted up until now, she wouldn't mind joining forces, but the moment things go sideways I would have to watch my back. Plus, I am not sure if she would be okay with that instead of trying to again create her own team. But there might be an easy solution for that.

I need Tess back. I need Lily and I will somehow deal with Kim. I have Hadwin. Maya will be handled by Tess. I know that the two girls were taken together, and knowing Tess, I'm sure she will become good friends with Maya. She is just that scary and smart.

So that leaves out the twins who are who knows where. For them, I will have Hadwin to take them in.

At that moment, everyone from our tutorial group would be under my influence, leaving Sophie no choice. In the worst-case scenario, I could use some force, but I would prefer not to. Then I would have people to watch her even more carefully. Tess, Hadwin, either of them is good and most likely able to control her if she didn't become too strong.

Sounds good!

The orbs stop spinning around me, and I let them and the mana arm dissipate and stand up, turning my Reinforcement construct off.

Unlike others, my strength and dexterity aren't that high so I don't have trouble moving inside the rooms and using things such as doors. But after getting passively boosted by my construct, I destroyed a few pieces of furniture, not having learned to control my power, so I am getting slowly used to it.

And hey, turning it off allows me to train my mana handling a bit more, even though it's not that difficult with my new passive skill.

As I enter the kitchen, I see Biscuit moving his mana arms around, trying to grab some food from the table, and once again I am surprised how good he is at it. Heck, dogs don't even have arms and hands, so how is he using them so skillfully? There was one day when he even stopped using his legs to walk and used four mana arms as a replacement for his legs. It was too creepy, so I instantly used [Disruption].

At this point, I am worried that soon he will learn to counter my disruptive skill, so I don't use it that much.

The era of animal archmages is drawing closer and closer.

The arm made of mana forms from my shoulder, and I use it to move the chair and sit on it, opposite Ruby who is reading something. Her eyes look at me, "What?"

"I want to hunt something."

"Master ordered me to keep you all here."

Yes, I know, I know. It's annoying, "Teach me magic, train with me."

"No and no. I'm terrible at holding back and really hate teaching. Sorry," she says, and there is a real hint of apology.

The young woman and I have come to talk a bit more lately. She isn't even acting so fakely extroverted anymore and her real personality is cheeky and smiley, but much less than she showed the first time. I also have a feeling that I did something she appreciated, so she is toning it down while dealing with me.

I sigh, yet I am slowly getting bored. Yes, I am getting better at using my skills but every time I grew and improved, it was in life or death situations. Sure, I could also improve in safety while learning from a teacher, but that's not something I have.

In the end, I exit the cottage and look around.

We are in the middle of nowhere and as far as I can see there is only a flat grassy plain. No trees, no mountains, no hills, nothing. Just a grassy plain for miles away. It feels somehow unreal, fake.

I stand there and [Kinetic Redistribution] fires up, and I use it to absorb all the energy from the swaying grass around me and the gentle wind. I slowly increase the area and absorb more and more, being able to do it thanks to my now activated Reinforcement construct and my new passive skill.

A massive area around me becomes motionless and quiet, then I use all of this energy to propel myself high in the air.

While floating up there, I absorb more from the wind around me and push against the air under me, it's terribly inefficient in comparison to pushing against something firm, but I still propel myself higher and higher.

Soon, I reach the height of the tip of a skyscraper and look around.

From this height, everything looks different. The grassy plain below is a flat, wide expanse of uniform green, like a huge outdoor carpet. The sunlight reflects off it, giving it a soft, muted glow. The horizon seems to curve subtly, a reminder of the planet's roundness.

Yet I see no movement, nothing but the flat green stretching out in every direction. It's quiet up here, away from the world. The sky above is a deep, clear blue, unmarred by clouds.

I'm alone in this vast space, the silence only broken by the soft rustle of the wind against my clothes.

Despite the simplicity, or perhaps because of it, there's an undeniable beauty to the view. It's a stark, raw kind of beauty, the kind that makes you feel small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. It's humbling and awe-inspiring in a way that's difficult to put into words. I just float there, taking it all in.

Then I start falling down and absorb more to keep myself high up and feel myself calming down even without my skill activated.

The view is something I would never ever be able to see if it wasn't for mana, and I love it.

I start falling down again and this time I don't fight against it. The air continues to hit my clothes and body and I can hear it next to my ears, and I am falling down faster and faster.

When I am not that far away from the ground, I absorb my own kinetic energy and immediately start slowing down until I gently land on the ground, the remaining energy I shoot towards the sky and breathe out.

Everything looks so normal again.

I get ready to do it again when I feel massive mana from inside of the cottage, the mana of Ruby's master.

I start moving there and inside the cottage, I find four people.

An old, grey-haired but immensely powerful woman, two twin boys, and Kim.