

Weapons of Mass Destruction #Chapter 31 - Read Weapons of Mass Destruction Chapter 31

Chapter 31

The "suns" are gone once again. As before, a terrible wave of mana washes over the entire first floor before they disappear.

This time, it's a bit colder than before, so we collect more wood and hunt more animals while expecting even colder weather next time. A few more people have learned how to skin them without damaging the skins, so we're keeping them in case another cycle becomes even colder. So we hunt as much as we can and smoke the meat.

There are more animals.

There are more goblins, many more.

And now, even groups of wolves have started attacking us.

In the forest around our camp, we've also found terribly mangled corpses of giant wolves and trolls.

We don't know for sure what monster did it, but I have my suspicion.

Cinderbear.

Oh, I almost forgot.

Fuck that guy.

The corpses are mangled with limbs broken, torn-off limbs, and gouged-out inner organs, but they are not eaten, and that's what worries me the most.

Did Cinderbear develop a taste for a human-based diet?

If yes, why hasn't he come back?

People would be terrified, so only a few of us know about mangled corpses.

The bus is even more "armored" now, and we're using bigger and bigger pieces of logs to make it more durable. It's still our go-to place to sleep or hide. Our surroundings have also changed a lot.

There is an insane amount of sharpened logs pointing outwards.

There are some palisades closer to the bus.

We are building pitfalls with more sharpened sticks inside them, and Hadwin has taught us to set up some traps.

We are also collecting as much food and water as we can.

And we are leveling up.

I don't even bother killing level-two monsters anymore; I just break their limbs and throw them in front of someone else to finish. Sure, it's less experience than if they killed it on their own, but it's something.

In all of this, I try to have some fun as well.

When I'm fighting anything under level five, I don't use any weapon, just my hands and mana.

It was a bit hard and awkward at the start, but now it has become good training for me. I've learned more about their physiology and weak points.

Oh, and the level seven troll we fought some time ago together with Tess and Kevin?

Well, it was a baby.

Just a cute little baby and I think we found its mom.

Or dad, who knows.

I'm sitting high up in a tree and looking down as the troll slowly comes closer and closer to where I am.

[Troll, lvl 12]

During the past few days, I've been watching it together with Tess. From really far away, careful to not get noticed. We learned its routes, and the troll is more reliable than your country asking you for taxes. It always walks the same way, and we suspect it either comes from its *house* or goes towards it.

And now, we are here. We both washed in water, both our bodies and clothes, and then we threw some mud on ourselves and finished it by rubbing some plants onto our skin and clothes. All of this was to cover our smell as much as possible and to smell like the forest in hopes of avoiding its nose.

It truly has a humongous nose, I must say.

The troll's skin is more grayish this time, and it is probably 50% bigger than the baby troll we met. Its muscles look much more dangerous. The earth shakes a bit as it moves and stones crack under its feet.

It moves closer and closer, and when it is right under me, Tess makes some noise where she is.

The monster instantly stops and looks towards her, smelling in that direction.

Nice timing.

Now it's up to me.

[Focus]

[Mana Manipulation]

I activate my skills, and my mind enters a calming, deeper state of focus. Everything other than this hunt ceases to matter.

I grip the mace in my hand and exhale.

The troll starts turning towards me when a spear comes flying out of nowhere and burrows deep into its left eye.

ROAR.

Another spear comes flying and shatters as it hits the troll's skin, unable to wound him at all.

The monster turns towards where the spears are flying from, and I jump down from the tree directly towards its head.

My muscles feel as if they are burning, and I swing my mace as hard as I can right at the back of the troll's head. The amount of mana going through my body is no joke, and I hear a crack as my mace hits.

Crack

Terrible wounds appear on the back of the troll's head, and the mace shatters to pieces. I throw away the now useless handle, instantly pulling out the short sword I have with me.

The troll staggers, confused and most likely with some brain damage.

Two more spears come flying and hit the troll's face, unable to do more than distract him.

I land on the troll's shoulders and dodge the hand reaching out for me.

[Oscillation]

I send mana through the handle of the sword and towards the blade. It creates a thin mana coating around one side of the blade.

My head hurts, and blood starts running from my nose.

I focus more and more.

Mana on the blade becomes denser and denser and moves towards the tip. Using the Oscillation skill, the blade begins to vibrate rapidly, its edges humming with energy. The swift back-and-forth motion of the mana enhances cutting power. With the full power of my mana-strengthened body, I stab the sword inside the wound left by the mace.

Then, I hold on tightly to avoid falling and have to dodge its hands as the troll starts thrashing around. When given the opportunity, I pull out the sword and stab again right next to the first wound, but the blade bounces off the monster's head; **[Oscillation]** is gone, and even my **[Focus]** can't keep it running any longer.

So, I stab the already existing wound again and again. Every time I do, the monster's roars become weaker and its movements slower.

A chilling, piercing noise fills the forest as spear, propelled by psychokinesis, slices through the air like a deadly projectile. The steel blade gleams menacingly, streaking towards the troll's neck at breakneck speed. The terrifying combination of Tess's psychic force and the spear's sharpness drives it deep into the creature's flesh, leaving it lodged within its throat.

I stab again and move with the sword while it's lodged inside the troll's brain, creating disgusting wet noises as i make a mess out of the monster's brain.

Finally, the troll starts falling to the ground, and while jumping down, I grab the spear and pull it out so it doesn't break.

You're welcome, Tess.

The monster lands, and I finally get the message.

[You have defeated the Troll Lvl 12]

[Lvl 8 > Lvl 9]

I invest my stat points and look at Tess coming closer. She answers my unspoken question, "I did level up, yes."

Good.

The spears she threw, start floating in the air and then move right towards her. She slowly checks them out one after another while the remaining ones float around her in a circular orbit.

That's just plain showing off!

Well, whatever, just wait until my **[Focus]** shows its true power; even you will shudder in fear.

We get to the clearing, and I realize that we've been here a bit over a week. It's surprising to me how some people have adapted to all of this.

As more and more time passes and I observe them, I come to realize that none of us are normal.

Maybe it's not that we were randomly put into hell difficulty, but that we were put into hell difficulty because of who we are?

My theory is that the system places people into the difficulty it thinks is best for the person. As for the fact that an entire busload of people got here, maybe we are all suitable for hell difficulty?

There are so many people on Earth; there have to be groups of people together where all of them are a good fit for a specific difficulty, right?

Anyway, that's just a little theory I came up with.

What welcomes us at the clearing is an angry Hadwin stomping right towards us, with a few people following him, probably wanting to enjoy the free show.

Well, I can't blame them. These days, it's hard to find something amusing to do.

Chapter 32

"So you did it..."

You bet we wiped the floor with that level 12 troll. No biggie.

He looks at me and at Tess.

"Fucking hell, Nathaniel," he sighs and waves his hands around. "Do you have any idea how dumb that was?"

Dumb? Please! Only slightly dangerous.

"You could've fucking died!"

No worries! If it looked too dangerous, I'd run and bring him straight to our camp... wait, what?

"I expected something like that from him, but even you, Tess?"

Huh?

Should I feel insulted?

"You're putting all of our lives in danger, Nathaniel. Can you imagine how hard it would be if we lost both of you? Or if you didn't kill him and lured him back?"

Oh, so it's like that.

It's not my problem, though?

Right, Tess?

I look at her and she seems to be ashamed, just a little bit, really a tiny bit.

Lately, Hadwin has been more and more stressed as he deals with all of this. A lot of people just rely on him and let him lead them, and that puts a lot of pressure on him. Sophie creating her own group during all of that probably doesn't brighten his mood either.

Well, that's something he decided to do, so suck it up.

As I try to pass by him, he steps in my way.

Uh?

Even people around us seem to be surprised and start whispering among themselves.

"Hadwin, I don't think it's a good idea..." Tess starts, but I filter out her voice and look at the man in front of me.

I look into his eyes, and he seems pretty serious, just staring into mine.

So that's how it is.

Feel free to try.

I enter **[Focus]** and then let a bit of my mana flow through my body.

Try it if you dare...

Then his fist hits me right in the face, and I stagger backward.

Huh?

Focus is gone, and so is the mana flowing through my veins.

He hits my face again, and I see blood. My blood.

What?

I try to collect mana and enter the **[Focus]**, but I am unable to do so.

This time he grabs my shoulders and kicks my stomach with his knee.

His kick is tough; air escapes my lungs and a sharp, searing pain radiates through my abdomen. My muscles tense involuntarily, and for a moment, it

feels as though my insides are being crushed. Gasping for breath, I struggle to regain my composure.

I barely block his second kick and duck under his swing. His physical stats, like strength and dexterity, are higher, and without mana strengthening myself, I am slower and weaker than him.

Slowly catching my breath and relaxing my mind, even without the skill, I continue to observe his movements.

I read his swing and block his fist with my hand, using his hit to send me moving backward so I can collect myself a bit more.

My face hurts, my stomach hurts, and I am unable to collect any mana.

Is it his skill?

I read his movements, keeping my eyes on the center of his body and watching every movement. His shoulders, his legs, his waist.

I dodge another kick and swing. He is much quicker than me, but I start to move even before he is halfway through his attack.

Then I counter in the middle of his attack and hit his neck. That forces him backward while he makes a choking noise. By a reflex, his hand goes up to cover his neck, and he blinks.

That gives me the opportunity to move closer, and I kick his knee. He staggers backward.

That's it?

I feint a hit at his neck with my fist. He moves his hand to block it, but I strike with my other hand.

That's all you can do?

I hit his belly, and he staggers back once more as I kick his knee again.

He grimaces from pain, and I hit his face with my fist, right into his left eye.

I feel his skill turn off, and I know that I can use my skills again.

But I don't do so.

I attack him without using mana, with only the strength of my body.

Step closer and bury my knee into his stomach, he bends over and I quickly hit the bottom of his chin.

He is faster, he is stronger, but his attacks are telegraphed and easy to dodge.

Another quick hit at his chin, and he staggers, feeling lightheaded as the hit is meant to shake an opponent's brain inside the skull.

Two hits at his neck, and he makes a louder choking noise. I kick at his crotch; he tries to block it with his leg but is too shaken to do it in time.

While he is falling to his knees, I twist my body, pull more strength into it, and give him as strong a punch as I can, right into the side of his face.

He falls down, unmoving and I stare at him, and others around us too, no one jumping in to help either of us.

After a while, he looks at me and, weirdly, there is a smile on his face.

What's so funny, old man?

You got beaten, and I didn't even use mana, so what's so funny about that!?

WHAT IS SO FUNNY?!

"Hehe..." there is some blood on his teeth.

"You know it too, right?" he laughs again, "I could have killed you if I really wanted to."

"..."

"Hehe, you were ready for me, expecting an attack, but I still managed to land a few solid hits." He lies on the ground, gazing at the sky. "Wow, that was satisfying. I've wanted to smack you in the face for ages." He takes a moment. "You little punk," he adds.

"..."

My silence makes him laugh even longer. "Finally, I can see some emotion on your face," he looks straight at me, "You always look so uninterested, bored, even when fighting, but now... you look so angry."

I look around, and most of the people avoid my gaze. Lily and a few others look scared. When I look back, I see Tess standing close to me. Her face is hard to read, but she seems ready to move. Not to help me, just to stop me if I decide to finish off Hadwin.

"You know, lately you've become too confident, Nathaniel, too fearless. You enjoy fighting too much; you risk a lot. Not only your life but also the lives of people around you." He looks straight into my eyes. "You are not undefeatable. You could have easily died today, and you can die to something else if you continue being so careless." With that, he stops, probably not having more to say.

I look at Tess; she doesn't avoid my gaze but doesn't say anything, and that's enough for me.

I leave before I hurt someone.

I enter the forest and slowly, slowly, calm myself down.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Repeat.

I don't use **[Focus]**. I disable it as much as I can and think.

And think.

And think more.

After calming down, I come to realize that both of us might be right. The truth is somewhere in the middle.

Sure, I can be more careful; actually, I need to be more careful and not blindly rely on my skills, as he showed me so *nicely*.

Damn that jerk, I'm sure he enjoyed hitting my face.

On the other side, I can't just stop hunting and give up on becoming stronger. Sure, there is some risk, but something tells me that this 1st floor of Hell tutorial is just the beginning. If I take it slowly and comfortably level up while being super careful might not make me grow fast enough to survive the entire five years.

I will hunt, I will risk, I will enjoy the challenges, and I will continue using focus to get rid of some useless emotions, as it's all for my survival.

As for Hadwin and his lesson? My thanks will be that I won't beat him senseless and will dial it down a bit. He is right about me being cocky and showed it off in a beautiful way.

So thank you and fuck you.

As for which of us is right?

Only time will show.

Chapter 33

POV Kevin Wilson

It's the first time I've seen Nathaniel so angry; actually, it might be the first time I've seen him showing any strong emotion at all. He usually walks around looking like someone printed his resting face onto paper and then stuck it to his head.

Damn, for a second, I thought he might kill Hadwin right here, right now.

I'm sure Tess would try to stop him, but I'm not sure if she would be able to if he really wanted to do it.

The scary part is that he didn't even use mana.

Like, what the hell, who does that?!

I didn't sense anything, but Kim told me that Hadwin did something to disrupt Nathaniel's mana. Then at some point during the fight, Nathaniel canceled the older man's skill, and even though he could use mana, he finished him off without even bothering to use it.

What a madlad.

Again, who the hell does that?!

Right after the fight, he went into the forest. The way he just casually entered it while checking his surroundings sent shivers down my back. He's probably the only one who does that. The rest of us are still nervous every time we go hunting.

I get back to smoking boar meat and continue what I started before the fight happened.

“Do you think he's very angry?” Lily asks quietly.

“You saw his face; he's suuuuper pissed off.”

“Oh...” she quiets down.

At this point, I am sure everyone can see that she's got a small crush on Nathaniel.

Well, probably everyone other than him. He doesn't seem to be too good with people stuff. He thinks he's careful, but I always notice how quickly he disappears every time more than one or two people talk to him. Sometimes he endures a bit longer, but as time passes, he becomes quieter and quieter. Most of the time, it ends up with him just leaving or Tess saving him – or us?

It's kind of fun to mess with him a bit.

That isn't the main problem; the main problem is him being a selfish, mostly emotionless asshole.

But he's our selfish, mostly emotionless asshole.

I don't know if he's aware of it, but I'm sure that half of the people would be already dead if it weren't for him; hell, probably even more.

Sure, he doesn't have to be such a dick about it.

I remember the time from a few days ago when he power-leveled Kim in exchange for his sword. Damn, he actually did take it without even a hint of hesitation after getting the boy to level four, leaving him unarmed.

He's ruthless, selfish, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm sure he doesn't care that much about all of us.

Yet.

He's always calm, and even when things go to deeper and deeper levels of shit, he doesn't become desperate; he just listens, nods, and says one or two sentences, giving us something to do.

It's weirdly calming, having someone to rely on just a little bit.

Even while knowing how he sees us.

I'm back.

First to welcome me is the goodest doggo of the first floor of hell difficulty.

Yup, the shameless little bugger of a corgi is still alive and well, and I swear at this point, he might be heavier than some of the girls.

God damn, boy!

As I sit with my back against one of our palisades, he comes to me while bringing something in his mouth.

A wallet.

“ ... ”

What the hell?!

What the actual heck?!

Also, good boy. We'll split 50/50.

I pet his head, which is still of a similar size to what it was at the start, and take the wallet from him while he swings his tail wildly. Once again, it looks like he's shaking his butt because of his short tail.

I open the wallet and there's some cash, bank cards, one ID and nothing more.

Hadwin Harper.

Oh my.

It's getting better and better!

I quickly look around, but there are no witnesses... uh, I mean, there's no one around.

I take all of the cash, probably around two hundred dollars, and close the wallet and give it back to the best boy.

"Can you put it back?"

He blinks slowly and then there he goes, running back to where he came from.

Is this the first cash theft on Hell difficulty's first floor? It must be, right?

Hehe.

Take that, old man!

I put the cash into my pocket and pull out the remaining pieces of the necklace that I got from the goblin shaman that I killed, which feels like weeks ago. It's still broken, and I only hold its pieces, but I keep coming back to it. I can feel some mana lingering on it, but I just can't find out what it's for and how it's etched into the pieces to be able to stay there.

One good thing is that I improved my usage of **[Oscillation]** thanks to studying the necklace, so that's something.

Biscuit comes back and lays on the ground next to me, putting his head on my thigh. He then breathes out and closes his eyes.

At this point, I'm almost sure that he's the smartest one out of all the people here. He just knows how to behave around me and never becomes too annoying, and then there are things like with Hadwin's wallet.

It's weird, but I think he saw us two fighting and wanted to help me get some petty revenge to get into my good graces.

I'm not crazy!

That must be it.

I slowly pet his small head and enter a bit deeper into **[Focus]** and start training my **[Mana Manipulation]**.

After a while, Tess comes to me.

"Hey..." she starts carefully.

"It's okay." I only say that much, but she will understand.

I know she partly agrees with Hadwin, but she wasn't able to tell that to me for some reason. Hell, I probably wouldn't even listen, so I can't actually be mad at her for not helping me or being ready to try to stop me if I tried to do something worse to Hadwin.

After a while, she gives one of her tiny smiles and sits next to me. She pokes Biscuit's bulging belly, and the dog opens one of its eyes and then closes it when he sees it's Tess. That makes her poke him a few more times, but the good boy ignores her, so she stops.

Corgi 1, human 0.

"Kim got his **[Telekinesis]** to level three, and Lily got **[Rejuvenation]** to level two," she informs me.

Damn, what is that scrawny boy eating and doing? Level three already?

"She can heal small and slightly bigger scratches now, but still only her own. She wasn't able to heal others."

Oh, that's a shame, but no worries, we will get there.

My personal healing station is coming along nicely.

Tess doesn't continue, so I guess others weren't able to level up any skills. The annoying thing is that I don't know if the speed at which we are leveling up our skills is good or bad. There is nothing to compare it to, just us.

Out of nowhere, I get an idea.

"Hey, Tess?"

"Hm?" she leans a bit closer, and I put my hand into my pocket and pull out a one hundred dollar bill, a gift from one unnamed guy.

"Can you go and buy me some sweets?" I hand her the banknote.

She looks at me, then at the bill.

Back at me and then once again at the bill.

Her confused face is so funny.

"Did you steal it from Hadwin?" she instantly guesses outright.

Crap, am I that predictable?

Oh, wait a moment! I didn't do it; I almost forgot.

"The dog did it," I point at the sleeping corgi, and she rolls her eyes.

"Sure," she just stands up and leaves.

The banknote stays behind.

Two hours later, the Cinderbear appears again.

Chapter 34

The once-peaceful forest transforms into an eerie, unsettling place. Every rustle and crack makes my heart race, and the sense of foreboding grows heavier with each passing second.

It is then that the monster makes its entrance. Emerging from the dense foliage, the giant gray bear steps into the clearing with a deliberate, unhurried pace.

The bear's enormous paws make a sickening crunch as they crush the underbrush and fallen leaves beneath them. Its massive size and power are evident in the way the ground trembles with each step it takes.

The most chilling aspect of the giant gray bear's appearance, however, is its eyes.

They glow with an unnatural orange light, as if fueled by a fire that burns within the monster itself.

A wave of mana hits the clearing and everyone becomes paralyzed with fear.

As the bear continues its slow, methodical advance, the forest grows quieter and quieter.

Its low growl reverberates through the air, a rumbling sound that makes your body shake.

Once again, the bear looks at me and then at the ground in front of it.

[Cinderbear, lvl 20]

The creature has leveled up.

Waves of mana I feel from the bear make my stomach clench, and my entire body feels as if it isn't getting enough air. It is even hard to breathe.

The bear takes a few steps towards us and then stops, looking at us with its wild but intelligent eyes.

One minute.

Two.

Three.

Cinderbear just keeps looking. At some point, someone screams out of fear and desperation. The monster's ears seem to perk up, but it just stays where it is and growls back. The remaining unbroken windows on the bus shatter, and the guy instantly shuts up.

"What does it want?!"

"I-i can't run."

"Can we fight it?"

"He should fight it!"

"Maybe it's friendly?"

Then someone says something I've been thinking about:

"Maybe it wants to eat something? Just like last time?"

Everyone falls silent, and we all remember the scene of Damon's body being slowly consumed by the bear. The monster growls and moves even closer. As it walks, it steps on a few spikes and hits several palisades with its paw. The pieces of wood shatter without dealing any damage.

With the memory of Damon's gruesome fate fresh in our minds, people exchange scared glances, unsure of how to handle the terrifying beast. The bear is getting closer and closer, and the fear is becoming worse and worse.

Our feet feel glued to the ground.

The air feels thicker now, and cold sweat is running down my back.

I thought I might be able to do something the next time we met the bear, but no, I can't do anything. Even thinking about running away feels impossible.

I feel... pathetic.

In a moment of selfish desperation, Ethan screams, his face twisted with panic, "Maybe we can throw it someone, just like last time! We should give it... someone." His eyes dart around, searching for the weakest among us, hoping to save himself at the expense of another.

The group recoils in horror at the suggestion, but the fear makes it hard to dismiss his idea completely.

Ethan's eyes land on Sophie's sister, but he quickly changes his mind, and his eyes stop at Lily, a petite, defenseless-looking girl. "We should... I'm sorry..." he desperately moves closer and grabs her; she screams.

At the moment, no one is able to move, so they react a bit late as he instantly starts pulling her closer to throw her at the bear.

I agree with him. He is most likely right. He is only trying to save his life.

But.

What does he think he is doing?

In front of me!?

I'm finally able to take a step and grab his neck while strengthening myself with mana. With my other hand, I break his hand he put on Lily, and he screams in pain. Then I pull him away from the girl. Towards the bear.

I am thankful, Ethan, you made the first move; at this moment, you were more decisive than me.

But.

That girl is someone I know a bit. I've talked with her a little and she always tries to speak nicely to me and not annoy me. You, on the other hand, I don't know.

You're a stranger to me.

So It's not a hard decision.

I pull him away from the others and throw him towards the bear while strengthening my body. He flies through the air, falls down, and then rolls until he stops right in front of the bear.

He looks up, shaken and confused, and then screams upon seeing the bear's maw right in front of him.

He uses his skill, and a light blue, thin barrier of mana appears around him.

Meanwhile, my eyes meet those of Cinderbear, and I feel a wave of mana from him, while he ignores the screaming human beneath him. Then he turns his attention back to Ethan.

The barrier instantly breaks the moment the monster touches it with its paw.

Crack.

It steps onto Ethan's left hand. The shield made of mana flashes into existence once more but instantly breaks. The bear bites his other hand and pulls it off with a wet sound of tearing muscles and tendons.

Ethan is still screaming.

Still alive as Cinderbear slowly chews his hand while curiously looking down at the man.

Then the bear leans closer and takes a bite of the man's belly.

I am sure I will remember his screams until the day I die.

Slowly, they become weaker and weaker, he coughs up a lot of blood and then passes out.

The monster slowly eats the entire man while looking at us and casually glancing around.

There isn't even a hint of wariness towards us as he finishes his meal.

After he is done, he licks his maw, and another pulse of mana flashes towards me. This time, I am able to sense that it's focused on the broken necklace in my pocket.

Then, Cinderbear leaves once more.

A few hours after the bear leaves, I go into the forest.

Alone.

I hunt and kill everything I can find.

Trolls, goblins, wolves, animals. I murder anything I see. Rage and mana are burning in my veins as I do so.

I've never felt so weak.

I've never felt so defenseless.

All I could do was watch and sit there, not even able to run.

Just helplessly wait and hope one man would be enough.

Pathetic.

I hate it, I despise it, I don't want to feel like this.

Never again.

Time passes, and I finally get the message I wanted.

[You have defeated the Troll Lvl 11]

[Lvl 9 > Lvl 10]

[Well done! The side quest has been successfully completed. Please select one of the traits. The traits are based on your actions and performance up until now within the Tutorial.]

Be advised: humans are limited to three Traits.

Choose with caution.]

The system has become nicer out of nowhere.

Chapter 35

When I come back, bloodied, and tired, but satisfied, I find everyone packing. Some of us are collecting food and hides, while others are making sure we will take enough water to last us for a while and gather all useful stuff.

The decision is unanimous.

Rather than waiting for the Cinderbear to appear once again, everyone prefers just moving somewhere else in hopes he won't find us.

I agree, even though I am unhappy about that. It's a smart decision, but it still feels sour, as if I am leaving behind unsolved problems. Cinderbear is terrifying, but I want revenge before the 1st-floor ends.

"Tess, can you keep a watch over me for a few minutes?" I instantly find the girl by her mana signature.

Hearing something in my voice, she doesn't ask where I went and what I want, and just nods solemnly.

I enter the bus and move to the last seat, the seat I sat in when we got here.

I breathe in. Let's see.

"Trait," I say.

Please select one of the traits that are based on your actions and performance up until now within the Tutorial.

Be advised: humans are limited to three Traits.

Available traits:

Enhanced Mana Heart (Passive)

Augments the user's natural mana pool and regeneration rate, allowing for longer and more sustained use of mana-based abilities. This passive trait enables the user to cast more spells and maintain their magical abilities with less downtime, providing a significant advantage in extended battles and outside of them.

Regenerative Tissue (Passive)

The user's body gains the ability to regenerate tissue rapidly, accelerating the healing of wounds and reducing the impact of injuries during combat. This trait not only helps the user recover from injuries more quickly but also ensures that they remain in peak fighting condition, even in the most grueling of encounters.

Mana Circuit (Passive)

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.

Adaptive Resistance (Passive)

Temporarily and gradually adjusts the user's resistances based on the types of damage they receive, allowing them to become more resilient against recurring threats over time. As the user encounters different forms of attack, their body learns to adapt and develop natural defenses against those specific damage types, providing a growing advantage in combat.

Mana-Infused Vitality (Passive)

Considerably strengthens the constitution by using user's mana to bolster their natural vitality, resulting in a drastic improvement in overall health, stamina, and recovery rate. This infusion of mana into the user's body grants them

increased durability and resilience, allowing them to endure more punishment and recover more quickly from damage.

Mana Sensitive Skeleton (Passive)

The user's bones become highly sensitive to mana, allowing them to channel and store mana within their skeletal structure. Additionally, this heightened sensitivity enables the user to better detect and sense mana within their own body and the surrounding environment, increasing their awareness of magical presences and activities.

Efficient Mana Conversion (Passive)

Increases the user's proficiency in converting their mana into different forms of energy, such as thermal, kinetic, or electrical, granting them a wider range of abilities and techniques in combat. This mastery over mana conversion allows the user to adapt their abilities to suit the situation at hand, providing a versatile and unpredictable fighting style.

Spell Diffusion (Passive)

This trait allows the user to diffuse a portion of incoming magical attacks, scattering the energy and reducing the overall impact on the user. This ability is especially useful in battles against magic-wielding foes, as it weakens their power and provides a defensive advantage to the user.

Reinforced Musculature (Passive)

Strengthens the user's muscles with an infusion of mana, granting them increased physical power and the ability to perform feats of strength beyond their natural capabilities. This trait not only enhances the user's offensive capabilities but also allows them to perform impressive physical feats that may be useful outside of combat.

Kinetic Channeling (Passive)

Enables the user to channel their mana into kinetic energy, allowing them to enhance their physical movements and attacks. This trait provides the user with the ability to perform faster, more agile, and more powerful physical actions, making them a formidable force in close-quarters combat.

Wow, that's a lot.

I expected a few traits, and here we go, 10 of them and even with descriptions!

What the hell? Who are you and what did you do to the system we all knew and hated?

I'm not complaining, just curious.

Also, any new skills for me? You know, I find it unfair as some people started with diamond spoons up their throats.

Just look at Tess! At this point, the stones she throws with her **[Psychokinesis]** feel more dangerous than bullets, and Sophie is there walking through the forest while manipulating monsters not to see her until she stabs her spear up their rear ends.

Look, I'm not ungrateful, but maybe, maybe one OP skill?

Just one.

...

Yeah, I thought so, screw you too! It's not like I wanted something from you or anything, stupid!

Now, back to traits. They look amazing, all of them. Unfortunately, I can pick only one, but in the future, there will probably be more opportunities, as it's said humans can have 3 of them.

Does that mean that there are different beings than humans that can get more or fewer traits?

Probably? But that's a problem for tomorrow me.

For a start, I read over them a few more times and try to think of all the usages and which one could be the best not only for immediate growth but also helpful to my growth in the future.

Enhanced Mana Heart (Passive) One mystery is solved. The thing that gives all of us mana, regenerates it, and collects it is called Mana Heart. It's either somewhere within my heart or my own heart changed into one. Either way, I like this one, and it seems like a strengthened version of it.

Regenerative Tissue (Passive) This one sounds really good too, as it would help me to heal from wounds faster than just increasing my constitution. But still, I like the first option more.

Mana Circuit (Passive) This is a serious contender for the first spot. Darn, I already know that I will have a hard time deciding which one to pick.

Adaptive Resistance (Passive) This one is meh. Sure, it sounds good, but I'd rather something that will allow me to end the fight faster.

Mana-Infused Vitality (Passive) Similar to Regenerative Tissue.

Mana Sensitive Skeleton (Passive) Something I got thanks to my **[Mana Perception]**? Not bad, but I still like Circuit and Mana Heart more.

Efficient Mana Conversion (Passive) Sounds interesting, but it's a trap! I'm sure I can learn to convert mana into different forms on my own, and now I even have hints. Hahaha. So thermal, kinetic, electrical, and probably much more. But let's start experimenting with these three.

Spell Diffusion (Passive) Good, but I need something more versatile and something that can increase my damage.

Reinforced Musculature (Passive) This one is probably from my continuous strengthening of my body?

Kinetic Channeling (Passive) This one is also a no.

So that's it. It's either Enhanced Mana Heart or Mana Circuit.

Which one should I pick?

Chapter 36

In the end, I pick the trait, and the window disappears.

Congratulations! You have acquired Mana Circuit (passive)

Traits 1/3

I immediately feel my heartbeat speeding up, and warmth washes over my body. My heart goes into overdrive and sends wave after wave of mana through my body. At first, it's only warm, but quickly it feels as if someone set

a red-hot wire through my body. I clench my teeth, but a quiet groan escapes my lips.

Forget anything nice I said about the system.

The pain becomes stronger and stronger as the system etches a network of mana channels through my body. Mana travels from my heart towards the tips of my fingers, up my skull, everywhere leaving a burning sensation in its wake.

After what feels like an hour, the pain slowly subsides and is replaced by a feeling of lightheadedness, as if I'm about to pass out.

Damn, I can't wait to go through this two more times!

Someone, please, send help.

Haa, whatever.

Still lightheaded I send mana through my body and stop instantly.

Ehm?

I try again.

And again.

What the heck?!

I take back everything I said. Give me more! More pain, more circuits!

It feels as if up until now, I kept using a fork to eat soup, but then someone bonked the back of my head and put a spoon in my hand.

It feels so much more natural to take mana from my Mana Heart and use it.

Also, the network of mana etched into me feels as if someone replaced an old road with a high-speed highway.

What the heck!

I almost want to forgive the system for playing favorites, but at this point, I'm sure that the traits others will get will be better than mine.

But that won't be able to quiet down my happiness.

I move mana all over my body; it's so fluid, so quick, and the amount I can move is much finer and more accurate. Now instead of using a river of mana, I can send a thin thread of mana through my circuit for more delicate control.

It's as if I used too much mana before because of my terrible body and low mana conductivity.

But dang, it just shows how unprepared and inefficient the human body is for handling mana.

[Mana Manipulation - Lvl 5 > Mana Manipulation - Lvl 6]

Here we go!

I get on my feet, and as I walk, my body still screams, but now I am more content with the pain.

"Finally!" Kevin sounds super annoying. Even more so now, when my head is still hurting.

But I'll let it go, just this time! Because I'm in a good mood.

"Even Burrito is ready to go."

"..."

Okay, he's not making it easy.

"Also, you walk like you crapped yourself." He laughs.

Well, that's it.

"Hey, hey, Nat. Why are you looking at me like that?"

Hmm, maybe I should make him skin more deer? I think he really disliked it a lot.

"Nat? Nathaniel, stop, wait a bit."

Biscuit greets me by wagging his tail and continues walking next to me.

"Look, it was just a joke, you know that, right? Just a joke, I didn't even mean it. You know how I am, right? Hehe."

I might make him train his skill a bit more. I'll help, obviously! I can throw some stones at him for him to reflect.

Maybe I can use a bit more mana this time; it will help him improve faster.

"Nathaniel...? Sir?"

He stops somewhere behind me, and I join Tess and Hadwin.

The girl greets me, but Hadwin only nods. He's trying not to show it, but I see the corners of his lips lifting up just a tiny bit.

Dang, are you remembering punching my face, old man?

Tess starts talking, "You seem to be ready, so we can leave in a few minutes. As we decided in the talk before, you and I will be scouts, and Sophie, Kevin, and Kim will move a bit further behind us, and then there will be Hadwin with the others."

"What about the dog? He seems to be uncooperative lately..." The look he gives to Biscuit doesn't seem that nice. Not at all.

What the heck did you do to him, Biscuit?

Good boy!

We are all looking down at him, and the best corgi sticks out his tongue while breathing. He looks so cheeky and almost smiling.

The dog looks at me, and I look at him; for a few seconds, our gazes meet.

"Stay with Hadwin and the others," I say shortly.

His tail stops swinging from side to side, and he blinks slowly.

"So we walk until it's about time for the night to come?"

"Wait, that's it for Burrito? Did he understand or something?" Kevin says something in the background, but most of us have already learned to mostly ignore him.

Someone already calculated the time when suns are going to disappear by looking at the system countdown until forced return, and now we can predict it pretty accurately.

"We can walk for like 5 to 7 hours, and after that, we will have to set up somewhere and build at least some defense. A few hours should be enough."

It's all the things we talked about before, so I start to filter them out and continue focusing on training my **[Mana Manipulation]**. The good thing is that my **[Oscillation]** has become easier to use, and now I can keep it up longer.

I glance down at my finger and the blade of mana created around it. When I activate the **[Oscillation]**, the difficulty goes up pretty fast, but it's doable so far.

The blade of mana oscillates wildly, and I keep it up for as long as I can before it slips out of my control and dissolves.

New record!

Just a bit more, and I might be able to coat the entire blade of my short sword with it.

Then Tess pokes my shoulder, and I look up. Everyone is staring at me.

Did I miss something?

"Haaa..." Hadwin sighs.

Why do you sound so annoyed? I just practiced a little bit! You don't have to be such a jerk about it!

Biscuit, defend me!

I look down, and the doggo is already jumping around a butterfly.

"..."

He catches it and eats it. Then he spits it out. He then looks at me while sticking out his tongue, trying to get rid of the taste.

Biscuit...

God bless your poor soul.

Tess and I enter the forest first. Even though I am walking first, Tess is the one pointing where we should go, as her skill somehow allows her to see through the dense forest. Why not call it X-ray vision? Why Farsight? Huh? System?

There is no answer, and we continue scouting ahead of the others while Tess seamlessly points me in the right direction.

You know, we came up with a code.

I have my **[Mana Perception]** activated, and when I feel her collecting the mana in her right hand, I go right; the same goes for left. If she collects mana in her chest, that means there is a monster. If she collects it in both of her legs, there is a strong monster, and we have to run. Stuff like that.

To be honest, our cooperation has become pretty good lately, and we can quietly go through the forest while leaving marks for the others.

Sometimes we kill one or two monsters, but that's it; the forest is quiet.

The wind blows gently, moving the leaves and creating shifting shadows on the ground. Sunlight streams through the branches, making the forest look lively and bright. The sun feels warm on my skin, the breeze is cool and refreshing, and the forest has a pleasant smell.

"Such a pretty day..." her voice is soft and quiet, and I slow down to end up walking next to her, loosening some tension from my body.

If she doesn't see any monster, there's no way I will, even with my **[Mana Perception]** active.

"Yes."

I look up at the sky, and the wind messes with my hair a bit. As I walk through the woods, I notice how the trees seem to create a natural rhythm with the swaying of their branches. The forest is quiet, devoid of the typical sounds of animals and birds, adding to the sense of solitude. The fresh air fills my lungs as I take a deep breath, and I can't help but feel a sense of calm and stillness.

Out of nowhere, Tess laughs quietly while covering her mouth with a hand.

"I'm sorry, but I just remembered the look you made when Hadwin hit you."

Woah, such a low blow.

"Don't look at me like that," she whispers and smiles at me. It's the first real smile I've seen on her face since we entered the First floor. "You kind of deserved that."

Maybe yes, but please be a bit less happy about me getting punched.

We continue walking in silence.

Chapter 37

"No, no. You have to use much less mana. Right now, you're wasting a lot of it. Also, try doing it a bit faster."

"It's not that easy!"

Huhu.

I continue to bully Tess while teaching her to improve her **[Mana Manipulation]**. With my trait, my handling of mana has improved a lot, and I don't feel that bad about her getting such good skills.

I'm helping her, right? I'm totally not doing it because of some petty reason, like her laughing while remembering me getting punched in the face by someone old enough to be my dad.

Not at all!

"Faster!"

"..."

Oh, Tess! Don't look at me like that! It's for your own good.

She only sighs, "There's a troll in front of us; this way." She points towards her right, and with a short nod, I head there while pulling out my sword. Soon enough, I see a baby troll.

[Troll - lvl 6]

Right now, I'm at a higher level than the monster, but I'm sure that it's still much stronger than me, and its constitution is higher.

As many times before, a rain of small stones flies like bullets from Tess and right onto the troll's face. They hit him hard. Most of them shatter on his skin, but some hit its weaker points, such as its eyes.

The troll roars and turns to me while sniffing. It covers its eyes while swinging its hand at me.

This time, I send a pulse of my mana towards the bottom half of my body and dash to the side. The troll is too slow to react and my sword's blade passes through its legs like it's made out of butter. The blade, coated in oscillating mana, cuts through it like that.

With another roar full of pain, the creature loses balance and falls down. I dodge slightly, and while it's falling, I make a diagonal cut across its face, deep enough to split it open. I dodge just in time to avoid a shower of its brain matter and blood.

[You have defeated the Troll - lvl 6]

“There are fewer and fewer goblins and more trolls; do you think we entered their territory or something?”

“It looks like it. We can be thankful that we ended up surrounded by goblins and not trolls.”

“Just one troll would be enough to tear through us...”

Yup, exactly.

That's what I've been saying the entire time. After seeing the monsters that are lurking around, I know that we were super lucky.

Or maybe not?

Maybe the system put us in a slightly less dangerous starting zone?

We continue.

“So, you were saying that I should get Mana Circuit as a trait if it's offered to me?”

“Probably? You might get offered something better, but right now, I think picking it was the right decision.”

“No, I think you're right. Humans probably don't have bodies evolved to handle mana, so giving it a push like that sounds logical.”

Right? I think so too!

“But Mana Heart also sounded good.”

Hmm, how to explain it?

“Imagine that you have a car.”

I move under a few branches and hold one up so Tess can walk under it as well. Then I wait for her to finish leaving the mark on the tree.

“You collect enough money and you buy a bigger engine. A much bigger engine goes into it, and the rest of the car remains the same. At some point, you go out, excited to try it...”

“Oh, but then you step on the gas, the car rushes ahead, and it breaks?”

“It either breaks, or you won't be able to handle it. You can't turn that easily anymore because it's much stronger. You can't stop quite as fast because it's much heavier.”

She falls deep into her thoughts.

“I think I agree with you somewhat.”

I see that I still haven't persuaded her completely, but that's okay.

But let's not tell her that I am doing the exact opposite with my stats.

Yup, do as I say, not as I do!

She should decide for herself and then bear the consequences or fruits of her decision.

“Let's wait for the second group and exchange information.”

I only nod and we wait in silence while keeping a watch.

After 5 or so minutes, I feel a wave of mana wash over my body. When it senses my mana signature, it instantly pulls back, and after a minute or so, Sophie, Kevin, and Kim appear from the forest.

“Hello, fellow scouts.” Kevin smiles brightly, and I sigh, already getting tired.

I let Tess deal with them, and for a second, my eyes meet those of a thin Korean boy wearing big glasses.

He smiles awkwardly and shrugs his shoulders, then looks away.

Huhu, my best test subj... my best student!

Other than mine, his **[Mana Manipulation]** is the highest level, and his skill...

[Telekinesis] seems to be a bit weaker version of Tess's **[Psychokinesis]**, as I think Tess can do much more than just manipulate objects with her mind. Also, the raw power of her skill seems to be stronger than Kim's.

But the boy got another skill, **[Gravity Well]**. It's still low level, but as for now, he can increase or decrease the weight of items he's touching, but in the future...

Okay, breathe in, breathe out.

Good.

Now don't whine; it's getting annoying.

Good.

The power of self-reflection!

Anyway, he is an extremely hard-working and smart boy, but the weirdest thing is that he seems to be the happiest to be here out of all the kids.

Yes, even more than Kevin.

He's not showing it that much, but I can feel it in the way he manipulates his mana with excitement. I often see him looking around while smiling gently and just taking in the air.

Well, as I said some time ago. We might all be weirdos, and that's why we ended up here.

They talk for a bit longer and then leave. As they are going, I can feel Sophie looking for targets for her **[Manipulation]** and using it as detection. It's pretty shrewd.

"We have two more hours, and then we will have to set up camp and set up some defenses," Tess says.

Seems doable enough.

Behold!

My nature-inspired abode with a classic touch. Constructed from stones sourced from the earth's depths. It's cool and pleasant, ensuring a comfortable summer climate.

Spacious enough to accommodate around 20 guests!

The entrance is...

Yes, yes... it's a cave.

For heaven's sake.

It's wet, it's cold, it smells, and I really hope it isn't a place where Cinderbear likes to take a nap.

After looking around for like thirty minutes, we didn't find anything, so we decide to set up our camp here.

Everyone else already joined us, and plenty of people with superhuman strength start cutting down the trees, moving giant stones to create a wall, and trying to make this dump... our camp as comfortable as possible.

Somehow Kevin ended up having to help move the heaviest stones.

Damn.

How could that happen?

Please, don't look at me like that while moving that stone; people will think you hate me!

Well, as the strongest one out of us, I am keeping watch with Sophie...

Someone, I am talking about you, HADWIN, did recommend Tess to use her psychokinesis to move heavy stuff, and so I ended up keeping watch with Ms. Mindbender.

At some point, her pulses of mana become really annoying.

Not because of frequency but because of how they feel.

I restrain myself, not wanting to help her at all, but after about 30 minutes, it becomes even more annoying. How are you not improving?

More time passes, and I swear she is even worse than before. At some point, she tried to experiment a bit and it somehow made it even more annoying.

Oh, come on.

"Hey..." she turns to me, not even expecting me to talk to her, "Don't move your mana like this. Try..."

I continue to give her a few tips on how to better handle her mana and reduce the waste.

The way she does it feels like looking for someone while screaming right next to their ear and asking where they are.

She listens quietly and tries it a few times, and I continue to correct her every time she does it wrong. I do it like 20 times, but she still continues and tries to fix it without complaining.

Her last try feels much better than what she's been doing the entire time, so I stop and leave her to her own practice.

She's a bit better now, and I breathe out with satisfaction. It really annoyed me.

Both of us keep watch like this for the remainder of the time until a sweaty and breathless Kevin comes to us.

"Damn, can't you two sit further from each other? A bit more, and you won't be able to see each other," he giggles; even tired, he has enough energy for his nonsense.

"Dinner's ready, Tess should be here soon to take over watching."

Seeing no reaction, the boy leaves, and I continue to watch while feeling the pulses of Sophie's mana near me.

Only then do I realize who I helped, and uncertainty washes over me.

Did I really do it just because I got annoyed?

I didn't feel her mana touching my body, and I kept **[Focus]** running the entire time.

Still, I'm unsure if I'll ever be certain about her manipulating me or not.

Chapter 38: "Meow"

After dinner, I take Kim, Lily, and Kevin to the side and continue to teach them a bit. We still have around one hour until the sun disappears, so why not spend it trying to learn something new from the way they use their skills?

I already nearly gave up trying to learn Lily's two starting skills. I really want her **[Rejuvenation]** as it sounds super useful, but even she can't use it that well, which makes it even harder. Her other skill, well, it sounds terrifying: **[Disintegration]**. She wasn't even able to activate it, so we can only guess what it does. But judging from the name... damn, it sounds cool.

I keep my **[Focus]** up and running as well as my **[Mana Perception]** and continue to watch Kim move stones with his mind and mana and throw them at Kevin, who reflects them back at the younger boy. Kim catches them with his skill and the cycle repeats.

I wish they would go a bit harder. Reflecting it with more strength or using telekinesis with a bit more power to get more from Kevin. But they are holding back a little.

Obviously, they don't hold back when they are practicing with me. They use so much power that it looks like they are fighting for their lives.

That's because of my excellent teaching skills!

Old school ways, if you know what I mean.

I am resting against the wall inside the cave, and Lily is sitting near me, both of us watching the boys practice. While doing so, Lily keeps making tiny cuts with my knife into her arm and then healing them with her skill.

Once again, I wish she would cut more deeply, but that might be my dimmed feelings talking. Cutting yourself with ease isn't something people usually do.

"You remind me of my cat," Lily says quietly out of nowhere. Quiet enough so only I can hear it.

Huh?

Is she dissing me?

There is a smile on her face when I turn to her.

"The way you quietly watch everything around you with curious eyes," her smile becomes a bit more longing.

Thank you?

"Grumpy also likes to just sit there and watch people, but he becomes really annoyed when someone tries to pet him. Most of the time, he just ignores people as they try to be friendly with him," she quietly laughs. "He just ignores it, but sometimes he gets his little acts of revenge. Once, I found a dead mouse in my bed after I kept making him try on some cat clothes."

Damn, I think I would like Grumpy a lot.

"But once in a while, he likes to come to people he trusts and snuggle with them, to share some warmth and spend time together," her big eyes look at me. "But only for a while. After just a moment, he leaves and stays on his own."

Her face is so serious as if she's talking to me about the truths of the universe.

But somehow, I don't mind it that much.

Not knowing why, I just open my mouth slightly and let out a very quiet sound.

"Meow."

Her face is amazing to look at.

From pure shock to confusion, and then a giant smile appears on her face, quickly followed by a loud laugh.

She's laughing even as Kim and Kevin turn to her; she's laughing like she really needed to do so.

The darkness comes once again. As always, right after the change, the monsters and animals become much more aggressive.

Kevin charges up the stone with his **[Combustion]** and throws it at the troll. The stone flies through the air while letting out heat and shining in bright orange color. Soon enough, it explodes, and the monster staggers back while covering its face with one hand.

A terrifying whistling noise sounds in the surroundings, and Tess's spear comes flying, stabbing the troll right in its belly with brutal force, nearly coming out on the other side.

ROAR.

It seems to be going pretty well, so I ignore the rest of the fight and turn to look at my opponent.

Well, well, well, if it isn't the well-known small green jerk.

[Goblin Warrior - lvl 5]

He is slightly wounded. We spotted a fight between a group of goblins and a lone troll, so obviously, we decided to interrupt it.

I dodge to the side and quickly kick at the goblin. To my surprise, the green monster blocks it with the palm of his hand and leaves deep scratches on my shin as I pull it back.

Right after, he rushes at me with his mouth wide open. I dodge to the side, but he throws a knife where I went and then, with amazing speed, dashes at me on all fours while using his arms to move faster.

Instead of dodging, I deflect the knife with my sword and swing it at the goblin, who ducks right under it.

What the hell, is he some martial arts master?

I hit him with my knee, but he blocks it and lets the force of my kick send him backward while leaving more scratches, this time around my knee.

Okay, this is getting ridiculous.

I let mana flow through my body, and I dash at the same time he does. He also pulls out another knife, this one a bit shorter than the one before.

This time I grab his forearm, and while strengthening my body, I turn around and throw him against a tree. He hits it with a loud crack. Before he gets a chance to catch his breath, I dash at him once more and slash with my sword.

Unbelievably, he ducks by letting himself fall on his backside.

But this time, I expect it, and my left knee hits the side of his head. While he's trying to get up from the ground, I stab my blade through his chest.

[You have defeated a Goblin Warrior - lvl 5]

Maybe I should invest some points into my dexterity and strength. It's pretty hard to deal with opponents like this without using mana to strengthen myself.

Or should I continue this way and invest most of my points into mana and constitution? Up until now, I did that with this logic - the more mana, the better. I can use it to strengthen myself and my other skills too. In the future, I will get more of them, so a huge mana pool would be amazing.

And the stats I used for constitution helped me get a stronger body able to handle wounds even without a healing skill and strong enough to handle mana in my body.

But damn, it's kind of annoying seeing how troublesome it is to deal with a slightly skilled opponent when I'm not using mana.

I'll have to rethink it later.

When I turn back to the group, the troll, and the remaining normal goblins are already dead, so they take all of the useful weapons and move back, while Tess and I continue deeper into the forest.

Our goal this time is to get Tess to level ten. She should be fairly close, so we look for more opponents to defeat.

I feel a pulse of mana from her right hand, quickly followed by a pulse from her chest and then a weaker one from both of her legs.

To my right, enemy, strong, maybe run?

I translate it as such and continue towards my right.

Tess is sometimes a bit too careful for my taste, so it's up to me to push and put us in some danger with hopefully good rewards.

What we find is a massive white-furred wolf. Its eyes are red and look right at us.

Somehow, it looks almost bored.

[CrimsonWolf - lvl 12]

This time, I don't hold back and let mana flow through my circuit, strengthening my entire body.

[Focus] makes colors less vibrant, and the sounds of the wind, leaves, and trees cracking disappear somewhere into the back of my head.

Breathe in, breathe out.

I point towards the ground with three of my fingers and rush at the wolf. I run straight at him while Tess stays behind me, ready.

One second.

The wolf still seems to be bored and only turns to me; there is an almost curious look on its face.

Two seconds.

It changes its stance and shows us its teeth. Its eyes instantly go from curious to dangerous, and a wave of mana hits my body, slightly slowing me down. To counter it, I let more mana flow through my circuit and continue shortening the distance.

Three seconds.

I dodge to the side and immediately after that, the spear hurtles through the air with terrifying speed, its flight enhanced by her skill. As it slices through the air, it emits a spine-chilling pitched sound.

The wolf easily dodges.

Damn.

Right after, a wave of mana sends me flying backward and right against a tree. The air escapes my chest, and I let go of the sword in my hand.

When I look up, the wolf is still standing there.

The massive, majestic-looking white wolf stands out even more in the darkness, lit only by pink, green, and blue aurora-like lights. Mana pulses from the wolf's body flow into the surroundings, making smaller trees and branches bend and lean away from it. Its eyes look at us with something I can't explain as anything other than amusement.

The red eyes seem to be burning with an inner fire.

I feel the wolf's mana move.

Not good.

I stop focusing on efficiency and let the entirety of my mana roar through my body as I dash.

The ground around the wolf shakes as it uses the same skill it used to throw me away to propel itself forward, giving itself an insane boost.

This time, its target is Tess.

Chapter 39: CrimsonWolf

The wolf's skill propels him like a rocket, and I barely manage to attack him as he passes by me. While bracing myself and strengthening with mana, I ram into his side with my shoulder first, using enough force to push him to the side just in time to give Tess an opportunity to reposition.

She moves further back, and several spears start floating around her, ready for her to grab and throw.

I am once again pushed away by the monster's skill, and he dashes at her again.

Immediately, three spears come flying at him. While moving incredibly fast, he ducks under one, dodges the second, and activates his skill again to push away the third spear.

A light flashes on its teeth, and it opens its terrifying maw and propels himself again with a dust cloud trailing behind him.

Tess holds her position up until the last moment, and when he is about to reach her, she activates her **[Psychokinesis]** at full force.

For a second, two similar skills clash, creating a shockwave that hits me and causes the trees to creak under pressure as if a strong wind is hitting them. The ground beneath them cracks, and dust comes flying away from the place where their skills met.

The girl's face is focused, and she gives it her all, and her mana shines beautifully in my **[Mana Perception]**, but in the end, she is thrown away by the Crimsonwolf's skill.

But I am there right after, with my sword back in hand and the blade coated in wildly oscillating mana.

My attack is about to hit the monster when it gets stopped, and then, as I am unable to hold it, the sword flies away from my hand with an insane push from the wolf.

Not wasting a second after losing the sword, I dodge under the monster's bite and stab at the wolf with my fingers while using **[Oscillation]**.

Again, a strong push of mana throws me away, but this time I miss the tree and just roll on the ground to reduce the impact.

I hear a roar, and when I look up, there is a spear sticking out from the wolf's left hind leg.

Immediately, I rush back at the wolf while keeping my body as low as possible while still being able to run fast.

My heart pumps like crazy and sends wave after wave of mana through my body. I immediately take it and send it through my muscles.

More.

Faster.

Take it, use it, expend it.

My body starts heating up, and I jump to the side, feeling something with my **[Mana Perception]**.

The force of the wolf's attack barely misses me and makes me stagger a bit, but I quickly regain my balance and continue.

The monster's eyes stay glued to me. They are still calm, wild, and dangerous.

Another spear flies at him, but he deflects it without even turning around and then propels himself towards me with his mouth wide open.

I duck and roll under the wolf, and behind me, I hear the terrifying noise of its mouth shutting down.

As I pass under the monster, I put more mana into my finger and make a deep wound on his belly with **[Oscillation]**.

My body feels so hot. I feel my Mana Circuit working in overdrive. It's as if the blood is boiling in my veins, and I feel as if I am about to lose control of my mana.

So, I **[Focus]** more.

[Focus Lvl 4 > Focus Lvl 5]

While letting out a scary noise, a spear passes by me, and the wolf dodges it while turning back to me.

Even wounded, he still looks composed and charges at me again without any hesitation.

Another spear is passing by me, and I grab it right from the air. Immediately after, I point two fingers at the ground.

I lower my body to avoid getting pushed, and the repulsive force intended for the spear hits me, slightly pushing me away from the wolf.

When it's gone, I throw the spear at him while charging again.

The wolf dodges my spear and bites at me.

At the last moment, I duck my head to the side and the monster's shoulder hits my body, but the spear passes through where my head was and burrows deep into its mouth.

This time he roars with pain, and I grab his fur.

As he uses his skill, I continue to hold onto him with my left hand while my legs fly into the air. When the skill stops, I stab my fingers coated in oscillating mana as deep as I can into its neck.

Again and again.

I quickly stab four times before the force of his mana pushes me away.

"Sword," I hear from Tess and put my hand in the air.

With her **[Psychokinesis]**, she sends the sword back into my hand, and I grab it.

The majestic monster's white fur is now covered in blood, as red as its eyes.

Yet, he still calmly tracks my movement with his eyes.

He pushes again, and this time even drops of his blood fly away from him at the epicenter.

After the skill stops, he attacks and immediately pauses as a shower of hundreds of small stones, twigs, and pieces of wood rush at him. Each piece is moving fast enough to kill a human back on Earth.

The shower gets reflected easily, and immediately after, a spear burrows deep into his neck.

There is no roar; he looks down at the spear and then back at us and jumps back to dodge my attack. A stone as big as my head rushes at him, and he tilts his head to dodge it, but then I cut off his front leg with a blade humming with mana.

He loses balance, and the stone that missed him comes flying back from behind and hits the back of his head.

The monster staggers even more, and I leave a deep cut in its neck, creating a bloody line on his beautiful white fur.

For the last time, my body is thrown away, I roll on the ground and jump back on my legs.

This time, the sword is still in my hand.

The Crimsonwolf forces his body back on his three legs and looks at us, majestically and proudly. The light slowly disappears from its eyes, and we get the message.

[You have defeated the CrimsonWolf - lvl 12]

[Lvl 10 > Lvl 11]

Only then does the monster fall to the ground.

I breathe out and slowly exit the deep state of my **[Focus]**. But I continue to strengthen my body a little bit to deal with the aftereffects of the fight.

Tess and I cautiously approach the fallen Crimsonwolf. Even being 99% sure that he is dead, my body tenses as we move closer, waiting for another wave of mana.

"His skill felt similar to Kim's," Tess starts. The spears are already back and flying around her, and she keeps looking around while we get closer to the corpse.

I quickly invest two points into constitution and one into mana.

"Not to yours?"

She shakes her head.

"It felt different from mine. He was much stronger, but he could only push."

I see. Well, it's not like it matters that much now.

Tess says what I'm thinking.

"I think the monsters with names such as Cinderbear or Crimsonwolf are much more dangerous than just a normal wolf or bear."

And I agree with her. Let's be a bit more careful, even if the monster is at a lower level.

Hmm, what now? I really don't feel like skinning the wolf.

The thought of skinning its corpse feels... not good.

Sure, I can do it, but I won't if I don't have to.

Let's leave it.

We don't lack animal hides right now, and the meat of wolves doesn't taste that good.

"Did you level up?" As we unanimously start walking back to camp, I ask Tess, and the answer is just a short nod.

Now I am curious.

Not only about what she will pick but also about the traits themselves. Just the description of the trait can be a hint as to what should be possible to do with mana. So we both impatiently rush back, and after drinking some water and eating some food, we go into the corner of the cave, and Tess tells me about her traits.

Unlike me, she got offered only seven traits:

Mana-Infused Musculature (Passive)

The user's muscles are imbued with mana, providing them with increased strength and endurance. This trait enables them to perform feats of physical prowess beyond the capabilities of ordinary individuals.

Accelerated Recovery (Passive)

The user's body is able to recover from injuries and fatigue more quickly than normal, thanks to an infusion of mana that accelerates their natural healing processes. This trait allows them to maintain peak performance during extended periods of physical exertion.

Farsight-Enhanced Reflexes (Passive)

The user's farsight ability is integrated with their reflexes, enabling them to respond to threats and react to changes in their environment with exceptional speed and precision. This trait grants them a significant advantage in both offensive and defensive situations.

Psychic Shielding (Passive)

The user's psychic abilities generate a protective aura that shields them from mental attacks and psychic intrusions. This trait grants them increased resistance to mind-altering effects and enhanced mental fortitude.

Kinetic Absorption (Passive)

The user's body is able to absorb and store kinetic energy from impacts, allowing them to reduce the damage taken from physical attacks. This stored energy can be released in a burst, enhancing their own attacks or movements.

Mana-Enhanced Agility (Passive)

The user's agility and dexterity are amplified by their connection to mana, allowing them to perform acrobatic feats and evade attacks with ease. This trait improves their overall mobility and responsiveness in combat.

Psychic Focus (Passive)

The user's ability to concentrate and maintain their psychic powers is significantly improved, allowing them to utilize their abilities more effectively and efficiently. This trait enhances their overall control and precision when using psychokinetic powers.

In the end, Tess decides on **Psychic Focus** and I leave her so she can get over the pain of acquiring the trait on her own.

Chapter 40: New skill

Finally!

Behold!

[Kinetic Redistribution]

Isn't it beautiful?

I love it as much as Biscuit loves food, probably even more!

After a buttload of testing, experimenting, and watching Kevin and others practice, along with some hints from the system, I was able to acquire this new skill.

There are a few minor similarities to Kevin's **[Reflection]** and how Tess and Kim's skills work, but that's all - just small similarities.

The skill allows me to absorb kinetic energy and then reuse it.

So, let's say someone hits me in my pretty face. If they do that, I can activate the skill and absorb some of that energy to reduce the damage. The energy I absorb can be used to strengthen my attacks, similar to how Tess uses her **[Psychokinesis]** to make spears fly faster.

It's the kind of skill I like - a counter skill, a skill where I use the enemy's attack against them while reducing the damage taken.

Sure, it's only level one for now, but wait! Soon it will shine.

As for now, I'm not great at the redistribution part and can only reduce some damage to myself. The energy just disappears into the air, as I can't get a handle on it yet.

Unfortunately, it only works for physical attacks and isn't that effective when I'm being stabbed with something sharp, probably because the point of contact is too small.

But I already have a few theories and ways in which I'd like to use it in the future.

Anyway, let's ditch Lily and Kim and practice my new skill!

Hey, why do you look so happy that I'm leaving?

What's with the relief on your face?

Somehow it annoys me.

[Name: *Nathaniel Gwyn*]

Difficulty: *Hell*

Floor: *1*

Time left until forced return: *4y 350d 01h 5m 32s*

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

Lvl *12*

Strength: *11*

Dexterity: *9*

Constitution: *16*

Mana: *25*

[Primary Class: *Unavailable*]

[Sub-class: *Unavailable*]

Skills:

Focus - lvl 5

Mana Manipulation - lvl 7

Mana Perception - lvl 5

Oscillation - lvl 3

Kinetic Redistribution - lvl 1

[Skill Points: *0*]

[Stat Points: *0*]

Around two weeks have passed since the start of the 1st floor, but somehow it feels much longer. Well, at least my stats are nice to look at.

In the end, I decided to go with my strategy of putting as many stat points as I can into mana and then increasing my constitution bit by bit so my body will be able to handle the mana.

Ultimately, I do this because it allows me to put much more stat points into mana than if I wanted to increase strength and dexterity.

That's it. I just want to play with mana. It still fascinates me, and now with my trait, it feels even better when I use it. In the long run, I think it's the best decision, as mana feels much more versatile than investing my points into, let's say, strength. Why would I? Instead, I can use mana to get a bit worse results - probably, and when I don't need to strengthen my body, I will have a lot of mana to play with!

Well, the problem is that I might get absolutely destroyed if someone finds a way to stop me from using mana, the same way Hadwin did.

But worry not! I found a way to counter it!

Probably!

It's simple; I just need to get my **[Mana Manipulation]** to the point where he won't be able to affect my mana, or something similar. I am sure even **[Focus]** can help a little bit to counter it.

Instead of being depressed by the amount of work ahead of me, I'm happy, as even now I can't see the limits of what I can acquire.

Just two weeks and I am like this. What will become of me in a few months? One year? Five more years? It sends goosebumps down my body, but not in the wrong way.

"Nathaniel," Hadwin stops by me while holding the best doggo by its nape. Biscuit seems as if he gave up on life and just hangs in the man's hand.

Not again, what did you do to him, Biscuit?

Also, good boy!

But tone it down; your smile is showing.

"Ever since we had a fight, he keeps peeing on my sleeping place and brings and leaves there pieces of meat and bones. I would ask Samantha to do something about it, but lately, he doesn't listen to her at all," he looks at me. He is more annoyed than angry, I guess, "So please, can you do something about it?"

He puts the dog on the ground and leaves.

We look at each other, and Biscuit blinks slowly.

Is it possible for such a good boy to exist?

I watch Kim as he tries to manipulate mana in his body following my instructions. He is getting better and better at this, easily the best out of the kids.

Yes, he still isn't close to me. But as I continue to watch others, I start to suspect that the things I do with mana aren't normal.

Kim is still stuck at level three of the skill, probably close to level four at this point, but to me, it feels like he is relying on the skill itself too much.

He knows about it, and we've tried multiple times, but it still comes back to this even though he is super hardworking.

It might improve with a good trait, but he is still far off from that, currently at level six.

I still help him a bit to level up, as I promised when he gave me his sword for my personal lessons.

A cheap price to pay, I would say so!

I don't understand why I had to pry the sword from his hand while he kept looking at me with unbelieving eyes.

No going back on your promise, not on my watch!

Anyway. He improved his **[Gravity Well]** and now he can use it on a small area, so I have him increase the gravity while I practice swinging my sword. We are defending our base pretty comfortably, so I find some time to exercise like this.

The effect of increased gravity is pretty strong, just in a small area, and in a few days of practicing and eating a lot of monster animal meat, I was able to increase my strength and constitution by one point each.

Another bonus is the rush of dopamine I feel after each exercise; damn, I missed exercising so much.

"For fuck's sake, at least keep the shirt on!" Kevin appears, closely followed by Lily.

Huh? But it will get sweaty and it's super annoying to wash.

Kevin sighs.

"I won't even try to explain it to you."

Good! So stay quiet so I can focus!

I get back to my training and move my sword through the air while increased gravity keeps pulling it down. My body feels so heavy, and I have to be careful not to lose balance; otherwise, I will get splatted on the ground in front of my lacking students.

There is no mana running through my body, as Kim's skill isn't strong enough yet for me to have to use it, so I exercise just by using my pure stats.

At some point, the world quiets down, and I focus on the movements and continue moving my body.

My muscles hurt.

But it's good pain.

It means I put effort into it. It means that I am training as hard as I can to improve. If I put effort into it, I will be rewarded; that's why it's so addicting for me to exercise, as it always was.

Many minutes later, I stop when the gravity pulling me down weakens and look at Kim; he is totally breathless.

"Out of mana," he says, and I just nod and turn to go and wash myself a bit. Obviously, I will use the precious water we collected from a nearby stream, but that's the advantage of being high in the rankings!

"Hey Lily, why are you so red?" I barely hear Kevin talking his nonsense when I am nearly gone.