

Weapons of Mass Destruction #Chapter 41: Laughing Shadow - Read Weapons of Mass Destruction Chapter 41: Laughing Shadow

Chapter 41: Laughing Shadow

Tess stole my hoodie.

Tess insists she's only "borrowing" my hoodie, but deep down, I know the truth. That hoodie is gone, never to return. She's like a hoodie black hole, absorbing all the coziness and leaving me shivering in my hoodie-less existence.

She says it's because of the screw-up I made during our last hunt that she ended up with her clothes torn, but look, who would have guessed that the troll is so good at throwing stuff?

Totally not my fault.

And sure, with my increased constitution, I don't feel the cold even in the slightly colder weather we are in, and the hoodie was just lying down in my gym bag, but... but, it's mine, it was mine.

Well, whatever.

There are 10 days remaining on the time limit for the floor quest, so I decided to hunt alone for some time. I took a lot of dried meat and a few bottles of water with me and went to the forest, leaving them to survive on their own for a few days.

Hadwin didn't like it at all, and neither did most of them, but I think it will help them too. Some of them became too reliant on my help, stopped improving on their own, and just followed my lead. Sure, they will get hurt, maybe even die, but if they just continue to follow me, they will for sure die in the future.

If we look at this like a game, the first floor should be the easiest one, right?

For me, the danger didn't feel that big, and I have a feeling that my growth has stagnated as well. I don't want to become too reliant on them, so I leave to return in a few days.

I am also worried that I am getting too close to them.

The forest is quiet, as always, and without Tess's scouting, I feel much more vulnerable, but surprisingly I don't hate it.

As always, there is mana flowing through my body, through my mana circuit, and my **[Mana Perception]** keeps sending wave after wave of mana into our surroundings like a sonar, trying to find something. The range isn't that big, but it's doable.

So I continue checking my quests once in a while. There still isn't a new **[Side Quest]** unfortunately, but knowing the system, I am sure it's cooking up something really spicy.

The first enemy I meet is a simple wolf.

[Wolf, lvl 2]

Poor guy, how did he end up here? In such a high-level zone.

He sniffs me and starts running away immediately. Unfortunately for him, I send more mana through my body and dash at him with a speed higher than his.

Surely enough, I catch up to him, and he turns to attack me in a last-ditch effort.

I dodge, and his teeth clamp close to my head.

Then I slap him.

Yup.

I bitch-slap that poor guy.

He staggers back, and I repeat it, and he falls down, unconscious.

I pull out the last remaining piece of the goblin shaman's amulet and tie it to the wolf's fur. I already did it multiple times in hopes of confusing the Cinderbear.

Fuck Cinderbear tho.

I started doing it immediately after the last time, and there should be 7 wolves running around with a piece of amulet tied to their fur. Or they lost it. I don't care. Just get that crap far away from me.

What the heck is it even?

A tracking device?

Whatever, I stand up and leave the wolf alive.

I may or may not have petted him a few times before leaving.

[BattleTroll, lvl 9]

I keep mana flowing through my body and blade, ready to use **[Oscillation]** at any time as I slowly walk towards the monster.

The BattleTroll is only slightly bigger than the first troll we met; he is slimmer but holds a massive club in his hand, most likely made of a tree trunk. There are weird red tattoos over his body.

This time, I decide to fight him on equal footing.

I feel a pulse of mana from him, and he swings his weapon.

A loud roar sounds into the surroundings.

The attack is impressively fast, but it's something I can dodge. However, I don't do it. Instead of dodging, I coat my blade in mana to prevent it from being destroyed and let mana rush to my body while I use **[Kinetic Redistribution]**.

Our weapons meet, and instead of instantly breaking my hand, I feel the force of his attack weaken as I absorb some of it with my skill. It's much more than I expected, so I groan under the power of his attack.

Unable to do anything with the absorbed kinetic force, I just let it escape into the surroundings, creating a small shockwave with us at the center.

The troll roars and attacks again from the same side. Again, I block his attack with my sword, absorbing more force than the first time, yet I still get pushed and stagger a bit. However, I regain enough balance to block another attack,

and another shockwave of absorbed kinetic energy explodes into the surroundings.

For the next few blows, I continue to block his attacks, and the way I use the skill improves a tiny bit every time.

I manipulate mana better and faster. Activating the skill sooner, using more mana at the right places, and reducing waste. Using bits of energy from his attacks to push against his weapon.

I dodge under his clumsy kick and block his club with my sword, but this time I manipulate the absorbed energy and use it to create a weak shockwave that I aim back at the troll.

He staggers backward a little but quickly attacks me again.

I feel his body generating more and more mana, and his tattoos start glowing.

This time, I dodge the attack, and it hits the ground. Earth explodes into the surroundings, and with a quick dash, I move closer and cut off his leg above his knee. The blade hums while oscillating wildly.

While he is falling down, I make a deep cut on his chest and then cut his club apart before jumping away.

My breathing is rough as I almost lose control over **[Oscillation]**.

I send more mana into my body, but then I get the message.

[You have defeated the BattleTroll Lvl 9]

Oh, it looks like I hit something important.

I almost feel disappointed as the monster falls down, dead.

That's it, I guess.

Out of nowhere I sense a hint of mana at the edge of my **[Mana Perception]** range and focus more mana in that direction. The feeling disappears without leaving anything behind.

Huh?

I dash towards it, but I don't catch anything. It's gone and there isn't leftover mana left behind.

What was that?

The forest immediately feels more dangerous, and silence fills the surroundings.

I feel mana behind me, but when I focus more on it, it disappears immediately in a way I can't explain.

Cold sweat starts running down my back, and I dash away from it. Mana strengthens my muscles, and at this point, I am able to run as fast as a horse while letting **[Focus]** help me to do it without hitting any trees.

After a few minutes I stop to catch a breath.

I lost it for sure...

Another pulse of mana appears at the edge of my perception.

Damn.

I run again.

Ten minutes pass, and I continue to strengthen my body; my muscles feel hot as I continue to channel mana through my Mana Circuit to strengthen them. My mana pool is now big enough to keep it up for a really long time.

As I run, I continue to feel the same mana signature at the edges of my perception.

At first, I try to run away from it, but it starts to feel as if it's trying to lure me somewhere, so I just avoid it.

At some point, I even attempt to dash toward it again, but it disappears and reappears behind me within a minute.

My **[Mana Perception]** continues to shoot into the surroundings, but I always only feel a hint of mana at the edge of my range.

While continuing to use the skill, I optimize it a bit and increase the range. However, the signature moves again, staying not entirely out of range but still close.

I stop.

My breathing is quick, and my muscles burn. Sweat runs down my body.

Something like laughter echoes in the distance.

The presence appears once again at the edge of my detection.

You asshole.

This is getting annoying.

Fight me or something.

As if knowing what I am thinking, the cackle sounds once again, and the presence disappears.

It looks like there will be no sleep tonight.

Chapter 42: The Cost of Perseverance

It's already a day since the start, and Sneaky McSneakface still continues to stalk me. I continue to monitor him even as I fight the monsters, but it doesn't attack at all. Yet, I do not let my guard down.

The only good thing that comes out of it is that I greatly improve my **[Mana Perception]**.

The range is now bigger, and I can feel even smaller usages of mana. Yet every time I do so on this stalker, it lowers its mana signature.

At this point, I am sure that it's making fun of me, as every time I dash at it, the presence immediately disappears. It's either moving insanely fast, teleporting, or just can totally erase its mana but continues to let out some for some reason, probably to piss me off.

At one point, it did copy Crimsonwolf. I let one troll hit me with nearly his full power, nearly breaking my arm in the process, but I absorbed an insane

amount of kinetic energy and used it to propel myself towards the sneaky stalker.

The trees turned into blurred lines, and I even crashed through multiple branches, yet the stalker was able to run away without leaving mana trail behind.

So that's it.

I can't ignore him, and it keeps me on my guard at all times. I do not dare to stop using mana to strengthen myself or for perception, so I continue to spend my mana.

To counter it, I improve my efficiency, and I am sure at this point my usage is twenty to thirty percent lower than before Sneaky McSneakface appeared.

So, thank you and fuck you.

Step on a Lego or something.

More time passes. I haven't slept for like 30 hours at this point?

Surprisingly, it's not that bad. Constitution has turned me into a superhuman for sure, and mana is now nearly permanently flowing and strengthening my body, reducing the effects of lack of sleep.

As for returning and having others help me? I refuse!

I went there to become less reliant on them, so coming back immediately after would feel pathetic. I also think this is something I can deal with on my own.

I took a sip of some water right from the stream, but I seem to be fine, so I came back and drank a bit more, It tasted really good.

Another problem is that I am already without any food. All this fighting and usage of mana made me hungry and I ate it all.

The sneaky stalker is still stalking me and continues to avoid my attempts to catch him.

Surprisingly, shouting like a maniac and insulting his parents doesn't help, and he still stays out of reach.

Oh, and I got lost.

I forgot to mark the way.

It's getting harder to think logically.

More time passes, and I was able to sleep for like three hours, well actually I slept without wanting to.

I stopped to lean against a tree and fell asleep while standing.

What woke me up was a sharp pain in my side. When I woke up and swung my sword, there was no one there, and I found a small wound in my side.

The cackle sounded in the surroundings, and goosebumps appeared all over my body.

I continue to fight trolls and goblins.

There are never-ending waves of them, and at this point, I am sure that the sneaky fucker is luring them to me.

I don't remember when, but my sword broke, and I continue to use the hilt that still holds a bit of a sharp broken blade. My **[Oscillation]** continues to improve, and my **[Focus]** also leveled up.

So that's something, I guess.

I fell asleep again.

This time, I did lose around half of my pinky finger on my left hand.

But it was worth it. After waking up, and feeling pain, I was able to wound the stalker before he ran away.

This time, he didn't laugh.

I am terribly hungry, but I continue to move.

Every time I pause for a bit longer, bigger and bigger groups of monsters attack me. Always monsters, I haven't seen any animals in a long time. It's always trolls or goblins.

Thankfully they are not that high leveled.

Every time I level up, I put stat points into constitution, and that helps me continue.

The sneaky stalker isn't laughing anymore, but I continue to feel him at the edge of my mana perception. I purposely reduce the range and continue to wait for the right opportunity.

Huh, level 16. That's pretty good, right?

I wonder what the others are doing. I bet they have warm food, those jerks.

Yup, goblin meat tastes terrible.

I finally saw the monster that's stalking me.

[Phantom Goblin - lvl 9]

He doesn't dare to come closer anymore, even after I pretend to fall asleep.

I check the status, and there is exactly one week remaining until the end of the **[Floor quest]**.

I also get another **[Side quest]**.

[Side quest]

Get one skill to level 10.

Rewards:

- 1 skill upgrade token

It sounds kind of underwhelming.

The BattleTroll hits me straight on; my sword and hilt are already gone, so I use both of my hands to block him. I absorb more kinetic energy than ever before, yet my arms still break, but I push through the pain, kick his neck with the tip of my foot coated in **[Oscillation]** and propel myself towards the presence at the edge of my perception.

I mold the mana and send it all to my legs; my shoes literally explode from the pressure I put on them, and I dash barefoot. Then I release the absorbed kinetic energy and push myself even faster. My **[Mana Perception]**

flashes into the surroundings like a sonar, and I locate the Phantom Goblin.

I reach him in a second, bulldozing through small trees; my shoulder collects unpleasant wounds, and I am sure I will be all bruised, but I push through it and reach the asshole.

He tries to run, but I let myself hit a tree, absorb a bit more energy from the crash, and use it to propel myself again.

The air around the goblin wavers, and his skin changes color like a chameleon, but this time I quickly find him by his mana with my improved perception.

Finally, I land a kick on him and he rolls on the ground.

The small green monster screams in pain, and it makes him cancel his skill. I dash before he tries to run and stomp on his feet, making him scream again.

Hahaha.

I stop for a second and continue to try to catch my breath.

My arms hurt, my body hurts, my stomach is sick, I feel thirsty, and my clothes are in tatters.

There are wounds all over my body.

Yet

HAHAHA.

I laugh while the green fucker screams in pain at my feet.

Then I stomp with my feet.

I break his legs, his arms, and the monster continues to scream and tries to crawl away even with broken limbs. It scratches me with its nails, but I ignore it.

I stomp on its stomach and chest, its neck.

I get the message about the kill.

But I continue until the green body at my feet turns into a mess of blood, bones, meat, internal organs, and green skin.

Haaa. I breathe out.

Easy, not even close.

Hahaha.

I laugh a bit and then feel a wave of relief wash over my body. I just realize how scared I was for the past few days, and I feel like crying.

But then I enter deeper into **[Focus]**, and the emotions slowly calm down.

My **[Mana Perception]** flashes into the surrounding area, encompassing a space roughly the size of a small village.

Let's go back.

Chapter 43: The Warmth of Mana

In the end, I didn't find anyone.

Tess found me.

Still wearing my hoodie, I see.

Hoodie Snatcher.

Also, why such a face? It's just a few flesh wounds and a few broken bones. With a bit of time, they will heal on their own, just by the power of my constitution. Infection also doesn't seem to be a problem because of the stat.

Missing a piece of my pinky?

You should see the other guy, hehe.

Actually, there might still be a few pieces of him on my feet.

I drink a lot of water and gobble up all the smoked meat Tess has with her. Then she leads me back to the camp and gives me an information dump while we walk.

It looks like they did relocate their camp because the trolls around it started to become stronger and stronger. Actually, overall, it looks like the monsters are at higher and higher levels.

The kids seem to be fine, but one more person died.

Actually, should I be calling them kids? They are only a few years younger than me.

Whatever, they look like kids to me, so it will stay.

As for the dead man, it's kind of on him. He either didn't put in enough effort and was just too naive, not realizing the situation they were in, and just waited for others to deal with it.

Anyway, it's not like I knew him.

The best doggo immediately welcomes me but stops just a bit away from me. I feel its eyes moving up and down my body.

Oi, I will be hurt if you don't recognize me.

He doesn't disappoint and rushes at me, jumping up my legs, and touching them with his front feet while bouncing on his hind ones.

Damn, I would be happy if I didn't know that he just likes that his food dispenser came back.

"What the fuck, Nat. Did you get dragged across the entire forest?"

I will forgive Kevin, as his voice sounds worried even as he says what he does.

"Welcome back," Hadwin says shortly and nods, and I return the gesture.

People start gathering around me, and I hear them talk and ask questions over each other. Some are worried, some are curious, and soon enough they start talking over each other and talking louder and louder to let their voices sound over other people's voices.

I am too tired to deal with this.

I gently stomp my feet, and my mana flares up into the surroundings as I try to replicate the thing Cinderbear did.

Everyone shuts up instantly.

"I'm tired, so I will go and sleep. Tess, please show me where I can go."

No one bothers us as she leads me towards the makeshift bed.

"I will keep watch."

A thankful feeling fills my body, and I fall asleep as soon as I put my head down.

When I wake up, Tess is sitting on the ground near me. She instantly notices that I've woken up and just acknowledges it and continues to keep watch.

Thank goodness.

I'm not a morning person, so if someone talks to me right after I wake up, I stay grumpy the entire day.

Instead of saying anything, I just lay there and look up at the side of the cliff the base is built around. The spot is nice, and it seems like there's only one way the enemy can come from, as there is only a high rock wall behind us.

I continue to think over everything that happened, and 30 minutes later, when I feel like it, I finally ask.

"How long?"

"You slept for six hours."

Huh, that's shorter than I thought it would be. I feel pretty good, all things considered, and even my arms seem to be healing pretty nicely. Did Lily help?

Fortunately, I don't have to worry about my bones growing back in the wrong way, as the natural regeneration of a high-constitution body seems to be pulling them into the right places. It's kind of fortunate, judging from how often I am getting wounded.

The only problem might be half of my missing pinky, but even now, when it's all over, I feel like it was a low price to pay to hurt that little... I forcefully calm myself down and enter a bit deeper into **[Focus]**.

Okay, it's time to eat!

Give me food, a lot of food, and water, a lot of water!

I hungrily look around, and it looks like Tess knows me very well, as there is a nice pile of dried meat near me and a full bottle of water.

After devouring it in what feels like a minute - with Tess's help, I lay down on the makeshift bed and stretch my limbs.

Dude, really, fuck this forest.

I want civilization.

Mattresses, freshly washed blankets, warm showers, sweets.

Give me.

Damn...

Let's hope the second floor won't be worse.

"Here's your second shirt you left behind, but we don't have any shoes or pants."

I guess I can't be too picky, but I will have to be careful not to fight around with my bare ass. That would be awkward, to say the least.

As for shoes, well, my constitution-strengthened feet don't mind walking on the ground that much. I'm not even getting wounds from sharp stones or small pieces of twigs, which is also nice.

So, back to the **[Side quests]**. I take a peek at my skills:

Focus - lvl 6

Mana Manipulation - lvl 9

Mana Perception - lvl 8

Oscillation - lvl 4

Kinetic Redistribution - lvl 4

It looks like the winner will be **[Mana Manipulation]**.

Actually, I am kind of curious about what will happen if I upgrade one of my skills. How big will the difference be? Will there be more options to choose from, or is there just one?

Well, I will see soon enough, I guess.

Together with Tess, we join the others. Kevin is eating, so I clumsily grab the meat from his hands and start chewing it while sitting down next to him. He says something about gluttony but doesn't complain that much.

Yup, stolen food tastes better. I can confirm.

The doggo immediately joins and puts its head on my knee, and I feed him small pieces of dried meat while listening to other people talking.

No one is asking me anything; they just talk.

About skills, and their levels; at some point, they talk about people they all know and laugh, remembering how much they complained about homework.

I feel movement to my side, and Lily moves closer to me, our legs almost touching.

"I'm glad you made it back," she whispers and holds my hand, the one with the missing piece of the pinky. I feel her mana wanting to enter my body, and my mana instantly pushes hers back with ease, but I slowly calm it down and move it away. Her mana enters my hand. It's warm and refreshing at the same time.

My pinky stings a bit, and I feel her mana focusing on the spot and some also on my arms.

A few minutes later, she stops, and I swear the missing part of the pinky is smaller.

"I'm sorry, that's all I can do for now. It will take a bit longer."

With big eyes and black hair framing her petite face, a tiny nose rests in the center. Her hair is neatly tied into a ponytail, and she offers an apologetic smile.

"It's fine."

I gently pull my hand from hers and get back to caressing the little doggo.

He's even heavier than he used to be.

I bet he kept stuffing himself with food while I was struggling out there.

As an act of revenge, I boop his snout, knowing that he doesn't like it that much. He ignores me at first, so I continue doing so until he woofs at me.

Huhu, take that.

I poke him one more time, and he woofs again.

Kim comes back with a bit more meat, so I stop and grab some. The doggo turns to me. Immediately after, I hear something in my mind.

(Food!)

"..."

What the heck?

Chapter 44: Broken Inside

I stare at the corgi, and he stares back at me. He blinks a few times, and I do the same.

Okay.

Okay!

Maybe I'm just hearing things.

Let's try again.

I grab a piece of meat from Kevin and wave it in front of the dog.

(*Food! Food!*) I hear again, and the corgi starts wagging his tail.

"..."

I stare at him again, and he stares at me and the meat, unable to look only at me.

What the heck, Biscuit?!

Did you obtain a skill or something?

Also, is it a telepathic communication skill or something like that?

A strong suspicion fills my mind. Did you obtain this kind of skill only to be able to ask for more food?

That can't be, right?

(*Food! Food!*) I continue to hear it in my mind.

The corgi's eyes now stay glued to the piece of meat in my hand and follow it from side to side as I move it in front of him.

"..."

Biscuit...

Why do I even bother? I throw the meat at him, and the voice in my head disappears.

He gobbles it up and looks at me with what looks like cheeky smile.

You little twerp.

I will be mad if I get offered a tamer class or something like this in place of something much more awesome.

No one else seems to be surprised, so I guess I was the only one able to hear the corgi. It's either because he did talk to me only, or they just were unable to.

I would pay just to see their reactions.

I lean back and close my eyes while listening to the quiet conversation around the campfire and feeling the warmth of the bodies around me.

Dang telepathic dogs, what's next?

Slowly, I doze off and fall asleep.

Another day, another me!

Well, a big part of it is thanks to Lily, who kept healing me. This time, I did tell her to focus more on my arms, not my pinky, and that sped up my already awesome natural regeneration even more. I am sure she also got some nice practice out of it too.

The entire time she healed me, I continued to follow the flow of her mana inside my body and also learned a tiny bit. Nothing too impressive, but hey, I have to start somewhere.

Telepathic doggo is still talking only to me, and his vocabulary is, well, unimpressive.

It consists of the word "*food*" said in different tones.

As a question, as a request, and that's mostly it.

He once tried to say it in what probably had to sound like an order, but I quickly flicked his snout, and he hasn't tried it since.

Also, Sophie came back from the hunt, and her eyebrow went up when she saw the state my clothes were in and the lack of my shoes.

But that's it. I just get a short nod that acknowledges my existence, and she goes to rest, followed by her sister, Maya, and Leon.

Yup, that's the party she runs lately, and it looks like they are power-leveling her sister too. But, dang, I can't imagine what this all does to someone as young as Isabella, as I learned she is called.

I send some mana towards them, just thin threads of it, and try to feel their mana pool. No one notices anything as I peek at it.

Sophie's is the biggest one, but surprisingly, Isabella is the second, closely followed by Maya and Leon is the last.

Dang, I wonder how much under her influence these two are.

I turn back to breathless Kim, and he still doesn't seem ready to continue his training. In the time I wasn't here, he improved greatly, so I have him practicing his **[Telekinesis]**, throwing stones as big as his head at me while I use my **[Kinetic Redistribution]** to absorb as much energy as I can from them.

Watching his skill also helps, as I observe the way his mana moves inside and outside of his body. His control is better now, and I can also follow the flow of his mana easier, so I get one or two ideas on how to improve the usage of my newest skill.

Another stone flies at me, and I extend my mana towards it while activating the skill. The stone slows down significantly, and in the end, it falls a bit in front of me. I manipulate and mold the absorbed kinetic energy and then shoot it back at the stone on the ground, pushing it a tiny bit.

Hmm, I am still not at the point where I want to be.

Another stone flies at me, and the same thing repeats. This time, I try to reduce the cone of absorbed kinetic energy I throw back at the stone, but I am unable to control it enough to do so, so instead, it's even worse than before.

My intention is to reduce the cone enough to change it into a piercing attack of kinetic energy, molded in a way that would allow me to shatter the stone or pierce the bodies.

That would be nice, yup.

Imagine hitting someone and then getting hit by the force of your own attack, just more focused. I really like the idea of that, but as of now, it still seems far away, so I guess I will mostly use it to absorb some energy from attacks to propel myself.

Once again, I thank Crimsonwolf for the idea.

Who knew one of the best users of the skills is animals?

Maybe the best mage will be from a zoo instead of one of us.

Damn, that's kinda depressing.

As I continue to mindlessly absorb Kim's attacks, I think over my new findings.

Using my improved **[Mana Perception]**, I went through my body in hopes of finding out what Sophie did to me and what prevents me from even thinking about... it happens once again, and my train of thought stops right there.

Yup, about that.

So, I found some weird thing inside my skull. It seems to be feeding on my mana and growing stronger together with my growing mana.

That would explain why I wasn't able to remove it even after my level vastly outperformed hers.

My theory is that she used her **[Manipulation]**

and **[Mana Infusion]** on me back then inside the bus when the first monster we met attacked.

At that point, her mana points were at 3, while mine were at 1, and she also said she started with **[Manipulation]** at level two.

So back then, she was stronger than me, and in desperation and probably not even knowing what she was doing, she pushed her mana inside me and created this... construct. And then the construct grew with me while sucking on my mana to not be washed away by my mana pool.

It's just guessing, but I am sure that I am close to it.

So I continue to watch the construct. My multiple attempts to remove it were unsuccessful. Even the full power of my mana wasn't enough; like a parasite, it pretends to be a part of me, and my body and even mana seems to be partly tricked by it.

I will continue to observe it, and I might be able to learn something from how it works. I also start covering it with my mana, so Sophie won't feel it by mistake while using her skill to detect enemies and doesn't recognize it somehow.

But damn, it pisses me off.

I gesture at Kim to stop and sit down, and he joins me breathlessly but with a satisfied smile on his face as he stares at the sky.

He has been like this since the start. Even after all he went through, he seems to be content with it and smiles happily every time he improves a bit.

Finally, I ask, unable to hide my curiosity and wanting to know the answer I thought over multiple times.

“Why are you so happy?”

At first, he seems surprised by my question, but then looks at me. His glasses are already gone as his improved constitution healed this defect, and his messy hair is longer than before.

“Everything feels meaningful now,” he starts carefully and then pauses. I just tilt my head slightly, waiting for him to continue.

“You know, back on Earth, all I did was study. My parents are super strict, and that's all I knew.” he pauses once again, “The problem is every time I did something, it was not enough. Never good enough. I had to get better grades, study harder, behave better, and stop wasting my time.” He looks straight into my eyes.

“It probably sounds silly to you, but it was way too much for me,” he is looking for the right words, “It felt like I couldn't breathe. That's the best way I can explain it.”

He takes a deep, long breath.

“I tried to kill myself once,” he says out of nowhere with a gentle smile on his face. Then he turns away from me to look back at the sky.

“I just couldn't handle it. All this pressure and disappointment from my parents. My older siblings were able to get to the best schools and universities, they got great jobs, yet me... no matter how hard I tried, I could never compare to them.”

I see.

“But now,” once again, a smile flashes. “It doesn't matter anymore, and it won't matter even if I come back to Earth. No more studying, no more comparing to my siblings, no more controlling me.” He squeezes his fist.

So that's how it is.

"I try hard, and I get rewarded. I practice and improve my level and my skills. Finally, I am good at something." Ten or so small stones fly up into the air and start orbiting his hand in difficult patterns. "Everything I do matters now. I hunt food we eat, I fight enemies so we can stay alive, and I train so hard it hurts sometimes."

He laughs quietly.

"I know you understand, we are similar... somewhat."

He can't be more than fifteen, still a child in my eyes. His eyes are big, and his smile is bright, while stones orbit around his hand faster and in more difficult patterns. He seems happy.

Yet, I can't shake the feeling that he is still somewhat wounded inside.

Chapter 45: Spider Matriarch

So, the thing about our base being in a good position to defend?

Yup, forget about that.

Fucking spiders.

Yes, spiders as big as our best doggo attacked us while climbing down the wall we were camped against.

Literally, dozens of them.

Look, I don't have arachnophobia, but even I was close to screaming like a little girl when I saw them and heard the disgusting noise of hundreds of legs tapping onto the stone wall as they climbed down.

The nice thing is that I finally saw Sophie's sister in action, showing off her impressive mana pool.

A ten-year-old girl stretched out her hands towards the spiders and then turned into a human flamethrower.

Orange flames came into existence, burning down the spiders and making them screech in pain. Up until now, I didn't know that spiders could scream from pain as they burned.

Unsurprisingly, they are super flammable.

Also unsurprisingly, our camp made out of wood and skinned animal leather was as well. So as the burning spiders fell down from the wall, they landed right on our camp.

That was the first time I saw Sophie hit her sister.

Well, she only smacked the back of her head, but it's something.

So, I continue to cut down the spiders that attacked us while others try to collect as much stuff as they can. Leathers, bottles, and things we made out of animal bones or leather, such as flasks we made out of hides.

[You have defeated the Spider - Lvl 2]

[You have defeated the Spider - Lvl 3]

[You have defeated the Spider - Lvl 3]

The monsters are fairly easy to kill, and their most repeated attack is just dashing onto us or trying to jump. To be honest, falling down and burning spiders are more dangerous. Biscuit even takes a bite into a few spiders, but this time he isn't calling them food, so I guess even this glutton has some limits.

But things quickly change; in between smaller spiders, we spot bigger ones.

[Spider Worker - Lvl 4]

[Spider Protector - Lvl 6]

[Spider Warrior - Lvl 7]

There are more and more of them as time passes, and that makes people pack their stuff even faster.

Next to me is our artillery. Tess and Kim continue to shower spiders with anything they can grab. Stones, pieces of wood, twigs. I even see them throwing the corpses of dead spiders. I bet they would throw the ones that are still alive, but for some reason, their skills don't work on living beings like that.

It becomes even more ridiculous when they start throwing burning spiders back at their own. God damn, imagine someone throwing the corpse of a burning human at you.

That's metal.

We are almost done when the boss appears.

[Spider Matriarch - Lvl 16]

The absolute unit of a spider jumps down from the wall and flies through the air with its legs spread wide open. Its multiple eyes seem to be cold, and lifeless. Pure dots of darkness, and unlike other spiders, the matriarch is covered in short white hair. Half expecting it to splash on the ground, I watch the spider, but before the matriarch meets its end, I feel a pulse of mana, and it descends slowly, landing almost elegantly.

Then the horror starts. The giant spider dashes towards us with insane speed, passes by me, and attacks Tess. The repulsive force of Tess' **[Psychokinesis]** running at full power pushes even me away, but the matriarch just stops, unable to move closer and bite Tess. So instead, it flings one of its front legs, and Tess, hit by it, flies away.

I stab the spear in my hand at the Matriarch, but she jumps into the air, does a somersault backward, and softly lands on her legs.

What the heck?

The giant spider rushes at me, and I let mana rage through my body and stab at the spider. One of its legs flashes with insane speed and breaks the spear in my hand. Immediately after, one of the legs hits me the same way it hit Tess. I try to absorb the energy of the attack, but I am still thrown away.

While flying through the air, I rotate my body, fall down feet first, and dash at the spider while boosting myself with the absorbed kinetic energy. There is an obsidian dagger in my hand, coated in wildly vibrating mana.

Once again, the spider avoids my attack, this time by dashing sideways with insane speed and then jumping back to avoid Kim's shower of stones flying as fast as a bullet.

Out of nowhere, all of its legs twitch, and it screeches in pain, instantly turning around, right towards Sophie. With crazy speed, it changes course once more, but Leon steps into its way and stomps his foot, making a large area of the ground explode, and spear-like shapes made out of stone stab at the spider.

The Matriarch, with unbelievable reflexes, jumps to the side and dashes again, only to stop and screech once more.

That allows Maya to dash at the spider while mana hovers around her body, creating something like a see-through armor made out of mana. She is really fast, but the monster still dodges her by jumping to the side and attacks the woman while in the air, sending her flying.

I am already dashing there, predicting where the spider will land. The mana on my blade becomes brighter and vibrates wildly.

But the matriarch doesn't give a damn.

While in the air, I feel a wave of mana from her, and her legs push as if against an invisible wall, and she flies back towards the Maya she kicked.

The heck!?

Before the spider reaches Maya, flames come into existence, and a giant wall of flames appears in front of it. Once again, the spider dodges midair, using an invisible platform to jump.

Then I hear the terrifying whistle, and the spear buries itself deep into the spider. The screech it makes hurts my ears.

Determined to use the opportunity, I dash at the spider while Leon attacks it as well, and a stone spear is able to hit one of its legs as Sophie does something that makes the spider freeze.

Wanting to protect their matriarch, dozens of spiders continue to dash at us but are mowed down by Hadwin and others. The old man continues to just stand in the middle of them, and they continue to attack him, trying to bite him, but they are unable to pierce his skin for some reason, and he continues to maul them with what looks like a smaller tree. Every hit sends a spider flying away with a broken body.

Damn, old man...

I reach the matriarch and she swings her leg at me. I partly dodge it, absorb some of the energy, and use it to propel myself closer.

Finally, I stab my dagger deep inside the spider, and my mana flares up around the blade, making the effect of **[Oscillation]** bigger.

Still, I have to jump back immediately after as the spider tries to bite me with its massive fangs.

Then, instead of trying to run away, it dashes at Leon while dodging his stone spears.

Maya then jumps in front of the man while looking amazingly calm and calculating. As if there isn't a giant spider rushing at her.

She waits until the last possible moment and stabs her spear through the head of the matriarch. The spider bites at her shoulder, but the mana around her upper body flares up into existence, creating armor around her chest.

Still, the fangs penetrate her shoulder while crushing the translucent armor, but it doesn't get any reaction from Maya, and the woman stabs again. At the same time, a shower of stones hits the matriarch, and a stone spear too, and the giant white spider slowly dies.

[You have defeated the Spider Matriarch - Lvl 16]

The dark-skinned, athletic young woman looks around calmly while pushing the dead spider away from her, and the fangs exit her skin. Our gazes meet for a second. She flashes me a bright, cocky smile and turns around.

Hmm, what did Tess say a few weeks ago? That there is another person with **[Focus]** among the passengers?

I guess I don't have to ask Tess who it is.

Chapter 46: Pushed to the Limit

So in the end, Lily did heal Maya.

For free.

What the heck!

Venom? Yeah, it either got dissolved by Lily's healing or wasn't strong enough to pose a problem for Maya. Or maybe the Matriarch didn't have venom? Are there spiders without it?

Well, whatever. The woman could have been fine even if Lily hadn't healed her, but it sure helps speed up the process.

Right now, we are walking away from our last camp, and every few minutes, a small group of monsters attacks us.

Currently, the sky is without its phony suns, and beautiful aurora-like lights shine in the sky, which somehow makes every monster suicidal.

It's even worse than before.

Sure, some confidence is nice, but can you imagine attacking our group as two level-two goblins?

Well, that's what happened a few times.

What legends.

Sophie sometimes gets too annoyed with dealing with low-level monsters and tries to send them away, but every time a stone flies as fast as a bullet, it crashes through their heads and kills them.

Kim doesn't care about it not being worth it. Even if he doesn't get much out of it, he continues to snipe them down.

The look Sophie gives him...

(Food. Food!) Biscuit continues to scream in my head.

Dang it, Biscuit, you just ate.

Our little doggo seems to be confused about why we are leaving behind such an amazing amount of food and once in a while takes a few bites before running back to us in his wobbly way.

At some point we split from the group and hunt the same way we used to do it before. Tess and I walk in front of the group and focus on taking down higher-leveled targets.

Up until now, we haven't encountered any "named" monsters, as we started calling them. The monsters such as Cinderbear, Crimsonwolf, BattleTroll, and Spider Matriarch.

But there are so many of them.

I pull my dagger out of the troll's head and jump down, ignoring the notification about the kill.

Immediately after, I let my mana flare up and dash towards another troll.

I slide on the ground past his swing, and when I am closer, I jump back up, high enough to reach his head and slash across his neck while using **[Oscillation]**.

Another notification about a kill.

I continue and dash at a group of three goblin warriors.

The first one dies from my strengthened kick, and his head disappears in an explosion of blood, brain matter, and some skin.

Notification.

I bury my dagger into the neck of another goblin warrior, and it breaks. I kick him away, and he hits the tree behind him, breaking his spine and multiple bones as he hits it.

Notification.

The last goblin stabs at me, and I grab his hand holding the dagger. I break it, grab the falling dagger, and slash his neck with it.

[You have defeated the Goblin warrior - Lvl 6]

"Level 15 Battle Troll ahead of us," Tess says to me instead of informing me by using mana pulses.

Damn. That doesn't sound good.

"Weapon?"

"None, and he is alone."

"Let's go back and have one or two people join us."

Then I hear the earth shaking and see trees exploding in the distance.

Well, of course, it's too late for that.

"Keep your distance; I will tank. Battle trolls can strengthen their bodies, and when you see its tattoos glowing, be careful," I say quickly and turn towards the source of the noise.

The Battle Troll appears from behind a tree in an explosion of wood, earth, and twigs. Unlike other trolls, he isn't slouching, and his hands are shorter, and his proportions are mostly human-like. Its muscular body is nearly fully covered in white tattoos.

He doesn't stop at all and just continues to rush at me, so I have to dodge to the side.

The massive monster passes by me and roars. Instantly, he slows down, and his legs burrow into the ground as he slides into the trees, unable to stop the inertia from his massive body and weight. Soon after, the earth explodes, and he charges at me again.

I dodge again, but this time I leave a wound on his leg as he passes by me. He is really tall; my head is only slightly higher than his knees.

With another roar, his mana explodes into the surroundings and then gets sucked in by the tattoos on his body, making them shine with white light.

I expected him to be fast, but he is much faster than that. The massive body appears in front of me in a split second, as if teleporting, and he swings at me.

Damn.

My mana flares up, and I reach out towards him with my **[Kinetic Redistribution]** and start slowing his swing. Even before he is halfway through his attack, I lose control over the absorbed energy, and it explodes into the surroundings like a shockwave.

Not good!

I enter a deeper **[Focus]** and feel calm wash over my mind. Knowing that I will die if I get hit by the full force, I collect my mana as quickly as ever before and once again activate **[Kinetic Redistribution]**. I absorb as much of his attack as I can and throw the kinetic force against his fist, slowing it down even more.

Then I take the hit with my bare hands while absorbing it once more. Mana rages through my body, strengthening it, and I stop the massive monster's hand in front of me.

He looks surprised that something so tiny stopped his attack, so he roars. Quickly after, a spear comes flying at him with a terrifying sound and lodges itself in his eye.

He roars, staggers backward, and kicks at me. I can only dodge it because I am trying to read his movements; he is just that fast.

I absorb some kinetic energy as the kick passes by me and use it to propel myself under his legs. While passing, I leave a deep wound on his calves. My dagger doesn't break, thanks only to the **[Oscillation]** coating it.

Good, it's doable.

We can do it.

I turn around to dash again, but the troll is gone.

Huh?

I hear Tess scream and feel mana behind my back.

Damn.

With speed I didn't know I was capable of, I activate **[Kinetic Redistribution]** and use it on my back. The entirety of my mana rushes there, and my body burns, unable to handle such an amount so quickly.

Then, even while using the skill, I get hit and find myself crashing through the trees. I roll into a ball, let go of the absorbed kinetic energy to slow myself down and focus my mana on strengthening my body.

Yet, I still get hurt.

I feel my right-hand bleeding. My left leg twists in a weird direction. I almost lose consciousness, and a piece of wood stabs through my right shoulder.

I continue to roll, adding scratches and bruises to my body. I absorb as much of the energy as I can and push it in the direction where I am rolling to slow myself down.

Then the world finally stops spinning.

I feel a huge mana signature approaching and the ground shaking.

Not good.

I try to get on my legs and almost fall down.

NOT GOOD!

I **[Focus]**, and in desperation, I stop trying to limit my mana and let it freely ravage my body. Immediately, I feel my muscles burning, and some of my capillary veins explode from the pressure.

My Mana Circuit feels as if someone is using white-hot iron to mark my body repeatedly.

The troll is dashing at me, really close, while ignoring multiple spears hitting him. I even feel the full force of Tess's **[Psychokinesis]** explode into the surroundings.

Tess screams something and trees bend and tear from the ground; the earth flies up in the air. I can see the terrible pressure she is trying to put on the Battle Troll, but he doesn't slow down.

He rushes through all of it while his tattoos shine with beautiful white light.

I **[Focus]** and forcefully take control over my vast mana, moving it, molding it in the way I want.

I hear the notification, and the world loses even more of its colors, and I don't hear anything anymore.

Then my mana flares up.

Chapter 47: The Price of Greed

The Battle Troll swings his fist at me, its tattoos shining brighter than ever, the entire force of its rush is behind the swing.

I lift up my left arm and reach out towards the monster's fist with my open palm. I barely hold back the mana ravaging my body.

The Troll's attack connects and touches my arm first.

And that's all.

His movement stops, the entire force of his attack disappearing in a blink.

The world comes to a stop.

Then I try to redirect the energy, and my entire left arm explodes almost up to my shoulder.

It just disappears in a fine mist of blood, flesh, and bones.

A short moment later, the Battle Troll's head explodes in the same way.

Then I pass out.

I wake up, and immediately I wish I did not.

Hoping I did level up, I try to invest three stat points into Constitution, and it actually works.

Now I have to wait.

I focus on breathing, slowly, breathing in, breathing out.

Good.

Slowly opening my eyes, I realize that two fake suns are again in the sky, and I am lying down on a few hides in the middle of a small clearing, so similar to the one where we first appeared. The only difference is the soft hum of a stream of water nearby.

"Nathaniel."

For fuck's sake, Tess, a bit quieter.

"Nathaniel..." she repeats, and her voice is a bit softer now.

After getting used to the light, I fully open my eyes and look at Tess sitting nearby.

There is also Lily lying down right next to me. Actually, she is lying pretty close, and our bodies are touching.

Uh?

"She kept healing you the entire time and as much as she could. She fell asleep after spending the entirety of her mana multiple times," Tess says as if knowing what's going through my mind.

I see.

I glance down, and unfortunately, my left arm is still gone, and the wound is healed, covered in new, smooth, pale skin that never saw the sun, so it's not tanned. All thanks to Lily.

Goddamn.

I guess I owe them both now.

I send mana through my body and enter **[Focus]**. It takes longer than before, and my body hurts while I'm doing so, but soon enough, I can focus a bit better and check out the rest of my body.

The smaller wounds are already gone, and only the big ones are the problem.

My entire left arm is gone.

My right arm hurts but it's thankfully not broken.

My left leg is not twisted anymore, but I can feel that it's not fully healed.

"Status," I whisper.

Then I slowly lift my right arm and roll my fingers into a fist, then lift my middle finger to show it to the holographic window floating in front of me.

Eat shit!

Motherfucker!

What the hell!

Why the fuck does every fucking monster on the fucking 1st floor of the fucking tutorial use fucking magic so fucking well?

What asshole came up with such an idea?

I swear, one day I will find the dickhead who came up with this, and I will fuck him up.

The window disappears, and I close my eyes.

For fuck's sake.

I enter a deeper **[Focus]** and calm down a bit.

My arm is gone. Just GONE. That will fuck up my balance and maybe mess with my Mana Circuit? Not even talking about all the other things.

I know I am at fault too. Almost the entire time, I continued to put more and more points into mana, relying on my talent way too much while hoping that my body would be able to handle it somehow.

It's a good idea, and it can work. But this is Hell difficulty.

Monsters here are crazy...

Even if I have a higher level, I can get killed if I'm not careful, as the Phantom Goblin showed me so nicely.

Battle Troll, Spider Matriarch, Crimson Wolf, and goddamn Cinderbear, all of them can use mana in some way and often have much higher base stats.

But.

It's my fault. I became too greedy, too charmed by mana, a shiny new thing, and ignored what I am good at.

Yet, I know I will not change the way I go about it.

Even if it costs me my arm, even if it destroys my body.

For the first time in my life, I found something I am willing to die for.

And in the same way, I am willing to sacrifice others to survive, I am willing to sacrifice myself.

It's dumb, it's not logical, and it doesn't sound like me.

Yet, ever since I first moved my mana, I feel as if something changed in me.

Even as I lay down with my body in tatters, my head ringing, and after nearly dying, I continue to move mana in my body.

My balance is really messed up with my entire left arm gone. I am barely limping, and my shoulder hurts every time I move it.

But I walk on my own.

I don't despair.

Even if they leave me now when I am not useful, I won't give them the satisfaction of seeing me desperate and scared.

Yet, they don't do that.

Tess is helping me while she could use the precious time to level up more.

Lily is almost permanently near me, healing me every time her mana regenerates a little bit.

Kevin and Kim showed some worry as well and asked me if they could help me somehow.

Even Doggo seemed to be less cheery when asking me for food.

I...

I don't know how to react.

Are they just trying to help me out, in hopes I'll come back to my full power quickly and owe them then?

Is it just pity, and they will throw me away when they don't have a choice?

Yet, Tess helped me, she dragged me back and is keeping watch over me. Lily continues to heal me, and even the two boys seem more considerate than usual.

I am worried that I wouldn't be able to do the same for them if our places were swapped, and that bothers me for some reason.

It bothers me a lot.

"Hey, Nathaniel, do you need a hand?" Sophie asks me when she sees me picking up some water to take a drink.

That's it!

Finally.

Goddamn.

I started feeling too awkward around all these people being super considerate and trying to even avoid looking at the stump I have instead of an arm.

I like this much more.

"Such a dick move, verbally attacking an unarmed person," I answer back, and shock flashes across her face before she smiles at me.

Her eyes measure me up and down, probably trying to guess if I am still someone she should be wary of.

I even feel a tiny wisp of her mana reaching out towards me, carefully, almost unnoticeably.

When it comes closer to me, I send a pulse of mana right at Sophie, while imitating the way Cinderbear used mana.

My mana obliterates her mana and hits Sophie, making her rouse up mana around her body.

I push out more and more, showing her the entirety of my mana pool, and our eyes meet.

I am wounded.

I can't walk properly right now, and I am missing an arm.

But I will not give up.

If they take my arm, I will kick; if they take my legs, I will crawl and bite.

Up until my last breath.

After a while, Sophie gives me another smile. There is no sympathy in it, yet I prefer it over the warmth others give me.

Then she leaves.

POV Sophie Martinez

Even when I tried to be as careful as possible, he felt my probing nearly instantly, and his mana fired up, totally obliterating and pushing back my mana.

Tattered, and crippled, yet his face looks calm as always as he looked at me with his differently colored eyes.

And the mana he has...

What level is he? How many points did he invest in mana? And how was he still able to be so fast, strong, and agile while putting so many points into mana?

I don't even try again and leave, soon joining Maya, Leon, and Izzie.

My little sister instantly jumps and sits near me, and I put my arm around her. The heat of her small body next to me calms me slightly as I caress her hair.

"So how is he?" Maya asks curiously.

"I wouldn't mess with him."

"Huh? He's done, right? There's no way he'll survive when the night comes again. I bet I could take him on, right now."

Remembering his firm gaze and vast mana, I somehow doubt that.

"Others will help him," Leon says shortly with his strong accent, and I agree.

"They will. There's no way they will just stand by," I warn her.

"Pfff, only Tess is worth something; the rest of them are like headless chickens without Nathaniel telling them what to do."

I've thought over it multiple times and partly agree with Maya. Tess is probably the strongest one of everyone here, now that Nathaniel is so severely wounded, but the others aren't as bad as Maya may think. Sure, Lily isn't combat-oriented, but Kim and Kevin would surely surprise her.

"Don't forget that Lily did heal your shoulder," once again, the big man says.

"I would have been fine even without it! It just healed a bit faster. I don't owe her anything!"

Before they start fighting again, I interrupt them.

"Also, I think you were right, Maya. Nathaniel probably also has **[Focus]** or something similar to it."

"I knew it!" The woman in her mid-twenties instantly gets distracted by new information and forgets about the fight she was about to start with Leon. "That brat is too calm! I always..." she continues to talk over Leon, who is trying to say something, and I listen to her in the back of my mind, making sure I remember everything she says.

I also continue to carefully send my mana at her.

Unlike Nathaniel, she doesn't notice it at all, and I slowly continue probing her with my **[Manipulation]**.

Chapter 48: Promises Made

So, I almost had a heart attack.

The cause?

A fucking dog.

I was eating some dried deer meat when I felt mana activate close to me and instantly rolled backward, activating my skills.

But what I saw made me open my mouth like a goldfish gasping for air.

Biscuit was standing there, and from somewhere around his shoulders, two tentacles made of dark purple mana reached out toward me. When I rolled away, one of the tentacles continued trying to grab a piece of meat I had dropped but was unsuccessful. So, the corgi wobbled closer and ate it from the ground.

Then the tentacles disappeared.

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

Another strong suspicion hits me.

This can't be, right?

Not again.

There is no way he learned it because he can't jump up and grab food from our hands or if we put it in some high place to hide it from him.

“ .. ”

Please, someone, tell me it's not because of that.

The corgi tilts his head and continues to look at me while breathing loudly with his tongue sticking out.

Biscuit...

Since then, I've had some fun by not telling anyone and watching people scream as the corgi tried it on them as well.

Hey, look, if it works, it works. Most of the time, they at least dropped their food, and the corgi ate it from the ground.

What I noticed is that for some people, he didn't even bother reaching out towards them with his mana tentacles. He just "spawned" them to scare people into dropping their food.

That's my boy.

Half a day passed, and my leg is nearly fully healed. I asked Lily to focus her healing there and ignore the rest of my wounds for now, and it did help a bit. As always, I continue to watch the way she uses her skill and the movement of her mana as it heals my wounds. It looks fairly simple at the start, but when I try it, nothing happens.

At this point, I am sure her mana is doing something on such a small, maybe even microscopic scale, and I can't ever observe it with my current skills.

Obviously, I will continue to try, but I don't think I will be able to replicate her skill anytime soon.

I check my skills:

Focus - Lvl 7

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 9

Mana Perception - Lvl 8

Oscillation - Lvl 4

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 5

So, **[Mana Manipulation]** is the closest one to level 10, and with a few days remaining, I am sure I will be able to complete the **[Side quest]**.

Overall, it's not bad, but I will need some ranged attacks or something to shorten the distance between me and my opponent.

I already noticed it during the fight with the Spider Matriarch.

Sure, I am fast, really fast, but she was much faster, and I had trouble even getting to her. And what would happen if I got into a fight against someone with ranged attacks and good positioning? Yea, it would make things difficult.

Hmm, what are my options?

Tess's **[Psychokinesis]** or Kim's **[Telekinesis]**

would be nice, but I tried them multiple times, and they seem to be similarly difficult to Lily's healing skill.

Kevin's **[Combustion]**? To be honest, I don't like it that much. Sure, I can grab some things, charge them up with skill, and then throw them, but it would feel awkward, not to mention the charging time needed before throwing.

Leon's technique, the stone spears, or something? I didn't even have time to check it out during the fight with the Matriarch, and somehow, I don't think he will be willing to teach me.

So that's it, I guess.

I will have to push through with my close-range combat and try to do something to increase my movement speed even more than just strengthening my body with mana.

Absorbing some kinetic power and using it to propel me forward is good, but what if someone throws fire at me or some magical nonsense?

Phew...Let's just continue practicing.

I move my body in various ways to get used to the altered balance I have right now with my missing left arm. My balance is off, but I know that I am exceptionally talented when it comes to using my body.

I've been told that since I was young, so getting used to it won't be such a problem.

Another thing is that my arm is not gone forever, and I just need to keep Lily alive long enough so she can level up her **[Rejuvenation]** and regrow it. It might take some time, but I am sure I will be able to get my arm back.

The problem is that I will be weakened until then, but that also might not be such a significant issue. The reason is mana.

Yup, this time, a human will learn something from an animal!

The gluttonous dog awakened his skill at the best possible moment.

I will totally copy it, yup.

Actually, I already started. I dangle food in front of him and ask him to use his skill to get it, and the best boy somehow understands.

Only after about thirty minutes of observing his skill, I realized that he is actually improving.

He learned to make the tentacles thinner to make it easier to grab small pieces of meat from me. It sent shivers down my back.

What have I done?

What monster am I creating here?

Huhu.

Anyway, the skill alone doesn't seem that difficult, but it will require a lot of mana.

Biscuit's skill takes care of efficiency and activation, and the dog only controls it, but I will have to push a lot of mana out of my body, manipulate it, make it denser, and shape it into the form of an arm.

Also, I will have to somehow connect it to my body, so it doesn't stay behind when I move...

Wait...

Sure, I found out that it's easier to manipulate my mana outside my body when it's connected to me at least a bit, but what if I improve enough? Won't it be possible to create objects that are not touching me and manipulate them?

Is that how Ethan's mana shield did work? Probably. More testing is needed!

Also, I will have to watch Maya a bit more. Her second skill, the translucent armor she used, might be a good inspiration for what I want to do and help me create not an armor but a translucent arm for myself.

I feel Lily's mana nearby, so I stop practicing and turn to her instead.

As she walks closer, she gives a small smile. "I got some mana back."

As I've done a few times before, I sit on the ground with my back against a tree, and she sits next to me. Then she places her hand on my knee, and I push my mana away so hers can enter and start healing.

It's warm yet refreshing, like a breeze on a hot day.

A minute passes as we sit there in silence, and I look at her hand on my knee. It's so small. Some of her nails are broken, and it's scratched up. Looking up close, I realize that most of the nails look as if she's been biting them off, probably out of distress.

Not everyone has skills such as **[Focus]**, and it's not hard to imagine how much pressure it puts on someone like Lily.

She continues until she's out of mana, and I notice that she pushes to get the last bit of it out. Some sweat even appears on her forehead from how hard she's focusing, and her hand trembles a bit.

Why?

Just take care of yourself, you silly girl.

We're just strangers.

It all just makes me feel sour.

"Phew! That's it for now, I guess." A bright smile appears on her small face, but then we hear a twig crack nearby, and she shudders, quickly turning towards it. Fear flashes through her face, but she pushes it away as fast as it appeared.

I don't look there, as with my **[Mana Perception]**, I know it's just a corgi passing by.

"Lily," I say quietly without thinking about it much.

She turns to me, smiling again, but there's still some stiffness in her body after she got scared.

"I can't promise you that everything will be fine, but know that I will help you if I can, okay?"

If it won't kill me, I'll help you. I can even risk some big wounds.

I don't mind it that much. They're just wounds that will heal.

I need you to get my arm back, that's why.

There... there isn't any other reason.

Her face freezes for a bit, and she nods slowly.

She doesn't say anything, but as she turns around, I see that her eyes are wetter than before.

She leaves, and I let mana flow through my body while looking up at the sky.

Chapter 49: Trauma

Only three days left until we complete the **[Floor quest]**. As it draws nearer, I realize that we've actually spent almost 30 days here, in the forest full of monsters.

But the monsters are getting stronger and attacking even during the day now.

I dodge a stab with a spear and kick a goblin's head, completely evaporating it in the process.

[You have defeated the Goblin - Lvl 4]

Even normal mob monsters are getting stronger. The highest normal goblin from before only reached level 3, but now? They range from level 4 to 6. There are almost no animals anymore, either eaten by monsters or having run away, so we are surviving only on the food we were able to save up. We don't even have time to boil water, and just drink it straight from the stream.

And our base? Gone. Oh, and two more after that. Every time we stop to build some defenses, monsters attack us in bigger and bigger waves, so we keep moving.

I coat my dagger in **[Oscillation]** and nearly cut off a troll's leg, then do the same to two more trolls. The fourth one dodges and swings at me, but I absorb all the kinetic energy of his hit and shoot it back at him, making him stagger backward. With the remaining energy, I propel myself toward him and create a terrible wound across the entire length of his chest. I dash again, this time jumping right into a group of five goblins.

In the back of my mind, I hear notifications as others finish the monsters I wounded.

[You have defeated the Troll - Lvl 7]

[You have defeated the Troll - Lvl 9]

[You have defeated the Troll - Lvl 8]

...It keeps going on as others continue finishing them as they fall down.

Kevin has learned to coat the tip of his spear in his **[Combustion]** and just stabs the spear at someone, then activates it, usually blowing off a massive piece of his target. Of course, the weapon gets destroyed, but with so many goblins around, he just grabs another one.

Kim, meanwhile, found a massive piece of iron ore or something. Unlike stones, it doesn't get destroyed when he hits more durable enemies with it, so he continues to move it around. To be honest, it's a kind of terrifying technique against bigger and slower enemies.

I absorb some energy and jump into the air, then throw it in front of me. It pushes me backward, and I stab the neck of the goblin behind me.

[You have defeated the Goblin - Lvl 5]

After a few more minutes of fighting, there are far fewer monsters, and we're finally able to breathe a bit. Judging from previous experience, we have around three hours before another large group finds us and attacks. But it's not like we'll be totally left alone; there will still be smaller groups attacking, but compared to the big ones, they feel like a joke.

Kim's lump of iron ore slowly passes by me, completely covered in blood, guts, and some brain matter.

That's quite metal.

Anyway, Biscuit is already eating. The corgi is an advocate of absolute equality - he eats everything without caring about size, gender, or skin color.

Dark purple tentacles reach out from behind his shoulders and hold the cut-off goblin legs while the dog munches.

The amazing skill he somehow acquired has turned into a glorified utensil.

Why do I even bother?

"I need to sleep a bit," Tess says wearily as she approaches me, her movements sluggish. Behind her back hover ores similar to Kim's, but hers are a bit flatter and with some sharp edges, slightly elongated. While using a ton of mana and with a loud, terrifying noise, she was able to flatten out two pieces of ores and stretch them a bit.

I won't lie, it was as cool as it was scary.

Thankfully, her skill doesn't work like that on beings with mana in them, at least for now.

"I'll keep watch," I agree pretty easily. She did the same for me when I went to sleep some time ago. She nods gratefully, places a piece of leather down near a tree, and lies down. Within a few seconds, she's asleep. Another useful skill we were forced to learn to get at least a bit of sleep here and there.

"I'm sleepy as hell," Kevin says without waiting or asking, lying down near Tess and falling asleep immediately.

"Thanks," Kim adds and does the same.

What the heck?

Kevin slept last time too! If I can't sleep, he won't sleep either.

I grab his leg and pull him towards me while he complains, but he does so quietly, still sane enough not to wake up a tired Tess. She can be really grumpy, and he still remembers the last time he did that.

"God damn, Nat, it wouldn't kill you to let me sleep!" he whispers. I just point towards the tree where I sense the mana signature of three goblins. By focusing a bit more, I can tell that they have similar signatures to level 4 to 5 goblins.

"Three goblins, kill them and this time only with **[Combustion]**."

With Tess and Kim being so strong, he's already starting to fall behind, so he'd better level up and gain a bit more experience.

Grumbling, he goes there, but I notice that he's ready to fight and his mana fires up inside his body. A few minutes later, he comes back, having successfully finished his task.

Good boy!

"It's annoying without **[Reflection]**," he complains.

So? It's not about having fun; you have a pretty nice skill, so you'd better learn it!

Tsk, tsk, ungrateful brats...

Then, during the next two hours, I continue sending him against small groups of goblins to practice his skills. After some time, I find it kind of fun and give him different orders:

Use your legs only.

Continue reflecting their attacks for as long as you can.

Don't use mana now.

It's like having my own Pokémon. I'm starting to understand why so many people liked the games so much.

Halfway through, Lily joins us, having finished healing some small injuries around the temporary camp. As she's done a few times before, she sends her healing mana through my body.

And me? I just stand near our two sleepyheads and only help out when there are stronger monsters while trying not to stray too far.

When it's almost time to go, Hadwin comes to us.

He looks... good. His body has gained some muscles, like all of us; the stats do that, and I swear he looks healthier than at the start. It's hard to describe. The way he moves energetically, the strength of his voice, his skin – he looks a bit younger than before.

Is it the effect of the stats, or something else?

"It's almost time to go," he says shortly, and I nod. To be honest, he's doing a pretty good job organizing all this stuff and still finds some time to level up while giving orders to his "group".

There are currently three groups:

Me, Tess, Kim, Kevin, and Lily.

Sophie, Isabella, Leon, and Maya.

And Hadwin with the remaining six people, including Biscuit's owner, three school kids, the bus driver, and one more woman.

Hadwin's group doesn't feel that strong, but from what I've seen, they have pretty good coordination. The older man finally leaves, and I send Kevin to wake up Tess.

While he does so, I sense a hint of mana near us.

Without letting it show, I stop probing and just walk towards the spot while acting as if I'm going somewhere else. I even yawn and stretch while walking, trying to appear as careless as possible.

When I'm passing by the spot where I felt the presence, I get ready. My mana flares up, and I send a probing pulse, quickly finding that the presence is still at the same spot but starting to run after sensing my mana probe.

Mana roars through my body, immediately strengthening it, and I dash the remaining distance, kicking the enemy.

The Phantom Goblin's camouflage deactivates, and the monster rolls on the ground while screeching.

Its arms are bent and broken, with bones sticking out of them. The green asshole had time to try to block my attack.

I slowly move closer, and even through the **[Focus]**, I feel terrible memories and feelings come back.

I step on its leg, breaking it as it tries to crawl away from me.

It screams again and turns on its back, trying to kick me with its unbroken leg and swinging its broken arms at me.

I stomp on its chest with my bare feet, denting it, breaking its ribcage, and with the force I applied, nearly going through its entire body.

Bloody foam forms on the monster's mouth, and I step again, this time on its head.

Splat.

Notification.

Stomp.

And again.

Again.

Once more.

I stop only when there's nothing left but a bloody mess where the small green monster once was.

Chapter 50: Into the Fray

Okay, so I might have a little problem on my hands. What I did to the Phantom Goblin doesn't sound like something a normal person would do.

But that's not such a big problem.

The problem is the looks people around me are giving me.

If I want to be able to move around other people without having them look at me like this, I will have to control myself a bit. I cannot allow slip-ups like this one.

At least not when they are around.

Sure, I can continue and let them see this side of me, but I would rather not. Reminding them once in a while what I can do would be good, especially when dealing with people like Sophie. But I would prefer them to be neutral or like me than scared.

Anyway, I get back and, unfortunately, most of them saw it.

The only ones acting as usual are Tess and unnamed corgi.

I even have to stop him from going to eat the remains.

(Food!) sounds into my mind in an almost complaining tone.

You just ate.

"Let's go," I say shortly, and I rejoin the others.

As many times before, Tess and I hunt for stronger monsters while Kim and Kevin stay near Lilly and some of Hadwin's people.

Hadwin also pushes a bit ahead.

Leon and Maya hunt for stronger monsters, and Sophie stays with her sister. The little girl uses her flamethrower when monsters get close, and Sophie often just sends weaker monsters away with her **[Manipulation]**.

The first strong monster we find is a goblin.

[Goblin warrior - lvl 13]

I step ahead and fire up my mana.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Mana rushes into my legs, and I bounce a bit on my feet.

Then I dash at the same time the monster dashes at me.

He calculates my movement and swings his axe at me, so I absorb my own kinetic energy and stop nearly at the spot.

Goblin's big surprised eyes are funny to look at.

I use the same absorbed energy to push myself ahead to reach him faster, and my dagger buries itself into the goblin's eyes.

[You have defeated the Goblin warrior - lvl 13]

I put away the dagger and pry the axe out of his hands, just in time to use it to block an attack with a spear.

It's hard to open up his clenched fist with one hand only, you know?

I straighten up and tilt to avoid another stab and kick the goblin with my mana-strengthened body.

He tries to get on his feet when an elongated iron ore comes flying and squashes his head.

[You have defeated the Goblin warrior - lvl 12]

I dash at another monster, this time it's a goblin shaman.

He reaches out to me and starts mumbling something. I feel mana his body is letting out swirl and move towards the palms of his hands. The mana feels hot and soon flames form around his fists.

But I am already close to him.

A Goblin warrior jumps in my way, so I boost my body and with a swift slash, cut off his hands. As he screams, I grab him and, burrowing my feet into the ground and twisting my body, I throw him at the goblin shaman.

Only then do I realize that I didn't even think about how heavy the green monsters are.

Yet, I am strong enough to send him flying through the air with ease.

The fire spell the goblin shaman was conjuring soars into the air, and he is too late to stop it. It hits the goblin flying towards him, and he instantly starts burning, but the inertia of his body is stronger than that of the spell, so he continues and hits the shaman. I do not move closer, not sure how dangerous the flames are, but a massive piece of iron ore comes flying and smashes multiple times down on the burning bodies.

[You have defeated the Goblin warrior - lvl 14]

[You have defeated the Goblin shaman - lvl 11]

I feel the massive mana and hear the stomping, and when I turn around, I see the biggest troll I've ever seen.

[Giant Troll - lvl 14]

My heartbeat speeds up, and I feel an itch at the place where my left hand used to be, but I quickly enter deeper **[Focus]** and intensify my usage of **[Mana Perception]**. Iron ores swish through the air and hit the troll's head, but don't do any damage, and the troll roars.

His mana explodes and covers the entire area we are fighting on.

Then everyone falters, and some of the weaker monsters and humans crumble to the ground. The skill is similar to Kim's **[Gravity Well]**.

My heart continues to pump blood and mana through my veins, and I fire it up even more.

More mana.

More strength.

I dash towards the monster while my mana flows through my body, wildly and close to getting out of my control, but I am not worried. I focus more, control it more, calm it down, and send it where it needs to be.

The troll stomps and I feel his mana. He is moving in the same way as the first time he used the skill, so I lower my body, send more mana to my core, and continue.

The gravity spell pushes onto me. This time, the area of effect around the troll is small, and weaker goblins scream as they are pushed even deeper into the ground, and their bones break.

My muscles burn, my body is hot, and the axe in my hand feels so heavy. Then I almost fall when he uses the skill for the third time, losing balance because the right side of my body is affected a bit more as I am missing an arm on the left side.

But I hold it.

I clench my teeth and push through all of it, and wildly oscillating mana appears around the axe.

The troll is massive, but I dodge his swing. While doing so, I jump onto his arm and sprint towards his head, using his arm to get there. He pulls back, but

it's too late; I am already there, and my axe buries itself deep into the monster's left eye. I pull it out, showered in the monster's warm blood.

I jump from the monster to avoid its coming hand, and I fall down to the ground much faster than expected, affected by the Giant Troll's gravity spell.

A groan escapes my mouth, feeling the pressure it puts on my body, but I straighten up again and once again activate **[Oscillation]**. I bury my axe into the troll's leg multiple times. Its roar almost deafens me, but I continue while it is moving around, trying to stomp on me.

Absorbing as much kinetic energy as I can from his stomps, I use it to push against the monster's hurt leg, as he is standing on only one and trying to stomp on me. That makes him stagger a bit, and I hear a new noise.

The whistling of a heavy thing flying terrifyingly fast through the air. Elongated iron ores hit the monster's head, and he roars even louder, finally losing balance and slowly falling down, pulled by his own skill too.

He slams down with a loud noise, and earth and dust fly into the air.

I take a step towards the monster and stomp gently on the ground, releasing some absorbed kinetic energy, and it instantly sends away all the dust that flew into the air.

I take another step and use the remaining energy to propel myself, quickly passing its flailing arms and reaching its head. The axe vibrates wildly as if it's about to break, but I force through and slash downwards.

Again and again, I bury the axe into the monster's head up until it breaks.

There is a wound on its skull big enough for me to see inside of its head through the shattered bones.

So I jump onto the monster's head and wait until the last moment. The giant hand reaches for me, still holding tremendous energy that I absorb as much as I can.

When the hand makes contact with me, I gather all the energy it produces and shape it into a focused cone. I continue to refine the cone, making it narrower and more concentrated, until it's a precise, lethal point. I direct this beam of

kinetic energy straight into the monster's head through the existing wound. It wreaks havoc within the troll's brain, making a mess of it.

The hand still hits me, but I do not try to fight against it and just jump up and let it throw me through the air while strengthening my body against it.

Flying through a few branches, I roll in the air and land on my feet, still sliding a bit, but I absorb the energy of my own fall and stop.

The energy escapes into the surrounding, creating a small shockwave with me in the epicenter, and I hear a notification.

[You have defeated the Giant Troll - lvl 14]

[Lvl 18 > Lvl 19]