

Hell Difficulty Tutorial

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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.