

Tutorial 51

Chapter 51: When Darkness Falls

Unable to lie to myself, I put three points into mana. At this point, it starts to feel as if I'm going to kill myself sooner than my enemies.

It's like I'm drawn to it, you know?

I can't help but seek it, I want more, and I'd even let go of some things to get it.

It's so dumb and illogical, but at the same time, it makes me happy.

Happy and scared at once.

Lvl 19

Strength: 13

Dexterity: 12

Constitution: 27

Mana:39

This can't be good, right? Even now, I can feel my body creaking under pressure as I use more and more mana. Only my control holds it back from wreaking havoc on my body as I continue to strengthen myself.

Dang it, I'd better learn some amazing skills in the future to make use of all this mana. Using it mostly to strengthen my body feels good, sure, but at the same time, it's as if I'm using a sports car just to get to the shop and back home.

Wasted mana lies here dormant, waiting until my skills are good enough.

Soon!

Hopefully...

My perception warns me, and I jump backward just in time to avoid a troll hitting the ground where I once stood.

[Battle Troll - lvl 11]

Its tattoos are red and glowing. The troll grabs his club and swings it at me again. My mana pushes against him, and I lift my empty hand against the club, quickly absorbing the energy of his swing. It slowly slows down until it hits my hand.

It feels as if someone hit my palm with their fist.

I focus, and the absorbed energy explodes against the troll, making him stagger backward. With a jump, I reach his neck and stab my hand through it, the hand coated in oscillating mana. Then I jump backward, leaving the troll to slowly die.

[You have defeated the Battle Troll - lvl 11]

The fight continues for a few more minutes, and then we move once again through the forest, trying to avoid a bigger group of monsters and not stay in one spot for too long.

"Kim reached level ten and got a trait," Tess says after rejoining me.

Telekinetic Reflexes (Passive):

This trait heightens the user's reflexes and reaction time by using their telekinesis to subtly manipulate their own movements. This enhancement allows the user to react more quickly and accurately in combat, improving their ability to dodge attacks and execute precise movements.

"He said it might allow him to fly or give some hints so he can learn to fly in the future. He didn't even check the other traits."

At this point, I don't even know what to say. In some ways, Kim might be even worse than me.

"Hadwin's coming," she stops and falls quiet once again until the man comes from behind the trees, followed by one of the kids from his group, the boy.

His name is either Dennis or Aaron; it's hard to say since they are twins. Usually, that wouldn't be a problem, as I can find out by their mana signature, but the weird thing is that their mana signatures are the same.

The question is, is it because they are twins or is there some other trickery at play here?

Hadwin goes straight to the point. "The monsters continue to attack even from our back, so I think it's better if Dennis stays with you. He and his brother have a connection and can talk to each other. So in case something happens, he can tell you." He looks at me.

Hmm, that's a fairly useful skill, but what about his request? Should I decline?

Coming back to help others isn't such a bother, and Lily, Kevin, and Kim are there as well, and I have a feeling that I owe them at least a bit.

"We can do that, but you know that I won't ensure his safety, right?"

The boy is around 17 years old and not that tall. He has short blonde hair and green eyes. Sure, he does have some muscle, but he seems more athletic than strong. But that can be misleading, as mana can turn even a little girl into a human flamethrower.

"It's okay! I can take care of myself!" he flashes his bright white teeth and smiles at us.

Right here and at this time, while we are surrounded by the corpses of the monsters, his smile feels more creepy than cheerful.

Yup, as I said, no one on the bus was normal, none.

Or are we just getting used to all this stuff?

"Okay then."

"See you later and be careful," the man quickly leaves, leaving us with the boy.

I turn to our newest group member.

"Just stay quiet and near Tess; that's all you need to do." Understanding immediately, he nods and does exactly that as we continue.

During the fights, Dennis stays silent and calm while Tess and I take care of everything.

What makes me curious about him is the thin string of mana going from him towards where Hadwin went.

Is it for communicating with his brother?

Can I copy it?

It's so interesting.

I almost can't feel it, and if Hadwin hadn't told me about it, I'm sure I would have had a hard time even finding out about it. Even now, I have to look really closely to even sense it, and yet most of the time, I don't. Only sometimes, when he sends a really weak pulse of mana through it, probably sending a message.

Is he sending words? Images? Feelings? Sounds?

"Nathaniel..." Tess's voice brings me back to reality.

Oh, I got lost right there. But worry not; I would feel the mana if someone came too close!

"The sky looks weird." She's right; there are more and more clouds, and even the wind is getting stronger. In the past hour or two, our surroundings have started to become more and more quiet.

The silence before the storm, such a thing.

But it's new. During the time we've spent here, the sky has changed only from two suns and a blue sky with a few clouds to an inky black sky with only aurora-like lights on it.

Sometimes we also saw the exact same clouds multiple times.

So seeing them darken like that and more and more of them is kind of disturbing.

"Aaron says we should come back..."

Huh? Isn't that too soon?

"Attack?"

"Nothing as of now, but there are more and more monsters surrounding them, and it's as if they're waiting for something."

I don't like that at all. What is the system planning now?

"Let's go back."

I turn back to where we came from and start walking ahead. This time I don't even check Tess for direction and follow the thin thread of mana leading from Dennis towards his brother.

The clouds are getting darker and darker, and it's getting hard to see, as we can't even see the suns anymore.

The trees are creaking under the wind, and the leaves are wildly flying everywhere. Even with our strengthened bodies, it's slowly getting harder to push through it.

Then the rain starts.

It's cold and falls on us like a shower. One moment there is nothing, and half a second later, we are drenched in water.

The raindrops are weakly tinged in the same colors as aurora-like lights during the night. Pink, green, and blue. They continue hitting our bodies with surprising force.

There are no monsters around us, and that makes me even more nervous.

"We have to hurry," the boy screams, trying to shout over the rain, the creaking sounds of trees, and the wind.

So we push.

At some point, it's hard to track the thin string of mana. The raindrops hold tiny bits of mana inside them, so it's starting to mess up my [Mana Perception] pretty badly, and I let the boy take over and lead us towards the group.

As we are getting closer to the others, I get the same feeling as when the suns disappeared.

For a few seconds, all the raindrops pause in the air as if someone stopped time, even the wind stops.

In deafening silence, I hear the screeches of the monsters.

Then the rain continues, and we start running faster.

"Hurry, please," Dennis says, and I can barely hear him through the rain.

A minute later, another monstrous wave of mana washes over the entire forest, and the raindrops hover in the air without falling.

This time we continue to run through them.

A few moments later, I hear the low, deep growl of a bear, and the rain resumes, silencing the roars of the monsters.

I quickly check the timer.

Time left until forced return: 4y 336d 23h 59m 42s

There are two days left.

Chapter 52: When Lightning Strikes

At one moment, Dennis' mana shines brightly, and he disappears. Immediately after, he reappears in the same spot. His clothes are now covered in blood, and he is breathless.

"Please hurry," he says weakly, "Dennis and the others won't be able to hold on for too long." He leans against a tree, almost falling down.

Dennis? Is this his twin Aaron? Did they switch places?

That would explain the wounds.

"Where are Lily, Kevin, and Kim?" I ask shortly.

"There's no time. You have to..."

He pauses when I step in front of him.

"This way..." he points his hand somewhere.

The thin string that connects the twins is leading right where he is pointing.

"If they're not there, I will hurt your brother."

His mouth opens and closes. His eyes turn to Tess, asking for help.

Is he messing with me?

I punch the wound on his chest, and he screams.

He tries to say something, but I punch his wound again, and he lets out an even louder scream.

"Where?"

My voice sounds too calm, even to myself.

Finally, some fear appears in his sky-blue eyes.

His hand moves, shaking, and he points somewhere.

"Tess?"

"I can't see through the raindrops."

I give a last look to the boy and dash towards where he was pointing.

Tess leaves one of her spears with him and follows me without any further hesitation.

My [Mana Perception]

But I continue.

I send mana further and further.

I unleash the entirety of my mana and filter out the useless information.

It hurts me, but I push through.

[Focus] makes the dull colors around me even less vibrant, but the mana in the drops shines even brighter.

"I'm sorry, I can't see a thing..." Tess apologizes, but I almost don't hear her.

The rain continues to hit us harder and harder, and I can feel the unnatural speed and weight of the raindrops on my skin.

My mana flares up into my surroundings, and I absorb the kinetic energy of all the drops I can.

Tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands.

The drops of water slow down, and for a moment, they pause in the air.

"Follow me."

Then I use [Kinetic Redistribution] to propel myself ahead, releasing a shockwave behind me.

Rain continues to fall, but I repeat the process.

Again and again.

Drenched in water I continue to use my skills.

I get better at it and absorb more energy.

I do it faster and faster.

My [Mana Perception] pushes through all the distractions, and I finally catch a feel of Kim's mana.

Instantly, I change the direction I am running in and dash towards it with Tess somewhere far behind.

When I get closer, I start to hear the monsters even through the heavy rain, and soon see them.

[Two-Headed Wolf - lvl 13]

The monster is attacking the group made up of Kim, Kevin, and Lily.

Kevin is at the front, already barehanded, but his palms seem to be burning in bright flames even in the heavy rain we are in.

He continues to reflect the monster's attack back at it, and every time he does so, he also reflects some raindrops away from him.

The monster seems to be careful, and there are a few burn spots on its skin.

Meanwhile, Kim continues to move his iron ore around and attack smaller monsters, only occasionally throwing it at the wolf. Lily stays close to him, holding a goblin spear in her shaking arm.

The wolf roars, and mana collects in its body as flames start forming in its mouth. Bright blue in one mouth and dark purple in the other.

That makes Kevin stagger backward in surprise.

I plant my feet on the ground, clench my core, and twist my body, throwing the weapon in my hand at the wolf. It flies through the air, boosted by my skill and the force of my strengthened body.

The projectile forcefully strikes the monster right in the midst of its attack. As it reels from the impact, one of its menacing heads swivels around, fixing its piercing gaze upon me, clearly singling me out as its next target. The air around us crackles with tension as the creature and I prepare.

Once again, I gather the kinetic energy from the raindrops surrounding me, harnessing their power to amplify my own abilities. With my body's strength enhanced by the infusion of mana and the support of my skills, I charge headlong towards the wolf.

As I soar through the air, the glistening droplets of water become a blur around me, and I approach the wolf with incredible speed.

Right before hitting it with my body, I use my skill again, absorbing the kinetic energy of my body, which makes me stop on the spot. Immediately after, I use that energy to propel myself to the side and dodge the wolf's bite.

[Oscillation] envelops my hand, and a razor-sharp blade of mana materializes, extending to a length comparable to that of a short sword. The energy vibrates and hums as it emanates from my fingertips.

I close the distance between the wolf and myself and in one fluid motion, I strike at the creature, severing one of its heads. Blood spurts from the wound, and the beast howls in pain.

The wolf's head falls to the ground, and it continues to move and try to bite me, but I kick it away while the stump of its neck keeps spewing blood.

The second head instantly turns to me and shoots flames, but I am not there anymore.

Kevin's palm strikes the wolf's side, and the impact is powerful enough to make the creature howl in pain. As it jumps away from him, the monster appears disoriented and injured.

Before it gets out of my reach, I absorb some energy and attack the wolf, leaving three deep slashes on its chest and neck before the mana around my hand disappears.

The monster thrashes around and falls down after a moment.

[You have defeated the Two-Headed Wolf - lvl 13]

Amidst the pouring rain, another monster appears.

[Stormbear - lvl 14]

Electricity crackles and dances around its dark, shaggy fur, casting an eerie glow in the gloomy surroundings. The ground trembles beneath its massive paws as it charges towards me with intimidating speed, revealing a gaping maw filled with razor-sharp teeth, each larger than my hand.

I absorb some energy from the rain, and the raindrops in a vast area slow down to a crawl.

A bit of that energy pushes Kevin towards Kim and Lily, and I take a step towards the charging bear.

More and more energy enters my body, and the Stormbear slows down as if it is running through water.

With each pounding beat of my heart, I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I take another step.

As I gather more energy, my mana surges within me, threatening to spiral out of control like a wild, untamed storm.

Despite the chaotic forces churning inside, I focus my mind and control the power that dwells within me, ready to be unleashed when the moment is right.

The bear stands before me as I unleash all that energy in a narrow cone. The force of the blast obliterates one of the monster's front legs, reducing it to a mist of flesh, bones, and blood. Unable to maintain its balance, the bear staggers and collapses onto the ground in front of me.

The electricity around the monster dissipates, and an oscillating mana appears on my hand once more as I bury my hand deep inside the monster's head.

For a moment, electricity touches my hand, but it's torn apart by my [Oscillation].

[You have defeated the Stormbear - lvl 14]

I feel another presence, and two more bears appear.

[Stormbear - lvl 12]

[Stormbear - lvl 15]

Even through the rain, I feel Tess's mana and a terrible howling noise fills the surroundings.

Two massive chunks of iron, tempered with Tess's mana, come flying towards the bigger bear.

Unlike before, the mana around the ores feels different.

More dangerous, vicious.

The projectiles soar through the air with a fearsome sound, accompanied by a trail of red and white lightning that flickers and dances in their wake.

The ores hit the bear, and immediately, lightning comes down from the sky.

Red lightning with traces of white.

It hits the ore that's buried inside the bear, and an explosion ensues, burning the monster's body and sending a shockwave to the other bear.

Right after, I feel the mana collecting in Tess's chest, a signal for me, and I dash forward. My mana vibrates and cuts through the stunned level 12 bear, and then I finish the terribly wounded bigger bear.

[You have defeated the Stormbear - lvl 12]

[You have defeated the Stormbear - lvl 15]

Chapter 53: The Monster in the Rain

One hour passes, and I continue to fight.

It feels as if I will be torn apart by my mana and the absorbed kinetic energy if I lose my focus even for a second.

The rain continues to fall down even harder, and at this point, the raindrops nearly hurt.

My body's burning.

My muscles are screaming.

My head feels like it's about to explode.

Yet, I feel so alive.

I lead mana through my circuit. It moves at dizzying speed, and it hurts every time I lose control over it and it crashes inside my body.

But I continue to improve even more. I move faster and more recklessly. I do not fear.

My mana pool feels bottomless and I continue use more and more mana, yet there's still a lot left over.

It's fun.

I dodge, and a cone of absorbed kinetic energy blows off the monster's head.

[You have defeated a Bear - lvl 15]

I jump up and the oscillating mana coats my hand, slashing through the troll's neck.

[You have defeated a Troll - lvl 14]

Raindrops freeze in the air, and when they move again, the monster is pushed away from me, breaking against the rocks nearby.

[You have defeated a Bear - lvl 11]

At some point, I almost don't move and just absorb the kinetic energy from the stronger and stronger rain.

It's hard to see, but my [Mana Perception] pierces through the rain, and I attack all moving mana signatures that aren't human.

I stand there and absorb energy from the monsters as they attack me and from the heavy raindrops falling from the dark sky.

Another head blows off.

Another mangled corpse flies away from me.

Notification and I invest stat points.

Into mana.

The rain weakens, and I start getting less kinetic energy from it.

But it's okay; I just increase efficiency.

Don't waste; use it all.

Another notification.

At some point, monsters stop attacking me, so I dash at them.

It's easier to see now.

I stomp, and the rain gets pushed away from me, along with a bunch of smaller monsters that surrounded me.

Multiple notifications about the kills.

A two-headed wolf is collecting mana in its mouth, and I dash at it while propelling myself ahead.

It shoots fire at me, and I jump over it.

While I am in the air, another head shoots its flame at me, and my mana flares up even more. I waste so much mana it almost makes me feel disappointed in myself, but I propel myself towards the ground, pushing against the air.

I slash through the monster's neck with my hand covered in oscillating mana.

Notification.

And then nothing.

Huh?

I look around, the rain is gone.

There are two suns in the sky.

Huh?

My [Mana Perception] sends a wave of mana into my surroundings and covers almost twice as big an area as before.

Nothing, only humans.

Again.

Still no monsters.

I slow the mana rushing through my veins.

The world... the world becomes a bit louder as I exit the [Focus], but at the same time, it feels less alive.

POV Kim Min-Jae

I watch as mana explodes from Nathaniel's body, causing the rain to stop as if time itself has come to a halt. The droplets slowly fall, and in that instant, a monster's head bursts into a fine red mist. The mana I feel from him makes me sick.

He continues to cast it into his surroundings as if without any care in the world, but I can see the patterns in everything he does. He moves only when he needs to, and the mana that looks as if it's about to tear him apart bends to his will.

Through the heavy rain, I catch a glimpse of Nathaniel's calm face, illuminated by the glowing drops of water.

A shiver runs through my body.

The monster slows down in front of him, coming to a stop the same way the raindrops did, and then its head explodes when the rain stops for half a second.

As the battle continues, I feel less and less mana from him, at first thinking that he's close to being depleted, but then I realize that he's only improving so much that I can barely sense any mana from his body anymore with my low level.

Without any hesitation and with calculated cruelty, Nathaniel goes through the monsters while Tess supports him from a distance. She moves around swiftly, using her skill to boost herself, and continues to kill monsters with ranged attacks as they try to assault Nathaniel.

Behind me, Lily's quiet sobs continue while she watches the man with an emotionless face and a frightening aptitude for mana before us.

The rain slowly calms down, and we continue to fight against the weaker monsters that Tess lets pass to us.

After what feels like an eternity, the rain stops, and two suns appear in the sky.

Then I feel it: a massive pulse of mana from Nathaniel. It passes by me at an insane speed, and goosebumps form all over my body as I feel it touching me.

It's as if a wild monster is looking for prey.

Another pulse, even stronger this time, feeling almost like a question.

Then nothing.

When I look back at him, he still looks the same, but somehow, I can't force myself to take a step towards him. The fear is palpable, and I can't help but wonder what lies beneath the surface.

I feel the touch of his mana again as it measures me and my own mana.

Our eyes meet for a split second, and what I see could be described as a disappointment.

When he looks away, I can't do anything other than clench my teeth so hard they feel like they are about to break.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 1

Time left until forced return: 4y 336d 19h 53m 42s

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

Lvl 21

Strength: 13

Dexterity: 12

Constitution: 27

Mana: 46

[Primary Class: Unavailable]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Skills:

Focus - lvl 9

Mana manipulation - lvl 9

Mana Perception - lvl 8

Oscillation - lvl 5

Kinetic Redistribution - lvl 8

[Skill Points: 0]

[Stat Points: 0]

Hehehe.

I am so dead.

Fuck.

We find others huddled in a group. Disheveled, wounded, bloodied, and surrounded by dead monsters.

A few more people have died.

The corgi is looking at the broken, mangled, and bloodied body on the ground that I hardly recognize as its owner.

Biscuit quietly leaves and comes to join me, bumping his head into my leg.

(Gone) I hear it in my head, and I gently caress his head.

I am sorry, but that's all I can do for you, little guy.

Sophie is there, only with Maya and her sister.

Hadwin is together with the twins and the bus driver, Jacob.

From our little group, no one has died, but Lily's eyes are still wet, and for some reason, she's avoiding my gaze.

Even Kim avoids looking at me, and I see his clenched jaw; Kevin seems to be less cheery.

So that's it.

It's fine.

It might be better if it stays this way.

Only Tess seems to be behaving the same way she did before. I catch her eyes with mine and look at her for a long moment.

She is looking at me without any hesitation, not dodging my gaze, not shuddering when I move.

I... see.

I just nod at her, and she nods back.

My [Mana Perception] flares up towards the sky, and I feel the mana collecting again, the same way it did before. It will take a few hours, but soon enough the same thing will repeat, so I need to become even stronger.

Lately, I have become too complacent and even started worrying about what others will think of me.

Not anymore.

I stop in front of Maya.

Her gaze is calm, and she looks at me without any worry. Mana is already circulating through her body, and she exudes the calmness that I know so well.

My body moves so fast she is unable to even dodge as I kick her.

She goes flying through the air, and I slowly walk towards her.

Her face is still calm as she stands up and brushes the dust off her body. A translucent armament made of mana appears around her body, and I start to observe it.

Behind me, someone screams, but then I hear Tess's weapons flying around and the crackle of lightning she is now able to infuse into them.

I continue to observe Sophie, but there isn't even a wisp of mana coming from her, and she holds her little sister in her hands.

Maya dashes at me. Her mana doesn't move that much, so I recognize it as pure strength or dexterity stat.

I dodge under her swing and hit her with my knee, sending her flying again.

When she lifts her face from the ground, I am already in front of her, and while giving her enough time to use her skill, I kick against her translucent armor.

I observe the way her mana moves and the way it reacts to my attacks.

She jumps to her feet and stands there, observing my movements as I slowly walk towards her.

Hmm, that's not enough. I should break her skill to observe it a bit more.

Even while in [Focus], she is slightly impatient and rushes at me.

Her movements slow down under the influence of my skill, as she gets closer and closer to me. I lower my output and hit her chest armor with absorbed energy.

That makes the translucent armor shatter into fine particles of mana, and I continue to observe as it slowly reforms.

"You fucker..."

Huh? Are you slipping out of [Focus] already?

She dashes again, this time attacking me from the side where my arm is missing.

She is probably the fastest one among the survivors.

But.

I only take a small step back, and her kick misses me. Then I take another step, and two of her swings miss me again.

Quick jab against her armor, and it breaks again.

Then I move my own mana, and as she is reforming her translucent armor, I try to copy it.

It fails, and the mana in my hand dissipates.

So I attack her again, and she again activates a skill.

I watch it.

I feel it.

Mana forms in my hand and slowly extends.

I focus more and move the mana.

It gets harder and harder, but I push through.

Soon, a translucent light blue light appears in my hand, taking a shape reminiscent of a short sword.

Then I hear the notification about acquiring a new skill.

Chapter 54: True Colors

The skill's name is [Armament].

" ... "

Damn it.

What the heck system?

Also, pfft, you maybe aren't as bad as I thought.

Anyway, right after acquiring it, I let my mana flow out of my body and, with the help of the skill, shape it into a sword.

It's see-through, the edges look terrible and dull, and the shape is all weird.

But it's a start.

Maya dashes at me once again, but I send her flying with a kick.

"I am done with you, so stay there."

She groans on the ground. I didn't hold back much on my last attack, but I was careful enough not to hurt her too much. She will be useful in the end.

"So now you're showing your colors."

There he is, Hadwin. He stops a short distance in front of me.

"I always knew you weren't right in your mind. Right from the start."

I see. It's weird to hear it from you, though.

He takes a step closer.

I know that he is partially right. Even before the 1st floor, I wasn't exactly... normal, and now, with [Focus], even less so. Yet, I'm trying. I helped others, taught them, and protected them somehow.

He moves even closer, and I let him do so.

In the end I thought it would be different here.

He looks at me, and mana starts moving in his body.

I... I thought they would be a bit similar to me, as we all got the same starting point.

The man in front of me believes I haven't noticed his mana movement while he talks, attempting to distract me.

But they are not.

His skill activates and pushes against my mana. Trying to dissipate it. To stop it from flowing through my body. To tear it apart and stop me from using it.

They are... weaker. Their will is lacking.

Hadwin's mana instantly gets pushed out of my body. My own mana roars and the pressure makes the older man stagger backward.

My body is mine. My mana is mine.

It explodes into the surroundings, and even others with lower mana sensitivity can feel it.

My eyes meet with Sophie's, and even when I try, I can't think of harming her. The construct in my head doesn't allow it.

But I did not forget.

I pull the mana back into my body and take a step towards Hadwin.

My fist hits him right in the face, and he staggers backward and falls.

"You know it too, right? I could have killed you if I really wanted to," I repeat the exact same thing he said to me while he looks at me from the ground.

So don't bother me. I have a lot to do.

My new skill is difficult; well, creating weapons is difficult. When I use it to create something like armor around my body, it becomes a bit easier. The problem is that the armor looks weak even to me so at this point [Kinetic Redistribution] seems better.

It would be amazing if I could change absorbed kinetic energy into other forms of energy, as the system descriptions hinted at, such as thermal or electric, but up until now, I didn't have any luck with that.

So I decide to use [Armament] to create a weapon that won't break so easily. A weapon I can always have with myself and can reform even if it breaks, unlike physical ones.

I like the idea of that and hey, might also be able to use it to create projectiles, finally gaining some ranged attack.

So as I fight the monsters, I continue using my new skill. Weapons made with its help look terrible, and sometimes they even flicker out of existence, and they are blunt, to say the least.

But I will improve.

I can do it.

Another thing is that despite my efforts, none of my skills have reached level 10 yet.

Is there a bottleneck? It sure looks like it.

I dodge to the side and slash against the wolf with a short sword made of my mana.

It doesn't cut him, and I try to apply [Oscillation] to it, but that makes the translucent weapon instantly dissipate as my control over it slips away.

So instead of using the ethereal weapon, I coat my hand in oscillating mana and finish off the wolf. The mana spent is much higher and the reach is shorter, but it's currently the best option.

[You have defeated the Wolf - lvl 14]

Another wolf attacks me from behind, and I use [Armament] to create a translucent armor-like layer of mana around my chest and let him try to bite me. At first, the skill slows down the wolf, but soon he crushes it, and it disappears into light blue particles of mana. Before its teeth reach me, I throw him away with the kinetic energy I absorbed.

Flying Iron ore finishes off the wolf.

Time passes, the sky darkens and the rain starts once again.

My [Mana Perception] covers the area we are defending, and I make sure to track the movements of our group. Even after a few hours, they continue to act awkwardly around me. They still seem careful around me.

Was it their naivety that led them to become friendly with me? Their desire to stick together with someone stronger?

It doesn't matter that much. I will protect Lily as much as I can because of my promise and because I want my arm back. Kevin and Kim, I will help too if possible.

As thanks.

[You have defeated the Wolf - lvl 16]

[You have defeated the Wolf - lvl 14]

[You have defeated the Wolf - lvl 11]

[You have defeated the Wolf - lvl 11]

I kill off the wolves around me, getting stronger with every passing second as I continue to absorb energy from the stronger and stronger rain. The rain is so heavy that even some monsters can't see clearly, and most of the time, I have to rely on my perception.

But it's fine.

I slip on the mud and let myself fall down to dodge the wolf's bite. Then I use a tiny bit of kinetic energy to push myself up and stand.

I am getting faster and better at using it. Under these conditions, I am strong.

The ground around me cracks, and from me at the epicenter, a shockwave explodes. The rain, the mud, the monsters - they all get pushed away by the power of my skill, and I finish them off.

Then a Giant Troll appears.

[Giant Troll - lvl 19]

The creature steps into view, and I'm left in awe of the monstrous being. The Giant Troll towers over the trees. Its skin is a sickly grayish-green, glistening in the rain. The rain seems to only add to the troll's grotesque appearance. Water streams down its face and body, emphasizing the troll's musculature.

Its bloodshot eyes glow, filled with hunger. It sneers, revealing a maw of jagged, broken teeth.

I can't see it properly, but I can tell that it's looking at me.

Only at me.

I feel mana collecting in my surroundings.

Strengthening my body, I dash away, and in the place where I did stand appears a deep, caved hole in the shape of a perfect circle. Its depth is around half of my height.

I continue to run, and multiple holes appear in the places where I once stood, as the troll's mana persistently tracks me.

I start running between all the other monsters, and when the attack meant for me hits them, they get splashed into a bloody mess, as if a giant hammer hit them, always leaving a circular hole in the ground with a loud pop.

The troll doesn't care and keeps trying to hit me, so I don't run or move closer; I just run around, and its attack continues to hit the other monsters while the giant doesn't seem to care. And I continue to observe its skill.

Then the skill becomes weaker but faster, and the area larger, so I dash towards the troll to finish it up. I feel the mana in the area around him, but I strengthen my body and enter it while bracing myself.

Then I fall to the ground, unable to keep myself standing in the terrifyingly strong gravity.

[Focus]

[Armament]

[Kinetic Redistribution]

I activate these three skills to their fullest power and brace myself against the attack.

The world becomes quieter, and mana trapped inside the rain glows brighter. A translucent armor appears around my chest and head, as thick and strong as I can manifest.

The rain in the area around the troll is also affected by the gravity field, so it's falling much faster than outside of it, allowing me to absorb an immense amount of energy from it.

Then, instead of trying to push against the monster's skill, I use the absorbed energy to propel myself towards the monster. The area behind me explodes, hit by my skill and the troll's.

As I fly through the air, I feel gravity pulling me down and I use [Armament] to manifest a spike in my hand. It's thick and only sharp at the top, but it's the best I can do.

I reach the monster, and my translucent weapon burrows itself deep inside its thigh and I barely hold onto it against the immense gravity pulling me down.

The monster roars and turns its head toward me. A lightning flash illuminates the area, casting an eerie glow on its face and making it appear even more sinister.

Um, what now?

Chapter 55: Closing Circle

The roar nearly deafens me, and I can hear it even through my [Focus] as if it's not affected by it at all.

Seeing the monster's hand reaching up to me, I let go, and my body instantly falls to the ground much faster than it should, affected by the gravity field. The troll tries to stomp on me.

I absorb as much energy as I can and propel myself again, this time out of the field.

I roll a few times and absorb my own energy, then release a bit of it to make myself stand up faster. The remaining energy escapes into the surroundings.

The troll's attack once again hits the place where I stood, and a perfectly circular hole appears there.

Then I notice the troll's leg healing.

What the heck!

How is that fair?

I continue to run around, at least allowing other monsters to be hit by the troll's attacks while I think.

Its regeneration makes it even more annoying. I am sure I would be able to finish him off if given enough time but like this?

Tess throws a few normal stones at the Giant Troll, but as soon as they enter the area around him, they come crashing down.

So she does what I would have done.

Two ores, squashed by her skill into a shape resembling a thick spear, fly high into the air, both of them surrounded by red and white lightning that shines even brighter than the raindrops falling from the sky. They fly high over the troll, out of reach of his skill.

Then I feel mana from Tess, and the iron ores start glowing even brighter and falling down to the ground straight at the giant troll.

As they enter the area of his skill, they speed up even more, and a scary whistling noise cuts through the heavy rain.

They hit the troll's head as two massive bullets and a geyser of blood and bone explodes into the surroundings, followed by a lightning strike from the sky that hits the ores buried deep inside the monster's head, making it literally explode.

[You have defeated the Giant Troll - lvl 19]

The skill around the monster disappears, and I see Tess moving closer to the corpse to regain control over her now deformed weapons.

A few hours later, the rain becomes dangerous.

I notice that the raindrops are piercing through the skin of weaker monsters, like tiny, sharp bullets, and I can even feel them hurting my skin.

That makes most of the weaker monsters run away and hide, allowing us to regroup.

Everyone is dealing with it in different ways.

Tess and Kim just stop the raindrops from hitting them at all while keeping Lily close to them. Kevin continuously reflects them.

Hadwin, still alive and well, continues to get hit by the raindrops, but as they enter the area around him, the mana disappears from them, and they stop glowing, hitting him as normal raindrops would. A few more people are huddled close to him.

Maya moves around while surrounded by a now firmer-looking armor that covers even her head, and it doesn't seem to affect her either.

As for Sophie and Isabella, they stand under something I can describe as an umbrella made out of a bright orange fire. The area isn't that big, but it evaporates every drop of water close to it.

And me? I use it as an opportunity to train my [Armament].

It isn't as strong as Maya's, but even if it cracks in some places, I use my mana to fix it quickly.

The huge mana consumption seems to be a problem, so we continue to move back to the cave we used before. Hadwin knows the way, so we follow him.

A group of people that would go at each other's throats if given the opportunity, brought together only to have a stronger chance of survival.

Trust? What is that, can I eat it? There is none.

Friendship? Can it kill the Cinderbear?

Cooperation? I'm just using them, and they're using me.

We get closer to the cave after pushing through fewer and fewer monsters until there are none.

The rainfall is light and less dense, with fewer droplets, but it's even more dangerous. I've already given up on training my skill and just continue to absorb the kinetic energy from the raindrops, not enough to stop them, just enough to reduce the impact.

Hadwin, struggling to maintain his large-area skill against the intensifying rain, eventually reduces its scope with a surprised groan. The bus driver, Jacob, who stood at the edge, exits the area, and the rain falls on him at full power.

For a second, some sort of barrier appears around his body, but it's quickly destroyed, and the rain goes through his body like needles.

Hundreds of beautifully glowing raindrops tear apart his body in a second, and not even a scream escapes his mouth.

Hadwin doesn't slow down and just gives the body a glance before more drops of water turn it into a gory mess.

We enter the cave and at some point, use our strong bodies to dig even deeper as the rain starts piercing through the stone.

Terrifying hours pass, and then, after what feels like an eternity, the rain is gone, and the suns reappear in the sky.

It all changed in a split second.

Immediately, as if someone flipped a switch.

It disturbs me to my core, even more than the Cinderbear or the murderous rain.

Time slowly passes, and there are still no monsters.

One hour.

Two hours.

Three.

Not a single sound from the forest.

Some people start screaming at each other as their nerves reach a breaking point, but no one wastes more energy than necessary.

Everyone is preparing for what's about to come.

Everyone knows this is not the end.

Just the calm before the storm.

We continue to dig down and inside the cave. Maya and I use our skills to create something resembling a shovel. Tess and Kim tear stones from the cave walls. Kevin makes small explosions to get rid of larger stones, and others either move the dirt out or help as much as they can.

And the dog? He's still with me.

Even through the rain, he either stayed close to Tess or Kim and now he's using his mana tentacles made of purple mana to grab smaller stones and move them away.

The rain doesn't come; instead, I feel hundreds of mana signatures moving closer and closer to the cave. Not wanting to get trapped inside the tunnel we dug, I move to the entrance but realize there's nowhere to run.

All around us are hundreds, perhaps thousands of monsters.

All of them are quiet.

Wolves.

Goblins.

Trolls.

Spiders.

Bears.

They don't make a single noise, just stand there in a giant circle around us, staring in our direction.

Tess stops using her [Farsight], saying it's terrifying to look at.

Somehow, I become calmer, even without entering deeper into my [Focus].

So that's it.

A pretty lousy first floor. Zero out of ten.

Bury the entrance to the cave? They have trolls.

Push through? As far as I can sense, there are monsters, surely even beyond my range of perception.

I follow the pulse of Sophie's mana and stop in front of her.

"How many can you control?"

Another pulse towards the monsters.

"A few dozen at most, lower-leveled ones only. Or two to three stronger monsters."

That's not even close to enough.

"Okay, Tess, Kim, you will attack as soon as they push us. Use the stones we got when we dug the tunnel. Sophie, you will focus on controlling trolls, and try to make them attack others. Your sister will burn as many as she can when they get into her range. Tess can throw a few burning corpses into others after that."

I look around, and no one says anything; all eyes are on me, but this time I do look into the eyes of every one of them.

"When they get closer, we all will fight. The only one in the backline will be Lily."

Yes, I am still selfish. I need Lily to get my arm back, so as I said, I will try to protect her.

No one complains. Either because they do not bother or they also think that it's better not to have our healer die uselessly.

So we wait.

And wait for more.

We eat the last remaining bits of our food and finish up the water.

I feel calmer and calmer as time passes.

I did everything I could. I worked hard. I endured the pain.

Now I will fight until my body breaks.

I look at the countdown, and there's one hour left when the monsters attack.

Quietly, without letting out any sound.

Chapter 56: Embers

They dash at us frenziedly.

The trolls do not care about monsters under their feet and continue to step on goblins, spiders, and wolves.

The bears run over the smaller monsters and push others away.

Even as they die they do not let out a single scream of pain and before they enter Tess' and Kim's range, dozens of them die.

As they came closer, the rain of quickly flying stones hit them.

Some are big, some are small, but all of them are dangerous. Monsters continue to die, and more of them climb over their dead bodies.

Then Sophie's mana washes over them, and a few of the biggest trolls turn against a horde of monsters. She even gets one of the Giant Trolls, and he starts spamming his gravity attacks. The giant circular holes start appearing all over the forest, destroying the trees, and squashing monsters under the power of the skill.

Just like that trolls wreak havoc.

Soon, the other monsters stop ignoring the manipulated monsters and jump at them.

The smaller ones only get squashed as they enter the gravity field around the giant troll, but some bears and other unaffected trolls push through and attack the monsters.

More of them die as they do so.

I feel Sophie switch her focus on another Giant Troll as the first one dies, and the same thing repeats. She stops trying to control smaller trolls and just continues to take over one giant troll after another. Every time she does so, the monsters stop pushing towards us and focus on killing the Giant Trolls.

We gain more precious time like this, and much more of them perish trying to take down massive Giant Trolls. I don't even bother to count how many but a new worry appears in my mind.

Is she getting the experience?

Finally, the last Giant Troll dies, and Sophie falls to her knees. Not losing consciousness but close to it. There is blood on her nose, and a few small blood vessels have burst in her eye.

The waves of monsters start pushing again, and Tess and Kim continuously throw at them what they can.

After that, Isabella's flames roar into the surroundings and even Kevin continues to throw smaller stones charged with his [Combustion] into the monsters.

What I regret is that we can't set the forest ablaze, as it is still wet because of the rain, and most of the trees are also destroyed because of it.

Still, monsters continue to burn in flames without letting out any screams of pain. They just move until their burning bodies allow them to, and then they fall down, the flames from their corpses burning more monsters.

I feel a presence closing up, and something in me moves. I dash at it and catch a Phantom Goblin about to sneak inside the cave by his neck. I squeeze until its head is separated from its body. The blood dirties my hand, and I shake it off. Then, while ignoring my surroundings, I stomp on its corpse.

Splat.

Its head explodes like overripe fruit, and its chest dents under my feet.

Fucker.

I get back to monitoring our surroundings, and there isn't another sneaky assailant.

When I get back to the position, I notice that Tess is attacking monsters that are further away, and Kim is focusing on throwing stones at the ones that are getting closer to the cave. Our frontline still hasn't gotten to fight, but as I see the smaller and smaller piles of stones, I know that it will happen soon. I send mana as far as I can and feel that there are even more monsters than at the start, even though so many of them have died.

How the heck is this clearable?

Did we do something wrong?

Are we that weak? Is it impossible to clear for a single strong individual, and the target of the First Floor is for all of us to get as strong as possible?

While probing with mana, I feel something familiar – the piece of amulet tied to the wolf.

What the fuck?

How is he still alive?

The low-level wolf monster rushes at us too and soon gets killed by one of the attacks.

As he dies, I feel a really weak pulse of mana from the piece of amulet I tied to its fur.

With my improved perception, I realize that it feels similar to the twins' connection, and it sends a message somewhere – a call if you will.

Damn.

I quickly check the timer, and there are still thirty minutes left.

The cave shakes, and dust starts falling down from the ceiling as some monsters begin attacking it.

There is already a fight at the front. Hadwin, Kevin, Maya, and the twins are fighting up close with the monsters, and I join them.

Immediately, a goblin warrior jumps at me, but I dodge and kick at his head while strengthening my body.

[You have defeated a Goblin warrior - lvl 6]

Another one – this time, I grab the monster's neck and throw him into the horde of monsters, where he gets stomped to death.

[You have defeated a Goblin - lvl 5]

A burning wolf dashes at me, but I absorb the kinetic energy of a few monsters around and push him into other monsters that also start burning.

Good.

They start moving closer with their bodies in flames.

Not good.

I absorb more and more energy and push them again, this time as strongly as I can. Tess continues to grab dead burning bodies and flings them as far as she can.

A few burning monsters also try to get to Hadwin, but as soon as he turns to them, I feel his mana activating, and the flames around the monsters dissipate as if extinguished by a strong wind. The man continues to finish them off with a massive club in his hands.

Some smaller monsters are able to get closer to him, but their attacks do not penetrate his skin at all, and I feel mana around his body.

Maya is holding a translucent pointy stick rather than a spear in her hand and keeps stabbing at the monsters. Calmly and every time a monster gets closer to her, she either avoids it with her high dexterity or uses her armor created out of mana to absorb the attack.

Kevin continues to create explosions in the palm of his hands and reflects the attacks of the monsters. The stronger they attack, the stronger they are pushed back, but I see that it's taking a toll on him.

A toll on all of them. Especially the twins, who are already wounded in multiple places while fighting back to back against every monster that gets to them.

I activate my [Armament] and hold something more like a spike than a sword.

I continue to stab every monster that gets in my way, slowing them down and stabbing through their eyes and necks. Mana flows through my body, but I am being careful with its usage, knowing that the worst is yet to come.

A wolf jumps at Kevin while he is turned towards another monster, and I use my skill to slow it down in the air. Then I use absorbed energy to dash and hit the monster with my shoulder, pushing it away from Kevin.

"T-thanks," he barely gets out of himself, once again fighting against another monster. There is sweat on his forehead.

More and more monsters get inside, and the wounds start accumulating.

Hadwin is limping, Maya isn't using her armor anymore, Kevin's reflection is weaker than before, and the twins are nowhere to be seen. Tess and Kim are barely able to throw some stones – only with their will do they keep themselves on their feet.

Then I feel a whisper of terrifying mana at the edge of my perception.

While other monsters are unnaturally quiet, one deep, low growl sounds in the surroundings, and we can hear it even inside the cave.

A bear's growl.

Monsters slow down and stop, then all of them at once turn towards one direction. I feel a wave of mana that scares me and reminds me of things I want to forget.

From one part of the forest, I notice flames that burn in a bright orange color. Soon sparks start glowing around the flames. Pushed by the wind, they move through the air and land on the monsters that are instantly set ablaze by them.

Tens, hundreds of monsters get burned to ashes in an instant, and then I spot the bear walking through the corpses while hot air flickers around.

He walks with a scarily confident stride.

[Cinderbear - lvl 25]

Its mana expands and covers a massive area, and then Cinderbear looks straight towards the cave.

Staring right at us.

Chapter 57: The Unyielding Beast

The monsters become frenzied and start screeching. After what feels like hours without any sound from them, it sounds terrifying and sends shivers down my back.

The screams sound hateful and angry as all the monsters rush at the bear. Crawling over each other to reach him first.

But Cinderbear doesn't care.

He continues to walk, and sparks of bright orange color, as big as grapes, continue to set monsters ablaze instantly.

Battle Trolls, Stormbears, and two-headed wolves - every monster burns after they get hit by a spark - as if they are made out of the most flammable material in the world.

The sparks look beautiful as they slowly float in the air setting the monsters ablaze.

I check the timer

Ten minutes left.

"Let's run," I say shortly to Tess and the others, and we do just that, followed by others too.

We run through the monsters that ignore us as they are trying to get to the bear, some even close to stomping on us.

So we dodge the bigger ones and push away smaller ones.

Sophie is affecting crazed monsters, and they split like a wave around her group.

Hadwin easily ignores hits from smaller monsters and pushes away stronger ones.

I continue to absorb as much kinetic energy as I can while using it to redirect the more dangerous monsters.

After what feels much longer than it was, there are no more monsters, and all of them are behind us, yet we still run.

Tess and Kim are using their skills to move faster, and the same goes for me. Lily and Kevin are barely keeping up with the help of others.

Not even realizing where we are running, we stagger into the clearing and freeze.

I would laugh if I could.

There is a bus in the middle of the clearing. Even though it should be hours of walk away, it's the same bus we arrived in.

All the windows are broken, and it's surrounded by palisades made out of wood. There are spikes, also made of wood, sticking out in all directions.

System, you jerk.

Are you having fun?

Three minutes left.

I notice that there is a single glowing orange spark floating nearby. The same the Cindebear used.

What is it?

Why?

How did we get here?

I clench my teeth and feel, I feel Biscuit poking my leg. Not right now.

When I turn to start running away, I feel mana from an orange spark floating near the bus.

A massive flame blazes into existence, and from the fire, the bear steps out.

[Cinderbear - lvl 26]

Immediately, a wave of mana covers the entire clearing, and fear dawns on all of us, making it hard to think, let alone run away.

The bear growls and takes a step towards us. I notice that there are multiple wounds all over its body, yet it seems unbothered by them.

It takes another step towards us, not even bothering to manifest the sparks it used before.

Lily falls to the ground, and Kevin freezes close to her as the two of them are closest to the bear.

Before anyone is able to move, the bear reaches them, stopping right over Lily, who continues to scream. Kevin just stands near the monster, unable to move.

Then the bear slowly lowers its open maw towards the girl.

At that very moment, something terrifying comes into existence from the girl under the bear. A grayish cloud of mana forms in front of her, and wisps of mana fly from it.

The skill Lily wasn't able to use until now: [Disintegration].

It makes the monster pause for a second, but then it just lowers its maw, about to take a bite.

The level-one skill collides with the bear's lower jaw, and something unthinkable happens.

Disgusting, terrifying mana flares out even more, and a few threads shoot into the surroundings from the cloud at the center.

But the biggest part of the skill hits the bear's maw.

Without any resistance, the bear's lower maw disappears as if torn off with immense force, and blood starts slowly running down from the bear's missing lower jaw, right on the girl under the monster.

Cinderbear pauses and tilts its head as if in surprise, but I am already there, pulling Lily away and throwing her further away. I avoid the last remains of her skill with extreme care.

When I reach to grab Kevin, I freeze.

Only one lifeless eye looks at me, and half of his face is missing, eaten away by Lily's skill. Then his body crumbles to the ground.

Ah.

I enter a deeper [Focus].

While boosting my body, I jump as far as I can, and when I am about to run away, another wave of mana hits the entire area, gluing our feet to the ground. I turn around and look at the bear that is just staring at me.

Despite its lower jaw being missing and blood gushing out like a waterfall, the monster's eyes remain calm, and an enormous surge of mana emanates from its body. Then the bear lowers its head once again and tries to take a bite of Kevin's body but is unable to do so. It pauses, and one of its legs steps on the boy's arm.

Crack.

It burrows its remaining upper teeth into the body but is unable to take a bite.

So it stops.

Then, slowly and deliberately, it looks at me, and little orange sparks start appearing around.

Two minutes left.

I scream through the fear caused by the bear's skill, and my mana flares up, alleviating some of the skill's effect on me. Then, I do something I wasn't able to do up until now, even though I tried many times before.

I activate [Armament] and [Mana Manipulation] and combine them. Instead of armor, I create small beads of light blue mana that fly around my body.

More.

Ten of them.

More.

A hundred.

Hundred of small glowing beads float in the air around me in a similar way to the bear's sparks, and then I push them towards the bear. They are slow and they are not dangerous at all.

The bear doesn't dodge, but instead of hitting him, they hit the sparks around the monster and make them explode. Only ten or so of the mana beads collide with Cinderbear's skill, but that's enough, as the chain reaction makes sure to explode the remaining ones.

A massive ball of hot flame explodes with the bear at the center, and the airwaves from all the heat make me stagger backward a few times.

But that won't be enough.

I know it won't be.

From the flames, the bear walks out, its fur only charred and still bleeding from its missing lower jaw, making it look even more horrifying than it is. The growl sounds from the monster, distorted because of the wound, making it more frightening than before.

A loud whistling noise fills the surroundings, and two mangled pieces of iron come flying towards the bear while lightning cracks audibly around them. The monster just looks towards them and growls again, and they slowly melt in the air, losing half of their volume, and then just weakly hitting the bear and falling to the ground, the lightning gone from them.

More objects come flying, stones, smaller trees, pieces of wooden palisades. Everything just gets pushed slightly as it comes closer to the bear and is set ablaze just by the heat the monster generates.

One minute.

I do not dare to move closer, so I just continue to shoot beads of mana at the bear. I make fewer of them, make them denser, move them faster, yet they burn the same way everything else does, dissipating into the air.

Then the bear takes a step towards us, and we try to run. But as soon as we enter the forest, and pass by a few trees, the clearing appears back in front of us, and the bear with it.

Is it the bear's skill?

Is the system messing with us?

What's happening?!

The bear rushes at us and then pauses in the middle of the movement, but only for a second before it continues to move again. I hear a painful scream from Sophie that tried to stop him, and she falls to the ground, holding her head. Hadwin's skill fires up and pushes against the bear, trying to disrupt the monster's mana, but it gets canceled by the bear's exceedingly large mana pool, and the man is pushed back instead.

Then Tess throws an entire bus at Cinderbear.

With a loud creaking, it lifts into the air, hovering at around my head's height, and flies at the monster that just stands there, looking at it almost curiously.

With a loud sound of creaking iron, it lands on the bear, covering the monster nearly entirely. Tess then falls to the ground, and I barely feel any mana from her.

Ten seconds.

Under the bus, there is movement, and flames start slowly glowing beneath it. Soon, I see the bus literally melting before it flies into the air, iron parts glowing brightly from the heat they absorbed.

The bus falls down, and the unhurt bear looks at me, the air around it waving from the heat its body is producing.

Three seconds.

Two seconds.

One second.

What appears is the best I can describe as a giant hole in the air, nearly reaching the sky. Wide enough to let multiple cars pass through and tall enough to reach the top of skyscrapers. Through this door, this entrance, I can see small hills covered in beautifully vibrant green grass that moves as the wind blows into it. The sky there is blue and clear, with only one sun.

The second floor.

Chapter 58: Cinderbear

I feel Cinderbear's mana move, and at the same time, a hundred beads made of mana appear around me. Orange glowing sparks appear around the bear. Then, I shoot my mana at the bear as it shoots its own.

Mine are impossibly weaker, but it's okay; they're enough to trigger the bear's skill.

A few sparks pass close to me, so I dodge hurriedly, remembering what happened to the monsters.

Then the glowing sparkle flares up into a giant flame, and I already know what's next.

Mana instantly flows through my body, focusing all on defense, making my translucent armor as strong as I can.

And then stronger.

I temper it without caring about my creaking body under the pressure from mana.

From the flame of the exploded spark, the bear steps out and instantly swings its paw at me.

I dodge and absorb as much energy as I can.

It feels as if I didn't absorb even a tenth of it; I'm unable to take in more because of the terrifying force behind the attack.

Then the air around the bear waves and a terrible heat hits me.

Initially, it's weak but rapidly gains strength, requiring some time before it reaches the full power of the skill.

My skin feels as if it's burning, and the armor around my body starts melting. I release the absorbed energy and push myself towards the entrance to the second floor.

I pause for a second and absorb my own energy, stopping at the spot. Then I grab Lily's unconscious body and throw her through the air, right towards the entrance.

One spark appears next to me, and I dash away, the bear instantly appearing at the spot from the flame.

I release a bit of energy and push Tess out of the bear's heat, and she also staggers towards the entrance, giving me one last look before she falls through by my push.

I dash in between the sparks, thanks to my [Mana Perception] that warns me by sensing the massive mana from the sparks the bear is using to appear.

There are tens of them floating in the air, illuminating my surroundings beautifully, yet deadly, as a single touch means death.

Only thanks to my [Mana Perception] I survive as I dash towards the entrance after luring the bear further away from it.

The sparks around me can't be affected by kinetic energy, so I create multiple beads of mana and explode them before rushing back. Not having a spark near me to use, the bear just charges at me.

He is fast, but I am faster, and the entrance is just an arm's reach away from me.

The monster seems to realize it and stops while letting out a terrifying growl, and we look at each other.

The entrance is right here, and the scary foe is behind me.

Through the "door," I see Tess screaming something at me, but the sound doesn't pass through. She tries to get through but is bounced back and just stands there, staring at me, into my eyes.

Biscuit is here too, along with Lily, Kim, Sophie, Isabella, Maya, Hadwin, and somehow even both of the twins.

Only Kevin's now mangled and burned corpse lies somewhere behind the bear.

Fear continues to make me to run away, to hide, to save my life.

It's not the bear's skill, but my own fear, my memories of what I went through. Memories of the pathetic state I was in, unable to do anything.

At that moment, I can run.

It's just a small step.

I see Tess sigh and close her eyes before I take a step.

Away from the entrance.

Towards the bear.

"Oi, fucker, did you have fun?" I feel a smile crawl on my lips as I move my shoulders and let out a cracking noise.

Finally, it feels as if the weight has fallen from my shoulders.

I feel free.

I shake off some stiffness in my remaining hand and bounce on the ground a few times on my bare feet.

The bear doesn't do anything, and I take another step further away from the second floor and towards the monster.

"Do you know what I went through because of you?"

I stop holding back my mana, and it flares up stronger than ever before.

But I do not worry.

It's my mana, so I better control it.

I force it under my control while it roars, threatening to make a mess of me. Multiple bloody wounds open all over my body, and my veins start bulging out, a few of them showing tears, and more of my blood covers my body.

The bear just tilts its head and fires up its mana too, and dozens of sparks start flowing around it.

At the same time, dozens of beads made out of mana appear around me.

They all move at the same time, meeting in the middle distance between us.

The massive explosion throws me away, and I feel the armor around my body crack.

One quick spark flies behind me, and I do not run.

This time I burrow my feet into the ground and put everything I have into the armor covering most of my body.

With a flare of mana, the bear steps out of the flame and swings at me, but I am already dodging under its paw.

Then the heat wave hits me, progressively intensifying in strength. I clench my teeth, my heart pumping mana like crazy, and my mana circuit goes into overdrive as I move mana through my body at dizzying speeds.

The helmet covering my entire head, starts melting and I watch the bear only through my [Mana Perception], its mana pathways through its limbs, creating an image of the bear in my head and dodging it.

A sharp spike appears in my hand, and my ears start ringing as [Oscillation] covers it.

My shirt catches aflame even through the armor, and I start getting burns and blisters all over my body because of the heat.

I hold my breath to not take the hot air into my lungs.

I release all the absorbed kinetic energy and push against the spike in my hand, nearly dislocating it with the sudden speed boost. The spike goes through the place where the bear's jaw used to be, straight towards the top of its head.

Time slows down, and in the black-and-white world of [Focus], I hear my and the bear's breathing.

The only color around us is that of my light blue mana and the beautifully glowing sparks around us.

The spike in my hand continues to melt, and I keep reforming it, focusing more and more on the spike weakens the armor around my body, which results in more severe burns.

But that's okay; if I survive, they will heal.

I just need to kill the monster in front of me.

The spike breaks, but I reform it and oscillate it more, faster.

I [Focus] more, and the sound of notifications sounds somewhere far in the distance.

I push out every ounce of my mana, and the spike finally goes through the monster's head.

Then its paw hits me. I absorb as much energy as I can and immediately use it to push myself away from the bear, yet a graze leaves wound along the entire length of my chest.

I fall down and roll a few times, then push myself away from the spark floating nearby, rolling a few more times until I am out of reach.

There are no sparks around me anymore, and the bear isn't moving, but I push myself back onto my feet.

I take in the still-warm but much colder air than the one around the bear, and I swear it never felt better breathing.

I look up at the Cinderbear; he is still standing there but with even more blood dripping down out of its head, one of his eyes all bloodied and blind.

Then he takes a step towards me.

Hahah.

I sigh and brace myself.

Obviously.

I reach out and grab my mana once again, forming floating beads of mana around me while barely keeping myself standing.

The bear makes one step.

Then another.

The last one and Cinderbear falls to the ground and stops moving, his one eye still looking at me.

I wait.

And wait.

Then I get a notification.

[You have defeated the CinderBear - lvl 26]

[Lvl 23 > Lvl 24]

I fall down on my ass and cancel out the beads of mana, putting every bit of mana I have left to keep my body strengthened.

I invest stat points into constitution and breathe out while looking at the corpse of the massive bear.

A minute passes as I continue to gaze at the dead monster before me.

It's hard to believe.

Then, the screeching of monsters from the surrounding forest reaches my ears.

Fuck.

I guess that's it for the question of whether I can stay on the 1st floor and not go to the second one.

As quickly as I can in my state, I get on my legs and limp towards the entrance.

My body falls to the ground, adding a few more scratches to my terrible state, but I crawl for a bit before getting on my knees and then on my feet, continuing to limp towards the giant entrance to the second floor.

The screeches sound closer and closer, and soon the monsters start entering the clearing just as I pass through the giant doorframe to the second floor.

Instantly, the entrance disappears behind me, and I just fall down and turn around to lay on my back. The grass feels nice, and the air feels so refreshingly cold in comparison to the air heated by that god forsaken bear.

I feel someone kneel beside me, and soon enough, warm mana starts flowing into my body.

Nice, while you're at it, try to regrow my hand.

When I look up, I see that Tess is standing with her back to me and a few stones are floating around her, crackling with red and white lightning.

Opposite of her stands Maya in her [Armament] and holding a translucent spear in her hand.

Even Hadwin seems to be waiting for a chance, and Sophie? Well, I already feel her mana reaching out to me.

So that's it for resting.

I sit up and, with the help of my hand, get back on my feet, wobbling from side to side as I do so.

"So that's how it's going to be? Feel free to try." I say, and my voice sounds weak even to myself, yet they heard it and look towards me.

Resentment, fear, and opportunity can all be felt from their gazes.

"I will fuck you up." This time, my voice is stronger, and my mana flares up again.

Chapter 59: Choose your primary class

"Hey, Maya. Don't tell me you're still butthurt."

It doesn't work and her eyes are calm as she takes a step.

Then a stone as big as my head flies at her, hitting her chest at full speed. Only her skill saves her from a terrible wound.

She flies through the air and rolls on the ground a few times, while lightning crackles around her body, seemingly ignoring her armament.

A scream escapes from her mouth.

What's most surprising is that she wasn't able to dodge it at all, even with her high dexterity. That is how fast the stone flew.

"Not a single step more!" Tess nearly screams, and it feels as if the ground is shaking and the stones spin around her faster than before.

She turns to Sophie and points her finger at her vehemently.

"Sophie, I swear, if you try something, you'll be the first to go. I'll be able to sense that much." Tess points at the brunette, who pushes her sister behind her back and then just lifts her hands up in the air defensively.

"Tess, you can't be serious. That guy is freaking crazy." Hadwin steps closer, and I feel mana activating in his body, as he is about to disrupt Tess's skill.

He takes another step, and two stones hit him in quick succession. He flies even further than Maya and quickly gets back on his legs, seemingly only slightly hurt.

"Crazier than you all? Don't talk such nonsense, Hadwin. Tell me, what happened to Damon? To Dominic, to Jacob?"

One more stone flies at Hadwin and hits him again, making him fly and roll even further on the grass.

His groan sounds more painful this time, and he tries to get back on his feet.

"Keep your goddamn ass on the ground, or you'll get some more," Tess hisses sharply, and the older man stops moving.

Darn, it.

What the hell!

Why are you so cool?

"Tess, I think Sophie is trying to use her skill," I say, and the named girl instantly puts her hands higher and screams.

"Bullshit! I'm not doing anything!"

It almost makes me smile, seeing all of them like this.

"Stop, Nathaniel. I know you'd like to get rid of them, but at least wait until we find out what the second floor is about, okay? I don't like it any more than you do, but we might all need each other."

I guess that's it.

Survival > revenge.

Let's not get emotional and destroy useful tools just because of some hurt feelings from someone trying to kill me. Dangerous, annoying, and sometimes not even that useful tools.

Yup.

For now.

Sure, it feels as if I am only postponing it further and playing with fire, but that's the situation we are in and unlike them, it seems that I can control myself much better.

Still, Maya seems to want to take revenge for me beating her, probably by only beating me as well. I do not feel much bloodthirst from her. Sophie wants to turn me into one of her pets or pawns that will keep her and her sister safer. The problem is Hadwin. The older man seems to be seriously considering killing me.

First I need to acquire more information about the second floor. What if it's the place where I absolutely need as many people as possible?

I check the surroundings with my perception, but I don't sense anything.

So now, let's check out the notifications.

Congratulations! You have cleared the 1st floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial. Welcome to the second floor: Mana-Infused Kingdom.

Congratulations! You can now choose your primary class. Your offered choices are based on your performance up until now in the tutorial.

You have acquired one skill upgrade token.

You have acquired one skill point.

You can now use Community, with a time limit of 10 minutes per 24 hours.

You have acquired 5 stat points.

Well, darn, that's a lot.

Something pokes me and I look down at the doggo.

Sorry, Biscuit, I barely have cloth to cover my rear end. Where do you think I'd be hiding more food?

Also, please stop; it hurts when you bump into my leg. Only my mana strengthening is keeping me awake.

I get back to it and invest the 5 stat points I got, three into mana and two into constitution, through my clenched teeth. I want more mana. I need more mana!

Then, I check my skills:

Focus - Lvl 10

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 10

Mana Perception - Lvl 9

Oscillation - Lvl 5

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 8

Armament - Lvl 2

"..."

Okay, I expected only [Mana Manipulation] at level 10 so this makes it difficult to decide.

Let's think about it a bit later; now, I want to see my classes first!

Well done! You successfully entered the second floor. You can now select one of the classes. The classes are based on your actions and performance up until now within the Tutorial.

Choose with caution!

Force Adept:

A novice class that harnesses the power of various forces, allowing the user to control and manipulate energy and momentum during combat, benefiting from their strong affinity with mana.

Mystic Tamer:

A novice class that uses their magical affinity to communicate with, control, and enhance magical creatures, forming bonds and empowering their allies.

Ether Warrior:

A novice class that blends martial prowess with basic magical abilities, creating a versatile combat style that relies on both physical strength and innate magical energies.

Mana Channeler:

A novice class that centers on the circulation of mana within the body, leveraging the user's innate talents to reinforce their physical attributes and refine their command over magic.

Mana Striker:

A novice combatant who channels their innate magical energies into powerful physical attacks, enhancing their strength and agility in battle.

Force Archer:

A novice class in which the user employs their magical abilities to enhance their archery skills, creating powerful force-based projectiles.

Kinetic Defender:

A novice class that specializes in mitigating the force of incoming attacks, providing protection for themselves and their allies by subtly manipulating energy and momentum.

Focus Ascendant:

A novice class that underscores the value of mental concentration, empowering the user to augment their magical prowess, maintain focus during combat, and increase their ability to rapidly adapt to changing situations in battle.

Mana Scout:

A novice class that combines their mana perception skills with stealth and tracking, allowing the user to locate hidden enemies, magical items, and areas of high magical concentration.

Mystic Armorer:

A novice class that focuses on creating and reinforcing equipment with magical properties, enabling the user to fashion basic magical weapons and armor as well as enhance existing gear.

O-Okay, this list seems even longer. Are 10 offered classes good, normal, or bad? Are these classes any good?

I look around again to distract myself a bit, and it seems that everyone is doing the same as me - picking their classes, everyone except Lily, who is looking into the air with an empty look in her eyes. Her hand is touching me, and I feel warm mana healing my wound.

What should I do? I'm terrible at stuff like this.

What can I even say?

It will be fine? You didn't mean to blow off your friend's head? It's not your fault?

Sigh.

Even my stance towards her has changed a bit. Her skill is that terrifying.

How is it even possible to hurt a level 26 "named" monster with a level one skill?

Are there tiers of skills? Can it be that some skills are just so much stronger?

I don't know.

I want to know.

While looking around, I see that Kim takes a glance at Lily, and his eyes are full of hate.

This could be a problem.

He and Kevin were best pals back on the first floor.

My eyes meet his, and after a second he turns away. I need Lily, so you don't dare put your hand on her. That's what I try to tell him wordlessly.

Then, once again, I feel someone bumping my leg.

(Food?)

"..."

Gosh darn it, Biscuit! Do you want to eat my leg or what?

He senses my mood and stops, then runs towards Hadwin, who is still sitting down on his rear end. I watch as he starts booping the older man, and then hear a short scream from him.

"What the fuck!"

Oh, can you hear Biscuit now too? Welcome to the club.

Tess moves closer to me.

"We can't join the community. It says the person with the highest level from the group needs to enter it first."

Huh?

That must be me, I guess.

"Did you pick your class already?"

"Yes, I will tell you more when we have fewer people listening."

Sounds good to me.

Okay, let's do it like this: first, I will check the community, then I will upgrade my skill - maybe I will get offered more classes after doing it, or maybe the ones I have will change.

As for the Community, there might be useful information on classes there.

"Community," I say and I get the notification.

Congratulations on completing the Floor quest for the 1st Floor.

You belong to group 4 in the Hell difficulty tier of the 5th tutorial round. As the highest-leveled one in your group, please select a name for your group prior to accessing the community, as well as an alias for your own use on the forum.

I pause and with a long sigh, I close my eyes, my [Mana Perception] still watching people around me and scanning as large an area around as I can.

Then I read it again, and again, and again.

What the heck, system?

What's your problem?

Chapter 60: Community

Okay, later, I will think about it later.

First, let's pick the name for our group and for myself.

Welcome to the Community! Your group is now registered as "Group 4," and your alias will be "Noname." Your daily time limit is 10 minutes; after that, your access to the Community will be cut off.

Then a window appears, looking similar to a forum style.

Easy difficulty: 1869/2000

Normal difficulty: 734/1000

Hard difficulty: 330/500

Hell difficulty: 56/250

Community tournament (currently unavailable)

So yup, Hell is the highest difficulty as expected. What surprises me is that there is a forum with all difficulties in the same place.

What do the numbers mean? The number of survivors out of the total amount that got into the tutorial?

Also, what the hell is with those numbers? Why are there so many people?

And why does Hell difficulty have so much lower numbers in comparison to others?

"..."

Ok, never mind the last part.

And also, what the fuck is the community tournament?

So many questions.

I touch on Hell difficulty, and a thread opens.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, TheGuild) - Hello.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - What the hell is this?

Bard (Hell, IDK) - I thought I would get some info from you guys.

Hadwin (Hell, Group 4) -Are you also on the second floor?

What the hell, Hadwin? Did you use your name as your alias?

The messages move as more and more people type in, and at this point, it's easy to guess that the first is the alias, then there is difficulty and group name.

As for now, no one from other difficulties joins this thread, and when I try to switch, I am unable to, and the system says it's unavailable at the moment.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, TheGuild) - Is your second floor also named Mana-Infused Kingdom? Small hills, a lot of grass?

Bard (Hell, IDK) - Yes, but I don't see anyone other than our group here. To our left, there is a stone as big as a house with a lot of rocks around it. To its right, there is a small hill going sharply downwards.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - OMG, same! Different dimensions or copies of the same floor?

Bard (Hell, IDK)- Probably. We also didn't meet anyone other than our group on the 1st floor. Trolls, wolves, spider matriarch, Cinderbear?

Hadwin (Hell, Group 4) - Yes, the same here.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, TheGuild) - That's it then. I guess we won't be seeing each other. We can't rule it out but...

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing)- How did you guys deal with Cinderbear?

Oh! I quickly join in.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) - Fuck Cinderbear!

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing)- Hell yes, Noname, fuck that furry asshole!

Oi, be more careful, it sounds kinda...

A few more people join, and everyone is happy to complain and vent a bit.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) - Did you pick your classes already?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Most of us did; there's no sense in waiting any longer.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) - Anything interesting? Hidden stuff?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Just s small one. When you *****

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Lol, it got censored. Good luck, Noname!

Obviously, the system wouldn't let it go.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - Did you use the amulet to get Cinderbear to help you?

Hadwin (Hell, Group 4) - What do you mean by that?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Lol, Hadwin, how the fuck are you guys alive?

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - You didn't use the amulet? The one from level five Goblin Shaman.

Hadwin (Hell, Group 4) - It broke...

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Lol, what the hell?

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - You could use the amulet to summon Cinderbear to help. He would move around your camp and kill stronger monsters, but once in a while, he would come and take one from the group in exchange. We think it's a cruel mechanic the system hid there.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing)

Hadwin (Hell, Group 4) - He ate a few people, but in the end, we killed him.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - ...

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing)- What?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing)- Bullshit.

Savant (Hell, Alone)- I killed him too.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - He wasn't that tough.

Then I get forcefully disconnected from the forum.

I lift my hand and stick out my middle finger, showing it to the floating holographic window in front of me.

Screw you and your hidden mechanics.

Let's check the skill upgrade.

Please select your class first; only after that can you upgrade your skills.

What the heck? This is just straight-up bullying.

Is it a progression structure? Is it possible to abuse it? Maybe there's a possibility of not picking a class and just upgrading your skills a few times, and then getting a way too strong starting class? That's why the system won't let me pick a skill upgrade?

But okay, let's check the classes again.

My favorites are:

Force Adept:

A beginner class that harnesses the power of various forces, allowing the user to control and manipulate energy and momentum during combat, benefiting from their strong affinity with mana.

Mana Channeler:

A novice class that centers on the circulation of mana within the body, leveraging the user's innate talents to reinforce their physical attributes and refine their command over magic.

Focus Ascendant:

A beginner class that underscores the value of mental concentration, empowering the user to augment their magical prowess, maintain focus during combat, and increase their ability to rapidly adapt to changing situations in battle.

As for the other ones.

Mystic Tamer is something I will have to talk about with Biscuit. This one is on his for sure. Goddamnit Biscuit. I swear if this one replaced some awesome class, you will boop your snout until I deplete my stamina.

Ether Warrior I like it, but it seems to rely a bit more on physical combat, and my goal is to improve my mana.

Mana Striker is something similar to Ether Warrior, but it's not for me.

Force Archer is interesting. Probably got it because of the absorbed kinetic energy I channeled into the thin cone and used it to attack the monsters? Can you even call that archery?

Kinetic Defender: nope, I need more damage.

Mana Scout also nope, doesn't seem to be that much into mana manipulation, and I don't want to scout and avoid fights; I want to win them quickly.

Mystic Armorer is a total nope. I will rely on myself and not on a piece of equipment. Did I get it offered because I kept using oscillation on my weapons to strengthen them?

So it's back to the top three.

Force Adept sounds super good as it even talks about mana a lot, and the various forces part sounds good.

Mana Channeler I like it a lot. Centers on the circulation of mana? Innate talents? Refine command over magic? Definitely a top pick.

Focus Ascendant- augmenting magical prowess sounds good, and maintaining focus during combat also - but I have a skill for that. And what does rapidly adapting to changing situations even mean?

In the end, it's not such a hard decision, and I pick Mana Channeler.

Congratulations! You have picked your first class - Mana Channeler. In the future, you will be able to upgrade your class or change it for a new one fitting your actions up until that point within the tutorial.

Another window pops up:

Congratulations! You have acquired your Primary Class - Mana Channeler.

Mana Channeler:

Active Skill: Mana Surge - The user can temporarily increase the flow of mana within their body, boosting the power of their magical abilities for a short duration.

Passive Skill: Mana Flow (Rare) - The user's mana flows more efficiently throughout their body, reducing the amount of mana needed for skill activation and improving their overall magical control.

Bonuses:

+10 to Mana

+2 to Constitution

Yes!

YES!

More mana!

Huhu.

Huhu...

I might have a problem.

Whatever! If I were a telepathic corgi, I totally wouldn't be screaming (Mana!) instead of (Food!).

I can stop anytime I want.

Anyway, why the hell is there a (Rare) thingy in the name of my shiny new skill? Yeah, system? Why don't you grade everything at once?

But it's okay; I am happy. Two new skills? One of them passive? Boosting magical abilities? Improving overall magical control?

Heck yeah!

Okay, breathe in.

Breathe out.

Now repeat that.

Good.

And do not test them now; you need your mana to keep your body together until you heal at least somewhat. Also, there is a bunch of assholes around you waiting for a chance to take a bite of you.

Overall, I like my new class, and I am excited to test it.

Now, let's check skill upgrades.

A new window pops up in front of me.

Congratulations! You can now upgrade your level 10 skill by using the skill upgrade token. Currently, there are two skills available for upgrade. Choose wisely!

Focus:

Deep Focus: Increases the intensity and effectiveness of your focus, further enhancing your magical abilities and concentration during combat.

Focus Extension: Lengthen the duration of your focused state, allowing you to maintain concentration for longer periods without experiencing mental fatigue.

Dual Focus: Train your mind to focus on two tasks simultaneously, allowing you to perform multiple actions at once with greater efficiency.

Focus Synergy: Improve the synergy between your focus and other skills, allowing you to combine their effects for more potent results.

Mana Manipulation:

Mana Amplification: Increase the potency of your mana manipulation, enabling you to generate more powerful magical effects.

Advanced Mana Manipulation: Enhance your control over mana, allowing for more precise and intricate manipulation of magical energies.

Mana Intensification: Strengthen the potency of your mana manipulation, enabling you to generate more powerful magical effects with less effort.

Mana Sensitivity: Heighten your sensitivity to mana in your surroundings, allowing you to detect and track mana sources more easily.

I notice one of the skill upgrades.

Huh? Did I see it right?