

Tutorial 71

Chapter 71: Pride

"Please give me the 92 gold you stole."

"No."

So goddamn shameless.

"Nat, please don't look at me like that. It doesn't suit your pretty face."

Damn it, don't call me Nat.

But wait a moment. The main objective of the quest is to witness the end of the world. Do I really need to pay back all this money?

"How long do I have to pay it back?" I try.

"A year?"

Huh? I know that I might not have to pay it all back, but what the heck!

"You said a level 50 soldier makes 1 gold a year."

"Yes."

"I am level 27 now."

"Yes."

How does this make sense?

"Your angry face is funny."

Okay, let's calm down.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Repeat.

"So after 12 months, I need to have 200 gold and pay it back, right?"

The second floor might end much earlier than that, so it would be perfect.

"Nope, monthly payments."

"Are you messing with me?"

"A bit, it's funny. Master can probably forgive you a bit if you miss a payment or two - if she likes you, but if you push it too much, she will feel as if you are disrespecting her, and who knows what will happen then."

Great.

"What are good paying jobs?"

"Soldier is pretty well paid."

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

"You just said again that they make 1 gold a year if they are level 50."

"Yes."

She is quite special, this woman in front of me.

"Anything else?"

"You can sell your body."

Huh?

"For experiments? Or selling body parts?"

"Nope, as a prostitute."

"..."

The what?

"Your face isn't that bad, and even though you are missing an arm, there are some people that are into this kind of stuff. You are a drifter too, so that makes you exotic as well, and your body is quite nice."

She looks me up and down.

"Oh, and your eyes are quite unusual. One gray and one brown, that's rare. Plus, some people might enjoy controlling someone as strong-willed as you."

A smile blooms on her face.

"I can be your first. 10 copper."

So, I am not worth more than 4 loaves of bread.

"Anything else?"

"I can go up to 50 copper if you agree to one or two role-plays I like."

Please stop looking at me like that, I am getting scared.

"We can do it if I become too desperate."

"Wow, some people would pay quite a few gold coins to even have dinner with me."

I can imagine that she seems to be a fairly strong and influential person, so it might be worth it for a chance to get closer to her master.

"I think there is something super rude going through your head."

Hm?

Anyway, let's try to explain to her my stance.

"You are pretty, and your offer sounds good too."

"But?"

"Instead of messing with you, I should focus on growing stronger, so I can not only pay off my debt but also be prepared for the future."

"So you don't even have a bit of time?" she teases me.

"Even as we talk, I am training, and if we didn't talk, I would be training even more." That would free my second [Focus].

She crosses her fingers under her chin and uses them to support it while she looks at me.

"But you said you wouldn't mind doing it if you were desperate. Does it mean you are not attracted to me? I am curious."

"I think you are pretty, but I try to think more logically. Sure, if you really want to, we can do it right away, even for free, if it means getting on your good side. It might also help me to relax a bit, but I think you're mostly teasing me and not meaning it seriously, so I would only make a fool of myself if I agreed at the start. Plus it would give you more reasons to make fun of me."

Our eyes meet, and she nods.

Another bright smile.

"You guessed right. But it's interesting to see your thought process. So you wouldn't mind selling your body in some cases, you don't mind kneeling, and I'm sure you would beg and lick my shoes if I asked you to do so."

I nod.

"Do you not value your pride?"

I've been asked this question multiple times in my life.

"Isn't the pride you are talking about something only the strong can have?"

There is some curiosity on her face, so I continue.

"I obviously dislike it, but isn't that a low price to pay? Kneeling or dying, it's obvious which one is better. Licking your shoes? Some people would even pay you to do that, as they enjoy this kind of stuff. For me, the pride you're talking about is something useless and others can have it."

I look up into her eyes, making sure she pays attention.

"My pride is different. If I have to eat rotten food, I will do it. If I have to kneel, I will do it. If I have to bite, scratch during a fight, or spit and kick my opponent's crotch, I will do it. If I have to stand naked in front of dozens of people and watch as they stare at me while they shave my hair, I don't mind it." I pause for a second.

Ruby is listening carefully without smiling.

"I will do it all If it means it will help me to survive. And then, after everything is over, and I am still alive, I will come back."

She listens without a single word.

"I will pay back for everything. Not in the same amount. I will be unreasonable, I will be petty. I will be cruel."

I always did it that way.

"That's the way I live, and that's my pride."

So in the end, I decided to become a freelance hunter, adventurer, or however Ruby called it.

They are individuals who go into the wild and hunt monsters or animals. Obviously, the owner of the land and the intermediary take a cut and the amount of money a person can get starts at a few copper and can become much higher.

The reason I picked this path is that I can level up while making some money at the same time, so that's quite good.

There are three ways hunters make money.

First is hunting monsters and bringing back their bodies for people to make use of them. Skins, meat, bones, teeth, nearly anything can be used.

Second, killing monsters that have multiplied way too much or pose a risk to roads; they can even get hired as guards for caravans if they want to.

Third is hunting monsters alive. This one is probably the best-paying one, as they will buy a live monster from you and sell it off to someone rich. The main reason is that rich people can kill them inside the safety of their houses and gain some experience to level up. I heard it's pretty popular among super-rich people, even though the amount of experience they gain isn't much.

So yeah, there are a lot of options.

Before I left with an average-looking sword, a few pairs of clothes, some food and paperwork, and owing a bit more silver, Ruby warned me not to run away and to come back every week to report to her and her. It looks like her master left some sort of marker on me, and I still can't find it.

It also surprises me how easily they let me go.

I could die out there, you know. Aren't you worried? Is it because of her master? Is it because of Ruby? Is it the system's work?

Well, it works for me. It's just annoying not to know.

So here I am, walking through Stonehaven, alone. It feels weird now that there isn't anyone leading me somewhere or giving me orders.

I stop by the side of the road, making sure I'm not in anyone's way.

The last thing I want right now is to bump into a hotheaded individual.

I open the community.

Noname (Hell, group 4)- Anyone?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Sup, Noname. Grumpy was super worried about you, dude.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Hello, you are late. The other two already spent their allotted time.

Yes, that's true. But it's not like I could use the community in front of Ruby.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I couldn't help it.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Is everything fine?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Yes, you said you were a hunter, are you near Stonehaven?

Sset (Hell, group 4)- They took us to another city and still keep us on a leash, but we are leveling up.

That's good to hear. Still, it looks like I will be on my own. I don't mind it that much; it just means I will have to be more careful.

I terribly lack any useful information, and I think they're not for free. Plus, a single high-level monster probably means the end.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing)- Oh, Noname and Sset! I wanted to tell you something. When both of you were away, a new guy joined the community. I'm only telling you because he is batshit crazy, and I haven't seen him before.

At first, I almost ignore him, not curious about this kind of stuff, but then he says something that catches my interest.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - He was from your group, so you probably know him. He named himself "FoodFood" and kept spamming in the chat, the one word only, and all the time. Either "Food!" or "Food?" or just "Food."

I sigh.

Why am I not even surprised?

Goddamn it, Biscuit.

I'm glad you seem okay, you little twerp.

Chapter 72: Weredeer

My job? Killing monster boars.

Pay? 1 to 2 silver per piece.

Bonus? Level ups.

A problem? They are heavy.

Solution? Hire a group with a skill similar to Kim's [Gravity Well] to carry them.

Price for that group? Thirty percent of every boar delivered.

God damn it.

But there is one thing I like about them. They use some glowing stone that they use their skill on and then put it on the corpses. At that point, the stone works like a medium, slowly releasing some mana to keep the skill active even without their presence.

Sure! It lasts only for a while, but it's cool as hell!

It amazes me and I want one.

But I am instantly rejected. Something about a trade secret.

God damn it.

To be honest, I might fall in love with this world for real. It's full of magic and its uses that fascinate me so much. After spending a few days here, I feel as if we used sticks and stones on the first floor.

You know, like monkeys, trying to figure out how to ride a bike, while here they are flying around in jets.

I love it.

I dodge to the side using absorbed kinetic energy, and a small bead made out of my mana forms near my shoulder then flies at the monster.

Unlike during my fight with the Cinderbear, there is damage as it hits the boar's eye, blinding it.

I form a few more and send them at the monster, distracting it while I move to its back.

I cover the blade of my sword in an oscillating mana and finish up the monster.

[You have defeated a Boar - lvl 19]

[Lvl 29 > Lvl 30]

Then I check my stats after putting everything into mana, obviously.

Lvl 30

Strength: 13

Dexterity: 14

Constitution: 39

Mana: 79

Good!

The not rounded-up number on mana slightly annoys me, but hey, it's only a matter of time.

Huhuh.

Finally, my mana is twice as high as my constitution.

I do not have a problem!

Anyway, after a few days of hunting, I was able to gain 3 levels and a grand total of 36 silver. That's surprisingly a lot and makes me wonder what on earth the soldiers are doing to be paid only 1 gold a year.

Oh, and I also removed Sophie's construct from my head. I already remembered its patterns, and I am sure the rest is only about some experimenting and practice until I create a construct of my own.

So yeah, I removed it. You know, just to be safe.

It totally wasn't because of my too-high mana.

It totally wasn't that I had to let one of my Focuses run permanently and keep my mana under control and then couldn't fight because the other part of my mind focused on keeping her construct isolated.

Pfff.

That would be stupid.

"..."

So yeah, anyway.

The construct is gone, and I can finally think of doing all sorts of things that do not align with Sophie. staying alive.

Indeed, I haven't forgotten, and the next time we cross paths, she'd better make me an offer I can't refuse or she'll be out of luck.

“Boss. We are done here!”

[Mass Manipulator - lvl 23]

The man's group members are even lower level than me, and they move the corpse away.

Judging from previous experience, I should get a silver and a half for one of this size. Before their cut, obviously.

“Aelric, I will need some better-paying jobs.”

“I thought the same! This seems too easy for you.” He starts smiling with that creepy smile that scammers like to have.

“How about Weredeers? Their antlers are really expensive right now, and people always pay a good price for them.”

The were-what?!

“Oh, sorry! Do you know deers?” After I nod, he continues, “Weredeers are something like bipedal deer. Obviously much more dangerous. They like to use body-strengthening magic and some ranged attacks made out of mana. Quite similar ones to yours.”

Oh? That sounds interesting; maybe I can learn a thing or two. From a monster, again.

People on this floor are learning magic since they are young, they even have schools for this, mentors, and all this stuff.

Meanwhile, I am here smashing two stones against each other, hoping something will happen.

“As before, get me as much information about the monster as possible. Levels, variants, skills, weaknesses, plus a map of the area. I will pay, as before.”

“Yes!” he says with a smile, and I am sure that I am paying him a premium.

But right now, I am almost sure that I don't even have to save up money to give them all back.

In the past few days, I did talk to Aelric a lot; I even bought a lot of information from him, and it looks like there is a war going on.

You might ask, how can that cause the end of the world, which is the objective of this quest?

Well, it's obviously because of goddamn humans.

Especially some individuals possessing overwhelming power.

Champions, Paragons, Absolutes. They call them many names, and every kingdom possesses a few of them.

People rumored to be powerful enough to wipe entire nations off the face of the Earth. Living monsters able to delete entire cities if they wish to do so, some of them may even be able to take it a step further.

That's what I think is the objective: to watch the war play out, to watch these insanely powerful humans destroy everything.

The reason? Hell if I know.

Maybe it's to show us something? Teach us a thing or two? A warning as to what can happen?

I also came to think that everyone here is fake, the reason being that I gained experience from killing Emeric, while I didn't get any when I threw Ethan at the Cinderbear back on the first floor.

They may be extremely human-like; there also might be copies of someone that existed, but I am almost 100% sure that they were just created for us to experience.

The flow of my thoughts stops as I feel another presence with my [Mana Perception].

“One more boar.”

Aelric just nods and quickly disappears to the back, rejoining his group while I start walking towards the monster.

[Iron Boar - lvl 28]

The boar covered in red fur. It's not much bigger than the one I just killed, but it feels so much stronger.

I gesture for them to move even further.

I slightly release the hold my [Focus] has on my mana, and it flows wildly through my body.

One part of my mind continues to manipulate and control my mana, and the other focuses on fighting. It still feels weird as my mind splits into two parts, but I am slowly getting used to it.

[Mana Surge]

[Armament]

I feel the strain on my mind as I use two skills at once, and a spear forms in my hand.

It's still translucent and see-through, but thanks to my training, it's much stronger than the spike I used on the Cinderbear.

The boar finally notices me, and its eyes seem to glow as it turns to me. The ground under the monster cracks, and it dashes at me, faster than it has any right to.

I breathe out and bury my feet into the ground.

For a moment, I release my second focus and use it to strengthen my body with [Mana Surge], then reach back with the spear in my hand. I twist my body, spin, and throw the spear at the boar.

Immediately after the spear leaves my hand, it starts losing some of its firmness, but that's okay. I used a lot of mana.

The spear flies through the air, turning into a blurred line of white-blue light.

It burrows itself deep into the monster's shoulder, and its charge staggers a bit before continuing.

At that point, I reach out towards the boar with [Kinetic Redistribution] and absorb its energy, making it slow down.

I groan; the monster is heavy, and the force behind its dash is no joke.

When it's almost within arm's reach of me, I use Hadwin's skill and disrupt the protective barrier around its body. Feeling the mana waver, I redirect the absorbed energy into a thin cone and aim it inside its eye, making a mess out of the inside of its head.

It lets out a long squeal and staggers even more, and I jump to the side as its body slides past me and then stops moving.

[You have defeated the Iron Boar - lvl 28]

I poke the corpse with my foot and gesture at the hiding Aelric.

“Nice job, boss! And you didn't even damage it that much!”

I just nod and move to the side.

Knowing a monster's weaknesses sure helps a lot, and having skills that counter them is useful, but I am still not satisfied.

Yes, throwing a spear made out of my mana is nice, and mana orbs too. I can make them stronger in the future, but somehow they feel... lacking, even as I use my surge to strengthen them.

I need some stronger ranged attacks that will take advantage of my ever-increasing mana pool.

And I also need to create my very first construct.

I need to practice [Disruption] as well. In a world where magic is so prevalent, it seems like a really strong skill, and it almost might help me learn to counter similar attacks that could end up being my biggest weakness, as I rely on mana so much.

Oh, also another [Focus] would be nice!

There is so much to do.

It's fun.

Even though I complain, I am happy.

I put in an effort, and I get rewarded. I gain more silver, and I can take a warm bath at night and sleep in freshly washed blankets. I eat tasty food and drink clean water.

Then there is so much magic to study and watch and so much to learn.

I leave people alone, and they leave me alone as well, not caring if I die or what I do with my life.

I hope it will last.

Weredeers?

Yeah?

Screw them.

God damned system.

Fucking Aelric.

A terrifying call sounds into the surroundings as more and more Weredeers gather at the edge of my perception.

[Weredeer - lvl 26]

[Weredeer - lvl 31]

[Weredeer - lvl 26]

There are three of them circling around me, moving on their hind legs most of the time, and sometimes getting on all fours to move faster.

Their antlers are sharp and glowing, covered in ominous red mana. Their calls hurt my ears, and their skin seems to be glowing, covered in similar tattoos that the Battle Trolls had back on the first floor.

But the main problem is this guy.

[Battle Weredeer - lvl 33]

The biggest one out of them. Antlers sharp enough to cut me apart and a mouth full of sharp teeth. The monster moves on its two legs, and its tattoos are glowing in beautiful white light.

Its eyes look at me like a hunter looks at its prey.

Then, the mana flows out of its antlers, creating a shape similar to that of an arrow. The mana begins to glow in a color similar to its tattoos and flies toward me at a speed that is difficult to follow with the naked eye.

Chapter 73: New Side quest

I dash to the side, strengthening my body as I do so.

The world becomes quieter, black and white, with only mana retaining its color in the world of [Focus].

My [Mana Perception] works overtime as I continue tracking the four weredeers' mana signatures around me.

Thankfully, only the Battle Weredeer seems to be able to create mana projectiles, so I keep running away from them or dodging them after determining their trajectory.

One weredeer moves closer to me, dropping to all fours. A horrifying noise escapes its mouth as it charges at me, red mana glowing around its antlers.

I take a step towards it, and my [Disruption] flares up, causing the glow around its antlers and tattoos to flicker. The monster slows down, and I stab at it with my sword.

Darn it.

I immediately absorb some energy and push myself away, rolling on the ground before springing back onto my feet. The spot where I had been standing is bombarded with mana arrows.

With no more time to think, I dash again, avoiding the charge of another weredeer.

As I pass by it, I make a deep wound in its side with my sword, coated in oscillating mana.

My body is already heating up, and mana surges through me, held at bay by the second part of my [Focus].

I dodge again and absorb more energy, using half of it to pierce the leg of one of the weredeers and the other half to push myself away.

The monster's tattoos begin to glow more intensely, and I can feel all this mana in the air as even my own mana rages through my body.

Mana Circuit and [Mana Flow] both allow it to move quickly, improving my control over it while thanks to [Focus] I mold it and send it where It needs to go.

I've already forgotten Aelric's betrayal. I don't think about the tutorial, the other people, or my problems.

I just fight.

My mana surges, and the oscillating mana on my blade extends, cutting off the weredeer's leg. As it falls, I absorb its inertia and remold it into a thin cone that I shoot at its head after using [Disruption] to weaken it.

Half of the head explodes, and the remaining eye slowly loses some of its glow, along with the mana around its antlers.

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 26]

I jump back. [Armanent] creates armor on my forearm, and I redirect two mana arrows from the Battle Weredeer.

Then I turn and stab my sword at the monster behind me. It dodges, and another one charges at me, but I dodge it as well.

I create dozen of mana orbs and shoot them at the Battle Weredeer while charging one of my opponents. With my perception, I feel the monster dodging my attack and giving me enough time to disrupt the mana in the tattoos of another weredeer. This slows it down just enough for me to reach it and stab my sword through its chest.

The sword breaks, and I let go. A sword made with [Armanent] appears in my hand, and I stab it into the monster, extending it as far as I can, making it go right through its body.

Then I have to dodge and jump behind the monster I just wounded.

The spot where I had been standing is hit by another shower of mana arrows, which also strikes the body of the monster I stabbed

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 31]

I slowly breathe out and release some tension in my body.

Then, I [Focus] more and take a deep breath in, followed by a slow breath out.

Ten mana orbs appear around my body, and I feed them more mana. I make them bigger, firmer, and then elongate them, attempting to replicate what the Battle Weredeer did.

The monster roars, and I shoot my attack at it. Half of the projectiles dissipate after a while, and the other half miss the monster, causing only minor damage to the ground.

I reduce the number of projectiles to two and continue shooting at them while dodging attacks from both the remaining weredeers.

My head hurts, and my ears are ringing. I'm breathing heavily, and sweat covers my body and forehead. I even feel it on my hairless scalp.

Caught in the heat of the moment, I release the second part of my [Focus] that holds my mana at bay and use it to temper my mana projectile.

The other part of my mind activates [Mana Surge] and then tries to control the massive output of mana.

Both mana projectiles shoot off at an incredible speed and blow the head off one of the weredeers charging at me.

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 26]

I stagger backward and roll to dodge another volley of arrows while both parts of my [Focus] work to regain control over my mana.

My circuit feels like burning, and my head is overheating.

I slow down and tilt my head to dodge another glowing arrow from the monster. My perception warns me that the weredeer is creating another one, and I dodge even before it shoots it off, already getting better at watching the monster's skills come to life and predicting where it will shoot.

I lower my body and start running straight at the bipedal deer, still focusing on calming my mana and only using [Mana Perception] to watch the monster.

The glow around its antlers disappears, as do its projectiles, and its tattoos start glowing even brighter. The monster roars louder than before, and its eyes follow me as I run.

For the first time, it puts all four of its limbs on the ground, and massive mana flows into its legs.

The ground around the monster cracks and then explodes into the air, leaving a small crater where it used to stand.

I absorb all of my kinetic energy, making me stop on the spot, and then I jump to the side using the absorbed energy to push myself.

The monster speeds past me and crashes through a few trees, bulldozing the forest. I can immediately feel it collecting mana into its legs once more.

A single mana projectile starts floating near me, and I make it denser and denser.

For a moment, I use the surge to boost my body and dodge to the side, avoiding a second dash. My ankles feel as if they're about to break, but I ignore the pain and focus more on the projectile floating near my body. Its color becomes a darker hue of blue.

The monster collects its mana again, and before it dashes, I release my [Focus] that is trying to control my mana and put as much as I can into this projectile.

It shoots off at the monster just as it's about to charge at me, and suddenly, the forest falls silent.

The weredeer freezes. The projectile went through its body and exited, still causing some damage to the forest behind it. The tattoos lose some of their glow, but then, with another grunt, they start to shine even brighter.

The monster is barely controlling its mana as it charges. This time, it misses me and crashes through the forest even more violently than before.

A pained roar sounds, and I feel the monster trying to collect its mana but failing as blood keeps flowing from its pierced body.

Slowly, life escapes its body while it keeps trying to stand up.

[You have defeated the Battle Weredeer - lvl 33]

[Lvl 30 > Lvl 31]

I exhale softly and calm myself down, feeling as though I am emerging from a trance now that the fight is over.

Mana?

Mana!

I quickly invest all of my stat points and go through the notifications while slowly calming down.

One part of my mind continues to calm my mana, and the other keeps scanning the area around me.

Oh, a new [Side quest].

Side quest: Get 5 skills over level 10

Rewards: Skill upgrade token

Huh, that sounds good, doesn't it?

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 11

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 12

Mana Perception - Lvl 11

Oscillation - Lvl 7

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 9

Armanent - Lvl 4

Mana Surge - Lvl 2

Disruption - Lvl 3

Does the already upgraded [Focus] count towards it? I wish it would, but I'm more inclined to think that it doesn't.

It just doesn't sound like the system that I know and simultaneously love and hate.

So, with [Kinetic Redistribution], I am over halfway there.

Another two skills I should focus on leveling up should be [Oscillation] and then... hmm, which one? The remaining ones are at similar levels, and I can use them all, but it would be more productive to bring one of them to level 10 instead of just using all of them.

[Armanent] just showed me how useful it can be as I finally gained a decent ranged attack.

It took a long time, but I'm finally starting to feel like a mage and not a cheap, knockoff version from the marketplace. A step closer to finally taking advantage of my mana without damaging my body every time!

But the problem is that other skills are amazing in their own way.

[Disruption], boosted by the surge, feels like straight-up bullying when I use it against someone with worse mana control or lower mana reserves.

[Mana Surge], on the other hand, gives me an incredible boost to almost everything, taking advantage of my passive skill and trait.

Dang it, too many good choices! A typical first-world problem.

I don't even want to think about all the headaches I will have while deciding which skill to upgrade. Last time I got eight options for two skills. Will I get twenty of them this time?

One part of me is already scared, but a small, excited part of me screeches in anticipation somewhere in the corner of my mind.

Okay, I'll deal with that later! It sounds like a problem for future Nathaniel! Screw that guy!

But first, there's one person I need to take care of.

The person who gave me the wrong information and sent me here to die.

Aelric.

Chapter 74: Biscuit, no!

I enter the bar in the inn Aelric frequents, which is situated in a small village near the wilderness where hunters gather to hunt monsters.

Surprisingly, he is there, together with his group. They are drinking happily without a care in the world.

It pisses me off.

I walk towards the inn owner, who works from behind the counter.

Five silver coins leave my hand – half a year's wage for a farmer.

"I need to have a 'talk' with Aelric and his buddies."

[Aura Strengthener - lvl 51]

Finally, I am able to see his level.

He looks at me, then at the coins, and then at Aelric. A sigh escapes his mouth.

"Triple it and no deaths. I don't want to deal with their godforsaken guild."

I put the coins out without any hesitation, reducing my saved-up coins by a fair amount.

The man takes them, and I turn towards Aelric and the four men surrounding him.

Two of them are level 30 and 35, while Aelric and two more are a bit over 20.

The group has already noticed and is on guard.

"Hey, boss! You wouldn't believe what happened. I swear there should be only level 20 weredeer and not moving in groups! We had to leave too! The big grou..."

He starts, but my fist already burrows itself into the belly of the level 35 man. He groans even though his reinforcement and mana flare up.

Immediately, my [Disruption] dissipates his hold over his mana, and my fist hits him in the face.

I take a step back to avoid the attack of another level thirty, and mana flows through my body as my leg hits his chest, sending him rolling on the ground.

None of the men dare to use big area damage skills inside the inn that is under the protection of a strong association.

Aelric, seeing the men he often hires for protection get beaten, becomes a bit nervous and takes a step back.

"Look, Boss, Nathaniel, Nat, it's just a huge misunderstanding."

[Armament] creates a helmet without any visor around my head, and the bottle smashes against it half a second later, trying to distract me.

I continue to watch them with my [Mana Perception], and when the level 35 dashes, there is mana glowing in the palms of his hands.

My [Kinetic Redistribution] slows down his charge to a crawl, and then I shoot absorbed energy back at him.

Something cracks, and he grabs his leg while groaning on the ground.

I create a small orb made of mana at the side of my fist and shoot it at level 31, who is slowly getting on his feet. I boost it with [Mana Surge] and after getting hit also staggers back, now with a broken arm.

"Nat, Nat! You have to calm down, you..."

I don't give him a chance, and my kick hits his crotch, sending him down on the ground with a loud groan.

The other two level 20s don't even try to run away, and I break both of their hands and finish them off with a kick to the crotch and then to the head.

Then I turn back to the man groaning on the ground.

"V-Viktor, Viktor paid me to do it! He didn't like you hunting so many boars; it got into his business." He pauses, breathless, but there's some hope in his eyes.

It's as if he thinks I will stop now and change my target.

He doesn't know me.

My stomp breaks his knee, and his screams are now louder as he keeps thrashing on the ground.

Fear slowly starts to creep into his eyes.

Could I have done it outside the inn and saved some money? Could I have even killed him for giving me the wrong information and sending me to my death?

Yes, I could have, and without any hesitation.

The instant he attempted to take my life, I no longer had any doubts about it and he doesn't have anything worth enough to make me change my mind.

But that's not how it works here.

I stomp on his other knee, and he passes out.

So, I pull up a chair and sit on it.

It's okay; I can wait.

I have time.

Eventually, I leave after breaking both of his elbows.

Oh, and I also cut off his hand.

Did I enjoy it?

Nope, I would have much preferred just killing him. An eye for an eye thing, but the current situation doesn't allow me that.

Even what I did just now might anger his guild a little bit, even though he was the first one to mess with me.

But it's much better than looking weak.

The moment I show weakness here, ten more people like Aelric will pop up and try to use me and then throw me away when I'm no longer useful.

I learned that the hard way after coming here.

The first day, multiple people made fun of me, called me a cripple, and tried to step over me or take my stuff.

At first, I wanted to ignore them, but it became even worse to the point where they were about to use me nearly as a slave or cannon fodder.

So, I fought them.

I beat a few people with higher levels than me senseless. I broke their bones and cut off their fingers.

Then no one dared to call me a cripple to my face, and Aelric approached me. After that no one cared what I did or if I died out there.

Still, It somewhat surprised me that Aelric attempted a similar thing as them.

He should have known better.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - No, you should put only 20% of your stats into mana and the same amount into constitution; otherwise, it will mess up your balance. You can split the remaining points between strength and dexterity as you wish.

What a dumbass.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - That's dumb; the more mana you can have, the better. It's riskier now, but it's better for you to get used to it. In the future, it will show.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - Sure, like I would listen to the guy who blew off his arm because of that.

The heck? Who told him? Hadwin? It had to be him!

Savant (Hell, Alone) - I don't care if you killed Cinderbear. I did it too, and it wasn't even that tough. The monster was just a punching bag if you knew what to do.

Lootenant (Hell, WhiteWing) - Are they at it again?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - LOL, yes, it's fun every time I watch it.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Food!

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - Biscuit! I miss you <>

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Here we go; the guy is here again.

BenDover (Hell, IDK) - This jerk is pissing me off. Why does he repeat one word over and over?

BenDover (Hell, IDK) - God damned asshole.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - STFU; you're the worst one here.

BenDover (Hell, IDK) - Asshole

Here we go; they're at it again.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Asshole?

Huh?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Huh?

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Asshole!

Oh no.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole!

Biscuit, no!

Then I get disconnected from the forum.

God damn it Biscuit.

After hunting more weredeer, I level up two times, and even my skills improve. Before going back to my weekly report to Ruby and her frightening master, I check out my stats.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 2 - Mana Infused Kingdom

Time left until forced return: 4y 322d 013h 51m 36s

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

Lvl 33

Strength: 14

Dexterity: 15

Constitution: 40

Mana: 88

[Primary Class: Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 13

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 13

Mana Perception - Lvl 12

Oscillation - Lvl 8

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 9

Armament - Lvl 6

Mana Surge - Lvl 3

Disruption - Lvl 4

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

[Skill Points: 1]

[Stat Points: 0]

Pfft, 20% of stats into mana?

Not on my watch!

All in.

Please, Mr. Focus, hold on! You can do it!

As I put more and more points into mana, I rarely can allow either one of my focuses to stop watching over it.

But hey, it's good training, right?

Right?

I partially blame my missing arm for making it more difficult even as I use everything to help me handle my mana. My trait, my passive, two of my skills.

As my [Mana Perception] and [Mana Manipulation] improved I realized how much of a problem is a missing arm to my flow and circuit.

It looks like there are a few important pathways for mana in arms, and cutting them off makes mana switch to other ones. But it's like you switch from a new highway to a country road.

So how do I solve it?

The best solution would be to get my arm back, but as I found out, that could be quite difficult.

It's super expensive, and healers here are locked up in luxurious mansions, leaving only to heal people rich enough to afford them. Sometimes they are even tied to strong families, being used to extend the life of old but powerful men and women.

Even someone with a low level like Lily is highly valued and taken care of.

So yup, this option might take a while.

The second option is to try to mess with my body and Mana Circuit and fix it myself. The consequences could be terrible if I mess it up with my current lackluster knowledge and skills.

The third option is to leave it as it is. Sure, it will continue to mess with my flow, but at the same time, it's as if I add more weight to myself while exercising. If I survive, it will help me become even stronger, and when I finally restore it, I will be that much more powerful.

It's not like there are many options anyway, so I will just go with the third one.

I also hope that at level 20, I will be able to upgrade [Focus] again; that would be amazing.

I find an inn in Stonehaven after leaving the village at the edge of the wilderness.

I enjoy a warm bath that costs me a few coppers, and I eat good food with dessert. I put on my freshly washed and nicely scented clothes.

With not that full pouch, I reach the mansion where I have to meet Ruby.

The guards let me in, expecting me.

I walk through the hallway, following my guide, who leaves me in front of the wooden door.

After a knock, the door opens and Ruby emerges. Her red hair flows freely over her shoulders, and her yellow eyes almost seem to be glowing as her gaze lands on me. She is wearing black pants and a white shirt. They almost look like men's clothes, but I notice a few changes here and there that accentuate her figure.

"Nat! It's nice to see you alive and well. Your hair is funny now; you look like a hedgehog."

Please don't call me Nat.

"Master is waiting for you. Come in," she says as she steps aside, revealing the figure of a tall, older woman sitting on the couch.

Her eyes slowly look at me, and I enter the room.

Then the door behind me closes with a loud thump.

Chapter 75: Champion Keiron

"You got rid of that rudimentary thing clinging to your brain, why?" she asks me immediately.

"It was too dangerous to leave it without oversight, and I'm not skilled enough yet to do that many things at once. Plus, I believe I learned all I could from it."

She stares at me for a second and then slowly nods.

"You walk a dangerous path."

As if I don't know that.

"Do you like mana that much?" she asks, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

"Yes," I say without any hesitation.

There is something in her eyes I have a hard time describing before she turns away, looking at the wildly spinning mana in her hand.

"You may ask a question."

"Can I use my mana in your presence?"

Her smile doesn't fit her age at all. It's barely noticeable, just a lifted corner of her lips, but even then, I can feel some cheekiness from it. Cheekiness and a warning.

"You can try."

I notice Ruby wildly gesturing at me to stop, but even through all of my senses warning me, I open up my mana and reach out towards her with my [Mana Perception].

At first, I don't sense anything.

"Allow me to reveal the path you've chosen to tread."

I start feeling it in my bones, in my insides, on my skin. Impossibly powerful mana.

Its edges are expanding more and more. It feels like a never-ending ocean, like a tsunami. It feels like the heat of a star.

And it's beautiful.

I release my focus on handling my mana and use all of it to feed my perception and defenses. I want to see more. I need to see more.

Her mana is too massive for any human to have a right to, and my mana continues flickering in her presence, like a dying candle in a hurricane.

My ears start ringing, and it's harder and harder to breathe, and I am already down on my knees, unable to stand. I even feel blood running out of my eyes.

But I continue to look.

Like a fly dreaming of reaching the sun.

"Well, that was dumb. You're lucky my master only released some of her mana. I've seen her kill people for much nicer requests than yours." Ruby sighs, "She must find you quite interesting, doing all of this."

I am listening to her with only one ear and still going through what I saw.

"Haa, so annoying," she throws herself on the couch, acting more brazen now that her master has left. She stretches her legs, "I could never understand your type. All of you are goddamn crazy."

I slowly focus on her words and stand up, my body complaining as if someone danced on it all night. With a groan, I sit on the armchair opposite her.

"How strong is she?"

"Who knows? I hope to never find out." Ruby shrugs her shoulders.

"Stronger than Champion Keiron or Champion Tristan?" I ask, curious since I heard the names of the two strongest people from Roland.

"I see that someone has been collecting information," she smirks and, still lying on the couch, continues to look at me, "My master is... she's special, that's all you need to know. But don't even dream about

reaching Champion Keiron. The man is ancient, and the last time he fought, he sank an island, along with a million people who lived there. He is a monster capable of destroying an entire kingdom if he wills it."

She jumps to her feet, "Enough of that. Now invite me to dinner, and I'll show you something interesting."

Huh?

I end up leaving the restaurant with my pouch much lighter.

Sure, the food was amazing. So good. But what the heck!

What kind of dinner for two costs as much as a farmer's yearly wage?!

Damn it.

"Look," I hear from Ruby, and I look where she's pointing.

The statue towers over the area, a depiction of a man tall and imposing and adorned in complete, meticulously crafted armor. You could spend hours studying the armor alone, each piece bearing intricate details of painstaking labor and skill. The armor's metallic sheen contrasts beautifully with the backdrop of the blue sky.

The sculpted face of the man exudes an aura of unwavering confidence and raw power. Etched with such realism, you could almost see the determination set in the statue's stone eyes. The man's grip on the sword is firm, with the blade stabbed into the ground in front of him.

"This is Champion Keiron," she says.

Ehm?

That makes me look at the statue once more, making sure I remember the face.

"It's nicely made," I start. Was this information really worth that much silver?

Ruby laughs. What's so funny?

"You don't understand. THIS is Champion Keiron."

"..."

What?

"No one remembers now how old he is, but everyone knows that every ten years, he creates another avatar of himself and places it somewhere in the kingdom."

No way.

"There are now tens of his avatars all over the kingdom and the world," she turns to me, none of her normal cheekiness visible on her face now, "Champion Keiron can instantly transfer his mind into any of these avatars and then fight with all his power available."

I have a hard time wrapping my head around it. How is something like that even possible?

How?

"Some say that he can now awaken all the avatars at once and control them, with each of them containing most of his power," her eyes have the same look I must have now.

I just don't know what to say.

"That is what Champion is capable of."

POV Lily Chen

"Novice Lily, please hurry up."

"Y-yes!" I quickly grab my bag with the things I'll be needing and glance around my room one last time, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness.

It's huge and predominantly white in color, filled with beautifully carved furniture with gold accents. The bed is massive, much bigger than I need. But the mattress is amazing, so I don't mind it that much. I still feel like I'm living in a dream, like any moment someone will pinch me, and I'll wake up.

Everything is better than sleeping on the first floor's cold, hard ground. My thoughts drift back to those nights, and I try to shake off all those bad memories.

I don't want to think about that. I'm in a better place now, right?

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, I'm ready now!" I say as I exit the room, hoping my enthusiasm isn't too obvious.

Everyone here is so nice to me, so I try to treat them with the same kindness. I can't help but feel a little out of place, though. I mean, I'm just a regular girl who happened to acquire healing powers.

My guide, Mentor Lyra, smiles at me, and I can't help but smile back, feeling my cheeks warm up a bit.

"It's okay, Novice Lily. Shall we go now?"

"Yes!"

I quickly follow her as we walk through the lavish hallway that I'm still not used to. It's too pristine, too fancy-looking. Every step I take feels like I'm walking on clouds, and I wonder if I'll ever get used to living like this.

We pass by a few more people, and everyone greets and smiles at me. Some even bow.

That's another thing I'm not used to. It makes me feel important, but also a little awkward.

In the community, Nat said that healers are super rare in this world and that I wouldn't have to worry about anything for a while. He told me to enjoy some rest and... I remember something and giggle a bit, suddenly feeling mischievous.

He also said to "yoink" some expensive things for him, mentioning that he might need some gold fairly soon. I can't believe he asked me to do that, but it's kind of exciting.

"Mentor Lyra, I was thinking, could I ask you for some gold coins?"

Her eyebrows rise a bit, but contrary to my expectations, she just nods.

"That's something we can do for you. We can discuss it when we return from your training and talk about the amount you need."

Oh, that was easier than I thought it would be. I can't wait to tell Nat!

"T-thank you."

She nods with a smile, and we enter the massive dining room. Huge windows offer a view of the beautiful gardens, and we eat slowly, served by a few dedicated attendants just for us. The food is amazing, and I only regret that the others can't be here with me, even silly Biscuit. I hope they're okay.

"Let's go and heal a few people, okay, Novice Lily?"

I agree and stand up, feeling determined. It's something I have to do to be allowed to live the way I live now.

And it will help me become more useful in the future, not just for myself, but for the people I care about.

I will not allow the events from the end of the first floor to repeat.

"I fed him to the pigs. I cut his body into small pieces and threw them inside the pen, making sure they eat it all," I say quietly to Ruby, who is sitting opposite me.

She doesn't smile, only nodding and pulling a card from the game we're playing. She flips it around and shows it to me again.

"I won again. Now tell me how you did it."

I stay silent for a moment, already yearning to forget the situation.

"I kept an eye on him since he started showing hostility towards me. Then I began to observe his movements and his sensitivity to my mana usage. I was careful, never showing any aggression," memories flash through my mind. "I created a small orb of mana inside my mouth. I've learned that everyone's body has a kind of barrier that partially conceals the mana within, and even though you can sense it if you try hard enough, or if the other person isn't good at controlling it, I noticed that Emeric wasn't proficient at it."

Ruby nods likely understanding where I'm heading with this.

"He continued to taunt me in the hallway to my room, out of earshot of everyone else.

He did it every day.

So one day, I simply waited for him to lean closer, and then I opened my mouth as if to say something, and shot the mana orb through his eye into his brain," I look at her, "he died almost instantly."

I leave out the part where I had to drag him to my room. I omit the part where I had to go out and immediately clean up the blood.

I don't tell her how I had to cut his entire body into pieces while using [Oscillation] and feeling like I was on the verge of passing out several times, able to continue only thanks to [Focus].

I don't regret it, I did it all to survive.

But damn, it feels disgusting.

Chapter 76: Rain, Wind, and Monsters

Two mana projectiles created thanks to [Armament] and [Mana Manipulation], hover over my shoulders as I dodge the charge of a weredeer. The monster doesn't seem too pleased and charges at me again.

[Mana Surge] blazes up, and I shoot one of the projectiles at the monster's head.

The weredeer ignores the wound and continues to charge, so another projectile hits it, finally making it stagger a bit.

A wildly oscillating blade made of mana forms in my hand, and I slash it through the monster's head, dodging just in time to avoid its dead body and the splash of blood.

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 34]

[Oscillation - lvl 8 > Oscillation - lvl 9]

[Lvl 34 > Lvl 35]

Now, without any hesitation, I put all the stat points into mana. If I had any before, now there is none. I wipe the rain from my head and look at the cloudy sky. It just can't stop raining.

"Hey! We're done here!"

I just nod and let the mana flow through my body. In the palm of my hand, a weird circular shape made of mana forms with the use of my [Armament]. I try to imitate Ruby's master and continue to move it, reform it, spin it, make it denser or less dense, and almost transparent. I find it to be good practice for my shaping skills, but it must look somewhat silly.

I slowly enter the clearing, which is occupied by a group of ten hunters, all of them on a mission or quest, if you will.

This time, I was extremely careful and picked a group that looked somewhat reliable. Sure, I'm not expecting them to sacrifice their lives to save me, nor do they expect the same. But at least I know they won't stab me in the back out of nowhere.

Probably. Look, it's difficult, okay? A man's got to eat. Eat and pay a ton of money, and this expedition is paying super well.

The main objective is to kill as many weredeer as possible and take care of their boss, who is leading them while hiding somewhere in this area.

Are they out of quests where I would have to guide someone super slow walking to some distant place? They don't need anyone to collect a certain amount of some material?

Anyway, the group thinks I am at a higher level than I really am, thanks to my unusually high mana.

Obviously, I joined even though it's dangerous and might be too risky for my current level.

The reason? Ruby's master.

I just can't get the image of her mana out of my mind, and to reach her level is impossible without putting my life at stake to grow stronger. Playing it safe won't get me there. It's as simple as that.

"Nathaniel, how many did you get this time?" our vice leader asks me.

"Three of them this time."

"That's pretty good. You're doing well," he gives me a small smile. "You might really save up enough money in a few years to restore your arm."

Yup, that's the story I'm going with. I lied to make it easier to get into the group.

"Thanks, Bram. That's the goal," I try to act nice. The man is fairly competent, and he has two skills that I really like, so it's better to stay closer to him so I can observe them. Obviously, it would be too rude if I did it with my perception and he felt it, but I may be able to ask for some pointers while thinking about the rest on my own.

Soon, more and more people from our group join us, having finished their part, and I start getting uncomfortable as so many people talk at once, some of them even talking to me.

At first, it's bearable, but I quickly feel my social batteries drain.

Darn, I miss Tess and maybe even Hadwin. They are both much better than me at dealing with people. On the other hand, I don't mind sitting to the side and only listening without having to open my mouth.

I don't think that will ever change. I've tried multiple times, but no matter how much I try, I start feeling uncomfortable when talking to more than one person after some time.

Fortunately, we start moving again as the rain becomes stronger and the wind picks up. A few times, I try to use my [Kinetic Redistribution] to absorb some kinetic energy from the wind, but I fail miserably. It's still way too difficult for me. The raindrops, on the other hand, are much easier, and I can even absorb some energy from swaying trees.

Well, it's only a matter of time until I come up with a solution. Later, I might even become able to absorb different kinds of energy. As of now, I can think of something like [Mana Redistribution] - that sounds like an overpowered skill. And how about absorbing sunlight, gravity, or thermal energy? The options are immense!

Also, soon I might be able to upgrade one of my skills after finishing one of the side quests:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 13

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 14

Mana Perception - Lvl 12

Oscillation - Lvl 9

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 9

Armament - Lvl 8

Mana Surge - Lvl 4

Disruption - Lvl 4

Three skills are close to level 10. Sure, there will most likely be some bottleneck, but I can do it. But which one should I upgrade after that?

The skill I'm considering upgrading the most is [Mana Manipulation], but if I get some enticing options for [Mana Perception], I might change it up. Lately, I rely on it a lot to learn new skills by watching other people's usage of mana, so even if it hurts me in my current situation, it might be a good option.

Heck, even [Kinetic Redistribution] could get amazing options for an upgrade.

Darn, it already makes my head hurt. I'll get what, 20 options to pick from? Nice.

"Nathaniel?" I hear.

Oh, darn it, not again. Lately, it's easy for me to get lost in my thoughts even as I keep running Perception to check for danger.

"Sorry, I'm coming."

I quickly rejoin the group. This time, I am careful to stay with the group and train my [Kinetic Redistribution]

I've found a new way to practice it. I try to absorb energy from a single raindrop out of the hundreds of them that are around me.

I don't even have to explain how crazily difficult that is.

A few minutes later, one of our group members dies.

His head explodes as a mana arrow hits it, also evaporating half of his chest due to the speed of the projectile. The remaining half of the body falls, and panic sets in.

No one felt anything, not even our scouts, who are most likely well over 50, and their area of Perception is much bigger than mine.

The arrow just came flying so fast and from so far away that they were unable to sense it forming.

We continue to look around, with a few stronger and faster members rushing towards the direction the arrow came from, but even they come back empty-handed.

"I say we get out of here and go back!" one of the men screams, a tall bald man.

"There's no need to be so rash. We made a mistake, and we know how to counter it now. Eamon can create a web of mana far around us with his gift. It can slightly change the direction of a projectile if it enters his area," says the leader of our group, looking around. He's a skilled hunter seemingly around Hadwin's age.

"Simon and Ivar will continue to run their [Detection] at full power, and we will have our vanguards nearby so they can block any attacks."

His voice is calming, and even I almost start believing him.

"We know what we're up against now, and we will be ready."

It sounds so easy.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to join this expedition.

A few hours later, and after a few fights with a normal weredeer, the leader dies.

This time it's not a ranged attack; it's something much more amazing.

An idle mana projectile was hovering in the air in the crown of a tree.

No one was able to sense it; that's how firm it was and how little mana leakage the projectile had.

We were only able to detect it as we passed under it.

Someone crossed a hair-thin thread of mana, which triggered the mana arrow, sending some impulse, and then, as if it were a homing missile, it flew right at the leader.

The vanguard didn't even have enough time to try to stop it.

The mana around the leader flared up, and in front of him, a barrier made of mana appeared at incredible speed, followed by another and another. The man was amazing, able to create a five-layered barrier in a split second.

Yet the projectile tore through them all of them.

Half of the man's chest disappeared in an explosion of innards, blood, and bones.

He died instantly.

That's when I decided it was time to leave, and I wasn't alone.

We immediately started moving back the way we came, but what awaited us made it all seem hopeless.

Dozens, probably well over fifty weredeer, were blocking our way back, with more of them around us. Even I could feel their mana.

So we just stood there in the rain, which continued to strengthen, and in the strong wind that kept hitting our bodies.

Threatened by mana projectiles and surrounded by monsters that we could hear roaring even through the wind, rain, and thunderstorm.

Chapter 77: Prey

We do the only thing we can do: run.

We charge toward where the horde of monsters seems thinnest.

Flames surge into the monsters; I hear the crackle of electricity. An arrow from one of our scouts flies ahead of us with enough power to destroy a tank back on Earth.

Pushing through isn't the problem; the problem is a sniper.

Another arrow comes flying, obliterating one of the men along with the monster he was fighting.

Meanwhile, my [Focus] keeps running at full power while I loosen its hold on my mana, now burning within my body. The [Kinetic Redistribution] boosted by [Mana Surge] covers a larger area than ever before and absorbs the energy of the rain, which I use to propel myself and attack the monsters, either pushing them away or piercing their bodies.

The world is colorless and quiet under the influence of my skill as I run, striving to stay with the group while keeping someone between me and the presumed location of the sniper. But no arrow comes flying, even as we plow through the monsters, killing a big number of them in the process.

I am thankful for the rain as it enables me to keep up with the group of higher-level men, propelling myself with the absorbed energy.

After what feels like thirty minutes, we slow down against the side of a hill, a small place sheltered from the rain. Discussions are already underway among the group, but I only half-listen, continuing to monitor our surroundings.

Something tells me this is far from over, and I extend my perception as far as possible, in waves, almost like a sonar. My body is tense, bracing for a mana arrow that could come at any moment.

My best bet is to counter it with [Disruption] and hopefully dissolve it, or to cut it with [Oscillation]. After seeing it pierce a five-layer barrier, I can't rely on [Armament].

So that's the plan. I will detect it, slow it with the redistribution, and then finish it off with [Mana Surge]

Once again, I curse my impatience. Why did I become so greedy after witnessing the power of that woman? I thought I had calmly considered it safe, yet now I feel I didn't because of my greed.

Thankfully, the rain is still strong, allowing me to use redistribution constantly. After a brief rest and some heated arguments, we continue moving back, still a few hours away from the city.

As we proceed, I stop using perception to sense the ranged projectile; instead, I look for similar ones that killed our leader - the ones triggered by thin threads of mana.

I continue to boost [Mana Perception] with surge, and even though my head hurts and sweat runs down my face, I keep sending it into our surroundings.

[Focus] helps a lot.

I don't notice the first one in time, and the man who wanted to leave first dies, his lower half separated from his chest. He dies looking surprised at his legs lying apart from his body.

Then we have to fight weredeers. I dodge the monster's rush, and as it passes by me, a sword made of [Armament] appears in my hand, and I slash at its neck, leaving it to bleed.

Not having enough time to dodge another one, I fire up redistribution again, absorb as much energy as I can, and then disrupt the protective barrier around the were-deer, finishing it by turning the sword into a spear and stabbing it through its neck.

With the absorbed energy, I propel myself to rejoin the running group, dodging to avoid the flames that one of the men is shooting at the monster behind me. Even in this situation, I use a bit of perception to observe his skill.

Thankfully, the men are dealing with higher-level monsters, and I'm picking off the slightly weaker ones that I can finish quickly thanks to my skills.

[Mana Perception - lvl 12 > Mana Perception - lvl 13]

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 28]

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 34]

I ignore the remaining notifications and follow behind the men. Two mana projectiles hover over my shoulders, and I keep feeding them mana, inspired by the arrow that killed a few of the men from the group.

I make my projectiles denser, sharper, and more durable, trying to imitate the sniper's skill.

As another monster charges at me with glowing tattoos on its body, I shoot both of them with the help of a surge, even pushing them a bit with redistribution and the energy I got from the rain.

The monster's chest explodes into a bloody crater, the tattoos flicker and soon stop glowing, and the monster dies.

[You have defeated the Battle Weredeer - lvl 31]

Again. I form another two projectiles.

My mana is enough, so I add one more. This time it makes my head hurt, and the third projectile dissipates as I have to focus on controlling my mana, strengthening my body, and the use of my skills.

Then I trigger a thin thread of mana at my feet. I only notice it when I feel the thread tearing.

The world feels as if it has slowed down, and I stop holding back my mana which instantly rushes through my body at a terrifying speed, pummeling my muscles and sending burning pain through my circuit.

But I don't care; I even boost it all with [Mana Surge], and my heart throbs wildly, sending even more mana into it.

My perception encompasses a small area and I [Focus] with both parts of my mind on it. One part is tracking the thread, the other is looking for a projectile.

In the black and white world of [Focus], I finally notice a thin thread shining slightly in pale blue color.

When I get a general idea, I shoot my mana projectiles towards the place where I think the projectile is, at the same time I start strengthening my body as much as I can, knowing that redistribution would be too slow.

It all happened in what feels like a split second.

Then I see the projectile flying right at me, hitting my own projectiles and only slightly changing its direction.

Dozens of small mana orbs appear around me, and I throw them at it, hoping for something.

[Disruption] fires up, boosted even more by the surge, and I try to change the area where it's focusing, making the effect smaller but more potent.

Another part of my mind focuses [Kinetic Redistribution] in the same direction, instantly releasing all the energy I absorbed, repeating this multiple times.

The notifications ring in my head as the projectile grazes my side, leaving a deep wound there before hitting the ground behind me.

With a groan, I fall to my knees, releasing all the energy I was able to absorb, and a strong shockwave hits the trees around me, sends smaller stones flying, and makes thinner trees bend under pressure.

It takes me a few seconds of effort with both parts of my mind to calm down my mana and get over the pressure of using so many skills so rapidly.

Unfortunately, it's not the end.

The weredeer hits my body, and only at the last moment am I able to create a translucent armor to soften the impact. I fly through the air and then roll on the ground, unable to even focus on absorbing that energy.

The armor around me disappears, and I crawl on the ground, trying to get as far away as I can from the monster.

I feel it charging at me again and I pull out the dagger from behind my belt. Slowly, I get up on my feet and turn towards the monster.

The rain continues to beat my body, the ground is slippery, and it's getting darker, more like night than afternoon.

The lightning sounds nearby, and I send one pulse of mana through my body at the last possible moment, just enough to jump to the side and then bury the dagger into the monster's eye as it passes by me.

Roar.

It swings its antlers, and I dodge by falling to the ground.

Another pulse of mana, just enough to make myself faster and slash against the monster's neck. The dagger is only weakly coated in [Oscillation], but it's enough. A deep wound opens on the monster's neck, and blood falls on my face.

Another pulse of mana and I stab into the monster's neck.

Then again and again.

The blood covers my body and mixes with the water from the rain running down to it. I make [Oscillation] move faster while using as little mana as possible.

Multiple notifications.

I dodge to the side, and the monster falls to the ground, dead.

Forcefully calming down my breathing, I stand up and move to the side, ending up leaning against a tree. My head hurts and the world spins around me.

The roars of monsters bring me back to reality, and I send perception into the area, not feeling any humans close to myself, only weredeers at the edge of my detection.

I am alone.

Chapter 78: Following the thread

[Lvl 36 > Lvl 37]

I pause briefly to invest my stats. After a moment's hesitation, I put them into mana; I don't believe any other stat will help me at this moment. I quickly skim through the notifications, paying no mind to the ones about kills.

[Focus - Lvl 14 > Focus - Lvl 15]

[Mana Manipulation - Lvl 14 > Mana Manipulation - Lvl 15]

[Oscillation - Lvl 9 > Oscillation - Lvl 10]

[Armament - Lvl 8 > Armament - Lvl 9]

[Disruption - Lvl 4 > Disruption - Lvl 5]

For a moment, I summon my status window while starting to run towards the area with the least amount of monsters.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 2 -Mana Infused Kingdom

Time left until forced return: 4y 318d 021h 51m 03s

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

Lvl 37

Strength: 14

Dexterity: 15

Constitution: 40

Mana: 100

[Primary Class: Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 15

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 15

Mana Perception - Lvl 14

Oscillation - Lvl 10

Kinetic Redistribution - Lvl 9

Armament - Lvl 9

Mana Surge - Lvl 5

Disruption - Lvl 5

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

[Skill Points: 1]

[Stat Points: 0]

I still have one skill point left, which means I only need to get either Redistribution or [Armament] to level 10 and then use the skill point to level up the last one. I'd prefer not to do it this way as I have a feeling that breaking through the bottleneck from level 9 to 10 would be better to do on my own, but it's not like I can be picky right now.

I gradually increase my speed, each step becoming firmer. The aftershocks slowly wear off, but I continue to search for traps more fervently than before. Every step I take is cautious, and could easily be my last.

My area of perception is smaller, but it allows me to pay closer attention. Now that my mana is over 100, I feel even more how the missing part of my circuit in my left arm interrupts my flow, forcing me to use even a small part of my secondary focus to move it properly.

Arrows fly at me, thankfully from regular weredeer, not the lethal ones. I dodge them, not even bothering to return fire, still not feeling too well. I stagger slightly, slipping on the mud-covered ground, but quickly regain my balance before the charging monster reaches me.

Mana flows only into my legs, just enough to dodge to the side. Immediately, I cut it off and use a bit of mana to absorb the monster's kinetic energy, propelling myself forward. I stagger once again before regaining my balance. With clenched teeth, I continue to run.

Three weredeer appear some distance ahead of me. I form simple mana orbs around me, spinning them and densifying them, trying to save as much mana as possible. I then start spinning them around my body, making them orbit me like tiny moons, gradually increasing their speed.

They spin faster and faster, accumulating a lot of kinetic energy. When I'm close enough to the monsters, I release them, shooting them like projectiles from a sling. Ten of them fly at the monsters at a terrifying speed, smaller than usual but denser. They pierce the weredeer's skin and exit their bodies on the other side.

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 33]

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 32]

Not having enough time to do it again, I boost my body and jump over the charging remaining monster. While I'm up in the air, I absorb a bit of kinetic energy from the rain and boost the spear I made out of [Armament] into the monster's back.

Now the wounded weredeer turns to me, a red glow covering its body. For half a second, [Disruption] fires up and the monster staggers as if stung after its skill cancels. I dash forward, and the dagger covered in [Oscillation] nearly decapitates it, leaving it hanging by a bit of skin.

But then I run again, ignoring the notification about the kill and dodging arrows or normal weredeer.

The wind continues to threaten to blow me to the ground and the lightning becomes more frequent.

The forest is dark and the branches of the trees are swaying wildly, cracking in the wind.

And I run.

Is it because we made fun of the deer we killed back on the first floor? Because we called him Bambi and did such a bad job skinning him?

After I get out of this, I swear I will kill any monster that has antlers or even reminds me of a deer.

My first meal will be deer steak and I will eat it whole while laughing, then order another one and throw it on the ground.

Damned weredeers.

I wobble from side to side as I walk between trees, a few more small wounds are on my body and even now I feel as if I'm about to pass out as my head keeps ringing and I have to continuously use my skills. While catching my breath, I stop to lean against a tree.

It's already night and I'm mostly navigating with the help of perception that only feels mana and the little light that the moon offers. Unlike Earth, it's bluish, giving the night an unusual hue.

At the edge of my reduced perception, I feel another signature that I identify as a weredeer and stop leaning against the tree, stepping a bit away from it.

One of the mana orbs that hover around me starts orbiting me and slowly increasing its speed. I found it's much better to increase its speed this way instead of using a surge that puts too much pressure on me in this state.

Sure, it's annoying and it takes a bit longer, but the result might be even better than just boosting it. I just anchor the bead to my body and push it to make it spin around me.

I let the weredeer get closer and then sling the mana bead at him. It hits the monster's face, tearing off a chunk of its head as big as my fist. My accuracy is only getting better and it's enough; the monster falls down dead.

[You have defeated a Weredeer - lvl 36]

I already invested my skill point into [Armament], knowing that it would probably have a more difficult bottleneck as I have a feeling that I am closer to leveling up [Kinetic Redistribution]. Also, the second skill is something that I think is better, and I know I would regret, using the easier way to master it instead of doing it my own way.

So even as I barely walk and mana continues to threaten to ravage my body, I keep continuing to absorb the energy of a single raindrop out of the thousands that continue to fall around me.

At some point, I find the corpse of one of the men that was in our group. His body is mangled, limbs torn off, and there isn't enough of his face left for me to identify, but I remember the dagger that lies nearby. I grab it and continue without looking back. The blade still seems to be in good shape.

A few minutes later, I find another corpse. Half of its body is missing, the wound looking similar to the one the sniper's projectiles caused.

It's been a few hours since I concluded this is the work of a human, not a monster. Probably someone paid to deal with the competition. Someone hired to kill the man that led us and to leave no witnesses.

The sniper must also have some ability to at least affect the monsters a little bit and they are not too high level, otherwise we would be dead already. They must have planted the triggering mana projectiles around us as we were pushing forward and then started using the super ranged sniping skill, probably

with a long preparation time or some setback that doesn't allow to use it quickly. Or it's just to mess with us.

I've learned to detect the threads of mana and this way avoided three traps. At the last one, I even climbed on a tree and observed the mana projectile, not too much out of fear to not trigger it, just enough to learn that there are two parts to it.

One of them is a huge amount of mana that is compressed into an elongated sharp shape, somehow made to not leak mana. The other part is the trigger, a mana thread that will activate something that will send the arrow flying at the place where the thread of mana touched the person. I already have multiple ideas of how I can use this to improve my skills or to help me in creating a construct.

Thanks to tracking mana threads, I find the one that is slightly different, even thinner, and leading somewhere else. There are no projectiles around. So I reduce the mana my body radiates. I slow my Mana Heart the same way I did when I killed Emeric, and I reduce the area of my perception by a lot.

And I continue to follow the thread of mana, slowly, carefully, concealed in the rain and the darkness that blankets the area. The wind continues to howl around me, sending leaves swirling and making the branches creak. Soon, I reach a small clearing, tucked away behind a line of trees.

There, I find two people, a man, and a woman, standing in between the wilderness where we went and the village. Even through the rain and darkness, I recognize the figure of one of the men from the group. The vice leader, Bram.

[Blade Sentinel - lvl 51]

[Phantom Sniper - lvl ?]

I take a small step to the side and only too late do I realize that I have torn a mana thread even thinner than the ones from before.

My surge fires up and both parts of my mind focus on redistribution. This time, I don't hesitate and reach out towards the forceful wind that keeps roaring through the area, causing the trees around us to groan under its strength.

I absorb the kinetic energy from the wind, almost instantly filling up the amount I can control.

I hear them scream something and turn towards me. Mana projectiles form around the sniper and the traitorous vice leader charges at me.

When he gets close, he hesitates for a moment, recognizing my face.

I do not.

His head blows off, hit by the kinetic energy I absorbed and I refocus my attention on the sniper.

Chapter 79: The Second Skill Upgrade

Using the remaining kinetic energy, I propel myself forward, my hand holding a knife covered in oscillating mana. I read the direction of the projectiles that the sniper fires at me, a much weaker version of the skills she used to kill so many of the group.

I dodge two and block the last one, barely avoiding breaking my hand. Meanwhile, I once again absorb the energy of the rain and mold it into as thin a cone as I can, shooting it at her. She dodges it but a few orbs of mana start spinning around me faster and faster.

I dodge another projectile and, unable to dodge the second, let it pierce through my thigh and sling a mana orb at her, forcing her to dodge again.

This time, tens of projectiles appear around her and all fly at me. My surge bursts forth and I put everything into [Disruption], causing all the quickly formed projectiles to disappear like candles in the wind.

I sling a few more orbs at her and boost them with surge and even the kinetic energy I absorbed. The trees and the ground around the woman become trashed and multiple projectiles hit her. The woman finally staggers, putting a hand on her chest and then looking at her bloodied palm.

She screams and again tens of projectiles form around her. At that moment, another orb made of mana hits her and she staggers again, half of the projectiles disappearing. Still, she clenches her teeth and the remaining ones fly at me.

Once again, [Disruption] flares up and the projectiles disappear. All other than one that she made denser after seeing me cancel her attack before. The projectile hits my arm, which I barely cover in [Armament], and I hear the bone crack.

The force of the attack sends me to the ground, but I quickly absorb more energy, using it to propel myself back onto my feet and towards the woman who is already preparing for another attack.

Coming at her faster than she expected, I tackle her, both of us rolling on the ground.

A quick jab hits my armored chest and another one is aimed at my crotch. I block this one with my broken hand. Then, I swing my head and hit her nose with it, breaking it in the process, causing blood to splurt out. I repeat it. And again, until another hit nearly breaks my [Armament].

Around my hand, I barely create oscillating mana and stab it into the woman's chest, making it oscillate as wildly as I can, tearing her flesh while her hateful eyes stare at me up until the last moment.

Then she dies.

[You have defeated the Phantom Sniper - lvl 72]

Two level-ups and I put all stat points into constitution, rolling on the ground to lay next to her, my heart beating wildly and mouth gasping for breath.

I rest for a minute while the rain continues to fall on my body and face, washing some of the blood off, then I send a pulse of mana into the surroundings, not feeling any monsters close. Still, I let one part of my mind monitor my surroundings, already knowing about the monsters that can mask their signature.

With the other, I open the notifications.

Congratulations! You have completed the Side quest and received a skill upgrade token. Currently, there are five skills available for upgrade. Choose wisely!

I pause for a second, really wanting to see all the options, but I know I can't right now. I'll check them later to see the possibilities.

Right now I need to get my mana under control. I can't continue to rely on [Focus] to handle it all the time. Even now, one entire [Focus] keeps it at bay and a bit of another as well, not allowing me to use the skills as much as I would like to.

So I glance over the options for [Mana Manipulation].

They are the same as before when I was using my first upgrade token.

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.

Yes, Advanced Mana Manipulation it is.

Half a second after I chose it, the pain hits my body and I groan, feeling it even more because of my pitiful state. My muscles spasm and my brain feels as if someone set it on fire and my heart feels as if it's about to explode out of my chest.

Slowly, after a minute or two, the pain dissipates, leaving me lying there staring at the sky.

These aren't tears. It's the rain. The raindrops.

Yes.

God damn it.

I groan and try to push myself up with my hand, too late remembering that it's broken and a groan of pain escapes my mouth. Great. Just great.

I carefully get up and send a pulse of mana as far as I can. Still no signs of life. I try to move mana in my body, keeping it strengthened. It feels much better than before but it's hard to tell properly. Yet another thing I will have to test later.

Slowly, I move towards the corpse of the woman and start looking through her pockets, being careful not to put too much pressure on my hand. At some point, I even form something like Biscuits' tentacles to open up the pockets.

Damn, I miss that little jerk.

In the end, I become a few gold pieces richer and even find some weird shining stones. I'm not sure what they're for but they crack and turn into the sand after I touch them. Other than that, she doesn't have any documents or identification. Not even any other weapon.

For the last time, I look at her and move towards the corpse of the vice leader of the group whose head I blew off.

I take his short sword that looks of high quality, some silver from his pockets, and his dagger. Before leaving, I look at him one last time and turn around, leaving both corpses behind me.

On my way back, I find no monster, only one more man. He immediately attacks, clearly with the intention to kill, but one of my mana orbs, which now spins much faster than before, pierces through his arm. Then I absorb their kinetic energy and a cone of kinetic energy explodes his leg and the man loses his will to fight, only begging for his life.

He is 10 levels higher, but I'm a terrible matchup for him. His main strategy seems to be using telekinesis and hurling small iron balls, reminiscent of bearings, at me. Boosted by his skill, I can envision them inflicting serious damage. Furthermore, he appears to have literally hundreds of them at his disposal.

As he moved them, he also made them glow in a blue hue, probably combining his telekinesis with something else, but [Disruption] took care of that.

The man is still alive as I get to him, carefully monitoring him with my [Mana Perception].

There are multiple questions I could ask him. For example, I could ask him why he tried to kill me. But the answer is obvious, he was with the two I killed before.

Another question I could ask him is why they attacked the group. Why did they all have to die?

However, there is one thing I'm particularly curious about. Who did it? I want to know information about this person, their power, and the number of their men, in case they decide to cause more problems for me. Other than that, I do not care. I am not interested in the reason why everyone in that group had to die. It's surely something similar to what happened to me when I used to hunt with Aelric.

Before killing him, I get another use out of the man. He already tried to take my life, so I show no mercy. With my improved [Mana Manipulation] and [Disruption], I send my mana inside his body. Unlike Sophie, I do not have [Mana Infusion], but the result is similar.

I use him to practice creating constructs and to test a few theories I have. After the third test, he dies. A temporary construct messes with his mana pathways in a harmful way, causing an uncontrollable flare of mana to damage his insides.

But I learn a lot.

When Ruby appears near me, I attack her, not recognizing her at first, but she just hits my chest, almost gently, sending me staggering backward. Immediately, she gets drenched in the rain but she doesn't seem to mind.

She looks down at the man near my feet and then back at me, seemingly unbothered.

"You look like shit," she says.

Yea, I bet.

"Well, it's raining," she says as if she only noticed it right now. "Are you done here?"

I just nod, too tired to talk.

The redhead then steps near me. My [Mana Perception] fires up and I watch, knowing that something amazing is going to happen.

With me by her side, she takes another step and immense mana erupts into the surroundings. The view in front of us disappears and the world by our sides seems as if shrinking.

The mana, the world, everything moves so crazily and so complexly that I can't even dream to follow right now. My head spins and I have a feeling as if someone pulled a carpet under me and stagger forward. Instead of into the mud, my feet step onto the wooden floor of a nice-looking room that we are inside.

The silence after hearing the thunderstorm and the rain for so long feels deafening.

With a tired sigh, I slide onto a chair nearby, too tired to even care if I am dirtying it because of the mess on me or not.

Then something sounds in my head.

(Asshole!)

The heck!?

Chapter 80: Your world sucks

The small body of the best doggo hits my chest, making me let out a quiet groan of pain. Yet, I still hug the corgi and keep him close to my chest while carefully petting him with my now slightly healed arm.

(Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole!)

Yes, yes, I missed you too.

Also, we will have to put some parental control on your access to the community; you are learning bad words from those guys there.

“Master wanted me to buy this creature from Henry as well.”

Oh no. Do I want to know?

“He did cost 10 gold,” she says anyways.

“How much did you pay for real?”

“Two gold? Henry wanted 4 but I blackmailed him, knowing that he sold you to Emeric to die.”

Damn.

“You must be super rich, why don’t you invite me for dinner?”

“Maybe if you grow your hair a bit and dress up nicely,” she giggles and comes closer to also pet Biscuit and he lets her, just like that.

Huh?

Seeing something on my face, Ruby says, "I fed him a bit from my dinner and he immediately became super friendly."

Biscuit! Stranger danger!

"So how did you find me?"

"Master left a Resonance Imprint on you and gave me your mana signature and I just tracked it."

The heck? That sounds so cool!

"Can you teach it to me?"

"That's what interests you? You are not complaining that we are tracking you or asking why I went to take you back?"

"I expected something like tracking and you either went after me because you wanted something annoying or master told you to do so. It also could be because you felt my state and didn't go to check on me."

But it doesn't matter.

"Please teach me."

"Maybe in the future, I will use it as my bargaining chip," she smirks and lets go of Biscuit who sends a message to her.

(Asshole!)

Good boy! Go and get her!

“Your dog... creature is kinda rude, you know that?”

Hey! He can hear you! Do not listen to her, Biscuit; you are perfect the way you are.

“He keeps saying that, I almost threw him out of the window when he said “Food, Asshole!” but never mind that. We will be leaving Stonehaven.”

“Can you tell me why?”

“Yes, it's because of the war. Frontlines will move here soon enough and Master doesn't want to get caught in all of that. Simple as that.”

I continue to pet the corgi, who is slowly closing his eyes and his breathing is calming as I continue to hold him.

“I heard a few things here and there, but can you tell me who is fighting against who? I would rather have accurate information.”

She thinks for a second and then just nods.

“We are currently what is known as the Mana-Infused kingdom and we are at war with the Solaris Empire and to be honest this kingdom is kinda screwed.”

Yeah, I heard that much. I wait for her to continue.

“The only reason why they didn't attack us properly is because of our Champions.”

“Keiron and Tristan?”

“Yes, the two of them and we also have a few more in their capital.”

I sit up carefully to not wake up Biscuit and ask “They are there in secret or do they know about them?”

“They know about them, but they are hidden. In case the war starts they will mess up their Empire as much as they can. Two Champions should be able to destroy the entire capital in a few minutes if they stop caring about their lives. Millions of people would die instantly.”

She looks at me.

“The problem is that they have something similar. Unlike us, they call them Paragons, but they are the same thing: living weapons capable of destroying entire nations in a moment.”

The floor quest is slowly starting to make more sense.

Floor quest: Witness the end of the world.

“The moment the war starts properly, everyone will lose.” she doesn't smile this time.

“Is it true that the emperor is a mind mage?”

“Yup, the most powerful one that ever lived, most likely. The man is under 40 and controlling their Paragons with his mind. Paragons! And the problem is that he can singlehandedly send them to die, making them not care about that, so that's it.” She moves closer to the fireplace in the corner of the room and sits nearby, still looking at me.

“Your world sucks.”

Surprise appears on her face and then a tiny, almost invisible smile follows it.

“Yes, it does, doesn’t it.”

“People are terrible, drifters are too expensive, and the food costs a farmer's monthly wage.”

Her tiny smile becomes a bit bigger, “Higher-ups are assholes, masters are a pain in the ass, and it's full of people ready to scam you out of a few golds!” she adds.

A few golds? More like 92 golds. But I nod.

“Overall, I would give it a terrible rating and recommend future visitors to avoid it as much as they can.”

In the end, a soft smile gently appears on her lips.

A bit later, Ruby uses her skill again and we appear somewhere high in the mountains. The air here feels a bit thinner, but the moment I exit the room and step onto the small terrace, I fall in love with the view.

I've seen some videos of people having breakfast in the Swiss Alps with an amazing view of mountain tops.

Yeah, they can suck it.

The view is much more beautiful, even the mountains seem to be so much bigger. Vibrant green grass, trees, and the tips of the mountains as if dyed in white snow.

For a few minutes, I just stand there and stare, feeling a sense of calm wash over me.

“Pretty, isn't it?” Ruby joins me.

“Yes,” for the first time in a long while, I feel the corners of my lips lift slightly.

I tried to warn others, but the forum censored most of my messages. I spent the entire daily limit trying to circumvent it, but in the end, I was only able to warn them about the danger and recommend moving away from the borders and the capital city.

After a long time, I also checked the numbers.

Easy difficulty 1638/2000

Normal difficulty 702/1000

Hard Difficulty 293/500

Hell difficulty 53/250

Noticeably, every difficulty seems to have lost some people. Around 100 in easy. Thirty in normal, 30 or so in hard, and 3 people in Hell.

Once again, it makes me curious how many floors the tutorial has. It's hard to guess now, but after the end of the second floor, we should have a better idea.

Now I only have to find out how to survive this war.

From how it looks now, it seems that the Champions and Paragons will go wild and mess up as much as they can while the mad emperor, Sophie lookalike, will mess with the remaining few.

But, can you call that the end of the world?

Just humans will disappear and after a few years, life will continue as the planet will still be here.

I bet the system did cook up something really spicy.

It fills me with curiosity and worries at the same time. The end of this floor will probably be the most dangerous, just like the end of the first floor.

Well, at least I have some time and the option to get stronger.

Lvl 39

Strength: 14

Dexterity: 15

Constitution: 46

Mana: 100

My stats are nice to look at, but I need to level up a bit more to get those spicy side quest rewards.

Floor quest:

Witness the end of the world.

Rewards:

Skill upgrade token

20 stat points

Increased daily limit of community usage

Tutorial Difficulty change token

Side quest: Reach level 50

Reward: Trait strengthening token

I still haven't received another side quest instead of the one I got my skill upgrade from, but as always, I can only wait and train.

Even now, I continue to practice moving my mana. With upgraded [Mana Manipulation] it has become much better and I can somewhat ignore the missing mana circuit part in my missing arm.

It's still a mess but it's much better now and my flow has improved.

Somehow, I also think that dealing with all these troubles with the missing part of the mana circuit is helping me level up [Mana Manipulation] a bit more. Still, I want my arm back.

So, Lily, you'd better put some effort into it so I can freeload on your amazing skill.

I also found out a bit more about healers and it looks like they are totally like nobles among gifted people. Most of the time, powerful nobles snatch them up, the king also keeps one or two, and the rest are taken away by the temple that uses them to prolong the lives of people that are rich enough to pay.

Yup, it seems like healers can get to such a level that they are able to prolong lives. If Lily gets back to Earth, she will either become insanely rich or they will try to kidnap her or use her.

But for that, they will have to go through me.

Now, seeing how useful healers can be, I am even more decided to keep her close to myself and risk a bit more to keep her alive. At least I will try. I am not that good at dealing with people.

But hey, she can use me to stay alive and I will use her for healing. It's a win-win situation.

I just need to hope that she will see it that way as well, and for that, I need to become more powerful. Strong enough that she will feel safe next to me so I can keep her by my side without letting anyone lay hands on her or take her away.

So, that's that. I know what I want, and I'm sticking to the plan. One step at a time, let's see where this crazy tutorial takes us.