

Tutorial 91

Chapter 91: It's your turn

"Hello, Nathaniel," Kim says quietly. From his stance, it's easy to see how nervous Ruby's master makes him.

Moreover, is she collecting us like Pokémon? At this rate, she'll collect us all in no time.

The gray-haired woman's eyes scan me over, and her brow furrows a bit.

"Ruby," she says simply while walking outside. The red-haired woman gestures for us to follow her as well.

There, the older woman swings her arm and a tear in the air appears with a sound akin to tearing iron. Inside the tear is a different place, and I notice monsters.

[Ember Serpent - lvl ?]

[Mireblood Troll - lvl ??]

[Thornclaw Lynx - lvl ?]

And there is also this one. [Vortexfang Hydra - lvl ???] Oh boy, I guess that makes her stronger than a triple question mark.

Then my eyes move back to the Hydra. The scales, a haunting blend of deep green and blue, are practically pulsating with mana, a tangible aura of energy that sends shivers down my spine. The air around the beast crackles, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

The way it moves, with a grace that betrays its enormous size shows its strength. The ground shakes with each step it takes, and I can see the raw power in the way its muscles ripple under the scales.

It's too strong, way too strong. I've faced my share of monsters before, but this is on a whole different level. I've got a sinking feeling that I'm way over my head here.

[Focus] I activate my skill and look away, still breathing heavily and relieved that there is an even stronger monster between me and the Hydra.

That monster, resembling an older woman, steps inside the tear, and the Hydra immediately attacks her only to be killed a moment later.

I don't even know what happened, but Hydra dies as if someone much bigger grabbed it and tore it to pieces. Pulling out its heads, its legs, and pieces of its body in the same way you tear paper to pieces. Once again, I am reminded of how terrifying the woman in front of me is.

She then reaches out with her hand and throws one monster through the tear, where it lands just steps away from us, also terrified and not even thinking about attacking.

[Thunderhowl Warg - lvl ?]

Its body hums with a subtle but distinct mana. It's certainly powerful, maybe even more so than me, but it doesn't feel impossible, unlike the Hydra. The air around it tingles with the electricity it generates, and every time it quietly howls, it's like a crack of thunder that echoes through the air.

The woman steps back through the tear and closes it. I feel a hint of mana from her towards Ruby.

"Have him fight the monster until I am back, short pauses only. Similar level to this thing," she looks at the warg that just squeals and steps even further away from her, "after a while, pick stronger ones."

She then slashes her hand through the air and disappears into another tear.

"Ok kids, the master left me coordinates and I will be picking more, so get to work," Ruby just says and steps back, ignoring the extremely confused gazes of newcomers.

Well, if this isn't interesting.

I create an [Armanent] in the shape of an arm and step towards the warg that is slowly getting braver and braver now that the woman is gone. Its teeth start showing more, and the electricity crackles around its black fur. It's massive, like a truck.

I dash at it after absorbing some energy from the wind and propel myself ahead. The monster howls and a lightning strike flies at me, instantly getting disappeared by [Disruption]. Seeing that it doesn't work, it attacks again, this time its strike is stronger, and I use [Mana Surge] to boost [Distruption], canceling it as well.

Finally, it dashes at me, and I absorb some of its energy. I focus on absorbing it only from one of its legs, making it stagger a bit. Then, I grab its head with my arm made out of mana, which has grown in size. I squeeze, burrowing fingers made of mana inside its eyes. Then, the absorbed kinetic energy from the wind shoots at the monster, crippling one of its legs, and I let go, having to avoid its electric attack.

The monster continues to thrash around while lighting sparks around it. I feel its mana move and jump to the side, my body strengthened by my reinforcement construct passively, and now even by me boosting it actively.

I feel strong, I feel fast.

I run around the monster, dodging strikes that come from the ground, looking like vines made of mana crackling with lightning all over it.

The warg dashes at me, somehow sensing my position even without its eyes. Its mouth is massive and full of sharp teeth. At the same time, the vines attack me from all sides and I pause, burrowing my feet into the ground and [Disruption] fires up at full power boosted by surge. Yet, it's unable to cancel the attack.

The monster is learning.

The world becomes black and white, and even the crackling of the lightning becomes quieter as I enter deep [Focus]. One part of my mind handles creating a mana arm and sword that appears in my hand. I

grab it with both hands, the real one and the one made out of mana. Its color is that of a darker shade of blue as I make it as dense as possible.

Another part of my mind creates wildly oscillating mana along the blade. I sharpen my focus, I feel the mana around me, and I calm down.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I dash and slash against the vine, cutting it apart. Another dash to the side and another one gets slashed apart like it's nothing. My body is heating up as mana rushes through it, and thanks to my construct, I feel stronger and faster than ever before.

It's addicting. It's dangerous. But it feels right.

The sword in my hand lengthens, and [Oscillation] roars up, covering the entire blade. I slash again. The mana moves so easily, it feels as if it should be like this all the time, as it's in harmony with my mind, my thoughts, and my wishes.

I dash towards the wolf and jump to the side, then over another lightning attack. When the warg dashes at me, I absorb my own energy and propel myself backward. The sword in my arms changes to a massive spear that I throw at the warg, boosting it with the strongest surge I've ever done. Yet my body handles it.

It buries itself deep inside the monster's chest and a long howl sounds into the surrounding, followed by lightning falling down from the cloudless sky, right at me.

I lift up my arm made of mana and send [Disruption] towards it, boosting it by as much mana as I can handle. In the end, my translucent arm disappears together with the lightning, and I turn to the bleeding monster.

Orbs start spinning around my body, big as tennis balls, and I continuously boost them by redistribution, absorbing the energy from the wind, and swaying grass, from the dying monster's last movements.

The orbs sling at the warg, obliterating its head into small pieces.

[You have defeated a Thunderhowl Warg - lvl 84]

[Lvl 51 > Lvl 52]

Quickly, I glance over the notifications and invest my stat points.

[Focus - lvl 21 > Focus - lvl 22]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 25 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 26]

[Armament - lvl 21 > Armament - lvl 22]

[Oscillation - lvl 15 > Oscillation - lvl 16]

There is also a new side quest:

Side quest: Reach level 75

Rewards: Upgrade token

Huh? Not skill upgrade token, just upgrade token? Does it mean I can upgrade anything I want? Class? Skill? Trait? Maybe? Interesting. Very interesting.

"Another one?" Ruby asks with a small smile on her lips. I guess she was bored too.

“Do you have to ask?” I throw back at her and the smile becomes bigger. She knows me at least that much.

“I tried to be nice, I was told that I was acting like an... well, as something unladylike, I refuse to repeat such a word. You might know the guy who told me that.”

Obviously, I know him. It was me!

The air in front of Ruby ripples and a monster appears out of nowhere, confused and looking around. The redhead woman's skill is much more delicate and relies on technique instead of the brute force of her master.

[Thunderhowl Warg - lvl ?]

The warg slowly starts looking around while letting out quiet growls. Electricity starts flickering on its fur and a sense of danger fills out the surroundings.

“Hadwin, it's your turn.” I turn to the man.

The older man's eyes look as if they are about to fall off, and even though he does that, I feel him charging more and more mana, also getting ready to fight.

I will help him, but for now, it will be better to try to make the man stronger as it will help me on the third floor as well or even at the end of this one.

But hey, why are you looking at me like that? We had a deal, didn't we? Well, we missed the regret bus. Next stop: Acceptance!

Chapter 92: Shameless

POV Dennis Dalton

I continue watching as Nathaniel and Hadwin grapple with the monstrous wolf-like creature, right after Nathaniel killed the first one.

He's just killed a monster with a question mark over its head. Alone. Just how strong is he?

(He's crazy), I hear Aaron say in my mind, using our [Connection].

I can't help but agree. Ever since two days before the end of the first floor, I've held a dislike for him. The memory of his cold eyes lingers as a bad memory.

(Damn it, why did we have to end up here? Who the hell was that crazy woman?) I send.

(Dude, I wasn't even able to see a question mark over her head, she's scary) I once again find myself in agreement with my few minutes younger brother.

(Let's try to keep a low profile as much as we can. We can also suck up to Hadwin a bit; the old man might still think he can manipulate us.)

(Yes, let's do that!)

The giant monster hits Hadwin with its paw, sending him rolling on the ground where he slowly gets back on his feet, seemingly not seriously hurt.

(Damn, Haddy is even tougher than before!) I hear from Aaron.

The warg shoots some lightning at the older man which dissipates, and soon he charges again, having no other choice as Nathaniel continues to watch him.

(Do you think this psycho will want us to fight as well?)

Just thinking about this sends goosebumps all over my body. I watch as the warg bites at Hadwin, only to be repelled by some of Nathaniel's skills. Then the translucent arm that he has instead of his missing left arm disappears, and two massive arms made out of mana appear at his back and reach towards the monster, which is too slow to dodge.

The massive arms hold the monster while Nathaniel says something to Hadwin, and the man attacks again.

(Maybe he can power-level us; he's helping Hadwin a bit.)

(We can suck up to him, apologize, and stuff. That could be good for us; and we can be quite useful.) I try to say more, but then I hear someone else interrupting our connection.

(Asshole!)

(What the heck?)

(The heck?)

Only then do I realize that the connection is coming from the cheeky corgi that Nathaniel likes so much.

How is something like that even possible?!

Finally, the warg dies.

[You have defeated a Thunderhowl Warg - lvl 82]

Hmm, how to say it... I expected Hadwin to do a bit better? Sure, the monster is well over my level, but it's just a normal one, not a "named" one. Maybe I'm the problem?

"God damn it," the older man is covered in sweat and breathing wildly while holding his fractured arm.

So much complaining for such a small wound. You have a skill, it'll heal.

Hypocrite? Who?

"Kim, your level?" I ask, feeling rather shameless. Ruby gives me an interesting look. Yup, I know, it's super rude to ask.

"38," he answers simply, without hesitation.

Hmm, that could be considered quite good as Hadwin is 34.

"We're both level 24!" Out of nowhere, one of the twins says.

The heck? Who asked? Why are they telling me?

When I glance over at them, they're smiling slightly, trying to look as friendly as possible. Oh, I see.

They want to get on board papa Nat's train, don't they? Okay, let's see.

"Skills?" I ask, showing them that I can be even more shameless. There's a bit more hesitation than with Kim, but they quickly answer without consulting each other. At least not out loud; I'm sure they can talk through their link.

"[Connection], [Mirrored Mending], [Haste], [Mana Manipulation], [Sensory Deception]."

Oh boy, that's even more than poor Hadwin and they're at a much lower level. And they all sound so interesting, so cool!

Okay, it's decided; I'll keep them.

"You know what to expect, right?"

"Yes," says one of them, and I look to confirm. I'm satisfied with what I see.

There's no trust, no high expectations, just two people who want to use me and know they'll have to pay for that. At the same time, they know they can't expect too much from me. There's no way I'd risk my life for them.

It's something hard to balance, but hey, let's try and see.

"Ruby, can you bring out a weaker one for the boys, one a bit stronger for Kim and Hadwin, and a stronger one for me?" I can help them, but I need to level up too, don't I?

Upgrade token is something I absolutely want to get before this floor ends, and I have a feeling that time is drawing near.

"Master said only for you,"

"Pretty please?"

"..."

Well, I tried.

"Is there something you want?" I ask.

The redhead woman ponders a bit and a small smile blooms on her face, "Let's say you owe me, okay? And I'll pick what I want later."

"Sounds good," I respond. I'm sure she won't ask for something too outrageous, but still, they'd better appreciate what I'm doing!

"Before we start, what level was that Hydra back then and the Mireblood Troll?"

"Hmm? If I had to guess, the Hydra was around 350, and the troll maybe 160?"

So it's not like over 100 equals one question mark, over 200 equals two, and over 300 equals three. Maybe up to 150 equals one mark, 150 - 300 equals two marks, and 300 - 450 equals three marks?

Damn, that would make Ruby's master over 450 and Ruby over 150 level? Heck, maybe there are 4 question marks, and her master over 600?

Well, that's scary... That's a lot of stats and experience. It's a league I can't even properly imagine right now.

What level Champions and Paragons are? This is something I'm super curious about, now that I'm sure Ruby's master is someone in a similar league to them. Hopefully. Otherwise, it would be too scary to imagine people even stronger than her.

Why the hell are there such strong people and monsters on the second floor? Isn't it bugged?

Sure, we don't have to destroy the world, we just have to survive until the end. Maybe it's just to show us what will be possible in the future? To set goals for ourselves and to etch into our minds what could happen to Earth in case we return and are able to retain our powers.

That sounds plausible.

Up until now, the system hasn't been too nice or helpful, but there's some twisted logic to everything we go through. One of the biggest hints is the name "Tutorial."

We're being trained, being prepared for something. Something that will likely happen after we return to Earth. Maybe the real "game" will start then?

Well, anyway, we still have a few years to go.

[Stone Troll - lvl 23]

[Blood Troll - lvl 46]

Ruby summons the monsters. The first one is for the twins and the second one is for Hadwin and Kim. I once again ponder the place where she is "taking" them from. She got the coordinates from her master, but there is a weird mix of monsters.

Is it a regular forest somewhere? Is it something else?

"This one is for you. It's close to one hundred, so be careful."

Before the monster attacks me, I ponder about how she knows. The natives of this floor don't seem to be able to see the text hovering over the monsters or humans' heads the way we people from the tutorial do. So, maybe they have come up with their own ways to measure it? Maybe by checking the mana signature?

[Ember-eye Warg - lvl ?]

I jump backwards as the monster lunges at the place where I used to stand. It's smaller than the warg before, but much faster, and my [Kinetic Redistribution] doesn't seem to slow it at all. It also doesn't absorb any energy, and my [Perception] feels some sort of barrier close to its skin.

I continue to observe it, but I'm unable to discern much more. It seems to disrupt my [Perception], and when I shoot small beads made of mana at it, they disappear after touching the barrier, seemingly working in a similar way to [Disruption].

Damn, that's quite an interesting way to use it. Are there any advantages in comparison to the way I use it?

Unable to fully dodge, I create armor around my body, which disappears after the monster's shoulder hits me and sends me rolling on the ground. I absorb more energy from the wind, from the swaying grass and use it to propel myself high into the air.

The monster's orange eyes continue to track my movements as I start falling down.

My translucent left arm made of mana continues to grow more and more dense, taking on a darker blue color. I create a single orb that I make orbit around myself while I feed it more and more mana, making it denser and stronger. Surge activates, and the orb turns into a blurry shape, seemingly instead of an orb orbiting me, there is a hoop around my body.

I feel a wave of disrupting mana from the monster the moment I land, but I shoot mine against it. The skills collide, the monster's winning, but lessening the impact of its disrupting skill on me.

I dash at the monster and then, instead of slinging an orb at it, I absorb all the kinetic energy from the orb that was spinning around me, immediately filling the amount I can handle.

The orb elongates and turns into a spear made out of dense mana, and I use the absorbed kinetic energy to propel myself right at the monster.

Chapter 93: Blazing Confrontation

I boost the spear with absorbed kinetic energy and stab right at the monster. Its disruptive field flares up and the spear becomes less dense, but the warg is unable to totally cancel out the fast stab, and the spear goes right into its chest.

A loud howl echoes through the surroundings as the spear in my hand, along with my left arm made out of mana, disappears.

But I already expected that.

I use the remaining energy I hold inside my body, which the monster wasn't able to absorb, to propel myself closer and kick the wound on its chest.

Another howl ensues, and I [Focus] as the monster attacks. I read its movement, its repositioning, where the warg looks, its open mouth, the twist of the neck.

I duck right under the bite and with my body strengthened by mana and constructs, I kick the wound again, this time with my knee.

Immediately, I fire up my [Disruption] and boost it with [Mana Surge] as much as I can, sending a pulse of disrupting energy against the monster's neck, using the moment of distraction as it howls in pain after my attack.

The field around the neck disappears, and my hand coated in oscillating mana cuts in, wreaking havoc on the monster's flesh. The warm blood spills on me, and I am forced to dash backward, stepping even further back.

The grass in a massive area stops moving and the wind quiets as I absorb all the energy while making a slow circle around the monster, having time on my side now that it's bleeding so much.

Slow breath in. Breath out.

Calmly, I force my heated body into a state of calmness as I wait, carefully observing the wounded monster.

Then, I reach out towards the sun and the warmth of its rays that fall to the ground, trying to absorb the thermal energy it provides.

I fail, and my hold on kinetic energy loosens. The grass starts swaying again, the wind blows again, and at the same moment, the monster attacks. The field of disrupting mana around it is already gone, replaced by smoke that slowly flows out of the monster's fur.

The smoke is dark black with tints of gray and it leaves a trail behind the monster as it dashes at me.

The moment it gets close, I send all the absorbed kinetic energy at its head which disappears, turning into smoke.

What the heck?

I absorb more and quickly move to the side. Two massive mana arms form from my back and push against the monster that turns its entire body into smoke.

[Disruption] fires up and the monster materializes again, to my left. Immediately, it attacks again, biting at me. I use [Disruption] quickly, followed by a stab with a spear made of mana.

Finally, the attack lands and the spear goes through its neck.

I continuously disrupt its mana and that continues to cancel the monster's attempts to attack or run. I shoot a cone of absorbed kinetic energy, exploding its head. The smoke disappears and the dead body falls to the ground.

[You have defeated an Ember-eye Warg - lvl 89]

[Disruption - lvl 8 > Disruption - lvl 9]

[Mana Surge - lvl 7 > Mana Surge - lvl 8]

Damn, these skills are getting more and more exotic.

Moreover, trying to absorb thermal energy from the sun's rays might not be a good idea. The difficulty seems to be too high for now.

But I'll get there. Soon, the power of the sun will be in the palm of my hand!

While catching my breath, I look around. The twins are already done with their monster. They seem to be using mental attacks to confuse the monster and then using their speed and amazing coordination to finish it. I wasn't able to catch much during my fight, but they seem to have a solid base.

But the most amazing is Kim. He continues to do what I call cheating and abusing his skills. First, he takes out a bunch of small orbs made of some durable metal, which seems to be basic for people with telekinesis here.

What's surprising is how skillfully he moves them around.

I don't know if it's inspired by me or if he did it before, but the orbs continue to spin around him. He seemingly anchors them to him in a similar way I do and then slings them at the monster with an accuracy that is much better than mine.

The monster he and Hadwin fight is already blind and there is a huge number of wounds on its neck.

Then the 15-year-old boy uses his second skill - [Gravity Well]. First, I feel him creating something I don't know what to call other than a tether that connects the orbs and the monster's head.

Then he uses the skill on the orbs. They slow down and it seems to take more mana from him to move them.

Did he make them heavier?

The next moment, he does something that feels like turning a switch while releasing the orb. They get an insane boost in speed and fly right at the monster as if pulled by the tether connecting them to its head.

Hundreds of small orbs made of metal literally delete the monster's head from existence and the level 46 Blood Troll dies.

Just from this short show, I can see how much effort he put in, all the training behind it, and the sleepless nights spent thinking about the best ways to utilize his skills.

"They aren't that bad, and you drifters have really weird ways to use your gifts," Ruby joins me. Then she adds, "I did get one monster for Biscuit too."

You what?

I quickly look around, finding Biscuit battling a level 10 hedgehog nearby.

What the heck?

"Don't look at me like that, Nat, I am bored too."

Don't bully the poor doggo only because you are bored!

Fortunately, Biscuit is putting on a good fight. Giving up on using arms, he made three tentacles out of purple mana that now seem to be darker than before and continues to attack the level 10 hedgehog.

The hedgehog just rolled into a ball, unnaturally sharp spikes sticking out; I even feel some mana on them.

Obviously, the best doggo on the second floor doesn't give up and starts hitting the ground under the hedgehog, aiming to make it roll over instead of attacking its spikes.

Smart boy!

At that moment, spikes elongate and one of them even reaches the corgi, stabbing its leg a tiny bit and drawing out a drop of blood, before quickly retracting while the hedgehog continues to hiss and jump on the spot.

The best doggo looks down at a drop of blood on its leg and then back at the hedgehog.

Oh boy.

Immediately, a cute small growl escapes Biscuit's maw and he barks. Five tentacles appear, growing from its back, quickly growing bigger while spinning wildly.

Even Biscuit's eyes seem to take on a bit of a purple glow, and he moves closer, thrashing the ground and the hedgehog, continuously pumping more and more mana into the tentacles, making them denser and bigger.

When he finally calms down, there is nothing left of the hedgehog and he looks towards me.

(Gone) I hear in my mind.

Yup, good job, you defeated it!

(Food Gone)

“...”

God damn it, Biscuit.

The monster I'm fighting now is slightly weaker than the warg I fought before, but it's a monster that uses fire attacks.

I was able to ask Ruby to do it for me and she actually did so. I feel that I owe her once again. I truly appreciate the things she does for me. After spending some time together, we learned a bit more about each other's personalities and learned to respect them.

Ruby doesn't blabber that much about things I'm not interested in, and I try to entertain her a bit when she feels bored. I talk to her, and give her my opinions, feeling much more comfortable about our conversations now.

I cancel out these thoughts and focus back on the monster in front of me, still surprised by the variety of monsters from this place.

[Scorching Salamander - lvl ?]

I dodge its burst of fire, feeling the heat on my skin even though I'm protected by [Armament]. At the same time, I reach out towards the flames and try to absorb their energy. I [Focus] and try to apply everything I've learned up until now about redistribution and fire attacks.

I move my mana differently than when using [Kinetic Redistribution], all because of all the testing I've done, all the nights I didn't sleep and kept practicing on the fireplace, on the flame radiating from the glowing mana crystal. All the tests I have done in the darkness of the tunnels.

I fail and my mana shatters in the air.

The salamander collects mana inside its body and then releases it all at once, molding it in a confusing way.

Instead of a fire attack, a strong flash of light comes into existence, blinding me and making me close my eyes and rely on [Perception].

I continue to track the monster's mana, its position, and the way it uses its skill, and I do it until the massive area around us is rid of grass and the ground glows as if it's made out of lava. The air wavers, showing how much heat there is.

And at that moment, I finally reach out towards the wisp of the monster's attack and absorb it, hold it, mold it, and release it while my mind goes into overdrive.

Finally, a notification sounds in my mind.

Chapter 94: Milestone reached

First, I release the absorbed thermal energy in an uncontrolled explosion of heat. Then, I dash towards the salamander, covering my entire body and head with pale blue armor.

A sword made of mana appears in my hands. The sword has a blade longer than me, and I coat it in widely oscillating mana, straining my mind and [Focus].

The heat becomes stronger closer to the monster, and it even tries to blind me with another flash, but I'm still keeping my eyes closed since the first flash, and continue to track it with [Perception] only.

[Disruption] activates, canceling some flames and the lava-like skill that covers the monster's body, making it more durable. A sword with an oscillating blade cuts through the monster's head, killing it instantly, and I jump far back to exit the still-hot area while canceling out my skills.

Good, let's see.

Your skill [Kinetic Redistribution] evolved into [Redistribution].

[Kinetic Redistribution - lvl 13 > Redistribution - lvl 8]

[You have defeated a Scorching Salamander - lvl 83]

[Lvl 52 > Lvl 53]

Not again. My levels!

Sure, I know that my skill upgraded to a better version of it - or combined with a new skill I acquired and the higher-tiered skill couldn't just stay on the same level. It's not properly showing my mastery over it.

But damn it stings.

Another thing is that this time it was easier than before, clearly the effect of my new passive skill—Cerebral Harmony—showing. Manipulating my mana just feels much better, much more connected to my thoughts and to my will.

It was a good decision to pick it, even though I am still not over losing Adaptive Physiology - that skill sounds so goddamn good.

To try it out, I reach out towards the field of molten ground and absorb some of the thermal energy that still radiates into the surroundings. It feels so different and yet so similar to the old skill. I mold the mana and the [Redistribution] helps me to collect it, and turn it into a small flame that flickers on top of my palm.

Immediately, I realize something amazing.

The flame vanishes and I absorb all the kinetic energy I can, the grass stops swaying and the wind becomes calmer. Then I turn all that kinetic energy into a thermal one while my heart is beating wildly from the excitement.

The efficiency is terrible, the waste is huge, it's slow, and feels bad to use. But I do it and instead of a thin cone of kinetic energy, I release a cone of heated air that flickers and burns more of the grass.

With excitement that I haven't felt in a while, I turn to Ruby.

"Hey, do you have more of these salamanders?"

POV Sophie Martinez

"She is here, we have to go!"

"How the hell did she find us and what does she want now? We didn't do anything to catch her interest!"

"It doesn't matter. Guards won't slow her for too long, just grab what you can and get ready for [Transport]."

I watch people with two question marks over their heads panic. The people I thought of as being so strong, now seem like normal humans, losing control, screaming, panicking. I and the others are led to a room in the far corner of the facility, and I make sure to hold Izzy's hand firmly.

“Leave behind the spell of Disruption, we can't allow her to track us!”

More screaming, more panicking. Then I feel the ground shaking, the air itself feels heavy and it's getting hard to move. Enchantings on the wall start glowing all around the facility. Defensive enchantments they were so proud of.

Another wave of shakes and more screaming and the enchantments start to flicker and slowly lose their glow.

Finally, an extremely difficult set of spells fire up into existence and I feel getting transferred somewhere else.

Only a third of us make it, even losing one of the people that I couldn't see the level of. Paragon of the Empire.

“We have to report this, the emperor needs to know,” Natasha says, her voice shaking, so unlike her usually calm self.

Only then did I realize that we are not in the kingdom anymore, we are in the empire led by the mind-mage emperor.

The secret facility in the kingdom's heart, which used to hide the paragon and empire's spies, now deserted and destroyed.

Five more level-ups later and 15 more points in mana, I give it a long thought.

People here usually don't put that many stats points into mana. It seems that spreading your stats evenly is the most often used solution, sometimes making some stat a bit higher.

Warriors usually go 30% strength, 30% dexterity, 30% constitution, and 10% mana. Some of them, based on their classes, might go 20% mana or slightly higher into other stat, but that's it.

As for mages, they usually try to go 1 point mana, 1 point constitution to handle it. Sometimes they go 1.5 mana and 1 constitution. Everything over it seems to be rare.

So my stats are currently like this:

Strength: 17

Dexterity: 18

Constitution: 53

Mana: 165

That means I am putting 3 stats into mana and 1 into constitution. Yet, it still feels doable but everyone keeps looking at me like I'm a dumbass. You are the dumb ones, not me!

So yea, they might be a tiny bit right but there are a few things that work for me.

My trait, Mana Circuit, allows me to handle mana better.

[Focus] takes over when my body is struggling.

[Mana Manipulation] helps me handle it.

Reinforcement (Construct) takes a chunk of mana and passively deals with it instead of me.

And last, my passive skills, Mana Flow (rare) and Cerebral Harmony (rare). Up until now, I was offered many different choices, yet I still doubled up on mana-related ones and probably only thanks to that I can handle more of it, and my mana stat is higher than it should be at my level.

Yet I feel that I am still lacking, even with my skills improving.

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 22

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 26

Perception - Lvl 15

Oscillation - Lvl 16

Redistribution - Lvl 9

Armament - Lvl 22

Mana Surge - Lvl 9

Disruption - Lvl 9

Yes, a few of them have super high potential but I can't help but feel greedy, starving for something that finally and for the first time allows me to completely use my reserves.

But step by step, the next goal is rewards for this side quest. I already have a few ideas on how to use the upgrade token.

Kim is doing really well and quickly growing. In the past few days, he even seems to have become friendlier with others, especially thanks to Hadwin, who to them seems to be someone older, and smarter and they can't help but look up to him slightly, even the twins.

All of them are young men, boys, still affected by thinking from back on Earth where it's normal to show respect to the elders and maybe even listen to them.

But it's not just it. I can see Hadwin smartly dealing with them. A compliment here and there, help here, every time seemingly honestly interested and listening to them when they complain or being happy with them.

Partially it's a mask he puts on but I see that from a small part it's the way he is and I realize that there might be some truth to the words he told to me.

Yet, these two little twin jerks better not think they can trick me. I'm not as gullible as Hadwin.

Overall, this all is good for me as they are getting trained to work together.

With Hadwin in the role of tank, the twins can use their skills to confuse the enemy keeping the group connected telepathically. While Kim fills the ranged support role.

The 15-year-old boy even learned to use [Gravity well] to affect only the monsters. Unlike me, who is using so many skills, it seems that he is trying to focus on his two favorite ones and strengthen them and make them as versatile as possible.

It's not a bad idea.

I close the community after checking on others. Two more people from Hell difficulty died. We don't know who, only learning about it thanks to the number that now shows two people less:

Hell difficulty 51/250

Over the duration of the second floor, we came to the decision that there are probably 10 groups in Hell difficulty, each starting on the first floor with around 25 people.

WhiteWing of the 1st group with 15 people.

IDK of the second group with 4 people.

Group 4 with 10 people and one corgi.

Alone in group 6 with Savant being the only one remaining.

TheGuild of the 8th group with 9 people.

That means there are 13 more people we don't know about as they never used the community.

There are most likely some groups that got killed off in their entirety but yet there are still 13 more people in Hell difficulty and it makes me think about what might have disallowed them to enter the community.

Hours turn into days and we fall into a nice schedule. Wake up, train, fight monsters, eat, fight monsters, rest, fight monsters, dinner, sleep.

That's it. It's nice but only until we get the message from the tutorial.

Attention, a milestone reached. Entry into Irreversible Narrative Progression has been detected for all the groups. In accordance, the Community Interface will now be deactivated for all groups within Hell Difficulty of the 5th round of the Tutorial.

Chapter 95: Restored

Attention, a milestone reached. Entry into Irreversible Narrative Progression has been detected for all the groups. In accordance, the Community Interface will now be deactivated for all groups within Hell Difficulty of the 5th round of the Tutorial.

Well, that's interesting, isn't it? It seems that the end of the second floor is getting closer and closer.

“Nathaniel, did you get the notification as well?” Kim moves closer to me, breathless and with small wounds all over his body. I also feel that he is under the effect of his [Gravity Well], using it to increase gravity on him and to train.

He still doesn't feel as comfortable with me and I see that he is still not over Kevin's death. But I guess that's something only time will solve.

“Did you try to access the community?” I ask.

He nods, “I can't join it and Aaron and Dennis are the same.”

I've already tried it too, and I had the same result as he did. That's it, I guess. More information would be nice, but it just wouldn't be the system we love and hate. Mostly hate. My level is currently 68 so I still need a bit more for that side quest.

Side quest:

Reach level 75

Rewards:

Upgrade token

And as for the main quest.

Floor quest:

Witness the end of the world.

It talks only about witnessing. The first floor's floor quest was to survive.

So does it mean witnessing is safer? Or is it just the weird way the system said it? Another thing is, is the end of the world the same for every group in hell difficulty? There could be things that they or we do that would change it for the group and blocking the community probably serves to make us focus on our quest.

Overall, the community feels more like moral support than a place to share information. Sure, we can exchange tidbits of info but the system censors a lot of it. So I have a feeling that the community serves just as a place to vent and not feel alone.

Still, would the system be so caring after putting us here and in such danger?

Well, there is no time to worry about things I can't change.

"Ruby, level 110 for me, if you will," I ask the redhead.

I just need to become stronger, prepare as much as I can, and then give it my all.

But first, the goal is to level up and improve my skills as much as I can.

[Shadewalker Panther - lvl ?]

The Shadewalker Panther emerges, its sleek figure slowly becoming visible. Its fur is a deep midnight black as if absorbing light rather than reflecting it. Its lean, muscular body moves with graceful stealth, each step soft and calculated.

The panther's eyes gleam a vibrant green, radiating an eerie glow. Its tail sways low and controlled, a silent metronome ticking off the seconds until an attack.

What I can feel from it could be best described as lethal elegance.

The monster immediately charges at me, running as if it's floating, yet moving with terrifying speed.

I slide inside the comfortable [Focus] and the world loses its colors, only mana remaining colorful. [Perception] warns me as I feel the panther collect mana on the end of its tail.

A shield made out of [Armament] appears in front of me, big enough to cover my entire body, and the next second the attack hits it, leaving a deep gouge in it.

At the same moment, I feel mana from my shadow. It swells and the panther jumps from it, all with terrifying speed.

[Redistribution] fires up immediately, yet I still get thrown away, hit by one of the panther's paws carrying much more strength than expected from its lean figure.

I let myself be thrown away and roll on the ground a few times before jumping back on my feet. The mana moves in my shadow once more and I change absorbed kinetic energy into thermal, sending vibrant yellow flame right at the panther.

The monster opens its mouth and eats it.

What?

Another attack with its paw and I block it with my arm made of mana, still getting thrown away. As if making fun of me by using the same strategy, my shadow swells once again but when I turn to it, there is nothing.

Even the panther's presence disappears and I can't see it with [Perception] and not even with my eyes.

Five orbs made of mana appear around me and I make them spin. The panther uses one of the orb's shadows and jumps right at me and at the same time, [Disruption] hits him, slowing him down. My arm made of mana expands and grabs the monster that starts scratching it widely, leaving deep gouges in the arm.

Yet, before one of the orbs hits him, he disappears once more, even under the disrupting effect of my mana.

Two more attacks fly at me and I dodge them, slinging one of the orbs in that direction but missing.

Once more the panther disappears.

This time I dash right towards the small wisp of mana that I track to the tiny shadow of one leaf of grass swaying in the wind.

The world feels as if coming to a stop as I absorb as much energy from the swaying grass and wind and at the same time [Disruption] activates, boosted massively by [Mana Surge].

The panther appears, immediately attacking me, and its tail swings, sending some slashing attack at me that disappears in the disruption field around me. At the same time, a thin cone as thick as my arm shoots towards the panther. It consists of a bright yellow flame and the panther eats it again.

At that moment another cone hits him, this time made out of kinetic energy and it blows off a piece of his neck.

The beautiful monster with fur dark as the night sky tries to disappear again but my [Disruption] knows what to expect. I feel the pattern of his skill and find the weakest part that I disrupt, making it fail to trigger, the skill falling like a house of cards.

Once again, another cone of kinetic energy hits the monster, and the orb made of mana expands next to him, releasing thin tendrils of mana covered in wildly oscillating energy, leaving deep gouges in the monster's skin.

The panther's eyes glow in a green color and he disappears one more time, this time into its own shadow, only to reappear again, healed, but much smaller than before.

A few attacks shoot at me and he starts running away, jumping from one shadow of the grass to another, moving terrifyingly fast.

“Woah, what an annoying guy,” I hear Ruby say, as she transfers her voice for me to hear even though she is standing so far.

Then the panther gets engulfed in her mana and appears next to me. Confused but immediately trying to run away only to be grabbed by my mana arms and his head squeezed.

[You have defeated a Shadewalker Panther - lvl 106]

[Lvl 68 > Lvl 69]

“Nice.” I can’t help but say it out loud to Ruby's confusion.

I gain four more levels and a bit later Ruby’s master appears again, this time with a young, petite, black-haired girl.

Lily seems to be terrified and immediately runs to me, for a moment it looks like she will jump into my arms but she sees my face and pauses for a moment, slowing the walk and stopping near me. There are some tears in her eyes as she looks towards Ruby’s master.

“Nat, she just appeared in my room, just out of nowhere and then she kept asking me questions and just brought me here. What's happening?”

“Be quiet for a moment, okay, Lily?” I take a step towards the grey-haired woman, keeping Lily behind me. I don’t think she would hurt her but it should make the girl feel safer.

Briefly, our eyes meet, her firm gaze meeting mine. I can see that she still hasn’t given up, still desperately looking for an answer.

For a moment I feel pity and realize the situation she is in. Just how many copies of her were made before for other people in the tutorial? Tens, hundreds? A copy of a once proud and powerful woman turned into the toy of the system. Back prompt for this stage.

“Push him harder.” That's the only thing she says to Ruby before she disappears again.

I put some time into calming Lily down. I talk to her carefully, making sure she feels safe. Slowly, I can see her getting calmer. The fear starts to leave her eyes and she becomes less anxious. She starts to become more cheerful and I can't help but notice she's got something on her mind, something she's eager, almost impatient, to share with me.

So, I steer our conversation in that direction, patiently and slowly until she feels ready to spill it. Eventually, she takes a deep breath and finally says what she's been holding back.

“I think I can restore your arm now.” Her smile is bright and like a child, she reaches out and puts her hand on my shoulder.

I barely stop myself from stepping back.

What?

All of this feels strange. It just came out of nowhere, too quickly. I already have my own plans on how to deal with my missing arms.

“I got a new skill.”

I feel her mana trying to enter my body and for a moment I let my mana fight back, pushing hers away, but in the end, after looking at her I just sigh.

Sure, I'm worried about the circuit, flow, and all this stuff, but the longer I wait the worse it will become as I will most likely continue to grow stronger faster than Lily.

Her eyes meet mine and I can see no bad intentions in them. Just simple, gentle kindness and a small smile on her lips.

"You must have suffered a lot," she whispers. I feel her mana probing my body as she uses more and more of it, preparing to heal me. Strangely, I sense some connection between her and my body. What is she doing?

"This skill is called [Sacrifice]" she says.

Called what?

Immediately my mana rouses up as I try to stop her, but it's too late and my mana barely detects her mana as something dangerous now that I let it in.

"Be a bit more careful and take care of your body, okay?" Her smile is so gentle that it makes me feel guilty.

Warm mana engulfs my body and at amazing speed, I see my left arm growing. Bone, nerves, veins, flesh, circuit, mana pathways. Everything appears and looks exactly the same as in my right arm.

As if it had never been obliterated, my left arm is restored to perfection. The only difference is its striking paleness, the new skin never having been exposed to the sun.

Amazed by the result I am late to notice and Lily's body falls against my chest, breathing and seemingly okay but unconscious.

But I notice one thing.

An empty sleeve of her dress at the place where her left arm used to be.

Chapter 96: Stupid girl

POV Kim Min-Jae

They're too far for me to hear exactly what they say, but I feel some mana from Lily. That warm mana she often used to heal all of us with that smile of hers.

I feel as if something got stuck in my throat and I blink my eyes multiple times to get rid of the tears.

What should I do? How can I look at her the same way as before knowing... god damn it. I shake my head and get rid of the bad memories.

There's nothing I can do now.

At that moment, I see Lily lose balance and lean on Nathaniel's chest. Her body then slowly slides down his body and ends up at his feet. He didn't even try to catch her.

I still feel her mana but she seems to be unconscious. As if by reflex, I take a step towards the duo but immediately, I stop in the middle of taking that step.

Nathaniel's mana explodes into the surrounding and for the first time since his fight with Hadwin, his face gains some expression.

Anger.

"You STUPID girl!" he screams towards the girl at his feet and his mana reaches even me. Dangerous, vicious, and cold, yet still under his control even in this state.

Two massive arms made of mana appear on his back and then slam towards the ground, seemingly about to crush Lily's head, and the ground cracks under their strength, sending some dust and pieces of ground and grass into the air.

"Do not dare..." he cuts off, "Do not DARE..." he cuts off again and even more mana fires up around him.

"FUCK!" one more scream and then all the mana disappears as if it never existed, immediately his face is back to his emotionless mask and he bends down only to pick up Lily.

He holds her gently, carefully, as if she is made out of glass.

[Focus][Focus][Focus]!

Fuck, I give up! The [Focus] just straight up refuses to get rid of the feelings that are right now confusing me.

I hate it.

Deep, slow breath in. Hold for a few seconds. Breathe out.

Repeat.

Good.

I glance at Lily's face and the emotions are all back.

How should I react when you treat me with such kindness? Why are you trying to get under my skin so much?

I hate you. I hate people like you.

Just use me. Simple give and take. Make me get hurt instead of you so in exchange you will be healing me.

Don't do this.

I gently put her on the bed inside of the house and look at her for a while and then at my restored left arm. Even only a few moments after restoring, I can feel how much better my mana flow is. The arm is perfect.

Okay.

OKAY.

I really give up. You won. I hope you're a happy, stupid girl. I won't forget your kindness towards me and I will pay more than I received.

Just as I repay in revenge much more than I receive, I will also return much more for the kindness you have shown me.

“Ruby, can you get me something close to 120? “

“Nat, I understand you, I do, but that is too much for you, try to think calmly.”

“ ... ”

“Nat...”

I know. I realize it. But I need to do something now. Something else to focus on.

“Ruby, please.”

“For fuck's sake, you're dumb.”

Her skill flickers into existence and a monster appears in the clearing.

[Mireblood Troll - lvl ?]

It feels strong, much stronger than any monster I fought up until now, yet I know that it isn't a named one. Named ones are much more dangerous even while being at lower levels.

Five orbs made of dark blue mana appear around me and start spinning, immediately gaining much more speed than I was able to do before.

I lift up my left arm and squeeze my fingers into a fist.

I feel my mana flowing, I feel my circuit working. Cerebral Harmony works too and my mana listens to every thought, more responsive, quicker than ever before.

[Mana Surge]

I boost the orbs and a loud whistling noise sounds in the surrounding.

First orb slings at the troll that immediately gets blocked by a shield made of mana that the troll puts up.

A loud deep groan reverberates in the air and with loud stomps, the troll runs at me, moving much faster than his seemingly too-big body should allow him.

The second orb stops in the air as I absorb its kinetic energy, immediately shooting it at the troll in a cone of concentrated energy that is thinner than ever before. This time cracks appear on the shield.

A tiny, small crack.

The third orb slings and smashes against the crack, finally breaking it and disappearing in the process.

The troll is so close that I can hear his deep growling and breathing, his eyes shining, glued on me. Angry and dangerous.

The fourth and fifth orb stop and also lose their energy and I hold it, transform it, and a brilliant dark yellow flame comes into existence. At first wide but I quickly force it into a thinner and thinner cone until it's as thick as my thigh.

The flame smashes against the troll and is stopped by the barrier that hovers over its skin. More orbs appear around and start spinning wildly only to slow down one after another, used to feed me with kinetic energy that I immediately transform into thermal one.

A notification rings somewhere in the back of my mind while the yellow flame roars through the air, making the air flicker from the heat and smashing against the troll's barrier, finally it cracks, and some of the monster's flesh gets burned.

Not enough and I dash backward, mana immediately switching from [Redistribution] to boosting my body.

The pieces of ground and grass explode into the surrounding, and the troll's hit leaves a crater on the ground.

Mana explodes from the troll and I feel pulled towards him.

[Disruption] fires up but it's not enough and the effects hit me, so I use one [Focus] to keep it running constantly, creating a disrupting field around my body.

Another notification.

The pale blue mana shines around the troll in the black-and-white world of [Focus].

I create a long sword. The mana it's made of is dark blue, the sword more dense than ever before.

Then I apply [Disruption] to the blade and try to add [Oscillation] as well but backlash hits me and I feel mana clash inside my arm, sending pain through my body and canceling the skills.

So I only use [Disruption].

I feel heat spreading through my body as I send even more mana to my Construct. My muscles tense up, feeling stronger than ever before.

The sense of speed is stronger than ever before as I dash towards the troll.

In the monster's hand, an axe made of blood and mana appears, radiating a pale red light. The same as the troll's eyes.

ROAR.

He challenges me and I just [Focus] more, watching its body, perceiving its mana.

At the last moment, I dodge to the side and absorb all the energy that would've otherwise created another crater in the ground, using it to make myself move even faster.

[Mana Surge] boosts [Disruption] around the sword and I forge it to a thinner and thinner shape, slashing against the monster's leg. The sword slashes through the barrier, disrupting mana and tearing it as if it's nothing, and the sword made of [Armament] lodges deep inside the monster's leg.

For a moment the disruptive field strengthens even more and I switch to oscillating mana, cleanly cutting off the monster's leg and at the last moment dodging a swing of its arm that I felt with my [Perception]

The monster falls to one knee while roaring.

Orbs start spinning around me again and this time I cover their surface with [Disruption]. Before the monster gets a chance to stand up all five orbs sling towards its face, blinding one of its eyes and leaving more wounds on it.

More mana explodes from its body and I feel pulled towards it only to immediately get hit by one of its arms, sent flying away and rolling on the ground.

My head is spinning as I didn't have enough time to react. When I get back on my feet the troll is in front of me, somehow shortening the distance between us even on one of its legs.

Another hit lands on my body but this time I brace myself, strengthening my body to the max and groaning with pain as my muscles feel they are about to tear. The kinetic energy I absorbed turns into thermal and a thin cone of yellow flame roasts the troll's head, making it stagger backward.

An axe made of mana appears in my hands, massive, and the blade of it is covered in wildly oscillating mana. The grass stops moving around me and I boost the swing with all the kinetic energy I have, cleaving the axe deep inside the monster's side.

ROAR.

I'm pulled towards the monster again and this time I let him do it, even boosting myself again. The axe turns into a massive spike whose entire size vibrates.

At the last moment, I use some absorbed energy to push against the monster's swinging axe and dodge it to the side, finally burrowing the spike inside its neck.

[Oscillation] runs wildly, wreaking havoc on the monster's flesh and I push more and more mana into the spine and with a push of [Mana Surge] enlarge it, finally separating the troll's head from its body.

When the notification sounds, I fall down on my bottom, breathless, my head ringing.

[You have defeated a Mireblood Troll - lvl 116]

[Lvl 73 > Lvl 75]

Congratulations, you have successfully completed the side quest. You have acquired an upgrade token. Choose carefully!

Chapter 97: [Dawn]

I close the notification screen and think a bit more. For a short moment, I glance towards where Lily is, and my decision becomes cemented. If it works the way I think it works... good, it's decided. I'll wait a bit longer before using it.

I push myself up with absorbed kinetic energy and shake off the stiffness from my arms and body. My mana is already close to full, and it flows so beautifully through my body, it can't even be compared to before. Together with my two passive skills and high leveled mana manipulation and trait, I almost don't feel the pressure on me.

Still, my body complains a bit and it's physically difficult and dangerous to handle all of it and keep using so many skills, yet I always knew about it.

My current road leads to a build that could be called a glass cannon. It's something I picked myself up after thinking about it a lot and knowing the consequences. It's something I could have easily avoided, yet I push even harder.

If I die, it will be my fault. If I reach my goal, it will be only thanks to me.

That's how it should be and if the time comes I won't blame anyone, only myself. But not for picking this way. I'll blame myself for not putting enough effort into it.

POV Tess Hansen

"Follow me," I say shortly to Maya and this time I do not smile. Thankfully, she listens to me, hearing my serious tone.

I use a prepared excuse to the guards and we pass by them, and then by another pair. Soon we are almost out of the camp and I lead us away from it.

It's all as we theorized. The notification we got before Community closed was a signal that only a few days remain, in the same way it happened on the first floor with the disappearance of the suns and when the rain came.

Staying with the others is not safe anymore, numbers mean nothing in the face of what the system has prepared.

"Tess..." Maya starts, but I gesture to her to stay quiet as we meet the last pair of guards.

"Oh, hello Tess," the woman smiles at me. She is 10 levels higher and someone I was able to befriend.

Words stop in my mouth as I see her face and read her expression. She knows something I do not.

"I'm sorry, I can't let you leave. Orders. Do not bother trying to give me some fake orders."

So that's it.

"Miriam, please, just let us go," I give her one more chance because of the nice way she always treated me.

"I'm sorry." Miriam says.

I'm sorry too.

A projectile, composed of mana and lightning that I had been preparing, pierces through her forehead. This instantly kills her and the same attack strikes the man who had been guarding alongside her.

[Lvl 65 > Lvl 66]

I ignore the notifications and turn to shocked Maya while I feel a mana wave from the camp, leaders informed of two killed guards.

"Follow me," I say one more time and I enter the forest, boosting my movements with [Psychokinesis]. I do not even look back, knowing that she will do just that.

POV Sophie Martinez

[Geas] works the way I wanted it to and the woman with a question mark over her head leads us outside of the main city of the empire. She is the strongest one from the group that was able to escape and I was able to put [Geas] on her after using [Mana Infusion].

Back then, she was still greatly shocked and her mana was wavering after passing through the portal. I wasn't able to do much, I only made her think that the emperor waits outside of the city instead of somewhere in it. A simple but strong change of direction.

When we reach our destination, she starts looking confused. At that moment, she understands and her mana fires up, putting pressure on my and Isabella's mind.

But it's too late.

A beautiful blue flame already roars into existence and hits the woman, making her immediately change from attack to defense.

At that moment I activate the second [Geas] I have put on her and for a split second, she forgets about Isabella and everything related to her. Not for a second, even less, she is just that strong.

But it's enough, the barrier around her disappears and she tries to attack me, likely thinking why she even used it in the first place and the blue flame engulfs her body, melting her skin, hair, and flesh. She dies right after the effect of [Geas] wears off and she spots my sister once more.

[You have defeated the Mind Flayer - lvl 104]

[Lvl 62 > Lvl 63]

"Izzy, come here," I barely get out of myself, my voice breaking at the last word.

"Did I do well?" her smile is bright and cheery while the corpse of a woman still lets out some smoke.

“Yes, you did really well,” I force a smile on my face for her and hug her body, “I’ll manipulate your feelings again, okay?”

There is a short moment of silence and then a nod.

“Soph, I already agreed, I trust you!” another bright smile on the face of the 10-year-old cute girl, and this time I can’t hold back my tears, thankful that she doesn’t see them.

I activate three of my most-used skills: [Manipulation], [Geas], [Mana Infusion], and strengthen the [Geas] I put on her back on the first floor.

“If someone tries to attack me I’ll use my skill and burn them or run away when they are too strong!” her voice is so cheery, almost like a kid playing.

I’m sorry.

I’m so sorry Izzy.

As the hours pass, Lily still refuses to wake up and after a long time, I check the timer.

Time left until forced return:4y 277d 20h 30m 00s

Almost three months within the Tutorial. One month on the first floor and almost two on the second floor that seems to be nearing the end.

“Ruby, where are we?” I ask for the first time since we all got moved to this massive flat piece of land with no hills or mountains in sight, only covered by grass that sways in the wind.

“It’s the ‘Ruined continent’,” Seeing the look on my face she continues, “Centuries ago an Absolute died here, cornered and pushed by two champions and one paragon. The entire continent is just a flat piece of land, poisoned by mana radiation, only this piece is safe thanks to master.”

Well, good to know, right?

“What is an 'Absolute'?”

“I'm sorry, I can't tell you.”

That's it, I guess. But judging from her words, it's a title given to someone even stronger than Champions

“About Lily...”

“I said it already, I can't help. I'm not a healer but from a quick look, I can say that it's an aftereffect of using a too-strong gift or something similar. They can be quite taxing.”

Biscuit is already on the bed, laying against the girl, looking around almost protectively. I look towards her once more and leave the room together with Ruby.

Hadwin, Kim and the twins are finishing their monster when it happens.

A wave of mana washes over me and then another, it repeats multiple times, each wave stronger than before. They are not targeted at anyone in particular, just rushing through the air at a terrifying speed.

I feel an urge to vomit due to the overwhelming amount of mana, and when I glance at Ruby, her face appears sour.

“So that's how it ends.” Ruby says.

What?

Another wave of mana hits, and this time even the ground shakes while the sky darkens. Suddenly, an orange hue appears out of nowhere, making it look as though the sun is about to set—a beautiful dawn. Then, I also hear it: a deep, reverberating noise that sounds as if the very air itself is vibrating.

“Ruby, what's happening.” even I myself don't recognize my voice, it's tense.

Am I scared?

“That's Tristan's [Dawn]. To reach so far with it he must have powered it with the 'Sword of Aeons'.”

She turns to me as if knowing what I'm thinking.

“The 'Sword of Aeons' is the greatest Mana Capacitor there is and yes, Tristan is on a different continent.”

The mana now starts to roar louder and louder, like a beast waking from a deep sleep. Like a bomb slowly charging up to explode.

“Nat, whatever happens. Thank you, I've enjoyed our time together.” Her face is happy and sad at the same time as she looks at me. “You are the first person that I can call a friend in a long time.”

What are you even talking about? Don't mess with me. Be clear!

A tear opens in the air and Ruby's master steps through. Her clothes are charred and torn; her arm bleeds and a chunk of flesh is visibly missing. Behind her, within the tear, I notice a man's body. I recognize his face—it's the same as the statue I saw with Ruby. Champion Keiron. But this time, it's not carved stone but real flesh and skin, and the man is dead.

"I'm glad we became friends, despite how it all started." The smile she offers is the most genuine I've ever seen on her face.

Ruby, don't talk like that.

The gray-haired woman steps closer, her mana circulating around her.

It all sounds too much like final words.

Ruby extends her hand towards me and the tips of her fingers brush against my cheek. She caresses it gently. "I hope you came to enjoy..."

"Yes," I say hastily, a feeling of unease washing over me. Despite this, she smiles.

Just then, her master's mana surges towards us.

Chapter 98: Let the world behold my mana

Before I can say anything else, the gray-haired woman speaks first, "Thank you for everything. Now, please, rest peacefully."

Then, Ruby vanishes into fine particles.

The world feels like it has stopped. My body turns cold instantly as if someone drained all life out of it. I feel lightheaded, and it's as if something's lodged in my throat.

My mana explodes for a brief moment. It literally explodes, all of it. Yet, a simple glance at the woman in front of me, at her mana, makes me stop.

[FOCUS]

All my emotions are pushed to the back of my mind.

[Focus - lvl 24 > Focus - lvl 25]

[Focus - lvl 25 > Focus - lvl 26]

“Good job holding it back, little pup,” the gray-haired woman looks at me. This time, her face isn't the calm mask I'm used to. There's a small, yet noticeable hint of madness in her expression.

Without her even moving her arm, a tear appears in the air and a monster steps through.

[Cinderbear- lvl 60]

As soon as the beast appears, an oppressive aura fills the air. Flames dance across its body, weaving in and out of its gray fur. Its eyes glow like smoldering coals in the dark. A low growl rumbles from its throat, resonating through the air and reverberating deep within.

Before I can react, I see the monster charging at the others while her mana grips me, pushing me through another tear.

From where we stand, atop the cliff, the city sprawls before us. Its towers stand tall and proud, clawing at the sky with smaller homes nestled in their shadows. A thick wall imbued with mana surrounds the city. Despite the distance, the city life stirs a swirl of color against the white stone.

Under the fading sunlight, the city takes on an ethereal glow, magic-infused lights flickering from windows, casting an inviting glow against the twilight. The city is full of life and resonating with magic and stands there, unaware of the impending doom.

“I have killed almost everyone I knew and had some relationship with. My descendants, my disciples, my friends, my grandson Keiron,” her eyes barely show any emotion as she says this. “It's better to put them to rest than... whatever this is.”

The city looks so peaceful as we observe it from a cliff.

“Now I only need you to witness everything. But before that,” she disappears, not using a tear, she just moves that fast. She lands in the middle of the city, creating a crater under her. Her mana explodes, shattering the ground under her feet and I feel multiple monstrously powerful people fight against her. A pillar of orange light quickly turns into a dark cloud.

The sky is still a dark orange, reverberating under the influence of the man named Tristan who is probably hundreds of miles away.

The ground around the distant woman lifts up, spewing more smoke and mana. White and red lightning starts to flicker around the clouds and the ground.

Slowly, the pillar grows, spewing out horrific amounts of mana that send me to my knees. My skin burns from the heat, my brain feels like it's about to melt even while my mana continues to try to push back against it.

The monster appears next to me and the pressure on me alleviates.

“Their emperor ran away and one of his paragons died trying to stop me.”

The pillar of light grows even bigger and even while being shielded by her, I feel her mana flaring up.

Suddenly, with a force so immense it's almost incomprehensible, her mana explodes. The shockwave ripples outwards, racing towards the city in a blink, reshaping the landscape with every passing second. Buildings don't just crumble; they implode, collapsing under the weight of the unleashed power, their sturdy structures folding as easily as paper.

Massive chunks of ground are torn from their roots as though being sucked away by an unseen force. In the aftermath of the mana burst, the city isn't just decimated, it's erased from existence. Every trace of life, every symbol of civilization, wiped away in an instant.

Accompanying it are sounds of destruction—the groans of twisting metal, the shattering of countless windows, and the devastating crashes of entire structures collapsing. Each sound resonates throughout the now-ruined landscape, marking the city's transition from a vibrant metropolis to a graveyard.

Dust and debris are flung into the air, creating a cloud that blocks out the sun. It spreads, growing until it cloaks the ruined city beneath.

A city housing millions of people is destroyed just like that.

“My last descendants are now dead. By my hand, that's the last favor I could give them all.”

Her face returns to its cold mask, yet her eyes seem off as she turns back to me.

Another tear appears in the air and she moves us somewhere else.

It's so quiet in the room where we are. [Perception] tells me that we are deep underground, surrounded only by a rock that has crystals filled with mana imbued in it. Each single one of them has a pattern too difficult to understand, disrupting the mana and the space all around us.

The room we are in is massive, as tall as a smaller building and squared. A silence dominates, sharp and absolute, broken only by the occasional distant hum of the mana-infused crystals. The floor underfoot is cool and unyielding, made out of polished stone.

As my eyes adjust to the subtle glow, I can make out the vague outlines of the massive room, all bathed in an ethereal glow from the mana crystals.

The gray-haired woman stops after we get there, looking at me.

“Try saying those words again.”

I do so.

She laughs, and her laugh echoes in the empty room with walls made of the same iron.

“I can't hear anything,” her laughter strengthens and her eyes turn to me, “I can't rewrite your mind, I can't copy my subconsciousness to your brain, I can't exit this planet. I don't hear what you say, and even some of my thoughts feel off.”

She pauses.

"It's disgusting."

Her mana flows into the room.

"My mind should be mine alone!" She screams.

Even now she is under the control of the system, unable to do anything, unable to come up with a reason or properly understand the situation. Even as powerful as she is, she is unable to do anything.

A brooch hits my chest and I catch it.

"This is the 'Peacekeeper,' the strongest defensive item in the world."

The item is heavier than it looks, giving off a sense of safety. It's just a silver oval, nothing fancy, but it's carved with lots of tiny patterns filled with mana. The engravings buzz a little when I touch them and when my mana reaches out, the Peacekeeper pushes back with a huge surge of energy, almost enough to knock me off my feet. It's powerful, really powerful, but it's holding back, ready to activate when needed.

My eyes meet hers.

"My name is Lissandra and I'm the first and last Absolute. My mana is the most powerful in this world. Deep like a dark ocean, more viscous than hurricanes on the ruined north, colder than southern seas, and vaster than the plains of the abandoned continent. I'm the most powerful being in this world, and I'm a fake."

Her words hang heavy in the air, a declaration of her existence. She stands as the embodiment of unparalleled power. Each syllable uttered seems to vibrate with power, sending ripples through the space around her. There's a bitter bit to her voice.

Her mana continues to charge, only to be pulled back to her and flow somewhere deep in her Mana Heart.

"I can't fight back even with my powers, and I can't escape."

More and more mana rushes to her and the item in my hands starts to let out mana, fighting against mana from her. The sheer volume of her mana is astounding, an ocean of power that threatens to overflow and engulf everything. The air around us crackles with raw, uncontrolled magic, the oppressive weight of her mana making it hard to breathe. It's like being trapped in a storm, surrounded by thunderous waves of pure, unbridled energy.

She is like the core of a star, generating more and more mana and immediately absorbing it while terrifyingly delicate patterns of mana appear all over her body, etched by herself deep into her own skin.

Her voice trails off into a bitter laugh. "I feel hollow," she continues, her face a haunting, full of torment. "I've lived centuries, commanded power beyond measure. Yet there's something missing, something incomplete." Her gaze drifts towards me, her cold eyes reflecting the dim light of the underground room. "Every person I've ever known, every place I've ever been, it's like they've been reduced to echoes... shadows."

Her hand clenches into a fist, raw power humming around her. "I'm nothing more than a ghost. A fake trapped in a reality that isn't mine." A dark smile twists her lips. "But, no more. If I am a fake, if all this is fake, then let the world behold my mana."

And then, with absolute confidence, she speaks.

"I'll destroy it all."

Chapter 99: [Singularity]

Attention! Narrative irregularity detected. The current difficulty has escalated, now verging on %e^*@d difficulty.

The present difficulty level doesn't align with the pre-set configuration. The floor quest is nearing completion. The deviation is within permissible limits. Reward reduction will be minimal.

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the second floor's main quest in the fifth round of the tutorial for Hell difficulty. An entrance to the third floor has been created.

A hole in the air, similar to the entrance that appeared after I completed the first floor, materializes next to me.

The woman in front of me, Lissandra, continues to charge more and more mana, looking at me and not even noticing the entrance. Her eyes don't even glance towards it. She is not feeling anything, not even with the room full of her mana, and even as she stands so close.

"That look of pity you're giving me is annoying, little pup."

The defensive item she gave me already works at full power, shielding me against her mana. I'm sure I would be long dead if not for it, overwhelmed by the pressure.

And now, the choice stands in front of me. I can keep an extremely powerful defensive item. The most powerful defensive item on this planet. With it in my hands, the next few floors of the tutorial would become so much easier.

Or I can stay.

The hole, the door, the entrance to the third floor hangs in the air next to me, and I see what lies in front of me. Just like back on the first floor, I take a step.

Away from the door, closer to the woman in front of me. The woman who killed Ruby. The woman who murdered everyone she considered a friend, a family member. All without a hint of hesitation. All at the moment she fully accepted that she is not real.

I want to know more, I want to hear more, and I want to see more. Even if it means sacrificing an item in my hands, I'll gladly throw it away just to be able to satisfy my curiosity.

Even as powerful as she is, she is still only a toy in the hands of the system, so I want to observe more of it. For my own future.

"You are different than me, so I have only one request for you," she says.

I watch as she does something similar to when I created a construct. She etches circuits and pathways into her body. They are as thin as hair and intricately complex to a dizzying degree. The pattern is so complex that it's hard to believe that something like this is possible for a human.

“Watch my last moments and the last moments of this world. Etch it all into your memory and live on as proof of my existence and of my determination not to be a slave to whatever this is.”

I hate her, my blood boils as I look at her, still remembering the last moments of the pitiful red-headed woman.

“What was her name?”

For a moment, the roars of her mana go silent, and instead, a quiet laugh sounds.

“Her real name was Ruby. She was a spy that the kingdom put on me, and she was precious to me.”

Oh, a last joke a red-haired woman did on me, pretending for it to be a fake name. It's so silly, it isn't even funny. It's so like her.

Lissandra's laugh continues and the room starts shaking more, the cause being something from the outside.

“They sense what I want to do, so they are trying to destroy this room. But they can't. I have killed everyone capable of putting up a fight, and the only one who could fight me now is Tristan, but even he will die soon. Devoured by his own [Dawn] that is now charged by the "Sword of Aeons," she looks at me, “The Emperor got to him and made him sacrifice his life and destroy the kingdom, the continent. He made him destroy most of humanity.”

So that's how the second floor should end.

Her hands move towards her head, one of them still bleeding profusely, and she fixes her hair, staining it with blood as she does so, making her grey hair partially red as she ties them into a ponytail and fixes her clothes one last time. She does it slowly, and carefully, all while the world continues to shake.

“Now then. Watch carefully, little pup. Witness my [Singularity]. Learn as much as you can and in the future, if you step beyond my level, remember this poor old woman, remember this world, and maybe...” She shakes her head, “You and I aren’t that dissimilar. There is no need for more words.”

Our eyes meet, and I think at that moment she understood me in the same way I understood her.

She then starts charging herself with more mana. She does something I thought impossible. She pulls ambient mana from the air. The mana that isn't hers, and she devours it. She keeps pulling it from greater and greater distances.

A bit beyond this room. The size of a city. An entire kingdom. A continent.

All the mana rushes towards her like water from a broken dam, yet she absorbs it all. She spins it around her body and pulls it inside her mana heart which is still beating strongly. Every single thud of her heart sounds deafening, and intricate patterns start glowing all over her body as she continues to etch them. On her skin, over her flesh, into her bones, on inner organs, circles around her heart.

The woman is turning herself into a construct.

An hour passes and the attacks on our position stop. Everyone above the ground is most likely dead already.

Lissandra is still standing there, tears visible all over her skin and blood flowing from her body. Yet not even for a second does her face lose its determination and her eyes continue to look at me.

Another hour passes. Her entire skin is covered in etched circuits, and I almost can't feel anything anymore, even my [Perception] pulled towards her. The mana in the air feels palpable, almost as if I can touch it.

But she continues to absorb more and more and squeeze it all into one place. She makes it so dense I would consider it impossible, yet she does just that. An impossible amount of mana gets squeezed to smaller and smaller point while the body of the woman continues to break. There is no hesitation as she continues.

In the same way, she was decisive when killing all the people she knew, she is also decisively ruining her own body. All because of some sort of twisted logic belonging to her.

A bit more time passes, and the item in my hands continues to hum, constantly generating a protective field around me. Yet, that field becomes smaller and smaller. Amazingly the item still holds on.

And more amazingly, the woman in front of me too.

Her eyes now burned out, her skin charred and her figure even thinner than before. Turned into a glowing shape only barely similar to that of a human.

Yet I still feel her mana on me and she continues to make sure I watch.

Lissandra dies. Her perceiving touch on me is gone. Her brain unable to endure all this mana.

The woman sacrificed her family, her friends, her body, and her own mind to reach her goal.

It's the single most captivating sight I've ever witnessed. A resolve so unyielding, it's willing to shatter its own mind upon making a decision. My eyes are glued to it, heart pounding, shaken by her absolute and unhesitating resolve.

Without hesitation, she slowly lost more and more of herself, as if wiping out her mind. Memories, thoughts, she gave it all up without a second thought, turning her body into a massive mana battery that continues to absorb mana from the world even now. Her heart is still beating, kept alive by an intricate web of circuits that cover what remains of her body.

The shield around me starts flickering, and I move closer to the entrance, yet I still watch as what remains of her finally activates the skill she had been charging the entire time, feeding it with mana.

[Singularity]

The skill activation is sudden, almost unfathomable. A core of darkness is emerging from the center of Lissandra's remains, akin to an obsidian pearl birthed from a shattered star.

It starts small, a mere point in space, but it's growing, nourished by an incessant stream of mana from the battered body. The shadows around it are warping and twisting, drawn towards it as if into a vortex.

The ground beneath it is buckling, groaning, and eventually shattering, unable to resist the unfathomable gravitational pull. It's like watching a star collapse in reverse, a world-ending event happening in slow motion.

The singularity, a black hole in its rawest form, is being unleashed. Space itself starts to bend around it.

Looking towards where she stood one more time, I step through the portal when I feel the item in my hands turning to dust.

The entrance behind me closes and so many notifications ring in my head. I have to shake them off, needing a moment to calm down, to absorb what I saw.

I look around, finding myself standing alone in a vast, desolate landscape. The remnants of what once must have been a bustling city lay in ruins around me. A cold wind cuts through the silence, carrying with it the scent of burnt wood.

In the distance, a small figure stands against the grey sky. A young girl, barely ten, with flames flickering around her body.

But I do not have time to rest. A circle of blue flames surrounds me, slithering like a serpent, the heat palpable on my skin.

Without any hesitation, the flames attack me and my [Redistribution] activates.

Chapter 100: You will owe me

Very quickly, I realize that my current skill at handling thermal energy is not enough. So, instead, a wave of disruptive mana explodes from me at the center, only further boosted by the surge.

For a long moment, the energies clash: blazing blue flames against an invisible force trying to cancel them out. Surprised, I push even more, feeding the skill with more and more mana until the flames finally dissipate, leaving burning pieces of wood from the ruined building nearby.

The young girl, Isabella, looks at me with a surprised expression.

“Oh, you are still alive.”

You what?

[Perception] fires up but there are only two of us as far as I can feel. Did Sophie not survive on the second floor?

“Where is your sister?”

“I don't know. I appeared here alone,” she seems to be surprisingly calm.

Sigh, I can't be dealing with kids now.

“Use difficulty change token and move to easier difficulty,” I just say, still shaken from the end of the second floor. I need some time alone to process it all.

“Sophie said that we will stay in Hell!”

Huh? That's surprising. Also, god damn it. What now? I can't leave her alone, she's just a kid. Even I am not such an asshole.

Haaa, so annoying!

“You know that your sister did something to your brain? She probably controls you or changed the way you think,” I say to her.

Just a short probe was enough and the girl didn't even notice my mana scanning her. What I found is something similar to the construct Sophie put on me so long ago. Yes, it's different and feels much more delicate, but the base is the same.

“I can remove it, you will get back to normal.” [Disruption] and [Mana Manipulation] should be enough to deal with it.

“It's fine, I know about it,” she is smiling at me while saying so, and with a few short steps, almost like small jumps, she gets to me, looking up, “You have your arm back,” she pokes my restored left arm.

That's another reason I can't be dealing with her. Lily still should be unconscious if she even survived the end of the floor. I already checked the community and the Hell Difficulty seems to have even more people than before. I blame it on dumbasses that have passed here from easier difficulties, a few of them already spamming the community.

What gives me hope is that Biscuit is one of them so hopefully, others are fine too. Tess also answered but there is nothing from Hadwin, Twins, and Kim, not even Sophie looking for her sister.

It's all one huge mess.

“Follow me,” I say to her and start walking while my [Perception] continues to fire up as far as I can. I even use [Redistribution] and energy from spinning mana orbs to get as high as I can, trying to see if I could spot anything.

The girl gives me an excited little scream asking me to take her and after a bit of thought, I take her on my chest and start quickly moving through the desolate third floor. Propelling myself high into the air, I look for anyone.

The third floor seems to be one big massive city. It's stretching as far as I can see, even as I am high up in the air. Just building after building and streets that are either made of ground dust or cobblestones. A huge percentage of buildings, nearly all of them, aren't higher than two stories tall, and only once in a while a taller building appears.

The city is in a desolate state. Some of the buildings are crumbling, some are burned, others are destroyed.

Carefully watching our surroundings I open the notifications.

Congratulations! You have cleared the 2nd floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial. Welcome to the third floor: Saint's Eternal Bastion.

You have acquired:

Skill upgrade token.

Tutorial Difficulty change token

You have acquired 20 stat points.

You can now use Community with a time limit of 15 minutes per 24 hours.

"Hey, where is the cute small doggo that was always with you? I want to pet him." Isabella pulls on the cloth of my shirt.

Are all kids like this? Trying to kill you and then immediately acting so friendly to the first person they meet? I can understand the first part, it might be Sophie's doing, trying to keep her little sister alive, but the second?

While investing all the stat points into mana, I ask her: "Didn't Sophie warn you not to follow strangers?" Even Biscuit understands that!

“She did! She also said something about you being a bad guy.”

She what? That's rich coming from her.

The little girl continues, “But Soph is dumb sometimes, I think you are a nice guy!” Her big eyes are looking at me and there is a small smile on her face.

Black hair, green eyes, and skin that seems to be tanned, she is a spitting image of her older sister, two girls easily recognizable as sisters.

“Where is the doggo...” she complains.

Sigh, this is going to be annoying.

Soph (Hell, group 4) -Isabella!

Soph (Hell, group 4) -Izzy!

Sophie continues to spam in Community while I continue to look and read the texts. Her desperation is clearly visible even in the texts she is sending and I believe I know how she is feeling. I have a sibling too, you know.

Plus, I still don't know anything about Lily. Everyone else seems to be fine all things considered. Broken limbs, deep wounds, a bit of trauma. Isn't that a cheap price to pay for surviving the end of the world?

The only ones not answering are Kim and Lily.

Right now it seems that everyone got split into smaller groups.

Tess is currently with Sophie and Aaron.

Hadwin is with Dennis and Maya.

Biscuit is most likely alone, yet he seems fine for now, seeing him spam the chat.

There are three guys from Hard Difficulty that used the difficulty change token to get here.

No other people joined our group, most likely meaning that you can change difficulty only by one level up or down, meaning easy or normal can't join hell. Others have also confirmed that it's not possible to use the token to change the difficulty to a higher one than "Hell."

I also confirm my suspicion that no one from Hell difficulty is normal. The reason?

Everyone is still fucking here. Not a single person decided to change the difficulty to lower, that would give them a much higher chance of survival.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I'm with your sister. She is sleeping right now.

Finally, Sophie pauses her spam.

Soph (Hell, group 4) -I swear if you hurt her.

Well, didn't things get solved for me? I just need to babysit her sister a bit and then I have a mind mage on my side, right? Right? Like it matters... I already know I won't be able to leave a little kid here alone, but Sophie doesn't need to know.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I will keep her safe. You will owe me. You will owe me a lot, okay?

I will get as much use as I can out of you. And this is your only chance. At this moment I'm about to ignore the fact that you played with my life and I will even take care of your precious sibling. Even you

should know that I had to take a step back two times, so don't trample on my pride. Even I am at my limit and probably only [Focus] allows me to push my feelings to back of my mind.

Soph (Hell, group 4) -Yes. I will owe you. Just... please, keep her safe. I will continue to look for you, try to find us...

Then her connection cuts off and I also turn off the community, decided to check it a bit later.

Okay, time to check the rest of my notifications.

Ability to identify item rarities unlocked!

Well isn't that interesting?

I pull out one of the mana stones from my pocket. The mana stone that Ruby kept making fun of me over so often and with such laughter. I freeze for a second, memories roaring through my mind. For that short moment, I let them. All these feelings, all these useless, dumb feelings.

I hate feeling like this.

[Focus]

I push them out and then look down at the stone in my palm.

Emberstone (uncommon) -A small, smooth mana stone that emits a gentle warmth when activated. Perfect for keeping hands warm in cold weather.

Could be useful, I'll see later how can I use it, now then, let's upgrade one of my skills.

Focus (Dual Focus) - Lvl 28

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 28

Perception - Lvl 22

Oscillation - Lvl 18

Redistribution - Lvl 13

Armament - Lvl 23

Mana Surge - Lvl 10

Disruption - Lvl 12

First, I try to use it on Focus and Mana manipulation.

Impossible to upgrade already upgraded skills at this moment!

Obviously. This is the system I both hate and love. There is no way it would be that easy.

Damn it.

Well, there are 6 skills over level 10 so 24 options?

Step by step! First, I need to check [Redistribution], [Perception]

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

[Redistribution]

Surge Absorption: Enhance your ability to absorb larger, more potent surges of energy, increasing the limit of energy you can store.

Symbiotic Transference: Learn to transfer the stored energy directly into physical strength, endurance, or speed, increasing combat prowess.

Force Field Creation: Learn to release absorbed energy as a protective force field, offering defense as well as attack capabilities.

Energy Imprint: Develop the ability to leave an imprint of your absorbed energy on objects or areas, creating traps or delayed effects.

[Perception]

Mana Echo Reading: Enhance your skill to perceive the residual trails of mana, enabling you to track past magical events or spells.

Kinesthetic Perception: Hone your ability to perceive the movement and position of your own body, increasing agility, balance, and accuracy in combat.

Perception Shielding: Upgrades the skill to mask one's own mana perception, making it more difficult for others to detect or trace your mana-sensing activities.

Mana Flow Analysis: Develops the capacity to identify nuanced patterns and rhythms in the movement of mana, offering deeper insight into how skills are invoked and controlled.

[Disruption]

Disruptive Echo: Master a technique to leave a lingering disruption in an opponent's mana flow, causing intermittent disruptions even after the initial contact.

Disruption Infusion: Improve your ability to infuse your own spells or physical attacks with disruptive energy, adding a disruptive effect to every action you make.

Disruption Wave: Increase your ability to disrupt mana over a wider area, affecting multiple opponents or a larger magical structure.

Mana Lockdown: Enhance your skill to create a sustained disruption that prevents the opponent from using their mana for a period of time.

Damn it, this is going to be a hard decision.