

Tutorial 151

Chapter 151: First trial

That's kind of unexpected. I don't mind free gifts, but I barely get any time to be happy about my new skill, and now the system is throwing this at me?

So the last requirement was to combine skills? Is it always this requirement, or does it differ from person to person? Knowing the system, I won't get any answers anytime soon.

But there is something that interests me even more.

You can enter Beyond once every four months.

First, the difficulty higher than Hell is called Beyond. Second, I can go there only once every four months, meaning I will be staying in Hell Difficulty and only be sent there for something like missions? For how long? Days, weeks, months?

Is there any hidden requirement that would allow me to go there permanently, or is that how Beyond works? It kind of makes sense as the token was called Beyond difficulty entrance token and not Beyond difficulty change token.

Oh boy, I'm curious, I want to go there. But I can't right now. I need to get healed, and get my missing eye and left hand restored. I also need to at least test [Resonance] and make sure a few people are taken care of. I might be gone for a long time.

Now, I'm curious about the community.

Easy difficulty 1350/2000

Normal difficulty 880/1000

Hard Difficulty 275/500

Hell difficulty 50/250

Beyond 3/10

Community Tournament (unavailable)

Well, here it is, the new spot I couldn't see up until now.

Noname - Mana is the best stat.

Savant - I thought you would never get there.

Obviously, this person is already there.

Noname - 3/10 means that 10 people got into the Beyond Difficulty right from the start or does 10 mean that only 10 people can get to Beyond?

Savant - Probably the second. There are 3 of us right now, and the other guy didn't say anything up until now, no matter what I tried. He can either be someone like us that got there, or it's as you said, and 10 people started in Beyond, and he is the only one alive.

Both of these options sound assholeish enough, so knowing the system, it could be either.

Noname - Combining skills as one of the requirements. Four requirements in total?

Savant - Yes.

Noname - Did you enter Beyond already?

Savant - What do you think?

Haaa, obviously Savant went there already. How the heck is he/she that fast? Am I that slow and held back by others, or is there something else?

Noname - Want to share some info?

Savant -Nope.

Noname - Understandable.

Savant - Yes.

I switch to Hell Community, and no matter what I try, everything gets censored. I can't mention a higher difficulty. It doesn't censor it; it straight up refuses to send the message.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Dang it.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Look at who it is. Noname, you are so dead. Grumpy continued to look for you.

Oh boy.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Poor girl kept spamming the community.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I was... occupied.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, TheGuild) -I'm sure she will understand, heh.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Leave the poor guy alone; he is too busy. Lately, he only lurks around and keeps reading the messages without talking in the Community at all.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -My social batteries are empty.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - The heck? This is just a chat.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - So?

What difference does it make? I count it as socializing.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -You have problems.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -I bet you send voice messages to people instead of texting.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) -Why do I feel like I just got insulted even though it's something normal? Did you guys not use voice messages?

I then turn off the chat after trying to get in some other keywords, but the system censors everything.

The next thing I try is my new skill, [Resonance]. As I create a blade made of mana instead of [Oscillation], which no longer exists, I use the new skill and the blade starts vibrating. It's similar to the lost skill, yet there's something unfamiliar about it.

Where [Oscillation] used to vibrate my mana to increase the cutting force of my attack, the new skill feels as if space itself is vibrating, resonating along the edge of my blade. When I push the sword into the wall next to me, it slides through it with ease.

There is no sound, no audible vibrations like before. The blade continues to resonate and even without further testing, I can say it's much sharper than before.

It's something like a concept now instead of focusing on vibrating mana. I create another sword made of my mana, making it dense to the point that streaks of light blue mana start appearing, then slash against it.

The sword without [Resonance] applied gets cut apart with such ease that it surprises even me. As the cut sword starts dissipating, I reach out and send [Resonance] at it, like I would have before, and the mana falls apart. This part doesn't feel too different, but I can tell it's only because of my lack of practice or maybe my low level of the skill.

Good, I like it. I like it very much.

“Little pup, your use of that skill is terrible.”

Here we go again.

The brooch is left behind in the house. There's no way I'm touching it or bringing it with me. Even what I'm doing now, I consider a risk. Lissandra could try to affect me or do something to me “wirelessly”. I bet her chances of affecting me would be higher if I touched the brooch.

Sure, we have a deal, but I'd rather not test it.

When I finally reach the hideout, the first person I meet is Kim. He's still practicing, but the moment he sees me, the stone hovering next to him falls down with a loud thump.

I pass by him, and the next one to welcome me is Biscuit.

(Sustenance!) he shouts.

Damn, I really should teach him more sophisticated words; he seems to like them. He might even forget about “asshole”.

“Good boy,” I quickly pet him. If I do it often enough, he'll associate it with his use of polite words and everything will be good.

Before I realize it, a purple tentacle appears. It slowly reaches towards my face and touches the empty socket where my eye used to be. The tentacle gently caresses me there, and the dog tilts his head while looking at me.

"It's fine," I boop his nose. How can such a burrito-like-looking doggo be so cute?

I stand up, and then my eyes, well, my eye, meet Lily's gaze.

At first, she just freezes on the spot, and the smile that appeared on her face quickly disappears. She stares at me and I look back. She moves closer, this time not looking as angry as before.

When she's close enough, I notice two of her fingers are missing and she has multiple wounds all over her body. There's even a deep scar on her neck that's slowly healing.

"I can wait," I say as she reaches out and places her hand under my cheek, her finger gently touching the skin near my missing eye.

"I know you can," Lily's voice is weak as she says so.

"It doesn't hurt much, and I'm not in a hurry. You can heal yourself first."

Her warm mana enters my body, and I let it. Soon it starts healing my eye. It's an interesting sensation, a mix of disgust and itchiness like there's an insect crawling inside my eye socket.

"Is it worth it? Enduring all this pain, all this bloodshed," she asks in a hushed tone.

Wanting to give her a sincere answer, I think it over, and in the end, there's only one word I can say, "Yes."

Our eyes meet, and through my [Perception], I see her two missing fingers, the slash on her neck, a deep wound on her belly, and a cut on her leg. Her hands are shaking, and I can see how hard this is for her. All the wounds are fresh. Maybe she ventured outside to level, maybe she wanted to fight, maybe she

went looking for me. Then she partially healed her body, conserving her mana for some other reason. For someone else that might need it.

Such a silly girl.

"You are so stu..."

"Both of us are stupid now," she interrupts, "The two most stupid people in this tutorial. You and me."

"I guess..." I can't say much to that, not after last night and the active tempering I went through.

"But Lily, there's no easy way. It might not even become easier, or it might not be worth it at all in the end," I begin, reaching out to pinch her small nose. Her eyes widen more than when she first saw my missing eye.

I always wanted to do that.

"But I can tell you this: if you give it your all and try your hardest, you won't regret it, regardless of the outcome." when I say that she only nods without saying anything else.

A few days pass. I train, I heal. I level up a bit more. I share as much as I can with Tess, who also plans to enter Beyond in the future as she already used her upgrade token. But I make sure to keep it a secret from the others. Some might want to go there, but I think they would most likely die. I'll know more after I get there.

So yeah. I tell them I'm going on a mission from the system and I don't know how long I'll be gone. Lily and Kim seem the most reluctant to let me go, but in the end, they don't protest much. They have food and water, and it seems we're in a safe area. If they stay put, there shouldn't be any problems.

Lissandra remains in the same spot; I still refuse to touch that thing. However, I've learned something from her in the past few days. She's an asshole, but she has a lot of knowledge and has shared some of it with me. She doesn't know anything about 'Beyond', either due to imperfections or because it's something the system deleted.

I check my stats before using the entrance token.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 3 - Saint's Eternal Bastion

Time left until forced return: 4y 246d 21h 31m 36s

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

Lvl 114

Strength: 43

Dexterity: 41

Constitution: 113

Mana: 340

[Primary Class: Mana Channeler]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus Consolidation) - Lvl 34

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 34

Perception - Lvl 29

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 29

Armament - Lvl 32

Mana Surge - Lvl 22

Mana Infusion - Lvl 24

Resonance - Lvl 12

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Kinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Tokens:

Beyond Difficulty entrance token

Then I give Sophie one more warning look and boop Biscuit's nose and caress Isabella's head. Who knows when I'll come back?

When I get out and a bit further from the hideout, I activate the token without any further hesitation, and the entrance appears next to me. I enter and find myself in a clearing in the middle of the forest. The clearing is surrounded by trees on all sides, and there are two suns in the sky.

It's the exact replica of the first floor.

Notifications pop up.

Welcome to the Beyond's first trial! Congratulations on fulfilling all the requirements.

Then the cracking sounds, and from behind the trees, a monster enters the clearing. A massive gray bear with glowing orange eyes and sparks floating around him of the same color. The bear takes a step closer.

[Cinderbear - lvl 120]

That doesn't seem that bad. So is Beyond the Tutorial all over, just much harder? Or is it to filter out the people the same way the first floor did, and only then does it start?

But before I can think further, glowing orange sparks appear all around the clearing. Then they are set ablaze, and from each of them, a monster steps out.

[Cinderbear - lvl ??]

[Cinderbear - lvl ?]

[Cinderbear - lvl 134]

[Cinderbear - lvl ??]

[Cinderbear - lvl ??]

[Cinderbear - lvl ?]

[Cinderbear - lvl 101]

...

Dozens of massive bears appear around me, and then at the same time, their mana blazes up, and I feel a massive pressure reaching towards me as a new window pops up in front of me.

Beyond's first trial. Objective: Survive for one hour.

Chapter 152: Phantom

The pressure on my body intensifies even more as multiple Cinderbears attack. I slip into [Focus], and [Resonance] activates at the same time. The air, the space around me resonates according to my will, and I change its frequency multiple times until the effects of the attack disappear and I'm freed.

Just in time, I redirect as much kinetic energy as I can towards the ground under me, making it explode as I push myself high in the air. I quickly move to the side as a dozen or so sparks barely miss me.

The ones that are about to touch me, I dissipate with [Resonance] and push myself far in the distance, away from dozens of Cinderbears. The forest behind me immediately explodes under the heat and flames, and I can feel them following me.

The heck!

I don't even have time to complain as another wave of pressure hits me, pulling me down to the ground. I track its source and immediately create two javelins that I fill with kinetic energy and shoot towards the source.

The bear there just uses its spark and appears in a different place, once again reaching towards me.

I cancel out the attack with my skill and propel myself even further, only to be met with a dozen more glowing orange sparks that soon blaze up into massive flames, and even more Cinderbears step out.

Okay.

Okay!

I immediately stop, and instead of running, I start to release my Mana Regulator, and the Kinetic Mana Heart beats loudly.

I will fuck you up.

Dark blue armor appears on my body, and my head gets covered by a helmet without any holes. I send perceiving mana into my surroundings. My heart sends waves of kinetic energy through my body, and I use half of it to strengthen it while collecting the remainder.

Dozens of mana form appear around me, and I anchor them to my core. With [Mana Surge], I start spinning them around my body, further boosting them with kinetic energy while continuing to make them denser but not to the point where tricolored mana appears.

A loud whistling noise sounds in the surroundings, along with the roars of the bears as I land on the ground.

The first bear dashes at me, the air around him wavering because of heat, and I sling two orbs at his head, one after another. The first one filled with kinetic energy explodes, dissipating some hot air around him, and the other, a bit denser, pierces his skull and immediately kills the monster.

[You have defeated a Cinderbear - lvl 116]

I absorb the remaining thermal energy from his body and transfer it into kinetic energy, sending more orbs towards the weaker monsters.

[You have defeated a Cinderbear - lvl 106]

[You have defeated a Cinderbear - lvl 119]

[You have defeated a Cinderbear - lvl 118]

A stronger one sends sparks towards me, and before I can cancel them, he uses one to materialize near me, with an extremely strong wave of heat reaching me. At the same moment, [Redistribution] activates, and I grab hold of all of that thermal energy, fighting for control over it with the bear. I focus on that even as another bear dashes at me.

I dodge his bite, then uppercut his bottom chin, breaking it. Then I hit his eye and send a thin cone of kinetic energy towards his brain, and the back of his skull explodes into pieces of bone, skin, and brain.

That moment of distraction allows the other bear to overpower me, as I'm trying to grab hold of his heat attack. The armor around my body immediately starts to heat up, and I can see some thinner parts melting. Still, I let the bear continue, and instead of canceling or controlling this attack, I strengthen my armor.

I take a step towards the bear and continue to send more and more of my mana towards my armor, which becomes a darker shade of blue with wisps of light blue mana flowing through it. The ground around us starts to melt, and the grass and the trees catch fire, quickly turning to ash. I take another step towards him.

From a spark behind me, another Cinderbear appears, but I ignore him. As my heart beats, I send a cone of kinetic energy at its head. I make it as thin as possible, transfer all this energy into a thin cone, barely thicker than my wrist, and it goes right through its eye.

The bear dies with a wound that looks like an invisible weapon stabbed him.

After taking the final step, I finally reach the bear attacking me with its heat wave. The armor around me holds strong, even as the bear tries to focus its attack on my chest and head. There are no holes in my armor, and it covers the entirety of my body, cutting it off from the space around me.

Then the bear stops, as if giving up, and this time I collect all the heat around me and all the energy from my heart. I transform it, and a beautiful dark yellow flame fires up from somewhere in front of my chest.

The flame reaches the bear with a massive roar, and for a moment, the bear fights back, holding against my attack. Still, I send more and more of it, making it more viscous, and more dangerous, and soon my flames pierce through the bear's heat aura and hit his head.

They melt his fur, his skin, revealing the skull underneath, and soon they reach its brain, finally killing the monster, which falls with a loud thump.

[You have defeated a Cinderbear - lvl 146]

[Lvl 114 > Lvl 115]

Multiple bears surround me, and the combined heatwave that hits me is hard to counter, so I send a pulse of [Resonance] into my surroundings and dash towards one of the bears.

Mana flows through my body, my mind is sharp, and my heart continues to beat wildly.

Another cone of kinetic energy obliterates one bear; a javelin pierces another one, exploding in the wound.

A shield forms in front of me and starts to melt slowly while I collect more and more mana into a javelin hovering over me, and when the shield disappears, I boost it at the bear.

The javelin pierces the air and starts melting as it gets closer to the monster, yet it's dense enough to reach it, and when the tip of the javelin touches the bear, it explodes. A thin cone of kinetic energy tears through the bear's body and stabs into it.

Then the flames reach it as well, fighting against its own, and soon win over, melting the bear. I pause for a second, and the helmet around my head disappears, and I take in a deep breath.

My body is itching to move, my mana rages through my body, and I feel so alive.

I check the time, and there are still 57 minutes left.

Good, good!

Then, without any warning, I feel a stab in my belly, and when I look down, there is a small green hand holding a knife that seems as if made from obsidian, but there is red mana flowing through the blade. The blade is deep inside my side, totally ignoring my armor.

[Phantom Goblin - lvl ??]

The hand immediately disappears as if becoming invisible, and I can't feel any presence anymore.

A giggle sounds in the surroundings.

In a rage triggered by old memories, without even knowing what I'm doing, all my mana rushes into my heart, and my heart beats loudly enough for me to hear. A wave of kinetic energy that I send all around me is the strongest that I ever produced, and it totally explodes in a large area around me.

Bodies of dead Cinderbears get thrown away like toys, the trees get uprooted from the ground, and the stones and ground fly all away from me, leaving me standing in the crater created by my attack.

Silence.

Then another short laugh followed by nothing.

My teeth feel like they are about to break, but I enter a deeper [Focus] and stretch a bandage-like piece of my mana around my wound to stop it from bleeding.

A spark flies next to me, and the bear appears in a massive blaze of flame, and without even recreating my helmet, I step closer and absorb all the thermal energy it throws at me.

I let the armor around me dissipate and sharpen my focus, as even half a second of hesitation or misuse threatens to burn me if I lose control over all that heat.

But I do not.

The ground around us burns, and the air flickers from all that heat as I stop in front of the bear, looking into its eyes.

It bites at me, but before it reaches me, I throw all the kinetic energy I collected at it, I increase the frequency, and with a loud pitching noise, his head explodes, splashing me with blood.

[Redistribution - lvl 29 > Redistribution - lvl 30]

My mana reaches as far as I'm able to, and with deep rage flowing inside me, I look for the invisible monster. I perceive as deeply as never before and consolidate both parts of my [Focus] to strengthen my skill.

Where are you, you little asshole?

[Perception - lvl 29 > Perception - lvl 30]

Then I take a step towards where I felt a movement.

Chapter 153: Frozen

The dagger was poisoned because, of course, it was, and I already feel it affecting my mana. Just barely over 3 minutes in. But that much is fine; it's nothing unexpected.

The problem is that I can't perceive the little green monster that. I don't feel its movement, I don't feel its position or mana no matter how much I try.

So, I do the smart thing.

I let the small green jerk stab me again.

As the dagger pierces my side, I clench my muscles to hold the dagger inside the wound and boost my body to the point where I feel I'm about to tear my muscles.

The small hand lets go of the dagger, jumps backwards, and disappears, even though the [Resonance] covers the entire area and [Redistribution] tries to slow his movement.

To calm myself, I enter a deeper [Focus] and pull out the dagger from my wound.

Venomstrike Mana Dagger (rare) - a short obsidian dagger with a sharp edge. Upon injury, the target experiences mana drain due to a poison effect. Use with caution - dangerous to magic users.

I infuse the dagger with my mana, without thinking, I combine it with [Resonance], and a transparent blade made of mana emanates from the dagger, soon turning from blue to black with glowing red lines reminding me of mana circuits.

[Resonance - lvl 12 > Resonance - lvl 13]

Then the forest far away explodes, and a giant monster takes another step towards me. It's easily as big as an Undead Deer or Undead Bear. This Cinderbear doesn't feel like it barely stepped into two question marks, a bit over level 150. It feels much stronger, closer to level 200.

My side bleeds, and part of my [Focus] continues to control my mana, which is getting harder and harder to manage.

So, I put some distance between us.

I push myself away just in time, and the heatwave sets ablaze the massive area around the bear.

Even as I'm absorbing as much as I can and using it to run away faster, I feel it follow me for a long time.

I continue to stab the dagger into the neck of the smaller Cinderbear, and while doing so, I continue to absorb all the heat the monster generates.

There's no armor around my body, only pieces of mana that are wrapped around two wounds left behind by the Phantom Goblin. The wounds are healing slower than usual.

My clothes are charred and burned in places, and I'm already getting covered in the blood of the monster. I continue to kill while running away from the giant Cinderbear that burns the entire forest as it moves towards me.

Every useless thought leaves my mind, and there's only pure focus on survival and killing.

I move like a wild animal when another invisible stab is aimed at me, this time I feel it. I track the movement of the air close to me, something barely noticeable even in the deep focus I am in.

Yet, I notice it, and before the monster can stab me, I catch its wrist.

I've got you.

The monster cuts off its hand and disappears, and I'm left with a piece of its body in my hand.

I squeeze it; the bones crack and blood rushes out. Then I send a wave of thermal energy through it, and it turns to ashes.

The monster doesn't laugh this time.

I send more mana into the dagger in my hand, and the mana blade extends, and I cut against another Cinderbear, separating its head from its body.

Immediately two more bears attack me, jumping from spark to spark while continuously releasing heat waves from their bodies.

I track the movement of their mana, and I step in front of the spark where one of them will appear from. Before the monster fully materializes, I stab the dagger-turned-sword between its eyes. The second one's teleport I cancel with [Resonance], the monster's body tearing in places from the failed skill.

A cone of kinetic energy finishes it off, and there are no more Cinderbears around me, only a giant one in the distance.

I run once again to put distance between us and quickly check the timer. Out of one hour, there are 51 minutes left.

That almost makes me want to laugh.

I then quickly skim through the quest rewards while running between the trees, trying to save as much mana as possible and be as efficient as I can with it.

Quest Rewards:

Attribute upgrade token

Rare graded equipment

100 shards

At least the rewards are somewhat good. I also confirmed my theory. People can get to Beyond only by fulfilling requirements through the Hell floor. There's no way someone on Earth would get thrown into Beyond right from the start and survive.

I stop on the spot, absorbing the kinetic energy of my movement. Where I once stood, a spear pierces. I dodge to the side, and another stab misses me as I read the movements of the goblin attacking me.

It all feels almost too familiar as two more goblin warriors jump from behind me, somehow able to hide from my [Perception]. I resonate my blade, and it cuts through the spear and the goblin. Then I stab another one.

The third goblin dodges my slash and stabs at me again. Blue tattoos start glowing around its body. The monster speeds up, abandoning the spear and getting on all fours, dashing closer to me.

[Redistribution] encompasses the area, and the monster slows to a crawl. I cut off its head.

[You have defeated a Goblin Warrior - lvl 126]

The air behind me stirs, and I boost my body with a surge, turning around as quickly as I can, slashing at that spot. I hit nothing, and the same thing repeats behind my back. This time, I don't turn. I close my eyes and consolidate both parts of my [Focus]. But there's nothing to be found, only a giggle echoing from the distance. Soon, another voice joins, and I hear multiple phantom goblins laughing.

I can't detect where the laughter is coming from. So, I fight for control over my mana, release my Kinetic heart even more, and strengthen my body further.

Then I lower my stance and reduce the amount of mana I'm sending towards the dagger. The blade made of mana shortens to the length of my forearm, still pitch black with glowing red circuits coursing through it.

I notice the grass behind me bending and stab right there, twisting my body swiftly while doing so.

Out of thin air, a Phantom goblin appears, staring in disbelief at the dagger in its neck. The monster coughs, splashing some blood onto my hand, and then dies.

[You have defeated Phantom Goblin - lvl 136]

I realize it's not the first one that attacked me, the one that sacrificed its hand to escape.

Another leaf on a tree flutters unnaturally given the wind. I kick the corpse of the goblin I just killed, and it collides with another invisible one approaching me. Before the monster recovers from the surprise, I'm in front of it. My dagger penetrates the top of its skull, embedding itself in its brain.

[You have defeated Phantom Goblin - lvl 142]

I twist the dagger and slash again, cleaving both corpses in two.

Then I [Focus] even more, attuning myself to every sound, every vibration.

The laughter has ceased.

"What happened? It's not funny anymore?" I straighten and step towards a tree. "Go on, laugh." I swing my dagger, and the phantom goblin charging from the right collapses, lifeless and decapitated.

[You have defeated Phantom Goblin - lvl 132]

My mana stretches into the distance, drawing in all available heat. Notifications bombard my mind as I siphon warmth from the surrounding air. Soon, my breath mists in the chill.

I hurl a mana projectile where I detect goblins' breath. It cuts through the monster and its halves tumbling to the ground.

I won't let you hunt me as that one phantom goblin did on the first floor. I refuse to be a prey and listen to your giggle.

Improving efficiency, I pour more mana into my skill, absorbing the area's thermal energy. The surroundings grows colder. Frost decorates leaves, grass, and bark. Each footstep echoes eerily on the frosted terrain.

Yet, no monster dares to approach. No frost is created on another body No warm breath becomes visible in the cold air.

I exert more power, and even I begin to feel the chill but push it aside.

In the end, I stop and turn around. The last phantom goblin stands behind me, nearly touching me. Its body is covered in frost, frozen solid, it's the same one whose arm I severed.

"Oh, I believe this one's yours," I taunt, showing it the dagger and only the goblin's eyes move.

I drive the blade into its heart. The frozen creature shatters upon impact with the ground. Then I stomp on its frozen head, reducing it to icy shards.

I cast one last glance at the remains and turn myself towards the four presences advancing on me. A massive wave of fire hurtles towards me, thawing the frost and igniting the land.

Drawing on that heat, I boost my defenses as new enemies emerge.

[Goblin Shaman - lvl ??]

[Goblin Shaman - lvl 149]

[Goblin Warrior - lvl ??]

[Goblin Warrior - lvl 141]

Chapter 154: Relying only on yourself

It feels as if time has slowed down as both warriors dash at me, and the shamans start mumbling something. I see mana collecting in their hands.

The warriors reach me, and the first shaman finishes his casting. The area around me changes. It's as if I was thrown into the deep mud, and the harder I try to move, the more difficult it becomes. It's the same field the Goblin shaman on the first floor used.

But not this time.

My mana resonates against the field around me. I take a step to the side to dodge a stab and block the attack from the second goblin.

The field changes slightly, and [Resonance] fails.

Interesting.

I create armor around my body, filling it with as much mana as possible and it deflects the next few attacks from the goblin warrior.

Meanwhile, I reach towards the field around me with [Resonance], but it fails again. So I observe it deeper and then realize something. The shaman changed the frequency his mana works on to activate the field. It wasn't a significant change that would affect the skill. No, he only twisted it slightly in response to my [Resonance].

One of the warriors' spears gets covered in pale blue mana. As he stabs at me, it pierces through my armor and into my leg.

I ignore it and send more mana toward my armor, turning it a darker shade of blue.

My attention is on the field around me and my skill.

I observe, I perceive, and I [Focus], adjusting [Resonance] slightly in a similar way to how the shaman did. I change the frequency it works on, and the field around me disappears.

No longer slowed, my kick sends one warrior flying away. I immediately shoot my flames at him, all the heat I drew from the air while dealing with phantom goblins. I feel relief as I finally release all that heat and it blazes up into the surroundings.

Before the flames reach him, the second shaman does something to them. My flames change direction as they approach and are all drawn towards the goblin shaman with ease, ignoring my hold over the flames and the fact they're mine.

Again, I resonate against the field about to slow me down. I disrupt the mana strengthening the goblin warriors and stab my dagger through one of them, barely avoiding the other. The wounded goblin warrior jumps away.

The remaining warrior jumps away, and as if it's a signal, the field tries to slow me again. This time, it operates on multiple frequencies. At the same time, my flames and goblins are launched at me as three dark orange fireballs.

I send a resonating mana against the field trying to hold me down. One after another, I quickly identify each frequency and adapt my [Resonance] to tear them apart until the field entirely disappears.

My eyes are fixed on the shaman who sent fireballs at me. As my mana reaches the fireballs, I remember how he took control of my fire and how he was creating it to throw at me.

I reach out and grab one of the fireballs, the one with the most thermal energy he stole from me. I force it to behave more according to my will while feeding it more mana. I move it to collide with another ball, and as they meet, they both explode. The explosion catches the last remaining fireball. The heat makes the air flicker, melting the stone on the ground and turning any flora into dust.

One of the warriors dies in the flames, while the remaining three goblins group together, both shamans absorbing the explosion.

On the other side, I step towards the explosion, absorbing all the heat that reaches me. Constant notifications ring as the air around me feels slightly breezy.

Flames swirl around me, pass by me, and disappear in front of me as I move closer to the monsters. Goblins continue to shout something in their language. The shaman that tried to trap me in the slowing field has burned his hands, with bones showing.

I release my flames simultaneously with the fire shaman and they collide. Dark orange and my dark yellow flames fight and push against each other, spilling terrifying heat all around.

My heart beats as I feed them more and more.

As the shaman's flames start to weaken, I concentrate the cones into a thin stream of glowing yellow flames. I narrow the stream more and more until it's as thin as my wrist and shoots like a laser against the trio of goblins.

A shield activates to try to stop them, but the flames melt through it, too concentrated for the shield to block such a small point of impact.

Laser-like flame cuts through all three monsters, reminding me of a red-hot iron rod cutting through styrofoam. All three of the goblins, and the notifications sound.

I invest all stat points into mana.

After glancing behind and seeing a giant Cinderbeast getting closer, I put the distance in between us again.

Okay, this is getting harder and harder. I've already started countering the poison's effect on my mana handling. To be honest, it's not that difficult; I have some experience with that. The bigger problem is that the poison even affects my mana regeneration.

Is it due to the weapon's rare rarity, or was it working together with some skills of the Phantom Goblin?

I curiously look at the weapon in my hand. It's a small, short dagger made from black obsidian-like material with circuits etched all across the blade that glows in red color. The interesting thing is that there isn't a mana stone to keep the effect running or continue transferring my mana into it.

It's as if the entire dagger is a mana stone, meaning that there are materials capable of handling mana even without a mana stone. Good to know for the future.

As for Beyond, it's different than I expected. Well, it's not like I knew what to expect from it.

The first floor's objective was to survive 30 days; the Beyond's first quest is to survive 1 hour. Right now, it feels as if this place is designed to filter out the “weeds” in a similar way to the first floor. It's either that or each time I enter Beyond, I will return to the floors I already visited, and they will be much harder.

And hell, the Beyond is difficult. Extremely difficult. I am absolutely sure I'm currently the only one from our group able to survive this. Maybe not even Tess would be able to stay alive, and I consider her to be the strongest after me.

Question mark monsters are everywhere, so many of them. Heck, I still remember my surprise when a bunch of Cinderbears popped up at the start.

The presence of the giant Cinderbear gets closer, and I stand up again, quickly running away. This time I try to use the least amount of mana and be as efficient as possible.

From a distance, I continue to observe the Cinderbear. The monster is massive, easily as big as the Undead bear and deer I fought. Like them, he also has two question marks. Not around level 150 like them. No, this cuddly bear is well over 200.

Yet, the entire time I watch him, and feel his gaze on me, I think of how I could kill him.

All while dealing with goblins once in a while. Each goblin warrior is around level 150. High enough to tear through most members of group 4. Yet I'm doing fine. Wounded in multiple places, poisoned, with my mana barely replenishing and slowly getting lower, I'm calmer than before.

I'm alone, relying only on myself.

I don't have to care about anyone. I can go all out and fight as I want, and all this danger pushes me to my limits.

Is it supposed to be like that, or am I just that strong, stronger than the standard? How strong am I from the point of view of the system?

I stand up, and a little bit of blood remains on the ground where I sat. Huh. I focus a bit more and tighten the mana bandages around my waist, chest, and thigh. The wounds continue to refuse to close.

After checking my reserves, I realize that I have barely around half of my mana left, which reduces the efficiency of my Mana-Fortified Resilience. It's fine, I'll push through.

When there are only 30 minutes remaining, the suns disappear from the sky as if someone flipped a switch.

On a void black night sky without any stars, lights appear. Beautiful blue, green, and pink polar lights swirl all around, lighting up the ground underneath with moving and uneven light.

As if all at once, the screeches of the monsters sound all around me. The goblins, wolves, bears. All terrifying and full of anger.

Then I feel all the presences moving towards me.

Chapter 155: Beyond the limits

Flashback - Tess Hansen - 12y old

"Some kids broke it, again. It's happening like every two years at this point," the boy in front of me says. He is slim, yet his body is athletic. He is around 2 years older than me and he is showing me his right arm in a cast, "The weird thing is that it's the right one, not the left one again."

The fun part is that while saying this, he is smiling, not bothered at all by the broken arm that is now in a cast.

He looks at me and for a moment, he smiles. His smile is so cheeky, so cheerful, all while he looks as if he is doing something he shouldn't. After smiling, he quickly looks around, making sure no one saw it.

Boy moves a bit closer, a small smile still on his face while his two differently colored eyes shine brightly.

They are pretty.

"I'll tell you a secret if you want," he says.

It almost makes me want to sigh; I've already gotten used to boys coming up with all kinds of stories to try to impress me. Mom keeps saying that I'm pretty, but I don't agree with her. I'm too tall to be pretty.

Still, I force myself to smile and nod.

"Wow, that was a gloriously fake smile," the boy immediately sees through me, "Hehe, you should see your expression now," he continues.

What's he talking about? I'm sure I'm controlling my face properly.

"Your brow furrowed a bit, and your left eyebrow twitched slightly. Then your smile froze on your face and you tried to keep it there," his eyes continue to examine me, like I'm some kind of interesting animal.

"As if you could do it better," I say. How annoying. It makes me want to punch him.

"Probably not."

Huh? Why is he then being so cheeky? Is he just teasing me?

"Asshole," I say, and instead of getting angry, he just nods.

"This is better," he says, "You really meant it this time." His smile is gone, but his eyes shine cheekily.

"So what are you doing here? Did you sit next to me just to annoy me?" I ask.

"Partially, but mostly I wanted to take a look at the police station," he lifts his hand and points his finger at the police station nearby, "Did you know it takes on average 10 to 20 minutes to leave the station after they get the call?" As he talks, any semblance of a smile disappears from his face, and it becomes an emotionless mask.

He continues, "Of course, it's quicker to some places as the cars usually move around there and it can go down to 5 to 10 minutes. But for poorer city parts, it's 10-20 minutes. Often longer for smaller crimes," he turns to me, emotions gone even from his eyes, and he tries to smile.

The smile is terrible.

"That's a big-ass fake smile," I blurt out, and for some reason, I start feeling uneasy.

"I know, right? I'm terrible at this. Sometimes it's easy to smile and sometimes I think I might forget how to do it if I'm not careful. It's getting harder and harder, you know."

I decide to ignore it. I don't know what to say to that. Instead, I ask, "So why do you watch the police station?"

He pauses and I can see him thinking. A small strand of hair falls onto his face, and he flings it away annoyed, and then he turns back to me.

"I'm Nathaniel," he says and reaches his hand towards me, and that makes me smile. What boy shakes hands with a girl?

When I reach out mine to shake with him, he pulls it away and pretends that he wasn't about to shake my hand but to touch his hair.

That's so childish! I bet he did it because he saw me smiling at his gesture.

"That's so petty!" I say.

He doesn't react to that and just continues to look at me with his pretty eyes.

"I'm Tess," I give up. This boy is crazy. Actually, all boys are crazy. Mom says it's because of puberty, but I think that's just an excuse. This one might be crazier than the others.

But it's fun; he's not boring. I like how he behaves. Should I try to mirror it a bit? It seems cool.

"So why are you watching the police station and learning how quickly they can get somewhere?" I ask, this time really curious.

"Well, Tess. You could say that I'm getting ready. You know, just in case," he says, and I immediately know he's serious. There isn't even a speck of hesitation as he says so.

I'm not a good person, quite far from it. That's how I see myself. It's not something that bothers me; it's just something I know about myself.

So maybe part of my mind doesn't mind all this bullshit thrown at me, all the pain I go through because it feels as if I deserve it?

A small, dumb-as-heck part of me.

I'm me. I'm Nathaniel Gwyn, and all of the decisions were made by me, so I will bear their consequences.

Wolves, goblins, normal animals. All of them, well over level 100, and some of them with two question marks, continue to rush at me no matter how much I reposition and how far I get.

And the giant Cindebear is gone, completely disappeared out of my detection range. It makes me uneasy.

I duck under the bite, and the dagger flashes, barely infused with mana that I resonate with, and I leave the wolf to bleed out while dashing away from a few more attacks.

I refuse to use full armor; there is only a gauntlet on my left forearm that I use to block the attacks I can't dodge. Otherwise, I continue to strengthen my body while trying to be as efficient as possible.

Another stab goes through a goblin warrior's eye, I block two arrows with the piece of armor on my left forearm and deflect the third one with the dagger. I then, for a split second, infuse it with more mana and elongate it to cut off another wolf's head.

All the monsters are extremely aggressive and continue to rush at me in a mindless rage.

I narrow a small amount of kinetic energy into three cones as thin as possible, and it pierces through the heads of three more goblins. I let the wolf bite my armored, left forearm and then pierce his temple with the dagger in my hand.

Another slash and I leave another wolf to bleed out.

I siphon a bit of thermal energy from a fire attack of a three-headed wolf and change it to strengthen my body. Immediately, I realize that it's less mana-efficient than using energy generated by my kinetic mana heart, and while jumping over the wolf, I throw the dagger at him, boosting it with a bit of kinetic energy and it burrows into one of its heads.

I don't even create a dagger made of mana and just coat my hand in [Resonance] to cut off the remaining two heads and grab the dagger that I threw.

Then I run for a few seconds, ducking attacks flying at me and dodging behind trees that continue to explode or get trashed by monsters rushing at me.

I form two orbs made of mana and boost them at the monsters.

Again, I realize that it's not efficient enough.

So I [Focus] more and reduce the amount of mana my heart is getting through the Mana Regulator. Immediately, I feel that I have much less kinetic energy to transfer with symbiotic transference, but I ignore it.

When another wolf dashes at me, I wait until the last moment and only boost my body for a split second to cut through its neck and then stop. Once again, I feel weaker, but I continue to observe everything to take it all in.

I sense another goblin dash at me from behind trying to stab me. Again, I send mana through my body only for a second, long enough to twist my body and stab the bottom of its chin, making the dagger pierce out on top of his head. Then I stop the mana and save it again.

Another pulse, just enough to deflect two arrows and a javelin. Then two more to reposition myself. Another one to stab the wolf. Three more to reposition and dodge.

I continue to trickle tiny bits of mana through my body, and now, even with the effect of the poison, I feel my reserves growing instead of decreasing.

Good. Something tells me I will need them.

Ten minutes before the end of the quest, the suns reappear, and immediately the monsters fall quiet. The silence fills the entire forest, only the sounds of burning wood and falling trees echo in the deafening quiet.

All the monsters freeze; they aren't moving at all. Not even if I get to one of the goblins and stab him; the monster just falls down dead, not reacting at all.

Soon after, their eyes start glowing. The left eye of every single monster starts glowing in a bright orange color, like a spark.

My eye as well.

Without hesitation, I boost my [Resonance] with [Mana Surge] and tear apart the foreign mana in my left eye. The pain hits me, but the mana is gone.

My heart is beating wildly, and I know how close to death I was.

My suspicion is confirmed, and the orange-glowing left eye of the wolf near me starts burning and expands into a massive flame that turns the monster into ash. From that flame, the giant Cindebear steps out, its head immediately burning a vast area around.

As if on cue, the sky gets covered in clouds, the suns barely visible behind them, and then the rain starts falling. Beautiful droplets of water infused with blue, green, and pink mana fall down with impossible speed and start tearing apart the bodies of the weaker monsters, piercing them like thousands of tiny bullets.

Left with no other option, my dormant mana stirs. The mana I've conserved for the past twenty minutes is now almost replenished.

It begins to rise, much like a wild animal waking up from a deep slumber.

My heart beats, and my mana flows through my body, quickly filling it with the power I've gotten used to.

My mana. My skills.

They surge from my body, and this time I do not run. I do not reposition, I do not dodge. This time I will go to my limits and if it won't be enough, I will go beyond them.

Chapter 156: Unallowed Interference

Everything slows to a crawl. In the black-and-white world of focus, only mana continues to hold its vibrant color.

The raindrops in a massive area stop in the air as if someone paused time.

The heat disappears from the air.

The giant bear in front of me stops moving.

In just a split second, a massive chunk of my mana disappears.

Then I take a step towards the monster, and the ground under my feet cracks as I transfer all the energy I hold into kinetic, infuse it all into a mana projectile, and shoot it all at the Cinderbear.

The air reverberates in front of me, vibrations I'm able to see with my eyes. The air flickers under the immense concentrated energy that covers the distance in a blink. The chest of the monster explodes into a geyser of blood and flesh, the attack revealing its beating heart and cutting off its front left paw, sending it flying until it falls on the ground, destroying multiple trees.

After the attack, pain surges through my head and body, making me lose control over my mana for a moment. The mana bandages disappear, revealing my still not closed wounds, and the armor piece on my left forearm dissipates.

Yet, I still continue to keep my perceiving touch on the monster as it disappears from the spot.

The body of the goblins is set ablaze, and from it, the Cinderbear steps out. It's smaller now, but its wounds fully healed. The heat again radiates from its body, setting ablaze its surroundings that are still being torn apart by beautiful but deadly rain. The rain that the bear ignores while its intelligent eyes track me.

As the rain starts falling again, I create a thin barrier over my skin that resonates with my mana. When the rain touches me, the barrier destroys the droplets, turning them back to the normal water that now hits my body, soon drenching me fully. The water is flowing down my hair and face, mixing with the blood from my wounds.

Then the bear roars once again and half of the remaining monsters that are still standing, unmoving, explode into pillars of flames that reach far over the top of the trees. They quickly bend, slithering like a snake, and then all at once, dozens of flame pillars coil and bend and reach towards me.

Sending my brain into overdrive, I [Focus] and with [Resonance] reach towards each and every one of the flames as I continue to endure.

I tear all of the flames apart. My mana roars and resonates through the air, accurately hitting the core of each flame and putting it out as if blowing out a candle. Not stopping there, after the flames are gone, my heart sends an audible thump into the surroundings as I collect kinetic energy in my body.

Both the Cinderbear and I take a step towards each other.

His flames and my flames continuously clash in the air between us until we get so close they start swirling around us like a fire tornado, heating the area to the extreme even with the rain that continues to fall.

My heart pumps more and more energy through my body, instantly to be transferred into dark yellow flames that battle the bear's orange ones. Just a tiny mistake, a moment of hesitation would be enough for me to lose control and allow his flames to burn me alive. But there isn't even a speck of hesitation or worry in my head.

I know that I'm smiling, the [Focus] fully working on skills and consolidated to a single task, allowing my emotions to surface.

My mana resonates across the dagger in my hand, and I slash the air in front of me. An attack shoots through the air and a deep cut appears across the bear's face, blinding one of its eyes.

In exchange, the bear takes another step towards me, and from its mouth, heat escapes concentrated into a stream as thin as wire. It slashes me across my face too, blinding one of my eyes and drawing blood that flows down my cheeks, onto my lips, and then dropping from my chin onto my charred and torn clothes.

I smile even more now, just a few steps away from the Cinderbear, and with my heart beating so loudly my bones start to resonate with the output that I need to generate to be able to fight against the monster's flames.

Another stream of concentrated flames slashes against me, and this time I block them with my hand to not get my head cut off, and the dagger falls from my hand along with a few of my fingers.

But it's fine; I don't need them right now. I continue to concentrate and continuously change the frequency my mana resonates on, and soon I hit the spot.

I reach out towards my flames that are all around us and change them, affect them, and soon they start to resonate together with my mana. They resonate at the same frequency as the Cinderbear's flames.

My flames audibly roar, the sound deafening and the ground melting. The air flickers under their force as they devour and take over the monster's flames.

My mana continues to drop to lower and lower levels, yet I continue to push even through my pain until I take control of them all. Then, for a split second, all the flames stop moving.

There is no flicker; they do not burn or move. It looks as if time itself did stop.

The Cinderbear doesn't like it, and with a loud roar, all the remaining monsters around us are set ablaze, turning into flames that start rushing towards us. But it's too late. Flames I took over move and coil like a snake, and this time they are not dark yellow; they are of a beautiful golden color as they rush towards the bear, pressing around the field around him and devouring his body.

In the end, only the skeleton of the bear steps out of the flames, and his flames flicker and dissipate. The skeleton of the monster takes one more step towards me before crashing down and finally stopping to move.

[You have defeated the CinderBear - lvl 196]

[Lvl 120 > Lvl 121]

[Lvl 121 > Lvl 122]

[Lvl 122 > Lvl 123]

[Resonance - lvl 15 > Resonance - lvl 16]

[Resonance - lvl 16 > Resonance - lvl 17]

[Redistribution - lvl 33 > Redistribution - lvl 34]

[Redistribution - lvl 34 > Redistribution - lvl 35]

The moment Cinderbear dies, the rain stops and disappears. Even the droplets that come crashing down, now that the heat doesn't destroy them, just straight up disappear. The sky is once again a beautiful blue, with two suns in the sky.

One minute remaining.

The ground starts shaking and the sky turns pure black, yet there is still somehow enough light to see.

The two suns in the sky expand and quickly grow bigger and bigger until they fill up most of the horizon. Two giant suns so close to the surface that they should be logically tearing it apart, burning it to ash. One yellow and the other one orange.

Then in the middle of the suns, a pupil expands, and two giant eyes stare down at me.

(Another unfortunate one.)

The voice like thunder, sounding only in my head, yet the ground shakes and the area around me continues to get destroyed.

Error. Unallowed Interference detected. Activating failsa...

(Enough.) the voice says, and the message from the system stops, and the window disappears.

Then the giant eyes continue to stare at me. Two giant burning balls of fire with pupils in the middle.

(I have only one piece of advice for you, an unfortunate one. Never get any of your skills to level 99.)

Then it all disappears. Two eyes are gone, the ground stops shaking, and the system messages fill up my vision as if nothing happened.

Congratulations on fulfilling Beyond's quest! You have acquired:

Attribute upgrade token

Rare graded equipment

100 shards

You will now be transported back to your floor within the Hell Difficulty Tutorial. You can enter Beyond again in 4 months.

Before I get transported out, I grab the dagger from the ground, immediately appearing back on the third floor of the house I entered the Beyond from.

One quick scan tells me I'm alone, and I lean against the wall and slide down to my bottom. My heart is beating wildly, my head is hurting. I still have a few stab wounds. I'm poisoned. One of my eyes is blinded, and I'm missing a few fingers. Am I getting careless because I have a healer at hand?

And what the heck was that even? Damn, that was scary; that thing even messed with the system. Was it because it was Beyond? Is Beyond under weaker control of the system or was that thing just that powerful?

And what was that warning? Not to get a skill to level 99?

Well, I'll deal with it later, future problems for future Nathaniel, screw that jerk. Now then, I need to check my rewards, don't I? I can lose a bit more blood; my body can handle it, but I don't think I can wait any longer.

"Use attribute upgrade token," I say, and a window appears.

WARNING! You can only upgrade one out of 4 attributes. After you pick an attribute, you can't change it later. You can upgrade your selected attribute up to three times.

Attributes for upgrade:

Strength

Dexterity

Constitution

Mana

Choose wisely.

What a dumb warning.

"Upgrade mana."

Congratulations! You can now upgrade your mana attribute. Please pick one of the three options.

Warning: after you pick the option, you can only continue to upgrade that option and won't be able to pick the other upgrades.

Choose wisely.

Mana Amplification: Enhances the sheer volume of mana you possess.

Stage 1: Vast Mana

Stage 2: Omnipresent Mana

Stage 3: Limitless Mana

Mana Restoration: Accelerates the rate at which your mana replenishes itself.

Stage 1: Sprouting Mana

Stage 2: Thriving Mana

Stage 3: Unending Mana

Mana Potency: Boosts the potency and intensity of your mana.

Stage 1: Potent Mana

Stage 2: Dynamic Mana

Stage 3: Supreme Mana

Chapter 157: Veiled Vulnerabilities

Oh boy, this will require a little bit of thinking. Once I pick my path, I won't be able to change it and will have to walk this way up until the end. The good thing is that I can pick the attribute upgrade that I like and then complement it with my future Traits or even Skills, creating the best possible combination.

I love it; I like theorizing. And yes, a bit more info would be nice so I can make the best possible decision, but that's not how the system works.

Just wait until I get to the original Lissandra and unleash her on you, you will be so screwed. And then, while you two fight, I'll get in some hits and have my revenge and rewards.

Sounds good?

Good!

As for the rewards, I have gained 9 levels, like what the heck. Nine entire levels, meaning 27 points into mana. All in less than one hour. Then plenty of skill level-ups. The best reward will surely be the attribute upgrade, but a rare piece of gear could be nice, and what the heck are shards? I've already checked them, and they do nothing. Maybe they will work when we enter the 4th floor and unlock the Shop, which is one of the rewards for clearing the third floor?

"I want to pick my rare piece of equipment." I say.

The system understands, and the options appear in front of me. It's kind of creepy how it continues to listen all the time, even to the point of reading our minds.

Please, pick one of the options, all are based on your performance within the tutorial.

Oh? Somewhat personalized rewards? That's quite nice.

Blade of Astral Resonance (rare) -This longsword, forged from a meteorite, harmonizes with its wielder's energies, and it's easy to infuse with mana and other energies.

Endurium Javelin (rare) -Created from a rare alloy known as Endurium, this javelin possesses an extraordinary hardness that resists all forms of destruction. While it holds no magical properties, its durability makes it a formidable weapon.

Barrier Bastion (rare) -

Pyroclast Mantle (rare) - Woven from the rare Ashen Silk, this cloak provides substantial protection against fire. Its fabric seems to come alive when subjected to flame, absorbing the fiery energy and enhancing its resistance proportional to the strength of the attack.

Mark of the physical strength (rare) -This tattoo, crafted with an ethereal pigment responsive to mana, subtly fortifies the physical strength of the wearer. This slight enhancement comes at the cost of a continuous mana drain.

Hmm, did the system fall in love with me? Did watching me struggle soften that big cold heart, and it took some pity on me? Is this reward for all my suffering up until now? Is there any bug?

I want to say that Beyond wasn't as hard as expected, but I have a suspicion that plenty of people would beat me up for that.

Am I that amazing? Too strong even for Beyond?

Huhuh. I don't think so. No matter how hard I try to soften it up, Beyond was dangerous, and I have a feeling that it really was just a start - a filter the same way the first floor was.

Well, as always, that's a problem for the future Nathaniel Gwyn, screw that jackass. I just need to do my best.

But first, I really like the tattoo; unfortunately, it's quite useless to me with all my strengthening and my construct doing the same, but it's interesting to see, and it could be worth picking just to examine it.

Javelin would be good for Tess and not for me; I don't need the shield, and why the heck would I pick the cape? I bet little Isabella would be making fun of me. Plus, I'm sure I can defend myself against fire better.

In the end, it could be either the sword or the tattoo but I don't need either of them even though their descriptions sound super cool. As for the sword, I don't like relying on weapons. Just having my mana and being able to create any weapon I need is good enough, even if it might be slightly weaker.

The rewards are all good options, just... just not for me, even though they are personalized by the system. Plus, I have the dagger I took from the phantom goblin.

Venomstrike Mana Dagger (rare) - A short obsidian dagger with a sharp edge. Upon injury, the target experiences mana drain due to a poison effect. Use with caution - it's dangerous to magic users.

I glance at it and then stab my thigh with it slightly after sending some mana through it. It immediately poisons me, making me regenerate my mana slower and disrupting some of my control over it. I continue to try to fight against the effect, using it as practice while thinking over the items.

Okay, let's just pick the javelin and give it to Tess.

Tattoos are interesting, but surely not as intriguing as my constructs, and there's a limited number of hours in a day, and I already have plenty to do. As for the sword, I just need to improve my usage of [Armament]. It's my mana, so it surely is much better than some sword at handling my energies or more of my mana. Plus relying on the sword would make that progress slow down.

When I decide, the weapon appears in front of me. It's just here as if it had been there the entire time. The javelin is made of a single piece. The metal is a light gray color, and I don't feel mana from it or any mana pathways. There's nothing.

As the description said, it's just a simple javelin made from a metal called Endurium, and most likely extremely tough in exchange for lacking any special effects.

Damn, Tess better be thankful; maybe I can use her to defend me against Lily.

I get back to the hideout, and Lily isn't there. Everyone just stares at me, surprised that I came so early and even more surprised by my state.

It's just a few missing fingers, a hurt eye, a nearly cut-off ear, some burns, and a few stab wounds. In a world where healers exist, these wounds start to feel like getting a papercut back on Earth. Painful, but something that can be dealt with easily.

Yet I know it's dangerous. I've noticed it, but I've already gotten used to Lily healing me, maybe too used. I should be more careful.

A few hours pass, and finally, Lily appears, together with Tess and Biscuit.

The best doggo seems to want to run to me, but then he glances at Lily and then at me and just disappears somewhere, his eyes darting around the cave, surely full of fear of little Isabella.

Tess is fine; there are no wounds on her. Yet, I still feel some of her mana lingering around her, a clear sign of the fights she went through not long ago.

Lily, on the other hand, is battered. Half of her face is terribly burned; she's missing a big chunk of her left forearm, and she's limping. Her eyes brighten up a little as she spots me, and she slowly moves towards me, leaving Tess behind.

There are wisps of bright white mana over her wounds, healing her, restoring her to her original state, but they disappear the moment she spots me and my wounds.

"Don't look at my face; I look terrible right now," she says, covering the terribly burned half of her face with her hair and sitting next to me.

She grabs my hand and sends her mana to me.

I disrupt it.

She tries again.

I disrupt it again.

"Nat?" she looks at me, surprised.

"Everyone, get out of the hideout." My voice sounds cold and soon everyone gets up and leaves, only Tess giving me an understanding nod before closing the entrance.

I look at the girl in front of me and then slightly lower the effect [Focus] has on me and my emotions.

My hand missing three fingers reaches up and pushes aside Lily's hair, revealing the burn on her face. She slightly shudders under my touch but lets me do it, looking at me with big eyes, like a scared little animal.

"Heal yourself," I let go and say.

"It's fine; that much is nothing. I will heal myself right after..."

"Heal yourself," my voice is stronger this time.

She falls silent for a moment and then says a single word, "No."

That word echoes loudly in the deafening silence of the hideout. Yet I heard it; I heard the emotion in her voice.

"Is it painful?" I ask.

"No, it's not."

"Is it hard?" my voice softens.

"...No."

"Are you scared?"

"No." she lies again, but this time her voice quivers a bit more, and I see her gulp as well as some tears collecting in her eyes.

Somehow, I want to help this girl. The way she acts bravely and hides her pain, pretending everything is okay, reminds me of my mom way too much. Even though it might be because she's not normal like the rest of us, she decided to help me over and over. Yet, at the start, I thought only of using her.

I can't give her what she wants. I don't feel such emotion for her, and I'm sure she knows that. Yet, she is a silly girl.

So I smile at her, and the shock on her face is fascinating to look at. Wide-open eyes, an unbelieving expression. I etch it into my mind, and then I hug her.

That makes her freeze even more.

"You're doing well, Lily." I whisper.

She starts shaking. I've long since seen the pain and fear in her eyes, no matter how hard she tried to act tough.

"You are so brave, and you're doing your hardest," I ignore the tears I feel on my back, "But you have to take care of yourself a bit more, okay?"

You're not like me, so don't try to imitate me. Don't go out to get hurt and don't try to suffer through it all while pretending not to be bothered by it all. Don't act the way my mom did; it just brings up bad memories for me.

"Push yourself if you wish to do so, but don't bottle it up. You have a few people around you who you can consider friends; feel free to vent with them." I say while hugging her.

When she starts sobbing and grabs me tightly, I allow her to do so.

It's okay for only me to suffer through it all. I can handle it.

Chapter 158: Mana Stage 1/3

So, for my next class upgrade, I'm pretty sure I will be offered a class called "Advanced Body Pillow."

Also, what the heck, am I making a friends? Sure, I knew Tess from before, but our relationship is quite... well, complicated.

But here, I've noticed that I've started looking after Lily already, and it's not only because she's a healer. There's no love or anything; it's just that I'm weak against people who are nice to me without expecting anything in return.

Maybe Lily is doing it on purpose?

I squint my eyes and look at her. We're still alone, sitting in the hideout, and she continues to sniff and tries to dry her wet, red eyes. She's even blushing more so when I look at her.

"This is so awkward..." she complains, "I don't know why..." She then shakes her head.

I guess not. She's too silly to trick me like that, but I'll have to be careful! I already know how devious little Isabella is, even though she looks so cute.

Lily could be the next one.

Other than her, I also somehow take care of Kim. Not because he's cute or super nice to me, obviously. To me, he just looks like a puppy left outside in the rain, looking for a place with some warmth and looking for some people he could befriend. Desperately so.

How can I treat someone so pitiful badly?

Weak, so weak!

I reach out and pinch Lily's small, cute nose.

"Phwat are u toing?" she says with her nose blocked, looking at me with her big eyes.

I pinch a bit more and then let go, not forgetting to flick her forehead.

"Owch," she complains, but I already feel slightly better.

"Crybaby," I say to her, and her face becomes red in an instant.

"You... you!"

"Anyway, feel free to push yourself. Losing some limbs is fine if you can restore them, but be careful, okay? Talk with Tess; she's good with this kind of stuff. You can complain to her for hours, and she'll continue to listen. Bully Biscuit a bit, tease Isabella."

After each sentence, I poke her cheek; it's not quite as soft as Isabella's, but it's also fun.

"There's no need to be all serious and gloomy all the time, and there's no need for the fake-ass smiles you've shown, okay?"

I'm quite good at this, am I not? Maybe I could be a psychologist or something.

"What about you?" she throws a question at me.

"What about me?"

"C-can I talk with you, to complain?" Lily asks.

Isn't that obvious? "Nah, just annoy Tess; I'm super busy." The look on her face as I say so immediately tells me that it's not the answer she expected, and I pinch her nose again, "Only sometimes, okay?"

Maybe I'm not gaining a friend; maybe I'm becoming a mom to these kids. To Lily, Kim, Biscuit, who is also like a kid.

"Okay," Lily says, and I can see that she's happy.

Somehow it annoys me, and I pinch her nose again. Unfortunately, that makes her even happier, even as she tries to hide it.

Goddamn, Lily... at least you be normal.

"What is that for?" Tess just stares at the rare graded weapon I'm giving her. She tries to act indifferent, but I see it's quite piqued her interest.

Hehe, she might think I don't know, but I do! I saw how well she takes care of her uncommon javelin. How she carries it everywhere, cleans it, and always carefully checks if it's not damaged!

Tess is someone who likes shiny new stuff. She's totally someone who would compare her shoes to the shoes of a girl she doesn't like and then feel superior to the other girl without letting it show at all.

No matter how she tries to hide it, I see it. Her furrowed brows, the tiny excited steps she made towards the javelin, and the shine in her eyes after she inspected it.

"So, you don't want it? I can give it to Kim."

That makes her freeze for a split second, but she quickly hides it. She then shamelessly takes it from my hand and gives me one long, judging look.

I know she knows I know, and that seems to annoy her slightly, yet even her proud self can't resist a shiny new weapon. A rare weapon, something that's hard to get.

"I will make sure to pay you back," Tess says.

"Works for me," I tell her.

I then watch as she walks away. When she gets behind the corner of one of the houses, I switch to [Perception] and watch as she stops and starts observing the javelin up close. There's a small, happy smile on her face as she tests the item's weight and sharpness while also sending a few small sparks through it.

There are 3 possible upgrades for mana:

Mana Amplification: Enhances the sheer volume of mana you possess.

Mana Restoration: Accelerates the rate at which your mana replenishes itself.

Mana Potency: Boosts the potency and intensity of your mana.

And I like all of them.

Amplification would give me straight up more mana, maybe in the form of pure stats, or it changes my body a bit to possess more of it. It's something that could be quite good for me, and it would mean stronger spells. Heck, later I could improve the quality of my mana on my own or something. I don't know.

More mana = good. That's how my brain works.

Mana restoration is also something similar. Less mana, but faster regeneration, which also means more mana. The only difference would be that I don't have as massive a mana pool to put into a single spell in the future. So my damage could be lower than with amplification, but it could allow me to restore my mana faster and spam my spells more.

It's also good just for longer fights.

The last one, Potency, is quite a question. The intensity of my mana... does it mean my spells would be stronger? Would that mana be more pure and already slightly concentrated even without me doing anything? If the mana is more potent, how does it compare to just having more mana?

Is, for example, 10 stats in potent mana equal to 20 stats in amplified mana?

System? Any hints?

"..."

Yeah, I thought so. Screw you.

But there are more hints: the stages! Obviously, after I pick an upgrade, I will be at stage 1, but stage 3, its name, could be a hint.

For Amplification, it's Limitless Mana, and that's something I really, really like. For Restoration, it's Unending Mana, and more questions arise. How does it compare to Limitless? So annoying! And what the heck is Supreme Mana, other than just sounding cool?

Whatever, I already know what I will do.

I will pick Amplification, get more mana, and then I will come up with ways to increase the regeneration of my mana. I already created a construct on my heart. The next step could be to create a construct that would help me regenerate more mana. Hell, it sounds difficult, but it's nice to set high goals, right?

As for Potency? It's also something I should work on my own, through my skills. I have one theory I want to try, and if it works as I think it should, it should be quite similar to Mana Potency, probably. Plus, I already have tricolored mana, don't I? It's probably something similar.

As someone smart said, you need to have strong basics before you start building. It's totally not only because I want to have more mana.

Okay?

Okay.

"Pick, Mana Amplification," I say and then close my eyes, ready to fight against the pain. And oh boy, it comes, and the world around me blacks out.

When I open my eyes and check the timer, I learn that it's a few hours later and my body, now slightly healed, still hurts. My mana pool feels bigger now, and I start examining it while turning my eyes to the item on the floor.

"Thanks for keeping watch," I say to the abomination lying on the floor of the room. A thing made from my flesh and bones with an imperfect imprint of Lissandra.

The fleshy abomination is quiet, probably too haughty to bother answering.

I open my status and immediately blink and stop with my mouth open.

Hehe, probably some bug.

My mana starts to move more and more, and the pressure of it on my body starts increasing. Something I haven't felt for a long time. Something that kept bothering me on the first floor and part of the second floor.

When I look at the status again, it's still there.

Okay, one more try. I close it and open it, and it's still there.

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 369 + 369

Plus 369. What the hell? Are attribute upgrades maybe much more important than I thought?

"I'm surprised you went with Mana Amplification, little pup. I personally went with Potency."

I listen to her only in the back of my mind and feel my constructs and passives work at full throttle, dealing with my doubled-up mana. I actively start taking control of my mana and help them to deal with a sudden and massive increase in mana pool.

It reminds me of the good old times.

Chapter 159: Official challenge

It's such a nice day, even this fleshy abomination on the floor won't ruin my mood. My mana doubled. The weather is as nice as it can be here on the third floor, and that improves my mood slightly. My mana doubled. I survived the first phase, floor, sorting test, or whatever of Beyond. My mana doubled. Thanks to that, my stats went up quite nicely.

I also improved my skills a lot, dealt with a few people, and gave Tess a gift. My mana doubled.

Did I forget something?

Oh yeah, my mana doubled!

Like, what the heck? It feels illegal. I am a measly level 123, and I know for sure that Lissandra, the person able to destroy an entire planet, was well over level 450, maybe closer to thousand? Who knows! It just feels super illegal to have an attribute upgrade that doubles my stat.

I love it, obviously, even though it threatens to tear apart my body. The system just wants me to put stat points into inferior stats such as constitution. Pff, what bullshit.

Anyways, send help.

This is dangerous, isn't it? The increase is too quick and out of nowhere, and it makes my mana 6 times higher than constitution. That's 6.4 mana to 1 constitution. Most of the mages around my level I met up until now barely went for 3:1.

So, why am I so happy? Is there something wrong with me? Why am I getting excited and drunk on all of this power? Maybe I'm not that normal?

It just can't be! Surely, I'm the most normal out of our group, right?

Reinforcement and Mana-Fortified Resilience, please hold on. I will have to rely on you once again, just for a bit. Damn, it would be kind of really bad if I didn't pick Mana-Fortified Resilience as my passive.

I have already tried Mana Regulator, but as expected, it doesn't work on that. The thing only regulates the amount of mana the kinetic heart is getting.

Another round of Active Tempering maybe? That doesn't sound like a good idea. I am still getting used to my expanded mana pool, and attempting to use it to temper my body could result in unfortunate consequences—by "unfortunate," I mean actively untempering my body out of existence.

"Natssandra, any ideas?"

"How did you call me?" the fleshy brooch asks threateningly.

"Lissthaniel, finally accept it, your imprint is imperfect and somehow you ended up affected by my personality. Real-fake-Lissandra would tear me apart multiple times already and wouldn't act so... inelegantly." She was a psycho, but a formidable one.

"It was the first time I have ever tried to create an imprint. Some... imperfections... are to be expected. But little pup, I really dislike the tone you are using while talking to me."

"I dislike that you killed Ruby, I dislike you throwing me into tunnels, so get used to it."

"Little pup, did you seriously get attached to that fake? Ruby was just a shadow of her real self that is most likely dead for millennia. She would disappear the moment all of you left. Her dying by my hand is mercy in comparison to her just disappearing."

Again, she and her twisted logic. Yes, there is some truth to that, but I don't have to like it.

"This tutorial, this place. Nothing here is real. So do not let emotions get in your way. Kill who you need to kill, use people, throw them away. Steal, pillage, cheat. Get as strong as possible. That's what you should be doing. Without a speck of regret and without any hesitation."

For a moment, depressing silence fills the room.

"Do not let useless emotions get in your way," the brooch finishes, and this time I don't know if it's the part that is Lissandra talking or the part that is affected by me.

"What I do will be decided by me and me only. But enough of that. Any ideas on how to deal with high mana, low constitution?" I answer her.

It takes just a moment, but I feel a single thin thread of mana reach towards me, touch me, and disappear, and that's all it takes for her to get enough information.

“Usually I would recommend slowly increasing your mana, but right now it's too late for that. Looking at your level of mana mastery, there are three options: Mana Venting, Mana Cycling, and Harmonic Resonance.” Lissandra then pauses for a moment, “Mana Cycling might be the right one for you.”

I then sit there quietly and listen to her explanations, once again feeling like cheating. As if other people are playing a game normally, and I'm reading advanced guides.

But hey, I will take whatever I can. Looking at the rewards I got, I think the next time I enter Beyond, it will be much more dangerous. Also, it's not like Hell became easy immediately. As before, there are always easier ways to clear a floor, and then there are some harder ones that are more rewarding when it comes to levels. I don't even have to mention which ones I prefer.

Anyways, Mana Cycling, to dumb it down, I just need to cycle mana through my body.

But that sounds too easy! Some people might think, and I would totally agree with them. Mana already flows through my body, and well, isn't that the problem? How would more mana flowing through my body help?

Well, as Natssandra says, control is key. Right now, mana is flowing inside me like a river - after the increase, and I have to control it, tame it if you will.

The main problem is that my mana is higher than my body can handle and I keep on going only because quite a big chunk of my mana gets taken away by Reinforcement and the rest is used through my newest passive to strengthen it. I blame the inferior constitution stat, which always holds me down.

But yeah, with Mana Cycling, I would regulate that flow, slow down my heartbeat, and throttle some mana.

Another step would be finding the best route through my body and guiding mana through stronger pathways.

Cycling mana through my body on my own would also increase the efficiency of passive tempering, and together with infusing my body with mana, it would make my body stronger faster.

So yeah, on the surface, Mana Cycling might just look like letting mana flow. But really, it's about taking control, guiding the flow, training my body, and managing the pressure. Not just letting mana flow however it wants, but doing it on my own. It's something I instinctively did on my own, but this will take it a step further.

It requires a lot of work. I need to have some part of my mind cycle that mana to the point where I get used to it so much it becomes as easy as breathing.

Another and the most annoying part is learning about mana pathways and a bit of their anatomy.

The heck? That feels like studying? Even in a hellish tutorial, I'm not safe, and I thought I was done with it after finishing school.

Many hours later, I leave and Lissaniel stays behind. I still refuse to touch that thing so it stays on the floor of the house.

After returning to the hideout, I just lie down and stare at the ceiling.

Should I just give up? A little bit of mana running through my body can't be that bad; I'm used to worse, right?

Damn it, I hate studying, and even more when Lissandra is so goddamn annoying. I never met a teacher like her. "No, you can't move your mana like this. Why didn't you remember this pathway? I've seen animals with better mana control. Your control is trash."

The more I talk with her, the more I separate my image from her from the Lissandra I saw destroy the world. This Lissandra, made from my hand, is just not her, even if she bears some similarities and knowledge.

Now that I think about it, since she took something after me, isn't that telling a bit? Me being so annoyed by her personality... such self-disses are quite rare.

As always, when I'm in such a mood, Biscuit comes running. This time not even using mana arms. He just wobbles on his short legs, woofs at me, and puts his head on my chest.

Such a good boy.

I start petting him immediately, and he closes his eyes, and his tail slowly moves from side to side.

Should I have Biscuit eat Lissthanial? Knowing the doggo, he might absorb all her skills and knowledge to rise up as the first absolute from the earth.

"..."

Okay, that is too scary; let's not do that.

In revenge for making me think such scary thoughts, I pull his cheek, still keeping some part of my mind focused on dealing with my mana and awkwardly trying to cycle it.

While I'm laying down, another little body sneaks closer, lies next to me, puts her small head on my chest, and snuggles closer.

"What are you doing, Isabella?" I ask.

"I had a fight with Sophie," the little girl says, her mouth pouting.

Oh my, she is using her full name instead of "Soph"; it must be serious. Still, it's not my problem, so I just stay quiet.

"You're not going to ask me why?" Isabella complains.

"No," I answer simply. Knowing her, I'm sure she will tell me anyways. I spent enough time with her on the third floor to know that.

"I keep telling her to go and become friends with you, but she keeps refusing." she says.

As I thought, and what the heck, Izzy?

"You are strong, so we will be safer if we become friends." Isabella continues.

That's so shameless. Then, even without me answering, little Isabella continues to talk. I don't even have to talk, and she just reads my mood or emotions or whatever she does and reacts to that. It's something I got used to, and even though it's a bit annoying that she can read me, it's not that bad because it's a little girl that holds such ability.

"It's not like we would bring you nothing! We would be friends, so we could help you. Sophie is strong, and so am I!" Isabella defends her idea.

I pet Biscuit and still don't say anything, just letting her read me.

"We are not as strong as you, but... but..." she quiets down, and her eyes become a bit wet, the little girl seemingly close to crying.

But I know her! She is too devious; I know crocodile tears when I see them!

Getting a read on my reaction, she just sighs and stands up quickly.

Her tears are gone as if they never existed, and the little aspiring actress just points at me, "You will become friends with Sophie!" she stomps her small leg and then points at Biscuit, "And I will take the doggo from you!" she stomps again, and this time I notice she is even more serious.

The little girl then turns around and rushes back to her sister.

So that's it, the great Biscuit war has started. I did receive the official challenge, and now it's up to me to defend this burrito-like doggo.

I turn and look at Biscuit, who just continues blinking slowly, unbothered at all. The best doggo of the third floor then yawns, and before he closes his mouth, I put my finger into his mouth, and he bites on it gently as he closes it.

He blinks again, this time with a hint of surprise.

You are mine.

Chapter 160: There's no way

So, a person would think that my passive would fully take care of my mana, right? Its description goes like this: Mana-Fortified Resilience (Rare) - The user's resilience strengthens with their current mana reserves, boosting resistance to physical strain, and also enhancing resistance to various energies.

What a bunch of crap!

The passive most likely doesn't negate the effect of too high mana fully, it might be because it's of too low rarity. Sure, it helps a lot, and when I cycle my mana as Lissthanial showed me, I don't even have to waste [Focus] on holding it back.

As always, I blame the system and send a rude message to BenDover in the Community. He seems to be getting used to it and answers just as rudely. The guy doesn't know how petty I am.

I'm able to wait years for the right chance so it doesn't matter if the Community Tournament happens only every 4 years like the Olympic games or once per year. I will wait and then... huhu.

But dealing with my increased mana also reminds me of my other passive that is helping me with it. Mana Flow (rare), the passive I got from my Mana Channeler class together with the active skill [Mana Surge].

At the start, I was quite happy with it but as more time passed, I start feeling quite disappointed. The class needs a serious upgrade to be viable. Lately, I almost do not use Surge as I can do something similar on my own and the passive doesn't even feel that strong anymore.

Plus, I didn't even get a sniff of a sub-class. As I told Tess before, I think the sub-class is something we get after reaching the 4th floor. As for an upgrade or new Primary class, I think we will get it at level 150. That's when we will turn from one question mark to two question marks. Isn't that quite cool?

We also have already moved beyond the wall and our camp is a beautiful grassy field with white trees that have golden leaves. The stream of water nearby is the reason we keep staying here. People continue to bathe in it daily and we drink water to the point our bellies are bulging.

The only time we leave is to hunt some sparrows. The past few days were peaceful. We continue to keep a watch all the time, but there is not a single monster here after we killed the undead ones so we take it easy and restore our powers before we get ready to move beyond the blue wall that is ahead of us.

"You are thinking again? You should be paying more attention to your surroundings," Tess says, but I can hear in her voice that she doesn't mean it that much.

"That's why you are here. But anyway, how is it going?"

"You would have known if you didn't spend most of your time somewhere beyond the white wall," Tess pokes me slightly, "But it's going pretty well. Sophie is trusting me a bit more now, Maya still listens to me," she pauses, "that also reminds me that you could give Maya a few pointers with [Focus] and [Armament]"

"I don't think she would like it."

"I can talk her into it, don't worry. Lately, she is quite cooperative so I don't think it would be a bad idea to help her a bit if you are willing to."

I continue to look down at the grassy green fields. We are both sitting on a skyscraper-like tall white wall, our legs dangling from the edge. The view is beautiful. A stunning, almost fable-like area down there creates a sharp contrast with the permanently cloudy weather and the ruined city behind the wall.

To answer Tess's question, I just nod. It shouldn't be too annoying to spend a few hours helping Maya out. I trust that Tess knows what she is doing and I need to help once in a while since she is dealing with this annoying stuff.

"Hadwin is also quite cooperative, he helps me a lot and he is good at dealing with Kim, Aaron, and Dennis. You could give him some pointers as well," Tess says carefully.

"Oi, I'm already helping Kim and Lily and you added Maya to that. Just tell Kim to shoot rocks at Hadwin and tell Hadwin to defend with his [Strengthening]. But tell him to only use it at places where the rocks are going to hit him and not on his entire body. Or you can keep throwing him off the wall until he is able to strengthen himself enough to not get any wounds."

What am I, a teacher? I can observe them a bit more and help them when I want to learn their skills or something, but right now I'm too busy with Lissthanial, my mana, preparing for another construct. I barely even hunt.

"I will do that, but Lily is also a bit of a problem. After you talked with her she is a bit more open and spends some time with other girls, but she keeps asking where you are. I guess you know the reason." Tess's eyebrows lift up as she looks at me.

"It's fine, she will get over it," I answer.

"Nat, she saw you explode two people in front of her while you did laugh, yet she still continues to look at you like you are a prince on a white horse. I don't think she will get over it."

Dang it.

"Can't you add her to your harem?" I ask.

“Nat...”

“Okay, okay. Maybe I can start burping in front of her, eating with my mouth open, and slurping loudly when I drink.”

“The hell, that's so childish,” Tess puts a hand in front of her mouth and quietly giggles, “well for now it's not too big of a problem so we can leave it as it is.”

Good, if we ignore it long enough, it will solve itself. That's how it works.

Right?

“Little pup, are you dumb or something? It's obvious that the attribute upgrade is as strong as it is. You can only ever upgrade a single attribute. I think you underestimate the importance of that,” Natssandra says, “and most people get their attribute upgrade around level 150.”

I move a bit closer, still cycling my mana, and listen as the brooch made of meat speaks. Actually... maybe I could call her sausage? Don't people throw whatever into the mixer and create a sausage out of it? This is slightly similar.

“You have only 4 attributes, and each attribute has the same 3 possible upgrades for everyone. Every upgrade then has 3 stages. That's basic. For example, the mana attribute has Amplification, Restoration, and Potency

Or maybe she's more of a meatball? There are some of my bones in it, so that's not as fitting.

“The strength upgrade, for example, has these options: Intensity, Efficiency, and Momentum. So, as I said, you take that creature you call a dog, put it near a firestone you set for half efficiency, and let it cook for ten...”

“Hey, what the heck!”

"Oh, so you are paying attention. I had a feeling you were ignoring me," Lissandra says.

"Obviously, I'm listening. " She's giving out some free information - useful free information. I need to get as much as possible before the system decides it's enough. For now, it seems like we either haven't gone beyond what the system judges as acceptable, or it just straight-up doesn't detect her. Either way, good for me.

The reason might also be that she's made out of my left hand and bears some of my personality. At this point, I don't even know if it was the original fake Lissandra's intention or just a lucky mistake.

Lissanthaniel then continues, and I listen carefully.

When I open Beyond Community, it still shows that only three out of ten people are in there. Also, Savant is in the chat.

Savant -If you wanted to act as if you were dead, you should have told Grumpy to keep her mouth shut.

Oh, dang it, Lily.

Savant -So how did you like Beyond's first trial?

Noname -What happened? Aren't you friendlier right now? Will you ask something from me in the next message?

Savant - As if. I just think if we start talking here a bit more, the third guy will join. I think he's one of the 13. Well, now, 10 people that didn't use the community up until now.

Noname -Or he/she is someone that started in Beyond the same way we started Hell.

Savant -Even you should know how impossible that is.

Noname - This would be an interesting thought.

Savant -You wanted to say scary.

Noname - Yes, yes.

After a few more messages, I close the window and think about what I said, then just shake my head. There's no way someone started in Beyond.

Then, while sitting and leaning against the tree, I look at the remaining members of group 4 who stand in a circle, all of them looking down at the fleshy, and in my opinion, quite a gross item on the ground.

Yep, I just took Lissandra from her home, the dusty floor of a nearly ruined house, and let her touch some grass. I also introduced her to the others, so no one can complain that I left a thousands-of-year-old grandma in a house alone and without any company.

“Are these finger bones?”

“I see some veins, and this looks like a fingernail?”

“...so disgusting.”

“Take it away...”

“Isabella, can you burn...”

Hadwin splits from the group and stops in front of me, and I look up at him, still leaning against the tree while sitting on the ground. It's quite nice.

“Nathaniel, what the fuck,” the older man says.

