

Tutorial 181

Chapter 181: Not a cloud

On our way back from the hole, everyone is surprisingly quiet, deep in their own thoughts. Learning about how deep that hole was, I also start to watch our surroundings more carefully.

The mountains that surround us are all terribly tall. Yet there is something that I do realize: they are a bit weirdly shaped. I can't exactly point it out, but something feels off about them, and now that I look, they start feeling off more and more.

"Maybe we should leave a bit sooner than expected. I or Maya can carry Lily. I know she probably won't like it, but this place starts feeling off," Tess says, echoing my thoughts.

"Yes, let's do it," I agree with her. "I will check where we should go."

I split from the group and generate enough kinetic energy to push myself higher. Unlike before, it's much smoother now, and I lift off quickly yet somewhat stably. It's like I am applying a constant push instead of the short thrusts of energy that I used before. I continue to send more and more energy under me, and it starts getting colder the higher I am, so I turn some of that energy into thermal energy to keep myself warm.

The day is quite clear, so I can see a great distance. When I feel that I am high enough, I stop pushing and instead focus on keeping myself floating at a single spot.

There are mountains as far as I can see. In one direction, there is more snow; most of the mountains are totally covered in snow. On the opposite side, the mountains are getting smaller and smaller.

I spend a bit more time looking and then land back near the others, finding them with my [Perception]. "I think this is the way we should go, but I didn't see far enough. Can you check it?" I gesture the direction to Tess.

"I won't be able to get myself that high; you will have to help me," Tess shakes her head and puts her hand on my shoulder.

I put my arm around her waist and pull her closer. "Ready?"

She nods, and I push us up in the air, this time generating a bit more heat for Tess as well.

When we are high enough, I start keeping us afloat. "I have to say, the view is amazing," Tess says and collects some mana in her eyes. [Farsight] activates, and she carefully looks around. It takes her around one minute, and then she taps my shoulder. "We can go back."

When we land again, I let go of her. "So?"

"I think you were right; there seem to be fewer mountains, and they are smaller that way and there are also some plains far in the distance. So let's grab the others and start moving there. But Nat, we will have to rely on you to keep us from freezing in case it gets worse. I don't think Isabella will be able to keep her skill running so long, and some of us don't have high physical stats to endure that."

"I will be nice enough and do it, so no worries, Tess," I then look at Izzy. "Who is the better fire user now?" I poke at the little girl.

"You are just a radiator! My flames are much better!" Isabella fights back, but it's no use. I know the truth.

Even though I do it in a super janky way and waste more mana than she does, it doesn't matter with my reserves.

The best fire user in group 4 is me!

Or at least until Biscuit learns that plenty of food tastes better cooked and learns how to use fire skills as well.

To move as quickly as possible, Min-Jae lowers our weight with [Gravity Well]. Afterward, he and Tess try to keep the group from splitting apart as others either know how to lower their defenses and let Min-Jae and Tess use skills on them, or they just hold onto people who can do it.

Meanwhile, I'm the engine, and the blonde woman and young boy hold onto me while I continue to generate enough energy to move us through the air.

Dennis says it's the most ghetto thing he's seen since the start of the tutorial, and I can't help but agree with him.

It takes some time to get used to it, and I almost throw us against the top of one of the mountains. There is also an accident where Maya gets separated from the group and nearly crashes to the ground. For that, Min-Jae continues to apologize.

After a few dozen minutes, I get used to it, so I relax slightly and, while still generating enough heat to keep others warm, I create arms made out of pale blue mana and grab every member of our group. Either around the wrist, ankle, or waist.

Then I start moving faster and faster. My doubled-up mana easily allows such expenditure. To move faster, I also have to generate more heat, until Tess uses her skill to push against the wind, creating something like a bubble around us, and it becomes immediately quieter, and the wind becomes almost no problem.

Once in a while, I move us up so Tess can scout again, and we continue. Some members of our group dislike it. Actually, they seem to be hating it, but they have to clench their teeth and deal with it. The distance we have passed would have taken us days on foot.

While traveling, we also spot more holes similar to the first one we saw, and the mountains become weirder and weirder. It's as if they are man-made instead of created by nature.

But after a few more hours, we start seeing fewer and fewer holes, and the mountains become somewhat more normal again.

"Ant," Tess says out of nowhere.

What?

I stop us at the spot and turn us toward where she is pointing. In the distance, there is an ant looking toward us. The ant is dark red, and his antennae are moving from side to side as he holds onto the side of the mountain.

He is too far away for me to feel mana from him, yet his eyes seem to have some soft glow to them.

The ant is as big as a bus.

The creature twitches and, with movement that is surprisingly quick, he dashes toward one of the immensely deep holes nearby and climbs inside.

"Nat, I think we should leave, quickly," Tess says, and without answering, I collect more of my mana than before and push us away from where the creature disappeared.

Fucking bus-sized ants.

Sure, normal ants are somewhat cute as they try to pull a big leaf and as they call their friend collect some sugar from the ground, but this?

They are massive, meaning that it's easier to see the details of their faces. Short hair-like things sticking out from some places. Metal-like looking carapace with eyes that seem so lifeless yet so dangerous.

Currently, dozens of them pop up on the mountains all around us, probably from the holes that are ever-present here.

The creatures move quickly and continue to appear in places we pass by. They do not attack, just watch.

"Fuck, do you think these mountains are anthills?" Aaron says out of nowhere, and I nearly crash us against the mountain. This can't be, right?

I check once again but soon find that the boy might be onto something, but it can't be right? There are thousands of these mountains.

Soon we enter the trap; there are a few dozen of ants between us and where we are going, and even more jump from the side around us.

Most of them are around level one hundred, with very few being closer to one fifty.

At first, they stand on their legs and bend their bodies slightly, shooting yellowish mana from their bottoms at us. The attack is seemingly organized; all the ants attack at once.

I move us away from the first attack, and Tess uses her [Psychokinesis] to push away the projectiles that are about to hit us.

Then I notice a few ants turning and starting to attack their own, and I realize that Sophie has already started working, and her attack does surprisingly well.

At first, the ants ignore their own tearing them apart, biting off their legs, or shooting yellowish acid-like substances at them, so multiple ants die. But then, with movements that feel full of anger, they turn against ants controlled by Sophie and attack them, ignoring any attack that lands on them and even ignoring us. They literally tear apart the four ants Sophie took control of, and when they turn back to us, they seem angrier than before.

I continue to focus on avoiding attacks and flying us higher and away from them while others deal with defense or with attacks on them. High in the air, the attacks become much less dangerous, and after a while, I feel others calm down slightly.

Then flying ants come at us, only a dozen of them but each even bigger than the ones from before. The only difference, other than size, is that they seem a lot thinner and have massive wings that flicker at immense speed.

Min-Jae's small projectiles shoot toward the monsters, and I even feel that he is trying to increase their weight with his skill, but they are hard to hit. Even Biscuit helps by creating a single, long purple mana tentacle that attacks the ants' wings, successfully causing some damage. I can also sense him sending telepathic messages to the ants. Hopefully, he's not asking them for food but perhaps calling them assholes.

Tess's javelin, filled with red and white lightning, pierces through the air and one of the ants; then it flies back and kills another one while returning. At the same moment, two of the ants turn around and start attacking their own, while even Isabella's blue flames blaze up and hit the closest ant which is immediately set ablaze and starts falling down while burning and twitching, covered in blue flames.

Another javelin trailed by lightning flies, and one more ant dies. Just a few more seconds and they are dealt with, their dead bodies falling to the ground.

"Nat, can you go faster?" Tess asks.

Huh, who does she think I am? I'm still limiting the speed we are moving at to not make them vomit all over me. Our current speed is nothing.

"Yes, that is not a problem. Why?" I ask her.

To that, Tess points toward a dark cloud far behind from where we came. Hmm, what's with that?

I turn to her and she still solemnly continues to point there, "Not a cloud," she says.

Huh? I look again at the not-a-cloud thing and notice that it's moving weirdly.

Oh, I see.

My heart thumps wildly and I use more energy to move us away from that. From thousands and thousands of flying ants that darken the sky and head right toward where we are.

I ignore screaming; I even ignore Maya's unladylike throwing up as I continue to move us between the mountains and sometimes changing the direction a bit to avoid smaller groups of flying giant ants.

It takes us an hour to get rid of the goddamn ants, and it's good because I already start feeling my mana depleting to dangerous levels. The amount of maneuvering and my lack of experience lead to inefficient

use of kinetic energy for flying. Then, I have to spend additional mana to create more energy while also heating the area around us and using mana arms to hold others, which is quite draining.

It's nice training, of course, and it became a bit more fun when others stopped screaming every time we almost crashed against something.

But at last, the ants stop following us and stay in the mountains or anthills or however, I should call them. The ants stopped right after we reached the plains. They just sit there right before the plains and continue looking toward us soundlessly while snapping their mandibles and moving around angrily.

Yeah, screw you too. It's dead certain I will be back

Chapter 182: Solo hunting time

The plains spread as far as I can see, and only Tess says that she sees some hills in the distance. It's noticeably warmer here and the ground is rocky with patches of grass here and there, and some trees once in a while. But best of all, there are no bus-sized nightmarish red ants.

I mean, some oversized ants might be fine, but it stops being funny when they start flying. Creepy jackasses.

I would have shown them something if I didn't have to taxi our small group. Oh boy, I would love to test the limits of my mana reserves, my bought passive, my flames. I also need to properly test [Resonance]. I have a feeling that I am only scratching the edges of what it's capable of, and there are plenty of ideas on how to utilize skills that are made from a combination of [Disruption] and [Oscillation].

As we continue to move further away from the giant anthills, I do not stop checking in the distance for suspicious cloud-like things. Tess does the same as we move on foot.

There is no road, so we have to jump over some stones, and small streams of water, and jump over some tears that scar the ground.

We don't spot any other monsters or animals; it's just an empty plain. But I'm not that surprised. What kind of maniac would want to stay so close to the thousands, maybe tens of thousands, or maybe even millions of ants? Did I also say that they are bus-sized?

"Our water and food should be able to last us for around one week. You said you and Nathaniel don't need that much water or food anymore after the body upgrade. By how much?" Hadwin is asking Tess.

"I'm not sure exactly, but I think I'm fine with 50-60% of what I used to eat before? Nathaniel maybe needs even less than that," Tess answers.

"Less than you; is there any difference between your upgrades?"

"I don't think so, I think it's because he has more mana than me and that might affect how much food or water he needs," Tess says as she moves over the fallen tree and turns to me, "Am I right, Nathaniel?"

"It's most likely as you said," I answer. There is still so much we don't know, and that makes things annoying at times but also more interesting. What is life without some secrets or things to strive for? Things like more mana!

But I think we've rested enough, and all this walking is getting boring, "Ready to fly again?" I ask.

Some of the reactions are far from enthusiastic, and I feel personally attacked. So I may or may not have flown a bit more turbulently at some places.

After a few days of walking and flying, we finally spot something other than empty plains.

"It's a city," Tess says smartly.

"Are you sure, Tess? We wouldn't like it to be another anthill."

"Nat, I'm sure I can now recognize an anthill from man-made towers."

"Tess, what if there are bipedal ants or some similar nonsense? Maybe were-ants, or deer ants, cinder ants."

"You sound annoyed," Tess asks, yet she still continues to look towards the city only she sees in the distance.

"People are way too nice; it's creepy," I answer her honestly.

"That's what happens if you treat them somewhat nicely and teach them some stuff and save their lives once or twice."

"Bullshit, I beat Hadwin and Maya, I punched Sophie and tried to kill her too. I exploded two people in front of them, and probably more nonsense. I tell you, Tess, they are planning something."

"Hadwin tried to kill you, so he deserved that. Beating Maya was quite rude, but I think she thinks you paid back for that by helping her improve. Sophie understands what she did to you, and I wouldn't be surprised if she expected even harsher behavior from your side. As for exploding two people, you weren't at your senses, and to be honest, some of us also did similar things, maybe just not in such a way," Tess pauses.

There is a short silence in which the two of us look into the distance, trying to catch more of the city that might be there.

"Some of us are murderers, and almost all of us did things that would terrify us back on Earth," she hesitates, "Or maybe not, maybe all of us are here for a reason - because we are not normal and we never fit into society. Maybe only people like us have a chance to survive here."

The light falls on her, and her long blonde hair tied into a ponytail shines in that light as she turns to me.

Her steel gray eyes are piercing as a smile slowly appears on her face, "Nat, I already told you, but I want all of us to become comrades. Friends. Even you. So just leave it up to me. Do not worry about what happened back on Earth; I have already forgiven you. Just think about it and maybe open up a bit, and I will deal with the rest. I believe you will enjoy having friends," the light seems to make her hair glow as it shines in it, while her unwavering eyes look at me.

I leave after saying something I do not remember. She is scary. She reads people easier than Isabella; she manipulates people better than Sophie with her skill. She knows what words to say to make it hurt, as well as to make me feel things I do not want to feel.

To me, Tess is the scariest out of this group.

It's solo hunting time! I've decided to spend a few days on my own. I need to vent a bit without any people around me.

I exchange a few words with Lily, who, after a few days of traveling through the plains, has one missing leg and a big part of the second one back. She doesn't seem too pleased, but it will be fine. The girl seems happy about the rare-rated amulet I gave her before. I also tell her the times when I will be in the community, so that seems to ease her a bit.

My goodbye to Min-Jae, Hadwin, and Maya is shorter. On the other hand, the twins and Sophie seem to be not exactly happy that I am leaving, just a little less unhappy than the others. Especially Sophie, who I'm sure still remembers the incident when Goldie turned off my [Focus].

Isabella is stuck between happy and unhappy. Happy because she will get to keep Biscuit for herself and unhappy... well, I don't know, maybe she got a bit attached to me during the start of the third floor?

Still, she doesn't have to cry; it makes things awkward.

So, I pet Biscuit a lot and tell him to take care of others. A reliable doggo should be able to.

Tess isn't there, but I meet her a minute after flying away from where I left the people of group four.

The blonde woman is smiling knowingly.

"What? You pushed too hard and too soon," I tell her. I still think it's more fun to stay with others, but with Tess organizing everything and even Lily doing some PR for me, things are moving too quickly for ol' introverted me.

So, I need some breathing room. A bit of leveling and fighting so I can clear my mind. The group will be fine as they are all capable and might even be able to grow more without me being there. It's something Tess and Hadwin both seem to agree with.

"I don't think I did push too hard," she takes a short step towards me and then hugs me. It's a short hug. "Take care of yourself, Nat. I would miss you if something happened to you. I don't have that many friends to lose one of them."

"You take care as well; I will be back soon. We will stay in touch in the community," I wave at her one more time and lift off right after, using kinetic energy to pierce through the air.

I move towards the place where we came from. This floor has a serious ant problem I might be able to help with.

Side quest: Defeat 100 ants.

Reward: 5 shards.

A new side quest pops up the moment I start moving towards the aforementioned monsters. The rewards are quite cheap, in my opinion, but I already know that the system is a scrooge.

Also, I have planned to use them to level up anyway, so it's just a small addition to it.

I have a smaller bag with me and within it some water, food, nice snacks, and replacement clothes. It's all the stuff I can buy through the system shop right now, but why would I waste precious shards when I could take it from Hadwin, who is taking care of rationing and inventory? I might have taken a bit more sweets than he liked, but the man didn't say much about it.

As I continue to travel through the air, I check the community once in a while, just for a second or two. The main reason is that I want to see when the other groups come to the 4th floor. Currently, it looks like communication with people on different floors is impossible.

That also confirms my theory that one group can return to Earth—in 5 years—while being for example on the 9th floor, and another group will, at that time, be only on the 4th floor. It makes sense, and it's another reason to clear the floors quickly after getting all you can from them, as the next floor can make you stronger than staying on one floor too long.

Curious, I also join the Beyond community.

Noname - Hey, Savant, are you still on the 3rd floor?

There is no answer, so for a moment, I think that communication through the floors is impossible, or Savant just ignores me, but then an answer appears.

Savant -Are you on the 4th floor?

Yes! Yes! Hahaha.

Noname - Suck it! All the cool guys are already on the 4th floor!

Savant - By cool guys, do you mean yourself? Well, whatever. It looks like those of us from Beyond can talk through the floors while other people can't.

Noname -Yup, do you have trouble with the 3rd-floor quest?

I can't help but poke.

Savant -A little bit, but nothing I won't be able to solve. The system will censor everything useful you could tell me, so just screw off.

Then Savant disconnects, and I am left feeling much better than before. Yup, I know I did have a cheat code called Lily and her [Disintegration], and that also makes me wonder how else I would clear the third floor.

I noticed that Edwal's lightning did have some anti-healing properties, so maybe by talking with the guy and having him help me? Maybe even the king could be lured to our side and influenced to help kill the Saint. I do not believe that he wouldn't know how after thousands of years. He most likely just didn't want to.

As for me, I could probably do it with that weird-ass black mana that the king seemed to recognize. Or I could once again create a strong enough thermal orb and burn the Saint's entire body at once. I just think I would need to be much stronger than the one I used against the two warriors. Much, much stronger.

Well, it's all in the past, and let's not think about Lissandra who stayed there. Let's hope she won't get her hands on the black dagger I left behind, which could dominate and devour mana a bit. Yup, she totally won't get her hands on it. It totally won't come back to bite me in the ass.

I miss Lissthaniel.

Well, not that much, but it would be better than Lissandra, who is so close to her original self. That cockroach-like Abolute is scary as heck.

Chapter 183: Favorite kind of monsters

So the ants are still there, waiting on the mountains but not entering the plains. Car and bus-sized nightmarish monsters with their dead-like eyes are crawling creepily over the rocky surface of the mountains or anthills or whatever it is. Even though they have no human-like eyes, I keep getting the feeling that all of them are staring at me.

Hundreds of them are there. Fewer than when we were running away and I already see a few of them leaving, maybe to call more friends.

There are even flying ones that are currently on the ground.

Good.

I breathe in and use the Mana Regulator to increase the amount of mana my heart is getting, and I start feeling kinetic energy flow through my body. As always, it threatens to tear it apart the moment there is

too much of it, but I accept the feeling. I got used to it and, after dealing with the energy time and time again, I welcome it.

I [Focus], and the world loses its colors. Useless thoughts disappear, and there is only me, my skills, and the enemies against me.

Armor forms around my body. The effect of [Initiate of Pride] makes it more beautiful. It's not to the point where it becomes overdecorated; it just seems masterfully crafted, simple, effective, and somewhat deadly.

More mana flows into the armor, and it takes on a dark blue hue with light blue wisps flowing through it.

Then I start turning all kinetic energy into thermal and fill ten or so mana javelins that float over me with that thermal energy. The pale blue projectiles start glowing with a dark yellow color that seems like cracks go through them.

I decide that first, I will test my new passive that heals me the more heat I have, and I will try to improve my flames.

When I charge towards them, the ants do not attack; they just wait. But the moment I step on one of the mountains, they charge at me. Not all at once, but in smaller groups. Smart monsters know that there isn't enough space for all of them.

The first ant dies the moment my javelin pierces through its head, and it then explodes into flames near another ant, hurting it badly.

[You have defeated an Ant Warrior - lvl 95]

Flame explodes in front of me like a flamethrower, scorching and melting another ant.

[You have defeated an Ant Warrior - lvl 92]

Two more attack from behind my back, and two javelins kill them. One of the javelins kills another ant in the explosion.

In quick succession, I use the javelins to target more ants, mainly flying ones. Before shooting them, I fill them with more thermal energy, so that when they explode, they kill more ants.

Ant monsters are big and quick; there are a lot of them, but it's not a problem. I continue to move quicker than they are able to, and when they get closer, my flames melt them, making them flail on the ground. The ones using ranged attacks, I kill with mana projectiles.

The ants are not as dangerous. Sure, they have high stats most likely, and they are quite massive, but their biggest advantage is their numbers and amazing coordination. It's like someone is leading them, or they are communicating in a way I can't notice.

After killing most likely a hundred of them, I get the notification and also shards.

A new quest appears:

Side quest: Defeat 200 ants.

Reward: 10 shards

A few more ants later, another notification pops up.

[Lvl 125 > Lvl 126]

Good, so now then. Let's see if I can get to level 150 quickly and upgrade my Primary Class finally.

I feel gravity pulling on me much harder as I fly over the mountains. The new kind of ants that I met prove themselves to be quite annoying.

Smaller than Ant Warriors but the same shade of red. Their heads are a bit bigger, and they love to use some kind of gravity skill to make me heavier. In the notification, they are called Gravity Ants.

Yup, the system doesn't bother to come up with a cooler name for them.

But this time there are too many of them; probably a few tens of gravity ants are able to target my body, and I come crashing down. My strengthened body doesn't take any damage, and the armor also helps, but the moment I stand up, I feel intense pressure pulling me back to the ground.

A new variation appears: Stone Ants. They just crawl from the ground. There are no tunnels; they just phase through the earth like it's not there.

I try to move, but the pressure intensifies even more, and I feel myself crashing down.

Stone Ants quickly reach me, and a few dozen of them surround me, biting on my armor, which resists them, and I take no damage. Yet they continue, and stronger and stronger ants start appearing, some of them even reaching close to level 140.

Cracks start to appear on my armor, and soon I feel the bites on my skin. Yet I am durable. The mana, my constructs, make my body even stronger than the armor that I made, and there is barely any damage; only sometimes do they draw some blood.

So I lower my defenses a bit and keep collecting kinetic energy inside my body.

Wounds collect, and more blood is drawn. Deep cuts and bites appear on my limbs, on my neck as they try to bite off my head, and more and more ants surround us. A hundred, two hundred. They create a circle and wait for their opportunity while gravity ants hold me.

My blood seems to excite them even more, and the ones that draw blood even let them twitch their antennae excitedly. The monsters communicate soundlessly between themselves.

Soon it reaches the point that I'm sure my body is impossible to see through all these ants, so I flip the imaginary switch. All the kinetic energy that I was collecting immediately turns into thermal, and brilliant golden flames explode into the area like a giant wave, melting every monster in their way.

Dozens, hundreds of notifications ring quickly after each other, and all but a few ants around me fall down dead. I boost my body and use [Resonance] to get rid of the annoying gravity skills' effects on me.

I slowly walk out of the area where the stones on the ground are melted, looking more like lava. There are hundreds of monstrous bodies around me. The area of effect is massive, and I feel a huge chunk of my mana disappear.

And in all of this, my injuries heal quickly. The blood stops flowing, cracked bones heal, and wounds close with speed visible to the naked eye. The effect is not as good as Lily's, but over time my newest passive heals my battered body easily.

I quickly locate the annoying gravity ants and rush at them. My sword slashes through them easily, even without me having to use my skills. It's that epic weapon whose connection to the saint of the third floor I cut with my black mana dagger.

When I'm done with the entire group, I am 10 shards richer and 1 level higher. A new side quest appeared this time with the goal of killing 300 ants for 15 shards.

I reduce the amount of mana my body leaks with the help of my Mantle and my control over it. To make it leak even less, I do Mana Circulation, and it continues to move mana through my circuits.

With such a reduced signature, I try hiding a bit to delve deeper into the mountains.

A day or two pass and even though I have fun hunting ants I decide to check the community.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -Yes, there are people in the city and something else... I would like to tell you, but Kim, Aaron, and Dennis keep telling me to keep it a secret to surprise you.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -You are making me curious.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - It won't hurt you; you will see. Anyway, the city is full of tall towers, and the situation here is... complicated. There were some problems, but now it's somewhat safe, and we are already looking for a place to sell some of the valuables the boys brought from the third floor.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -Nathaniel, Biscuit misses you; you should come here as soon as possible.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Who is Nathaniel?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -Oh... but Tess used our real names too!

Sset (Hell, group 4) -No, Noname is right. We should avoid using our real names. Right now, we are probably the only ones on the 4th floor, but some of them will surely clear it. I made a mistake.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Well, it probably doesn't matter anyway, but just in case. So you plan to set up the base and then go on quests outside of the city?

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Yes, the system gave us plenty of quests, and some of them even offered shards as rewards. There are a lot of monsters in the underground tunnels, plains nearby, or in the forest that's a bit further. So we will level up as well.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Sounds good. I will connect again at the time we mentioned.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -Stay safe.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - Stay safe! (•◡•) /

I close the window and look toward one of the holes that are deeper than Mount Everest and a continuous stream of ants that continue to climb out of it. This time, most of them are either two question marks or close to it, meaning that hundreds of around level 150 ants crawl around, probably looking for me.

I open my mouth, and two orbs fly out. Orbs made of tricolored mana that already start turning white and are about to explode.

Some of the ants notice that, and tens of monsters turn to me with their lifeless-looking eyes as I sling two orbs toward them, feeling around half of my mana leaving my body.

A big group of a new variation does something that feels like combining their skills and targets one of the orbs, which gets slowly untangled by them and dissipates even before reaching, just exploding halfway.

The second orb reaches them and hits something like a mana barrier that is kept up by another group of ants. Even though they try to stop it, the orb explodes and tears apart the barrier, and the shockwave followed by heat hits the monsters, scorching plenty of them and then sucking in more of them.

Bus-sized monsters are unable to resist the implosion, and their bodies get broken, folded, and pulled toward where the center of the orb is.

[Lvl 129 > Lvl 130]

I invest the stat points and use kinetic energy to push myself away from them, then continue to fly for around twenty minutes until I am sure I am far enough.

Then I start masking my presence again, hiding in the ever-present gaps on the side of the anthills, or whatever they are.

I watch my mana regenerate, and slowly I start creating another orb inside my mouth, an orb that I hide with Mantle and [Resonance]. It's easier to hide a small orb than to hide mana that would flow through my body. This time, I start storing thermal energy inside of it and watch as their scouts continue to fly around. I even feel pulses of mana searching the area.

More time passes like that, and when I am finally ready, I leave my hiding spot.

Then I feel movement and immediately use Symbiotic Transference to turn some of that thermal energy inside the orb into strengthening my body. Just in time to stop myself from being bitten in half.

I look down at the ant that is reaching my waist, and its massive mandibles bite into my body, drawing blood but unable to push more because of my strengthening.

[Phantom Ant - lvl ??]

The ant seems to be almost surprised and quickly lets go, and its body flickers, the monster turning invisible.

Oh, I see, my favorite kind of monster.

Before the ant disappears fully, I blow its head off with a short burst of concentrated thermal energy and send my senses into the area, looking for similar signatures I felt from the ant when it tried to turn invisible.

Immediately, I locate a few dozen of them all around me.

Chapter 184: Flames

Before they get to react, the orb filled to the brim with thermal energy leaves my mouth and floats near me. Then I start releasing short bursts of concentrated flames from it instead of exploding it at once.

The already darkening area lights up with the yellowish glow of my flames, and monster after monster is set ablaze and killed immediately.

Entering deeper [Focus], I methodically change my position and continue to search for and attack the invisible ants that are all around me. As with most of the monsters with skills that allow them to hide, they are fast but physically weaker. Every time they try to get closer, they just get burned by a blast of flames.

I continue to jump, dodge, and improve my hold over the orb that floats nearby. It's still so filled with an immense amount of heat, and I only use a little bit to kill the Phantom Ants. I do not stop until they are all dead.

All twenty-six of them.

I even spent some time obliterating their bodies using kinetic energy.

Then I feel a touch of Gravity Ants and just resonate mana on my skin, removing the effect of their skill from me over and over again, no matter how hard they try or how many of them do so.

I lift off and start flying around while feeding my heart with more mana and keep converting kinetic into thermal energy.

Yellow flames continuously explode from me. Sometimes as a flamethrower, sometimes like a short blast of heat. In other cases, mixed into my mana projectiles and shot over long distances.

Then, just before finishing the side quest requiring me to kill 300 ants, the strongest one so far appears. One with immense mana that reaches out toward me and tries to dissipate my flames and the orb still floating near me.

For a moment, our mana clashes against each other and I push against him with my [Resonance] and stop him from doing that. Immediately after, I shoot projectiles at him. A javelin that I fill with thermal energy that the monster dissipates before it reaches him.

Another javelin appears and this time filled with kinetic energy, the ant dissipates it as well.

[Mana Harvester Ant - lvl ??]

I start releasing heat all around my body, burning the ants that get closer to me, and dash at this one. When I reach him, my flames become weaker, yet I continue to feed them more and more from the orb until the area around me continues to light the surrounding area in the slowly darkening day.

Yellowish flames light up the side of the mountain and throw flickering flames all around us while I continue to focus on the monster in front of me.

I study him, watch the way the monster moves its mana, and when it tries to dissipate my flames again, I reach out and this time my mana resonates. The monster loses control over his skill.

It's just a short moment, but it's enough for a blast of now more concentrated golden flames to blow off his head.

[You have defeated a Mana Harvester Ant - lvl 158]

The moment the monster dies, even more of them replace him. With more ants of the same variation, all of them reach out to me to cancel my skills.

My Mantle totally blocks their attempts to mess with the mana inside my body, but my flames weaken and I feel my heart thump loudly.

I slip deeper into [Focus] and lower a bit of its hold over my emotions and feel myself getting fired up as more and more monsters surround me. Wordlessly, and with only the sound of their chitin-like legs hitting the rocky surface of the mountains.

Then all the sounds disappear, and the world loses even more of its colors, and mana starts shining even brighter.

I throw myself right against them while releasing all the heat stored inside of the orb in a brilliant explosion of golden flames that lick the entire side of the mountain, melting the stone and killing dozens of the monsters.

A bit later, I don't even bother hiding and just sit at the top of one of the mountains and wait for ants to group up before they push me again.

This situation reminds me of Beyond a bit, yet it doesn't feel that dangerous. Ants' biggest advantage is numbers, and individually they aren't that strong, even with levels well into the hundreds. Sure, they have big bodies and are most likely really durable, but I counter them pretty well.

I am faster than them, my skills do more damage, and their skills don't affect me as I can disrupt them. And my mana pool is massive.

Fighting for a few hours, I more and more appreciate the 1st stage of Mana Amplification. I already did have a high amount of mana before, and doubling it still feels like cheating. Every time I invest stat points into mana, it's as if I leveled up twice and got 6 stats in the attribute instead of three.

So yeah, the ants are weak against me, and if they don't pull out some stronger, named ants, I will continue to farm them for levels.

Sensing another Phantom Ant sneaking up on me, I let him get closer, and when he nearly reaches me, a blaze of yellow flames sets him ablaze and a push with kinetic energy sends him rolling down the mountain while burning.

Who told you to be so flammable, you dumbass?

Finally, the ants seem to be ready as they start climbing up the mountain at the same time as the flying ones join the attack.

Hundreds of giant ants silently start their attack.

First, I blow off the side of the mountain, and the first wave gets hit by the landslide and snow slide. Then dozens of projectiles boosted with kinetic energy pierce the most annoying variations.

And when more of the melee attack ants attack me, [Redistribution] envelops them and affects dozens of the monsters, slowing their movements slightly. There are too many of them, and their stats are too high to do more, but even that is enough.

I grab that energy; I change it, and the golden flames light up the night again.

I have noticed it before, but the closer to level 40 my skills are, the harder they are to level up. Obviously, the higher the level of the skill, the harder it is to level it up, so it makes sense. It's nothing unexpected, but it's nothing I am happy with.

The being in the Beyond warned me not to get my skill to level 99, so maybe something special will happen then? As for that being, what levels are its skills? 99, the level it warned me about, or does it not rely on something like that? Or is the level much higher?

As always, the system won't tell me anything about it, so I just have to wait and find out on my own, and I will do just that. I was warned not to get any skill to level 99, and it sounded to me that having even one skill close to that level is a really big achievement.

So, obviously, my goal is to get multiple skills to that level! I won't let some creepy stalker-like presence hold me back!

But step after step, I need to reach level 150 and upgrade my Primary class; then I will return to others and learn a bit more about this floor. They should be able to collect some useful information.

I look down at the monsters that slowly surround the area around the mountain I sit on. They just stand there, motionless, and stare at me.

The monsters are waiting for something or someone.

I breathe in the cold air around me and continue to fill the orb hovering near me with more and more thermal energy. It's easier to squash a lot of energy inside of it, unlike my body. Also, in case I lose control, I can just throw the orb away, unlike the energy I would be collecting inside of my body.

Snow continues to fall slowly; when it gets close to me, it melts and evaporates. A bit of the area around me is without any snow on it, and it gets bigger and bigger the more thermal energy I fill into the orb.

I found out it works better than kinetic energy or just compressing mana into tricolored mana. The ants seem to have lower defenses against fire, and even their mage-like variations defend against it much worse than against mana-based attacks.

That's why I continue to jump around like some pyromaniac with a flamethrower. Once again, I thank the sacrifice of all the monsters that died so I could learn to convert kinetic energy into thermal.

Slightly bored by waiting, I start examining my own feelings as well. Now that I am away from other members of our group, I can think properly, and there is some sense of freedom as well.

Yet part of my mind already misses that silly doggo, reliable Tess, extremely bullyable Lily, nosy Isabella, and even the cheeky boys. Heck, even Hadwin and Maya have kind of grown on me. I can't even pretend anymore that I don't care about them.

It's not like I see them as friends; that much old silly me still doesn't want to accept, but I think there are already some seeds of that.

When did it happen? When did I open up enough for them to find a way to me?

Dangerous, people from the Hell Difficulty are dangerous.

Anyway, I already decided to give it a chance, so that's what I will do. But knowing Tess and seeing her and Lily's attempts to improve my image, I already know it might happen sooner rather than later.

Finally, the monsters start moving, creating a pathway between their bodies. A new variation of the ant uses this pathway to move closer. It walks slowly, almost as if bearing some dignity, and the other ants silently and without moving at all, watch it pass.

The new ant stops, and then blue flames start to flicker all over its red carapace.

[Flame Legion Ant - lvl ??]

Right after, another ant crawls to its side.

[Flame Legion Ant - lvl ??]

And another. Soon, ten of them stand down there, blue fire burning around them. Their lifeless eyes seem to be looking right at me and at the orb next to me as their antennae continue to move in sync.

An orb appears in front of the group of ten Flame Legion ants, and flames from all of the ants start feeding it in a similar way I do to my orb.

Flame orb swells to the size of beach balls as more and more of their fire enters it. It starts to illuminate the night with soft and flickering blue light that throws creepy shadows on the ground and lights up the hundreds of ants down there. The way they just stand there without moving at all is somewhat creepy. Like they are bus-sized statues made by some crazy artist. Extremely detailed and even creepier because of that.

The Flame Legion ants continue to only move their antennae and feed the orb.

And I do the same, compressing all the thermal energy that I feed it. It's smaller than theirs, much smaller, maybe the size of a baseball and it shrinks even more and gradually changes color from dark yellow to brilliant golden.

Come, show me what you can do.

As if hearing my thoughts, the ants do just that, and their orb flies high into the air. It then expands to the size of a smaller house, lighting up the entire side of the mountain in bright blue light, like a small sun. The air becomes dry. The snow melts, and the water from it instantly evaporates.

Then the giant orb flies at me and as it passes through the air, it elongates and changes from a round, globe-like shape to a more elliptical one. The front of the orb takes on a darker shade of blue, and its tail becomes much paler.

And I do not dodge, nor fly away, even though I easily could.

In the same way, the ants attacked me, I shoot my golden orb at them, much smaller in comparison to theirs, and then I [Focus] and reach out toward theirs.

Chapter 185: Night into day

There is no hesitation as my mana swirls through my body and powers up the skills I need to use. It moves with all the confidence I feel and is fed to the skill that transforms it and reaches out from my body toward the fireball flying at me.

The giant ball of flames pauses in the air and returns to its round shape. I push more; my mana resonates as I take over the flames with my usage of [Redistribution] and [Resonance].

How hard can it be to deal with a few monsters that are around level 160 from what I can feel? How can they compare to Cinderbear from Beyond and his control over the heat his body generated?

At the same moment as I take over the blue fireball, my golden orb explodes down there as ten Flame Legion Ants try to take it over. Their mana moves, tries to weaken it; they try to absorb the orb, they try to dissipate it.

Nothing works, and just a moment before reaching them, the orb expands and blazes up into an explosion of bright golden flames that devour everything.

A golden light turns the night into day for just a short moment, and then heat follows. Snow immediately turns into vapor without turning into water first. The ground cracks under immense heat and turns into something that reminds me of lava.

The heat immediately evaporates the closest ants, dozens of them, and the ones further away are set ablaze.

I absorb the heat that reaches me and recycle it, feeding it to the blue fireball I took over. It expands and threatens to explode, but I take control of it and force it under my will.

[Resonance] breaks through the bottleneck and finally reaches level twenty at the same moment as I make the fireball smaller. And smaller. The color is still blue, affected by the mana of the ants, but now there are streaks of gold going through it; it's now as big as an orange.

The attack continues, and the surviving ants climb up the mountain, still, hundreds of them left. The monsters are not scared, not hesitating as they throw their bodies against me at the top of the mountain.

Streams of blue flame with golden streaks blaze into the night, continuing to burn all the ants that get too close. The amount of heat the orb packs is incredible, so I continuously funnel it and shoot it out in a

stream that devours and sets ablaze any monster that gets too close, constantly sending flashes of light into the area.

[You have defeated an Ant Warrior - lvl 95]

[You have defeated an Ant Warrior - lvl 97]

[You have defeated a Gravity Ant - lvl 135]

[You have defeated a Phantom Ant - lvl 145]

[You have defeated an Ant Warrior - lvl 95]

[You have defeated an Ant Warrior - lvl 101]

[You have defeated a Phantom Ant - lvl 148]

...

Notifications continue to ring, and I only pause to invest all the stat points I am getting from level-ups. It takes what feels like a long time, but the last ant finally dies, and I stop my flames, which I had to feed with my own energy as I depleted the ones from Flame Legion Ants.

The air continues to shimmer, still hot from all the heat that was released. The air is hard to breathe. My throat is parched, and I can feel how dry the air and my skin are.

I reach out and pull as much residual heat as I can and start creating a new orb while checking notifications.

[Lvl 132 > Lvl 135]

Side quest is also updated again. Side quest: Defeat 800 ants.

The amount of shards I am getting seems like it shouldn't be so "easy" to get. Sure the system won't nerf it? Anyway, I quite lucked out with my opponents, didn't I? But yeah, who told them to be so flammable and weak for their level? Well, at least to me they are weak. Something tells me that other people might have a bit more trouble with them.

But the plan is simple. Get as much as I can out of this before things turn to shit. Knowing the system, something will mess up fairly soon, and I will have to make some changes. The system just hates me having some fun. Maybe I will lose my left arm again; maybe some Deer ant will pop up, or some were-ant monster. I wouldn't be surprised at all.

My mana encompasses the area as far as I can, and this time I detect only a single ant. A smaller variant I didn't see up until now. That ant stands at the top of the mountain quite a distance away from me, and when I move closer, the ant activates some skill and disappears to the edge of my detection range, watching me.

Looks like they have swapped tactics after Flame Legion Ants did nothing against the attack they saw me use the most—my flames.

I try shooting a javelin at the scouting ant, but the monster disappears the moment I do so and once again watches me from the edge of my [Perception]. It's too far so I can't see what class or level it is, but from seeing how it keeps a distance, it's sure to be at least a bit over 150.

Okay, let's collect more thermal energy before another wave comes at me; the little scout can watch.

As before, I find one of the taller mountains and sit on top of it. I use Mana Regulator and allow more of my mana to flow into my Kinetic Mana Heart and then transfer all energy it generates into thermal energy.

It doesn't take that long and two more ants appear on the edge of my [Perception] and continue to watch me.

After a few more minutes, it gets annoying, them just looking at me.

Okay, I will fuck you up.

I stand up and prepare to throw myself at them when something hits me. A skill.

A moment later, mana washes over me and the orb I was compressing until now gets out of my control.

Uh, oh.

The orb explodes and a blast of dark yellow flames fire up against me. The entire amount I was collecting up until now gets expelled at once and I slip into [Focus] and knowing that my [Redistribution] wouldn't be able to handle all of this heat at once, I activate [Resonance] instead.

Space itself shimmers around me as I resonate and weaken and cancel all the heat that is expanding from the exploding orb near me. I am able to reduce the impact by a lot, yet I still feel burns covering the entirety of my body as I am thrown away from the explosion.

My body crashes on the ground and continues to roll down the mountain until I absorb the kinetic energy of my fall and immediately create armor around my body. Just in time as the ground under me bulges and two heads of ants bigger than before bite at me.

One of the ants bites its mandibles around me and the armor around my body cracks and barely holds on before I send a pulse of resonating mana along the blade of the sword I pull out and cut off the mandible.

I do not stay on the ground and instead push myself high into the air.

But they have expected that.

There is already something like a web encompassing the huge area around me. The mana it contains isn't that large as they created it quickly, but there are multiple layers to it and it seems to have disrupting tendencies.

I shoot flames against it, but the moment I do so another wave of mana washes over me and the flames that left my body get out of my control and just die off in the air.

Quickly, I detect the monster that did that and instead of flying up, I change direction and push myself towards that monster. But even that seems to be somewhat expected and two ants step into my way.

Ants of a similar size to the others, yet their bodies are covered in weird symbols that radiate mana and glow in a white color.

The moment I get close, these ants charge at me and their carapaces easily deflect my mana projectiles, and their mandibles get filled with mana and with an effect similar to my [Armament], they elongate and double up in size. Large mandibles made of mana that, even without checking, I immediately know are immensely sharp.

I reduce the amount of thermal energy inside me that I kept high to heal myself, and instead, I turn it back to its original form and a thin cone of kinetic energy hits one of the ants and explodes half of its head.

The monster staggers backwards and white glowing symbols on its body start to glow even more, and its head starts regenerating until it's fully healed. Right after, some of the white glowing symbols on the ant disappear.

Interesting.

I dodge their attacks that are much faster than those of the other ants and continue to throw kinetic energy at them. This energy is not canceled, unlike thermal energy.

Both ants that have carapaces covered in white glowing symbols attack me in tandem and continue to block for each other. When I explode the legs of one of them, the other one pushes me hard until the other one regenerates them.

They quickly learn to expect attacks with kinetic energy and every time I move my sword, they jump back and wait for the right chance, almost as if they feel the resonating mana that coats the blade.

Their physical stats are really high, so it's hard to absorb the movement of their bodies.

Soon, they find a chance and I get thrown away by one of them; the second one uses the opportunity and jumps at me with mana-filled mandibles wide open, while the other one circles as if to attack my back.

My mana resonates and the mandibles dissipate to the ant's shock, and its normal mandibles just snap a bit in front of me.

More mana flows into my sword, and I slash it against the ant's face, which gets split in half. The symbols start glowing and [Resonance] halts the skill long enough for my kinetic energy to explode half of the ant's body.

The ant's body falls down, and the symbols flicker one more time before the ant dies.

[You have defeated an Ant Sentinel - lvl 181]

Without hesitation, I turn around and this time I do not hold back. I've seen everything I wanted and have an idea of how their skills work. Mana resonates in the area while two large mana arms reach out from my back and grab the remaining ant. It's easier now that the ant's symbols have lost some of their glow under the influence of my disrupting mana.

A following blast of kinetic energy finishes the monster.

[You have defeated an Ant Sentinel - lvl 178]

[Lvl 135 > Lvl 136]

Having dealt with the duo, I boost my body and continue to run towards the place where the ant that keeps messing with my flames is.

The net over my head continues to strengthen more and more, and the spacing in between is finer. The net covers a massive area, and I see hundreds of ants that enter the edge of my perceiving scans and continue to feed it. They all work together, and only a few ants maintain the skills while others feed them their mana. Something that all ants share allows them to work together in such a way.

Just as I reach the annoying ant, another ant phases out of the ground; it nearly looks like its body moves through the material like earth. That ant touches the one that messes with my thermal energy, and both of them sink into the ground and their mana signature disappears.

Then a giant net around me sets down, and a pulse of mana is sent through the area.

Chapter 186: Just four more levels

Did I just get caught in the net or cage-like thing by a bunch of ants? It sure looks like it.

Still, I'm not that worried, as the ants seem to be able to pass through that net easily. At some point, the net turns into something like a mana barrier that seems to allow only them to go in and out.

Right behind the barrier, I see the ants grouping up.

When I shoot a mana projectile at the barrier, it doesn't even dent it. Instead, a pulse of mana is sent through the barrier at the point of impact. It looks as if you threw a stone into water, with ripples going through.

The same thing happens to projectiles filled with kinetic energy and thermal energy. They just crash, explode, create ripples, and that's it. Ants behind it continue to feed it more and more mana, and it continues to shrink as well as become denser.

When I step closer to it and shoot disrupting mana at it, the ripples become much bigger than before, as the barrier itself or the ants behind it detect an attempt to cancel it and fight against it by strengthening and reforming it at the point where the disruptive skill hit it.

I also detect that the barrier goes deep into the ground.

For the next few minutes, I continue to throw attack after attack on it, even hurling a javelin filled with tricolored mana or striking against it with the epic sword I took from the third floor. None of the attacks do that much damage, yet I continue doing so while observing it.

It's quite fascinating to watch dozens of ants with different mana signatures combine their mana to feed the barrier and maintain it. They must have a skill similar to what the twins have - Dennis and Aaron. Something like [Connection] that allows them to work together. Or it could be a trait that all of the ants have? Or maybe something entirely different.

Fascinating, so fascinating!

The barrier as well. I have created some barriers of my own before, but this one is different. It's much bigger and, unlike mine which are hard as steel and break when the attack is too strong, this one moves a bit. Ripples are sent through it as it absorbs some of the attacks, and the mana from other parts of the barrier rushes to the point of impact to strengthen it.

I then pause and check the amount of kinetic energy that I've collected inside of my body. It's a lot. That much should be enough.

Taking a few steps, I reach the barrier and activate [Resonance]. The mana flickers and pulsates on top of my skin; it resonates all around me. I already know the frequency of the barrier, so I mirror it. I take another step and pass through the barrier as if it's not there.

The ants that up until now continued to flicker their antennae and communicate while strengthening the barrier come to a stop. The bus-sized monsters almost seem to be embarrassed.

Then, the collected kinetic energy explodes from my body, and the fight continues.

POV Lily Chen

“So, then Grumpy brought a dead mouse to my bed. I still don't know from where since we live in an apartment building and there shouldn't be any, right? And I only wanted him to try on the clothes I bought for him once.”

“Lily, your cat is based,” Dennis says.

“Right? What a chad. Grumpy sounds cool,” Aaron chimes in.

As many times before, the twins start to tease me. They do it even more now that Nathaniel isn't here.

“Tess, I am so bored,” I complain to the blonde girl who sits in the corner of the room and goes through multiple papers with Hadwin and Sophie.

“The easiest solution to that would be to finish regenerating your arm, and when you're fully healed, we will take you out to hunt,” Tess turns to me and winks while smiling. Then she turns back to Hadwin, “I think this quest would be good for you. These kinds of monsters seem to be mostly melee range attackers and...” she continues, but I already turn back to the twins.

Aaron and Dennis are silent, but as always, they must be communicating through the connection they share.

The house we are in is pretty, very pretty. It's on top of a hill with a view of nearly the entire city full of tall towers and trees. Kim said it was expensive as heck, costing them a big chunk of the valuables they stole from the third floor. But he mentioned that our home base should be comfortable since we don't know how long we will stay here.

“Do you think Nathaniel will be mad if he finds out we sold the epic bracelet he left with us?” When I ask that, the twins immediately go silent, and even Kim, who sits near them, looks uncomfortable.

It's so funny that I giggle.

“Shut it, Lily! You're also staying in the house we bought with the money we got for it!” Even though Dennis says that I see he's still nervous.

“Nat always says it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission,” Kim joins in.

“Kim, buddy, that's nice and all, but as you might have noticed, Nat can be really...” Dennis pauses and looks around. When he sees Biscuit, he stops.

“Heh, Dennis, are you worried that Biscuit will tell on you to Nathaniel?” I just can't help but add in.

Nathaniel always treats me so nicely, so it's fun to see the two cheeky twins be so worried about his petty acts of revenge. I know that Nathaniel doesn't see me the way I would like him to, but that's fine! I will grow! And I am patient, really patient.

For now, I will enjoy him treating me like a cute little sister.

“Lily, you should be much more scared of this corgi; you guys have no idea how terrifying he is!” This time it's Aaron saying that, and all of us look towards where Biscuit is.

Held in the arms of little Izzy, who even put a scarf around his neck. Now that Nathaniel isn't here, poor Biscuit is constantly targeted by the girl.

(Asshole. Gone.) Biscuit sends to everyone in the room. And it almost seems like he is complaining about Nat being gone and having to deal with Izzy.

Kim starts laughing out loud, and even Maya giggles a bit, along with Hadwin.

Only the twins are silent. “They are so screwed if Nathaniel finds out,” one of them says, and the other one just nods solemnly.

That's when someone knocks on the door, and Kim opens it to a nicely dressed man who bows to him. I notice that this somewhat makes Kim happy, but he also blushes slightly and tries to act with dignity.

“Here is a list of available quests, monster information, maps, a list of powerful people in the city, and all the other things you asked for,” the bag he hands to Kim seems to be filled to the brim with papers with information, and Kim nods.

He then takes out a mana stone from the pouch he has on his belt and hands it to the man. It makes the man's eyes shine. We have paid upfront, so this tip seems to make him happy and probably is worth a lot.

“Me too!” Izzy lets go of Biscuit and runs on her short legs towards Sophie and reaches out her hand.

To that, Sophie smiles. As many times before, I'm amazed by the change the big loving smile does to her face, and she absentmindedly grabs a mana stone from her pouch and hands it to Izzy.

It's one of the more valuable ones.

Izzy immediately runs to the man and hands him the stone, which he carefully takes with his eyes wide open. He then quickly leaves, as if worried we will ask it back.

“Sophie, that stone was most likely as much as his yearly wage,” Tess sighs from behind the table.

But Sophie ignores it and seems to enjoy the thankful hug Isabella gives her before the little girl goes back to Biscuit.

The quest for killing 800 ants was completed, and then the one for killing 900 as well. Expecting a new one for killing 1,000 of them, I open the notifications, and there is nothing.

I knew it.

System, you asshole! Stop holding me back, you can't ruin my farm spot just out of nowhere!

As always, there is no answer.

Damn, I bet one day I will keep throwing some nonsense like that at the system, and it will actually answer just to troll me.

Killing ants is a sure boring job, but someone has to do it, so why not me, the selfless paragon of justice, Nathaniel Gwyn!

Ignore my subclass that says Initiate of Pride.

Anyway, the rewards are quite chunky, 10 levels meaning 30 stats into mana, meaning another 30 from stage one of Mana attribute upgrade. It still feels like cheating, but I will take what I can!

"Status," I say.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty: Hell

Floor:4 - Waning Realm

Time left until forced return: 4y 218d 21h 32m 46s

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

Lvl 146

Strength: 51

Dexterity: 49

Constitution: 127

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 480 + 480

Primary Class: Mana Channeler

Sub-class:

Active skills:

Focus (Dual Focus Consolidation) - Lvl 36

Mana Manipulation (Advanced Mana Manipulation) - Lvl 39

Perception - Lvl 34

Redistribution (Symbiotic Transference) - Lvl 37

Armament - Lvl 35

Mana Surge - Lvl 24

Mana Infusion - Lvl 28

Resonance - Lvl 22

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Kinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Flow (rare)

Cerebral Harmony (rare)

Mana-Fortified Resilience (rare)

Pyrokinetic Resurgence (Rare)

Tokens:

Beyond Difficulty entrance token

Shards:

In the past few days, I barely slept, only for a few minutes here and there. The food and water I took with me are already gone, and my clothes are in tatters.

But the rewards are nice!

It's to the point where my mana starts to pressure me once more. Mana Cycling, which I continue to do, helps a lot, but my rare passives that help me handle it seem to be getting pushed to their limits.

So it's either time for another round of Active Tempering, upgrading my constructs, or creating another one, or somehow making enough shards to get an epic passive skill that will deal with my mana.

But I will wait for that. Maybe a new Primary class will offer me something that will deal with that. That would allow me to spend my shards on something better, something that would give me more mana! Or maybe a stronger passive healing skill. The current one, Pyrokinetic Resurgence, is really good and for me, with my transferring kinetic energy to thermal, it works really well.

Unfortunately, it doesn't restore limbs. During one of the fights, I lost a small piece of my finger, and the passive doesn't want to restore it. I guess that's just the limitation of its grade, which is - rare.

As for the others, we keep exchanging messages, and they seem to be doing well. They even set up a base and are collecting information. Tess and Hadwin are truly reliable.

They've already started going on what they call quests after collecting information and picking the right opponent for each of them. It allows them to hunt quickly and safely, while sometimes they spice things up a bit and throw each other against a much stronger enemy just to stay in shape.

Sure, there are some wounds, missing limbs, but in the same way as me, they know that they need to push hard in order to not fall behind.

Another thing is that Savant entered the 4th floor a day ago and no one else. In the community, I checked the numbers, and it looks like Hell Difficulty lost five more people. Hard lost around ten. Normal lost twenty-five and Easy around fifteen people.

Easy difficulty 1335/2000

Normal difficulty 855/1000

Hard Difficulty 265/500

Hell difficulty 45/250

Beyond 3/10

Beyond still has only 3 people.

After feeling movement near me, I come back to reality and a pulse of my kinetic energy kills the ant that was sneaking up on me. Damn, they are getting closer and closer. Are they improving to dodge my detection, or is my lack of sleep after a few days out here showing?

Well, it doesn't matter anyway. I'll be done soon.

I take one more step and look down one of the giant holes that are everywhere and that ants use to get to the surface. Holes that are deeper than the tallest mountain on Earth.

Over the palm of my hand, a mana orb hovers. Three colors swirl inside of it, a tricolored mana, but this time I changed the composition a bit. Instead of it being all mana, it is 2 parts mana and one-third thermal energy.

This is going to be fun.

It took a bit of testing in the past few days, but now I'm sure I did everything correctly and the ball won't explode too soon. Without waiting longer, I drop it and a shining orb as big as an orange starts falling down the hole as dark blue, blue mana, and yellow thermal energy swirl inside of it. I give it one more push with kinetic energy and it speeds up.

The orb that I spent a day or two creating and filling with my mana to the point where I barely have ten percent of my mana left.

I immediately lift off and start running away. This will either get me the four more levels I need, wake up some ancient monster, and get the entire ant colony after me, or do nothing.

Whatever happens, I'm done here. Even if I don't get any levels, I'll get some sleep and continue in a day or two.

A few minutes later the first notification sounds. The notification about killing an ant.

Then another.

Another dozen of them.

Level up.

More notifications.

Even more notifications.

Another level up.

Minutes continue to pass and notifications still ring in my head.

At this point, I'm getting scared. The bomb seems to have caused some unexpected chain reaction that made it more deadly and notifications continue to ring and ring to the point where cold sweat starts flowing down my back, and I speed up to move at the maximum speed I am capable of.

Yet the sound of notifications continues to follow me, with longer pauses in between. They continue even after I leave the mountain range.

It takes longer than I would like and when they finally stop, after what feels like hours, I'm almost scared to check my level.

[Lvl 146 > Lvl 159]

Well, fuck. I just wanted four levels.

Okay, the mountain range is a no-entry zone for at least a few weeks.

Chapter 187: It's fine

So, after investing stats from all the level-ups, my mana is well over a thousand. That means no more leveling for a while. I grew way too quickly and I need to get used to it. My own pride won't allow me to have all that mana and not be used to it or not be able to handle it. In the same way, people from Hard difficulty were to my standard terrible at handling their skills and stats.

After getting to the others, I will spend some time training, testing, and all that good stuff. My current level is high enough for me to have some time to scam the system and improve my base.

And let's quickly forget what just happened. Surely nothing wrong will come of it.

It's fine. Totally fine.

Oh boy.

I force myself not to look at Primary Classes options. That's something I will do after a shower and nice sleep, and booping Biscuit's nose a few hundred times. I haven't seen him for a few days, so the debt has increased quite a bit.

Letting myself land on the ground, I slow down and, while walking, I continue to observe the mountain range behind me. There are no ants defending it and staring at me, which makes me even more nervous. Plus, even now, I get a notification once in a while. Most of them are for ants much lower than level 100, and the notification sounds only once every few dozen minutes.

OH BOY.

It's FINE.

I start running, only using my stats, and let my mana regenerate. Even though I am nervous, I start enjoying the speed I am running at. My physical stats, passively boosted by my constructs that take a big

chunk of my mana, are quite high and I run at speeds that would make me faster than some cars back on Earth.

And I am not getting tired at all.

Enamored by it, I boost my body slightly and my legs start cracking the ground under my feet as I continue to spring myself ahead, feeling the wind in my face.

The speed I move at is slower than when I am quasi-flying, yet there is some charm to it as I feel my feet hitting the ground and jump over obstacles.

My body moves like a perfectly oiled machine and somehow, this act of running makes me realize how much my body changed. It's weird as I am already able to create flames with my mind and mana and other amazing things. Yet I am so excited by just running quickly.

It's hard to explain but it's relaxing, and I focus more on feeling my body, and my muscles while increasing my speed even further until the landscape around me turns into a blur when I am not actively focusing on it.

I don't even try to fly and just continue to run.

The city that towers in front of me is beautiful. It's a mess, but it's a beautiful mess. A mix of buildings of all styles, some of them ancient-looking. There are trees inside the city as tall as skyscrapers. There are towers even higher than those trees.

Colors are everywhere: the green of flora, smaller buildings with walls painted in vibrant yellow, red, blue, and multiple other colors. Towers of so many different styles. The impossibly high trees create shade and seem to have some buildings on them as well.

That's what I can see from atop one of the hills near the city. Unlike the plains I just passed, this hill is covered by trees and vibrant green, a striking contrast to the lack of colors on the plains.

Unlike the mountain range, even the air here is warmer and the sun feels better on my skin.

I am still a few miles away from it and I am currently taking a short break before getting in. That's when I sense a few presences moving closer to me, all of them feeling humanoid, and they send me something like a greeting feeling a touch of my mana.

My touch on them weakens and I send back a similar greeting. I stop examining them to not seem too rude and then wait for them to get closer.

It doesn't take too long and three figures appear in front of me. Two women and one man, all of them at least two heads taller than me. Their eyes are sharp, yet they are smiling excitedly after spotting me.

"Wow, this one is especially cute!" one of the women says.

"Right? And he seems so feral!" another woman adds.

"His eyes are pretty," the man joins in.

[Astral Archer - lvl 178]

[Elemental Warden - lvl 188]

[Phantom Assassin - lvl 175]

Other than their height, there are a few more interesting things about them.

Cat ears poking from their heads.

A little bit sharper canines than normal for a human.

And a tail that each of them has.

Their tails flicker around excitedly like cats eyeing a new toy.

What the heck?

So, yup, this is something the others refused to tell me, wanting me to experience it firsthand while they laughed behind my back.

My revenge will be terrifying.

It's as it looks. A race of cat people that are much taller than humans that seem to rule this place. There are humans as well that live together with them in symbiosis, and the cat people race doesn't seem to treat them harshly or anything.

They are just weird.

"Hey, feral one, want to work with me? I promise I will pay you well," one of the women says.

Very weird.

"Myrra! This one is mine! I saw him first," the other woman complains while the man just remains quiet and acts patiently. Yet, I see his eyes looking at me a bit.

"Look, look! His expression changed a bit!" the woman called Myrra says.

"Oh, you're right, he's so annoyed!"

"Right? He looks so regal, yet so wild!"

"Yes, yes! And he moves so elegantly!"

What.

The.

Fuck.

What's wrong with them?

Even though all of them are of a higher level than me, they are not trying to force me into anything and do not even try to touch me. They just continue to blabber while giving me offers to work for them. What that work would include I don't know, and I don't even want to know.

“Feral one, tell me, do you belong to the group of people that came from the Colony’s territory some time ago?” Myrra asks.

“Yes. Did you meet them?” I ask carefully, and she reacts by swinging her tail even more excitedly. It's quite fascinating to see it move, and she smiles when she notices me looking at her tail.

“We did. That group also had a few cute ones,” Myrra turns to the other woman, “Lysara, do you remember them?”

“Of course I do. There was this cute small black-haired girl and a tall blonde,” she pauses, “They seemed to be quite rich,” Lysara seems to be disappointed as if someone escaped her claws.

“Tell me, feral one, what do you like? Food? Riches? Magical items? Mana stones? I'm quite rich so I would be able to pay you nicely,” Myrra interrupts Lysara.

Myrra is the highest-leveled one out of them: a level 188 elemental warden. Her hair is white and her eyes are golden in color. Her ears and tail are of a gray color that nicely contrasts with her long hair. Horizontally across her nose, a deep but healed scar passes through, which is weird to see in a place where constitution should be able to heal it.

“What does working for you include?” I ask, and listening to them up until now made me quite curious.

The white-haired woman seems excited as if smelling a chance, “Nothing much, feral one! You would live in my mansion and come to me when I am bored. We could talk, and I could observe you doing your stuff. I could ask you to be my attendant once in a while. You would come with me shopping and carry my stuff. I would require you to dress nicely and sometimes show you off to my friends. Normal stuff,” she explains quickly.

This doesn't sound normal at all.

Are all of them like this? “Would you mind if I ask why you would do that?” I ask carefully while cursing the others. I bet they thought it would be so funny to put me in this situation.

Once again, I promise terrifying revenge. Yet, it doesn't feel dangerous, and I also think they would have told me if it was.

“Because you're cute!” this time it's Lysara who says that, “You look so feral and almost bored the entire time. The way you look around is as if everything is beneath you, even though you are just a weak human. Your differently colored eyes too.”

Oh, I see.

Myrra joins in, “And when your expression changes a bit, it's so fun. I want to bully you until you finally show some emotion.”

Oh boy. It looks like this race of cat people looks at humans in a similar way humans look at cats back on Earth.

While moving back to the city, I keep asking them questions while fighting against their increasing offers to “hire me.” Myrra seems to be a boss here, and the man who barely speaks is her guard, while Lysara is her friend.

They are all of a race of cat people called Lynthari. They and humans live together in the city in front of us. Everything seems peaceful, and even as lynthari are often much stronger than humans, they seem to be weird enough to treat humans somewhat nicely. Only sometimes do they take in some humans they find interesting, cute, or funny.

There seem to be some strict rules about how lynthari treat humans that I don't know yet, and being often much stronger than humans, Lynthari seem to view the human race in a similar way we look at pets. It's not exactly the same, as humans often work alongside them, and sometimes, though rarely, hold higher positions, but it's close to that.

Lynthari are born stronger than humans and live longer. Lysara and Myrra are a few hundred years old, while humans here rarely live over one hundred fifty years; only the stronger ones live longer, and that seems rare.

Looking at the power levels, anything close to level two hundred seems to be the cream of the crop, and individuals that reach over level two hundred are few and far between, treated exceedingly well.

When we enter the city, most of the humans carefully avoid the three lynthari I travel with, and the trio barely gives them any look.

The humans on the edges of the city are almost all under level fifty, but the deeper we go, the average level increases, and more and more lynthari appear. Even their clothes seem to look more expensive. There are so many shops, auction buildings, places Myrra calls guild halls, and dueling areas. The city is bustling with life and magic everywhere that I can sense.

"Oh, so you do like magical items," Myrra smiles at me, showing her sharp canines. "Feral one, if you work with me, I can give you a lot of them," she says, her eyes glowing with a dangerous light.

It's almost like a suspicious individual calling me to an unmarked van to get some candy.

Danger! Stranger danger! I remind myself and force myself to refuse, but I try to do it carefully to not insult her. She seems to be disappointed but she doesn't push it.

As they leave, she pushes a rare graded magical item into my hand. A bribe.

Before I can check it, she also gives me a small mana stone as well, "Use this stone if you change your mind, feral one," her ears perk up, and she smiles at me and leaves with her companions.

I finally check the item in my hand.

Brooch of the Silent Whisper (rare) -A small, unassuming brooch that has the power to absorb sound in a localized area when activated. It's perfect for stealth missions or for keeping conversations private.

Deep breath in.

Breathe out.

Repeat to yourself: Stranger danger.

Chapter 188: Blimp

I already know where to look for the rest of Group 4, but it takes me some time to reach them. I slowly walk through the city and take in its atmosphere which makes me shiver. The city is so confusing, so exciting. Everything feels so... new.

Unlike small towns with barely a few thousand people I visited on the second floor, this one is much bigger and weirder. Lynthari are moving through the streets, each of them much taller than humans and, in most cases, much higher leveled.

They don't feel arrogant or dangerous as they stroll around and curiously take in everything, while their tails show their emotions and their ears twitch as they talk, smile, or get excited about something. But the humans still treat them carefully, extremely carefully. It's hard to identify, but it doesn't feel like it's out of fear.

What I also notice is that lynthari sometimes shows interest in humans. In most cases, it's only when the human is higher leveled, and it's rare to see a human with a level over one hundred.

Sometimes they also stop and buy some trinkets the merchants are selling. Usually, it is humans that are selling stuff or working there. The race of cat people seems to be stronger, more combat-oriented, or just straight-up rich. It's no surprise as they live hundreds of years longer than humans.

And even though I am hiding my mana under the Mantle and cycling it inside my body, disrupting it into small particles before it leaks out, a few lynthari still show some interest in me. They don't seem to notice my mana or level, as on the floors before the natives don't seem to have the ability to see the text over the heads of people from the tutorial.

No, the lynthari that talk to me seem to do so because of how I behave. Like Myrra before, they are attracted by the way I look around and the lack of expression on my face.

After rejecting a few offers, I start to understand that a bit.

To them, I look similar to how Grumpy, Liliy's cat, looks to her. A bad-tempered, but pretty and somewhat regal-looking cat that Lily can't help but want to get closer to. As if taking it as a challenge and trying to earn the cat's love. Or just poke and annoy the cat while enjoying her lack of reactions.

That's me. A cat.

My eyes, one brown and the other gray, also seem to interest them as well, as heterochromia seems to be rare here even more so than it is on Earth.

Their offers annoy me, so I just act nice and even hint that I am looking for a "job" and tell them about a gift, a rare brooch from Myrra. I do it carefully, mentioning it as if in passing. But even that is enough, and they offer me gifts as well, almost forcefully pushing them into my hands to look better in front of me.

I pretend to refuse for a bit, and some of them seem to like that and give me even more stuff that I take.

It's hard for me to do so, so I do not smile at them while thanking them, but surprisingly they seem to like that even more.

What weirdos.

That's how I end up with a few small pieces of jewelry, some mana stones they are using here as currency, and a few more stones with their address and something like contact info.

That makes it almost worth it, and to improve my mood a bit more, I find a nice restaurant-looking place and enter it. I ignore the people inside and use the stairs to climb onto the second floor that leads to a large wooden balcony-like terrace with a few tables and flora everywhere, even on the railing.

I take a good place for myself and while I wait for the waiter, I look at the bustling street below me. Dozens of people pass by every few minutes, sometimes walking, sometimes using some exotic monster-like animals, and in other cases, they are in carriages pulled by six-legged monsters.

When I turn my gaze back to the balcony, I notice other visitors eyeing me, but they turn their eyes away the moment I look at them.

What? I have new clothes I spent some shards on to buy, as I lost the ones from the third floor, and I did clean myself with water I also bought. So why are you staring?

“Welcome to ‘Distant Dream,’ sir. What would you like to order?” the cheerful waiter asks. She's a young woman with brown hair tied into a ponytail.

“I'll leave it up to you. A little bit of food, some dessert, and something to drink. No alcohol,” I say simply, and the waitress nods, quickly leaving after giving me a short smile.

It doesn't take long and she is back already. She brings something like a sandwich, a drink of pale blue color, and green stuff in a bowl.

“I have picked a fire salamander sandwich as the main course, the drink is lunar nectar we make on our own. The best in the city! For dessert, you have Leafy Gelato; the cook made it just this morning!” her voice is excited as she places all of this in front of me and leaves, wishing me a good meal.

All the food looks amazing, and I try not to think much about its name as I start with the sandwich. Then, before I know it, it's gone.

What the heck?

I quickly take a sip from the lunar nectar and then eat the gelato before I know it. Then I sit there for a minute and just stare into the air. I know I don't need to eat as much as before, but this stuff is even better than the food we stole from the manor on the third floor. Is it because I earned this one and I will be paying for that?

When I finish the last drops of the drink and that's when the waitress comes back.

She tells me the price and I pull out one of the smallest mana stones I got from the lynthari. But even that seems to be a lot, as she asks me for patience and disappears for a while before returning with change. From that, I take a few pieces and slide them to her while thanking her.

"Thanks, Mr. Customer!" she chirps happily and bows.

Downstairs, I buy a bottle of Lunar Nectar, a pale blue drink that looks extremely refreshing in the bottle made out of slightly frosted glass.

Then I walk towards one of the places I have noticed from the balcony. The mana stone of the door sends a pulse inside the building as I enter, and an older man with a nicely taken care of beard turns to me with a smile.

"How can I serve you, young man?" he asks.

"I would like to cut my hair, something simple and nothing too eye-catching."

After that, I find a more luxurious-looking shop with simple but quality-looking clothes and another one where I buy a bag of sweets and something for Biscuit.

The clothes truly make a human. It's hard to describe but I feel... civilized now and somewhat lighter as I walk through the street while holding the sword in my hand by its scabbard. The epic sword of the last king.

It doesn't take long before I reach the tree Tess told me about, and here I see Min-Jae waiting, together with one of the twins. A smile grows on his face the moment he sees me, and he rushes to welcome me.

"Nat! That took you a while! You said only a few days." Min-Jae stops in front of me and unlike him, I notice that Dennis is somewhat nervous and avoiding my gaze.

What did they do?

"It took only a few days," I answer him and gesture for him to lead the way.

As we walk, Min-Jae continues, "Nine days," He says.

Huh? Maybe I should have checked the system countdown clock a bit more. I would have promised it took me only a few days. But I guess time passes quickly when you have fun.

"Oh, and Min-Jae?" I say.

"Yes?" he starts but quickly pauses as I grab and pull his ear, "Ouch!"

"Did you guys have fun not telling me about lynthari?" Did you? Little jerks, all of you, even Tess!

"It was Lily's idea!" he tries.

"As if!" I pull even harder and then let go, "I will deal with you later, but now, anything interesting happened?"

He rubs his red ear, and I see him looking around. His face is red because I did it in the middle of the street and some people noticed it and are giggling.

"A few, but Tess and Hadwin will tell you more. They deal with most of that stuff," the young boy tries to regain a bit of his dignity by releasing some mana to the point a human that giggled at him feels it and quickly stops.

Min-Jae then smiles, satisfied, and turns back to me, "There is so much stuff, Nat! Auctions, guilds, quests, and lynthari. We even got an amazing base for ourselves and went hunting a few times!" Even though he said Tess and Hadwin would tell me more, the excited boy continues to blabber the entire time we walk towards our "base".

"Oh, that's quite nice, must have been expensive," I say and I pay some attention to Dennis who becomes even quieter and some color disappears from his face.

Suspicious, very suspicious. Did they sell Biscuit? The best doggo of the third... of the fourth floor should easily be worth that much.

"Asshole!" Izzy screams the moment I enter, and I feel her skill connecting to me as she jumps and hugs me.

"Izzy, you might be spending too much time with Biscuit," I say as I return the hug she gives me and then let her go.

"Yes, he is mine now! I keep feeding him the best food I can find. Sophie is rich so I can do that."

"Oh, you do?" I ask and feeling that I'm not panicking, Izzy herself starts to panic.

"Yes! He won't be able to leave me now!" she says, but this time she doesn't sound so sure.

Poor girl doesn't know Biscuit as well as I do.

(Food!) sounds from behind the corner, and the corgi appears. There are no tentacles around him and he floats just a palm's length above the ground, his short legs hanging in the air. He looks like a corgi-shaped burrito blimp.

What the hell?

Everyone else seems to be used to it and the corgi slowly hovers and moves towards us at a speed that is much, much slower than if he decided to walk or use mana arms. Yet he moves like that and his face seems to tell that he is proud of his new ability to float just a bit over the floor and move extremely slowly.

The terrifying floating monster of a doggo is wearing a dark yellow vest and a scarf around his neck.

He moves past Izzy and stops in front of me. Then, as if changing the setting, the best doggo hovers vertically into my arms, his tail wagging while he continues to shout in my mind.

To show Izzy who is the boss, I pet Biscuit for a while, and then, to deliver the final blow, I put him on the ground and step back so there is the same distance for Biscuit between me and the little empath girl.

"B-biscuit, come here, I have more food," the little girl tries while unpacking and offering some meat to the doggo. Even from where I am, I can immediately smell it and feel drool collect in my mouth.

What the hell, give that to me, not to Biscuit.

With the use of [Focus], I get back to my senses and say, "Biscuit, come here," then I reach out and offer him dried jerky made of deer meat I spent one hour looking for.

It was cheap, extremely cheap. The quality is low, and the meat doesn't even come close to the one Izzy holds, yet Biscuit doesn't hesitate and rushes to me.

I win.

“Nat, you'll make Izzy cry,” Tess says as she also enters the room, together with Sophie who continues to look between me and Izzy, trying to understand what's happening.

“Wars require sacrifices, and this is one I am willing to pay,” I answer her.

“You seem to be in a good mood,” Tess smiles and also gives me a short hug, “I'm glad you made it back safely.”

“Yes, it was fun, but Tess, there is something I would like to see,” silence fills the hallway we are standing in, “can you guys show me the extremely valuable epic items I left with you guys?” I ask, then enjoy the funny expressions of some of the younger members of group 4.

Chapter 189: New Primary Class

“Oh, we can deal with them later, can't we? I see that you got a haircut and went shopping a bit. Why don't you look around our base? We kept a nice room for you.” The way Tess says it makes me even more suspicious and I notice a cheeky shine in her eyes, but she is right. It would be best to take some rest and go over my Primary Class options.

I keep having to hold myself back, and now in the safety of the city, I can go through them.

“Others went out to hunt, and I'll tell you about the stuff we learned. So just take it easy, rest a bit, and tomorrow we can talk,” Tess adds.

Impatient to check the classes, I just nod. Holding Biscuit in my arms, I move to follow Tess towards the room they saved for me.

The room is on the highest floor with a large window and a balcony that offers a view of the city below the hill on which the house stands.

They know me well; the view is amazing.

“Everyone wanted this room, but...” Min-Jea pauses under Tess's gaze and carefully continues, “But we wanted to keep it for you.”

They are hiding something from me. Did they sell one of the epic items I got from the 3rd floor? I don't think the valuables they took would be worth that much.

Well, even if they did, it's not such a problem. I still have three of them left, but they don't need to know. If they really did that, I will bully them a bit.

“Okay, I'll rest a bit and in a few hours we can talk.” I stop, and a cheeky idea flashes through my mind. “Oh, and can you bring me the items I left with you? I came up with an amazing way to use them.” I lie, and immediately I know Tess and Izzy noticed.

Yet they both smile secretly and leave me alone. While boys seem to panic.

Little twerps.

Anyway, greetings were short, but it's time for Primary class selection!

I look around the room and identify a massive armchair near the balcony as the most comfortable spot. I sit in it and check the notifications.

Well done! You successfully reached level 150. You can now select one of the Primary Classes. The classes and their rarity are based on your actions and performance up until now within the Tutorial.

Mana Forgemaster (Rare)

An advanced class specializing in the use of mana to craft complex constructs. Their abilities go beyond simple creations, allowing them to manifest highly versatile magical objects for offense and defense, elevating them to a critical role in any skirmish.

Your prowess in handling mana constructs is evident. With a mana stat of 200 or higher, you've created dozens of creations entirely from compressed mana. Possesses the Mana Manipulation skill, or its equivalent, at level 25 or higher.

Horizon Striker (Rare)

An elite class excelling in long-range combat. With attacks supercharged by potent magical energies, they can deliver devastating blows from distances where retaliation seems impossible.

Your unleashed power is a sight to behold. You've expended over 50% of your mana in a single long-range assault, decimating hundreds with your long-range abilities. You've also defeated hundreds of enemies nearly matching your own level in just one strike.

Paramount Fighter (Rare)

With unparalleled martial prowess and an expert handle on mana to amplify their physical capabilities, their role in battle is often a game-changer, commanding respect from both friends and foes alike.

Your body is a lethal weapon. You've maintained enhanced bodily fortifications for over 24 hours. You defeated hundreds of enemies of equal or superior strength in close-range combat. Your fortified physique alone allows you to withstand attacks that would be fatal to others.

Energy Conductor (Epic)

A potent class specialized in the mastery and manipulation of diverse energies, wielding them with such finesse and power that they can shift the tides of battle, shatter defensive lines, and provide crucial shields in dire situations.

You channel the elusive Primordial Energies, a feat accomplished by only a select few. You have skills at level 30 or higher that allow mastery over Primordial Energies. Acquired one of the Primordial energies purely through the indomitable force of your will and have managed to control two such energies.

Focused Channeler (Epic)

An epic class with unmatched expertise in the intricate art of mana manipulation, able to shape and control the flow of mana. This highly specialized skill set renders them an influential force in any magical confrontation.

Through sheer determination, you reign supreme over your mana. Has a skill related to concentration and a Mana Manipulation skill at level 30 or higher. Has mana stat is over 400. You've used mana far surpassing your body's boundaries and survived.

I spend a few minutes reading the descriptions over and over again. It's always an amazing feeling to do so, as I know how much they can strengthen me. I also come to think that the only possible way of getting an active skill, other than by learning it, is with the help of a Primary Class. I might be wrong, and Sub-classes will offer that, but I don't think so.

It's also one of the things I asked Lissthaniel, and she confirmed that. With my experience, I am inclined to believe that.

Skills are important, and the words of the being in Beyond prove it. "Never get your skills to level 99," it said. Primary classes do give skills, which [Mana Surge] from my Mana Channeler proves. The importance of skills is also why I have decided not to use skill upgrade tokens for the skills I think are my strongest ones.

This is the description of my current class:

Mana Channeler:

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

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

Bonuses:

Constitution +2

Mana +10

There is no rarity unlike now, and the bonuses are... just bad. 2 Constitution and 10 Mana. What even is that?

As for the skills, both passive and active, they currently aren't that strong. It's something I outgrew quickly, but I can't be too disappointed. It was just a starting class.

So yes, I am offered three rare classes and two epic, and that makes me curious. Do people often get offered epic classes at level 150? I am inclined to think it's not.

Through the community, I learned that some of the members of other groups rarely saw a rare passive skill. Yet for me, they became something of a norm, and even if I could buy a few more of them through the shop, I do not do so as even a few of them wouldn't strengthen me that much.

Focused Channeler seems like a good choice. An epic class, most likely an upgrade of my current Mana Channeler, and it even mentions focus. The amount of mana that I possess right now is really high, so I am drawn more to this class rather than the Energy Conductor that deals with Primordial energies such as kinetic or thermal. I mean, Primordial energy also doesn't sound weak, and I'm sure they are powerful, but they were never my main interest.

Well, let's not hesitate much longer. I'm sure in the end I would pick Focused Channeler even if I gave it a few more days to think. So I just do that and pick my Primary class.

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

Another window pops up:

Congratulations! You have acquired your Primary Class:

Focused Channeler (Epic)

Active Skill: Mana Domain -Establishes a limited area where the user has heightened control and influence over the flow of mana, providing various tactical advantages.

Active Skill: Tether - Anchors the user's mana to a specific location, enabling quick return or other location-based effects.

Passive Skills: Mana Reservoir (epic) -Allows the user to slowly and gradually store mana beyond their natural maximum, effectively increasing their total mana pool for subsequent actions.

Bonuses:

Constitution +20

Mana +100

I check my status, and [Mana Surge] and passive Mana Flow (rare) are gone. I expected something like that, but it's also something I need to take into consideration in the future. Right now, I won't feel the loss of [Mana Surge] at all as I've already outgrown the lower-tiered skill. However, I already feel the effect of losing the passive. It's become harder to control my mana, so I dedicate a more significant portion of my [Focus] to it, especially now after my mana increased again — by 100 points from the bonus and 100 more from the attribute upgrade.

At this point, I might have more mana than I can spend. It's already challenging to use it all!

Good!

It also reinforces my decision to not go hunting for a while and to focus on getting my mana under control. Another round of active tempering and improving my constructs will be more helpful than gaining more levels.

Now then, let's see what my newest epic passive does. I send my senses into my body. My mana, which is already at its peak as I didn't use it, didn't increase. Instead, it feels like there's an additional mana pool that starts slowly filling with my mana.

That pool doesn't take the mana from my main mana pool but absorbs the excess, some leakage, and starts storing it. It's difficult for me to locate it properly. It feels as if it's part of my body, but also as if it's not. The sensation is odd, and I can't even estimate the size of the mana reservoir.

Judging from the passive skill's rarity, which is epic, the reservoir should be significant. Maybe as large as my current mana pool? Maybe a bit larger? It fills slowly, and when I use my mana, the filling of it stops. The mana reservoir continues to fill only after my mana tops up again.

Interesting.

I reach out and use the mana from the reservoir. It's simple as if using my mana normally, and when I stop, it starts filling again.

After spending a few more minutes observing it, I'm still unable to judge the size of the reservoir, but the speed at which it fills is much slower than my own mana regenerating. Maybe it's ten percent or even less of the speed at which my mana regenerates?

It's not as good as I expected, but I might be mistaken about something, so I decide to give it a few more hours to see how large the reservoir is. It better be at least as big as my current pool.

As for the skills, [Mana Domain] excites me the most, and I activate it. Immediately, I feel a strong pull on my mana as the skill takes a decently sized chunk of it, and the reservoir stops filling. But I ignore that and instead focus on the skill.

The area the size of the room I'm in changes peculiarly. Now, I even notice the mana my body is leaking, and when I [Focus] on it, even that little mana easily gets pushed back inside my body.

Then I push more of my mana outside my body, and as I start moving it inside the area of the domain I notice how much easier it is. The mana, even though separated from my body is easy to maneuver. While it's currently not as easy as manipulating mana inside my body, the skill definitely feels like that's where it's heading.

The orb I create starts moving as I want it to, and even when it gets further away from my body, it's easy to control, shape, or dissolve it.

I radiate more mana into the area and spend a few more minutes observing the changes. A few times, I also cancel the domain just to compare the difference, and it seems significant.

[Mana Domain] is only at level 1, and yet, my mana within that area is easy to shape even without direct touch.

Interesting. What will become possible when I level it up? Will I be able to affect the mana of my opponents within the domain? Maybe even change my domain a bit?

The best idea comes to me. What if I evolve my [Mana Infusion] into [Infusion] and then infuse the domain with kinetic or thermal energy? And what if I make the area of the domain much larger?

Good, good! I'm already excited. The skill seems to be of a higher tier, so that's promising. I'll play with it more later.

Now then, [Tether]. I activate the skill, and then, following the “feeling” the skill gives me, I create something like an imprint I'm currently not understanding. The imprint stays anchored to the space in front of me, and for a moment, I observe it.

It's an anchor or tether that slowly crumbles as it stays in the air, yet I still feel I can use it. To be sure, I activate my mana again and feed the anchor, and it stops crumbling.

Then I stand up from the armchair and move a bit further away from it. Following the knowledge offered by the skill, I activate it, and the skill takes another sizable chunk of my mana. At the same time, the world around me turns into a blur, and I have a feeling of weightlessness. When it all calms down, I find myself standing on the armchair, right at the place where I left the anchor.

Chapter 190: Can't help wanting more

Well, it's not as confusing as I expected it to be, and I don't even feel dizzy after using the skill.

It's as I thought: [Tether] will currently allow me to teleport back to the place where I left the anchor, which is something like a construct or imprint.

When I try to set up the anchor again and then another one, the first one crumbles.

That's unfortunate, but it's nothing some leveling in the skill wouldn't take care of.

I use as much mana as I can and set up another anchor, then start playing with [Mana Domain] again. Inside the domain, the anchor shines brighter, and I can understand it better, even feeding it some mana from a further distance.

Very interesting. I will need to do more testing and try to use all my skills within [Mana Domain]. Right now, I have a feeling that some of the skills could be strengthened or their uses increased.

Only thirty seconds pass, and the anchor crumbles.

It looks like my hit-and-run tactic will require a bit more leveling to work properly, but it's not something I mind too much. My new Primary Class is amazing, and the active skills it gives me seem to be equally fantastic. I especially love [Mana Domain].

As for the passive, I'll have to wait a bit more to see how big the reservoir is.

I move towards the bed and close my eyes.

For the next hour, I just stare at the ceiling and rest. It's hard to fall asleep. After a few days of constant fighting against the ants, the calm and safety within our newest base feels somewhat unreal.

It takes me another hour before light sleep comes to me, and I finally doze off.

I wake up, and after a short moment of panic and looking around, I remember where I am and calm down my mana, which hums around me, ready to explode at my command.

Slowly calming it down, I stand up, stretch a bit, then step onto the balcony. While feeling a light warm breeze on my skin, I look down on the city.

It's the middle of the night, so the city is quieter than before, yet there are myriads of lights all over it. Blue, white, yellow; all of them dimly glowing, lighting the streets or showing places where people aren't asleep yet.

A few of the giant trees that are throughout the city also seem to have leaves that glow softly in a pale green color while being swayed by the wind.

It's so peaceful and I etch the scene into my memory.

Then I observe the mana around the house we are using as our base. I felt it the moment I came here, but there is some field set up around it. A somewhat intricate yet amateurish web of mana is used for detection.

I also notice that, unlike when I came here, a few hours ago, the web of mana seems to be better. The person who set it up is constantly improving it, most likely.

It's not hard to locate that person. The one doing that is a tanned, black-haired girl sitting in her room, with her sister sleeping on the bed near her.

Obviously, it's Sophie, someone who I still consider the most skilled from our group, after me, when it comes to handling mana.

I radiate a bit more mana and start carefully observing what she is doing and notice that she's practicing and improving the web of mana around the house.

It doesn't take long for her to notice my examination. After a bit of panic, she locates me and realizes that it's me who's doing that and not some enemy.

I send a mana variation of a greeting towards her, and instead of answering in a similar way, she does something else.

(You scared me here. I was about to alert everyone.) Sophie contacted me telepathically in a similar way the twins can. She does it by using the web she created.

It makes sense; her [Manipulation] should be capable of doing at least that much. Or maybe she got another skill; who knows?

I use the connection she set up and answer, (Your web has holes, here and here and here as well.) I point at them using pulses of mana.

Sophie hesitates for a moment, most likely surprised by the unexpected answer, but she quickly checks the places and right after, she starts working on fixing them.

(Won't your web dissipate when you stop focusing on it?) I ask.

(No,)" Sophie answers simply.

Well, I can't expect her to tell me all her secrets. Does [Manipulation] or [Mana Infusion] allow her to create semi-permanent things like that?

(It will be harder to improve it if you keep poking it the entire time,)

(What does it do other than some sort of detection?) I keep observing the web she had set up.

(It detects minds entering the premises and warns me. It also senses the usage of a larger amount of mana. I did feel you experimenting in your room, just so you know. But currently, I am excluding your room from the web.)

Oh? Isn't that nice of her? I know she most likely did it to avoid conflict with me, and I do realize that since that situation when I lost control over myself, she has been careful when dealing with me.

Also, the way she's manipulating mana to create this web, in combination with some of her skills, is quite fascinating. It makes me want to observe it more.

It's also good to know that everyone continues to improve. Maybe my leaving them on their own really did help in that way. If they rely on me too much, their growth will stagnate.

(Listen, I have an idea. Would you like to make some shards?) In the end, I decide to ask her.

I almost can feel her curiosity as she answers, (Can we talk about it in the morning? I want to finish what I started. Plus, it would be better to talk face to face.)

(Sure,) I sent the last message, and the connection cuts off.

Slowly, I observe as the web of mana gets pulled further away from my room, and after examining it a few times, it is as Sophie said. My room was excluded from it.

The rest of the night, I spent standing on the balcony and leaning against the railing. I don't use any mana and let it slowly trickle into my Mana Reservoir. Instead, I just use my own eyes to observe the city downhill. I watch as the night lights slowly turn off and as the sun appears in the sky in a beautiful dawn.

Golden rays of the early morning shine on the towers and trees that dominate the city, bathing all the buildings in a soft glow.

The city awakes, and during the next few hours, more and more people start appearing on the streets, and the sounds of life returns to the once-silent city.

The sight is something I hadn't been able to see for a long time. There's so much life in the city that it almost makes me panic because of the ever-present humans and lynthari. The months of fighting for survival on the mostly empty floors of the tutorial made many of us a bit wild, and that's something I also noticed the first time I entered the city.

Even now, I have to control myself to not constantly send waves of mana into my surroundings in search of ambushers or traps. But even though it makes me feel that way, I still think it's beautiful. This mess of the city that would be impossible to see back on Earth and, by extension, all these powers I wield.

Although I often complain about the system and this tutorial, I am equally, if not more, grateful for it.

It's as Tess said, it's an adventure, beautiful, dangerous, and at times a sad adventure. But as abusive as all of this is, I can't help but want more.

"Nat!" A petite black-haired girl hugs me the moment I walk downstairs, totally ignoring the people staring and not even asking for my opinion.

"Lily, it's nice to see you all healed up," I answer instead, and after her awkward hug, I let go of her.

Lily tries to hold me a bit longer and when she lets me go, there is a bright smile on her face, "My batteries are recharged now," she says jokingly, and for that, I pinch her nose.

"I'm not a charger." When I look at her, she still doesn't seem to be fully back to herself, but it's not bad. I guess losing most of her limbs and having to rely on people she barely knows does that to people.

"Oh, and Nat, thanks for the amulet! I already used it a few times while hunting, and it's amazing!" she says loud enough for others to hear as if wanting everyone to know.

Somewhat, it makes me want to pinch her nose or pull her ear again, but I have a strong suspicion that's her intention and she enjoys even that sort of attention from me.

I give her a short answer and continue to walk towards the kitchen island where the rest of the group is already eating their breakfast while going through some papers. I hear them talking about quests, levels of monsters, and such stuff.

They all seem halfway used to it even though we spent only around nine days separated.

Biscuit is there as well, hovering at the height of the kitchen table and moving from person to person. This seems to take most of his concentration as he isn't even able to create mana tentacles to steal some food.

Yet, the doggo looks proud, like a child showing off a skill it learned.

Cute.

I sit on the chair, and Biscuit floats towards me, and I give him some food from the table. Then, still not fully feeling like talking, I listen to others while Lily chirps near me, moving some tastier stuff in front of me.

After a while, I stand up to take a glass from the counter, and when I turn back while walking, I see that Lily is pulling my chair closer to herself. Thinking I didn't notice, she shamelessly continues to talk with others.

Wow.

When I sit back on the chair, now closer to this silly kid, she acts as if nothing happened.

During the morning meeting/breakfast, I sometimes join the conversation but most of the time, I listen, still getting used to all of this. At some point, it feels too suspicious. Everyone is too considerate, and they do not talk to me that often, only once in a while as they speak.

It all feels too... deliberate.

I look at the tall blonde. Tess? What did you do? Did you train them? Am I treated like that crazy uncle during a family party? The one that parents warn their children not to annoy too much and not to talk with him about certain topics, like politics?

Somehow, it annoys me, but it also makes me feel good, and because of that, it annoys me again.

To make things feel right once again, I reach out and boop Biscuit's nose a few times, to which Isabella jumps from her chair and does the same, not wanting to be left behind.

The mighty floating divine beast mercifully allows that.

"Tess, can we talk in around ten minutes?" I ask when it's close to the end of breakfast.

"Sure, Hadwin will join too, and we can go through everything," Tess, reliable as always, answers.

I nod and then turn to Sophie, "Do you have time to talk?"

To my question, Sophie glances down at Izzy, and I sense my feelings being probed.

So rude.

"It's fine, Soph," Isabella's answer is simple, and Sophie gestures for me to follow as she leaves the table. That earns us a few curious looks that I ignore, and I follow the sisters onto the terrace that has pots with big flowers all around it and some comfortable seating, while also overlooking the city.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Sophie asks me after sitting down, and Isabella hops on the couch near her. Sophie's eyes seem curious yet careful at the same time. She is always so careful around me.

"What would you think if I said we could potentially earn thousands, even tens of thousands, of shards from the system shop together?" I ask her directly.

Sophie's green eyes shine brighter, and she gives me her full attention now, "I would say that I might be interested. Please continue."