

Chapter 219 - Silent Triumph

Kai watched the notification hanging in the air. His boot got caught in a root, but Makyn grabbed his backpack before he had any chance of tripping.

“Thanks.” He regained his footing with an embarrassed look.

The people who turned at the commotion quickly lost interest. Only Bert grumbled something unkind under his breath.

“Any danger?” His porter peered at the bend in the tunnel. It was nice knowing the man had enough confidence in him to expect he wouldn’t trip for no reason.

Alas, Kai couldn’t discuss the matter with twelve other people present. “All quiet. The King must know it’d be at a disadvantage down here.” He tried to contain the smile tugging at his lips and dismissed the Guide.

Whether Makyn believed him or not, the man gave a curt nod and went back to studying the path for threats.

Mages and soldiers trudged through the meandering tunnels without a squeak from the evil lizard. The lack of any remarkable discovery brought them into a monotonous rhythm. No one realized something remarkable had happened, a life-changing event in the dripping quiet of the underground.

Like all goals someone pursued for years, he was so used to them feeling unreachable that his mind struggled to wrap around his success.

I did it. I brought a skill up to Yellow.

Disbelief morphed into elation as the reality of the situation sank in. He had acquired Mana Sense on his second birthday, more than ten years ago. The third skill he had ever learned. Now it had ticked the last level, ready to evolve.

Kai had earned four levels since the Republic recruited him a little more than two weeks before. It was a ridiculous pace even with Gifted Novice boosting his gains, though the Guide rewarded risk and new experiences.

He had been involved in two mana anomalies on Kawei, scoured ancient ruins, fought multiple yellow beasts, talked with a god, avoided spatial tears, and got stalked by an elite monster. Throughout all that, he had never stopped using Mana Sense for a moment.

Hmm... it might not be so outrageous after all. Should I wait to see the evolutions?

They were treading in the most dangerous place Kai ever visited. The basilisk had dug out sections of the underground with no apparent logic. He would have suspected it was a ploy

to lead them deeper, but the overgrown tunnels were too old for any amount of devious planning.

They had passed a skeletal old tree, its roots extending into the nearby rooms. Carpets of vines and flowers covered entire chambers where scant rays of light filtered from the broken towers. Walls of mushrooms filled the damp tunnels in between.

Even if incomplete, the number of excavated tunnels was astonishing. It must have been the work of a bored King over its long rule, or perhaps, the continuous effort of a long line of them. The site had the highest concentration of mana in Veeryd, any dominant specimen throughout the millennia must have burrowed around here.

While there wasn't a whisper of danger, broken plants and clawed imprints served as fresh reminders of the King. There were no other awakened beasts around, and strangely enough, much fewer mana herbs than Kai expected to find.

Okay, show me what I got.

Mana Sense (lv100) →

As you reach the final milestone, you are presented with four choices to continue your journey to new heights:

- **Advanced Mana Sense (lv1)** — Persist on your path. The Essence of the World has many bottomless depths waiting to be explored.
- **Elemental Vision (lv1)** — Detect and understand mana embedded with the meaning of an element. Your ability to sense it will be proportional to your affinities.
- **Mana Observer (lv1)** — Cast your attention on a subject to untangle its mysteries. Focusing on a specific target will reduce the clarity of your surroundings in proportional measure.
- **Mana Sight (lv1)** — Channel your ability to sense mana through your eyes to see as far as your sight can reach. Your ability to sense your surroundings will neither wither nor grow.

Plenty of choices, yay!

Specializing a skill at the milestones allowed him to experiment with different abilities and potentially unlock specific evolutions. They were important decisions, but they weren't final. There would have always been more chances to adjust the aim when the skill advanced to the next grade.

Once he evolved Mana Sense, the change would be permanent. He'd be stuck with the skill unless he grinded it back from Orange. Since it had taken ten years the first time, Kai'd rather not screw this up.

Yeah, no pressure at all.

He kept an eye on the path as he examined the four options. Perhaps it would be wiser to postpone his decision till he was back to the camp, though an evolution might help him glean more from the ruins. Spirits knew if he would get any more chances to explore these tunnels.

Walking beside him, Makyn would soon notice—if he hadn't already. The porter was too keen to miss his eyes moving back and forth on words that weren't there. It was enough not to attract everyone else's attention.

Now the fun part. What do I pick?

Not every skill possessed a straightforward evolution, though it came as no surprise that Mana Sense did. Even at level 100, his skill still had a wide margin of improvement in both range and precision.

Advanced Mana Sense was the safe option if there was no alternative. It would give him no distinct advantage and close no door.

Mana might have countless depths to explore, but my time is limited. I can't do everything. Hmm... I'll put it aside for now.

If he picked Elemental Vision, a hundred lifetimes wouldn't be enough to learn everything there was to know about that field. Shaping the elements was his preferred school of magic, and his main offensive weapon.

There was a simple elegance he had grown fond of. Elemental spells offered room for creativity and proficiency without overly complicated rules. He could spend months making an ice bolt stronger and more efficient, or he could chuck mana at the problem to overwhelm his foes.

Still...

He would be more tempted if he were evolving Mana Manipulation; Mana Sense would only give him a minor boost to his elemental casting. It would be convenient to detect Space notes—especially in his current situation—, but it sounded like a wasted upgrade with his other affinities.

It does also mention understanding...

Improving his grasp on an element would strengthen his spells, though understanding required time and study. It would offer little help for completing Zervathi's quest.

Elemental Vision might also allow him to use his minor affinities, like Wind and Fire. They'd be neat to have while brewing elemental herbs in alchemy, though it wasn't essential, and not particularly useful in combat.

Okay, let's move on to Mana Observer.

The time spent crafting and solving Virya's riddle had not gone unnoticed. This evolution would help when he brewed and carved runes. He could think of many enchantments he would like to spend hours studying, like the ones he had seen in the summoning chamber.

He had to focus on one thing at the expense of everything else. While Mana Observer would be of great help in his lab, on a battlefield he rarely had the luxury of dedicating his attention to a single subject for any amount of time. Though it might help to spot the sneaky lizard...

Hmm... As long as I'm not fighting more than one enemy, it might be useful.

Last was Mana Sight. While he had never purposefully worked for it, any human had inevitably tried using Mana Sense through their eyes. Now he could do it without feeling stupid.

To see essence wherever he turned, no matter the distance, would be...

What would that even look like?

To look at the sky and see swirling currents of mana. His senses had long surpassed those of a normal human, he could recognize people walking miles away. His skill would scale with his Perception, as much as Spirit and Mind.

The trade-off was equally meaningful: Mana Sight would cripple his ability to sense essence around him in the long term. If he reached Green, having the equivalent of Mana Sense at Orange would be like not sensing anything at all.

How far would his sight be able to reach behind a wall or underground? Even if the limit wasn't insurmountable, he would be blind to anyone approaching him from outside his field of view.

Nope.

No matter the benefits, he would be too vulnerable to ambushes. And he couldn't even imagine fighting without being able to perceive what was going on around him. It would be a death sentence.

Perhaps if I was a scout.

With all the information on the table, the choice appeared blatantly obvious.

While Elemental Vision didn't explicitly cripple him like Mana Sight, a skill focused on the elements wouldn't improve anything else to a meaningful degree. Unattuned mana was crucial to crafting, and materials with an affinity were rare. But the benefits this evolution offered couldn't justify forsaking Alchemy and enchanting.

The pros of Advanced Mana Sense were that it closed no doors and offered a boost to every aspect. Mana Observer was broad enough, and he'd gladly pay a minor loss in efficiency.

Focusing on a single target at the expense of his surroundings could get him killed, though the skill didn't force him to do it at every moment.

I'm going to find you, evil lizard.

Are you sure you want to evolve Mana Sense (lv100) into Mana Observer (lv1)? Be Aware this choice is irreversible.

Yep. And don't you dare give me second thoughts!

Congratulations, Mana Sense (lv100) has successfully evolved into Mana Observer (lv1)!

Kai clenched his jaw to hide his excitement behind an indifferent visage. The manic energy of triumph urged him to run and explore his new skill. Instead, he had to keep the monotonous pace of the soldiers.

Be patient. We'll celebrate with a stale cookie tonight!

He had just wrapped his body under control when another light blinked in his vision.

Ding

New Feat: For evolving an Orange skill to Yellow through your own efforts before your fourteenth birthday, you are awarded: +1 Favor!

Uh... that's a bit cheap, but I'll take it.

Grasping to the stingy nature of the Guide, Kai got his euphoria under control with the help of Improvisation.

The reward of the feat would have probably been higher if he was still restricted by his Second Seal, and netted him nothing at all if he had used elixirs to boost his skill. Overall, he was pretty satisfied, it would have taken him another year to evolve Mana Sense without a profession.

"Good news I assume?" Makyn gave him a vaguely amused look, his voice was barely a whisper.

“Yes.” Kai focused on their surroundings in case anyone else noticed.

They had reached a vast chamber overgrown with pale blue flowers. Each plant was a red herb near the peak of the grade, and there were hundreds. The garden was marred by five random claw imprints as if the basilisk couldn't stand its beauty.

Activating his skill, the meadow turned alight with flowing Water mana. Inside such a dense area, Kai was momentarily overwhelmed by the number of motes he could perceive. Colorful elemental particles swirled around him as if his affinities had all been blessed again. Even elusive Space mana stood out with no trouble.

The details and range of his skill had doubled—and that wasn't even the selling point of the evolution. When he focused on a single bell-shaped flower, it was like pointing a spotlight on a dark stage.

Every single channel and capillary transporting mana appeared in excruciating detail as if it were a palm from his nose. Kai blinked to divert his attention, and the world returned to his new normality. It would take some time to get used to the blinding colors.

His gaping had not passed unnoticed, Bert was watching him with a sneer and shared a chuckle with another soldier. It seemed everyone attributed it to the small fortune at their feet.

The rest of the team was less obvious than him, throwing cool glances at their surroundings. These weren't the first mana herbs they encountered, though they were the most numerous by far.

“Why are there no flowers that reach Orange?” Kai wondered aloud to sell them on their fantasy.

“A bit greedy are you, boy?” Bert snorted. “Everything you see belongs to the Republic.”

Then you have the nerve to call me greedy...

“The basilisk probably eats them as they mature,” the Earth shaper spoke up, attracting everyone's attention. She bent to pick a flower with an elegant bow and gestured to the claw marks around the meadow. “The whole underground complex must be its garden. It probably harvested the plants early when we invaded its den.”

A bearded mage dismissively waved his hand. “Even if that beast had the foresight to tend a garden, which is debatable, it cannot consume random plants. The basilisk will need to share an affinity or some other attribute to not get poisoned.”

The woman stored the flower in her robe with no hurry or annoyance. “If it were an orange beast you might be right. But this so-called King of Veeryd must be a C or B-ranked beast, it won't have a problem digesting them. Even if the benefits are minimal, it's not like it costs him anything.”

Okay, I changed my mind. That lizard is the greediest of all.

"That's just a theory," the bearded mage said, soon falling into another debate with his fellows.

Taking advantage of the impromptu stop, Kai checked his progress.

- Name: **Kai Tylenn**
- Race: **Human ★★★** – 129,472 > 141,838 / 300,000 XP
- Profession: **Mana Child lv 8** – 5,900 > 7,300 / 13,000 XP

Body stats

- Strength: **22**
- Dexterity: **24**
- Constitution: **26**
- Mind: **37 (29+8)**
- Spirit: **46 (34+12)**
- Perception: **27 (23+4)**
- Favor: **38>45**

Profession Skills:

- **Gifted Novice (lv70>96)**
- **Mana Echo (lv79>100)**

General Skills:

- **Hallowed Intuition (lv13>18)**
- **Mana Engraving (lv1>3)**
- **Mana Observer (lv1)**
- **Mana Manipulation (lv83>87)**
- **Empower (lv77>79)**
- **Inspect (lv77>79)**
- **Runes (lv67>68)**
- **Water Magic (lv61>65)**
- **Blessed Swimmer (lv57)**
- **Alchemy (lv57)**

- **Nature Magic (lv50)**
- **Herbology – Advanced (lv47)**
- **Swordsmanship – Advanced (lv40>41)**
- **Improvisation (lv28>32)**

Risking his neck had paid off.

After making a pact with Zervathi, his Favor had almost regained its rightful place in the lead. It was a pity he couldn't evolve Mana Echo without evolving his profession first.

Oh, well... I cannot complain, Hallowed Intuition made up a third on its own.

Using Mana Observer to get used to the changes, Kai was ever more sure the swirling essence around them must have an origin. The currents were chaotic but not random. He might just have a way to find where they led.