

Tutorial 331

Chapter 331: Channeler

I decide to land rather than fly any further, and once I have I proceed to walk uphill towards some buildings I saw when I was flying earlier. Tacita seems to be amazed by my ability to fly and even claps for me when I land.

As we walk, she seems to become a bit more comfortable, neither of us making any attempt to speak. That makes me realize that I may have found a kindred spirit, a fellow introvert.

We take the time to enjoy the nice weather and the pretty forest as we pass by. Even the sound of the birds is calming, It reminds me of Earth. I wouldn't be surprised at all if this floor was made specifically to resemble Earth.

As I've been checking the tournament status, I've noticed something interesting.

Participants in the tournament:

Easy difficulty - 1290

Normal difficulty - 802

Hard Difficulty - 231

Hell difficulty - 31

When I compare it to the numbers I saw the last time, I come to the conclusion that a few people from Hell difficulty are missing, a few scores of people from Easy and Normal difficulty are not here, and only one person is missing from Beyond. Tess, Lily, Tacita, and I are here and Savant and Gareth aren't likely to skip out. So the 1st Beyonder probably decided not to join.

I find that interesting and wonder what kind of reason he could have.

Tacita catches my attention and gestures to me in sign language, then points in a direction.

When I search the area with my senses, I notice a presence belonging to a couple of people who seem to have mana signatures on the weaker end of the scale. Unfortunately, it seems like I'll be meeting more people before I can regroup with the others and let them deal with it.

Still, I'm curious, so I head in their direction, followed by the thin young woman.

I take notice as she moves extremely quietly. She makes not a single sound as she walks, releasing no mana at all. She's even suppressing her heat signature and I can't sense her heartbeat either. It's as if she is not there. And that fascinates me.

"Hello!" Shouts a blonde man with gentle brown eyes, waving at us with a smile as he rushes to meet us as another man follows behind him. "What do you think of the tournament? Seems promising, doesn't it?" he inquires.

I don't respond and Tacita doesn't seem to be any more forthcoming than I, and upon seeing this he chuckles nervously. The young man is extremely handsome. By that, I mean supermodel level handsome. Like damn, isn't it illegal for a man to look like that? He could easily work as a model or an actor.

Good for him.

It pisses me off. Should I bully him?

"I'm Channeler from Easy difficulty and this is Oren from Normal difficulty!"

Oh... damn.

"I'm Nomencl from Hell and this is Tacita, also from Hell."

"Noname!" his eyes widen and he takes a few steps closer and his bearing changes a bit. Like a chameleon, he adapts to his surroundings and he almost seems to shift his behavior specifically to deal with me.

I've spoken to Channeler the most out of anyone else from Easy difficulty, and from what he's said, he's been putting as many points of mana as he can get away with. Of course, not to the same extent as me, but even that small fact serves to raise my esteem for him by multiple degrees over the majority of the others.

In a calmer voice, he continues, "It's such a coincidence to meet you here. I want to thank you for all the advice you've given me. I appreciate it and I'm happy to meet a kindred spirit," he smirks and reaches out to me with his right hand.

I grab and shake the offered hand, "It's fine."

"As you say! But damn, you two from Hell difficulty are really good at hiding your mana, I can't sense it at all!"

I decide not to complain about his awkward attempts at probing our mana. It's not smooth at all, and the feeling is more reminiscent of a lash from a wet towel than a subtle probe.

"Don't mind Tacita, she doesn't like to talk," I tell him when I see he is looking toward her.

Quickly understanding, he nods, "Noted. Though Noname, you're fairly close to what I was imagining. Though I did expect you to be missing more pieces from the way Grumpy trashed your passive in the Community."

"Grumpy likes to joke." For the moment, I've decided to avoid pushing for any more information. I want to ask for his level, skill levels, and a lot of other things like the rarity of gear and such. But I kind of like the guy, though I only really know him from the Community, and it would be rude to ask such personal questions about his power level.

I'll find someone to ask later. There is no need to hurry with a whole free day before the events start. And Channeler seems useful, really useful. He seems to be extroverted, but he seems to have a knack for reading people and adjusting his behavior.

A high-level extrovert class like Tess.

He could be useful in the future. Especially with his face. People tend to be more trusting of a person with spades of confidence and a pretty face. I will have to point him out to Tess.

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As we walk, he continues the conversation, never too much, just a simple sentence here and there. Even Tacita seems comfortable, and the other guy whose name I've already forgotten is trailing behind.

"I wonder what the events will be like. There'll be duels for sure. Surely someone from Hell is going to win. Or maybe we'll be separated by difficulty."

"There'll probably be events for each difficulty as well, it wouldn't be fair if the system put someone from Easy difficulty against someone from Hell."

He nods, "That's true. I wonder how many Easy difficulty people you would need to beat one of you from Hell."

Then he asks about mana, and I find myself talking a bit more, it's certainly a subject that I enjoy. So I give him advice and explain some things. Honestly, it feels almost like explaining things to Vega all over again, and in honor of my good mood, I also give him a small mana stone with inscriptions for training.

"But that's a rare grade mana stone, are you sure you want to give it to me?" Channeler asks carefully.

"Just take it, It would sell for a few shards at most. It's almost not worth it."

"What do you mean it's not worth it? Do you know how rare items like this are in Easy?" He pauses, seeing my expression, "I can only guess you don't. I can tell you that I've only ever seen one a few times, and I don't think anyone from Easy has a rare grade weapon or armor."

"But it's only 200 shards to buy in the system shop," I note.

"Noname, I have 150 shards and I've been saving up ever since we started the tutorial."

I check my shards.

Shards: 64,725

Am I rich?

"Okay, let's make a deal. If we meet people, you make sure they don't annoy me, and I'll buy you some rare gear before the tournament ends. You can even pick something in upper rare grade."

He stays quiet for a while and then quietly asks, "There are more grades within the rare grade?"

That poor guy. "Yes, there are low, mid, and upper grades within each grade. It doesn't matter if it's rare, epic, or arcane."

"A-arcane? Epic?"

Oh boy.

"Ignore that for now. I will give you a rare grade item if you tell me what level..."

"I'm level 43! My highest level skill is level 8, It's one of the highest in my group! I have three active skills and two passives!" He seems to be proud, even happy at the level he reached.

I stop him before he can continue. If he continues, I will only pity him more. "Okay, that's enough. Here, take this," out of my bag I take a low rare amulet that creates a barrier around the user.

Channeler just stares at it as he holds it in his hand. It's as if he can't believe I actually did it, and his eyes move as he keeps reading the description.

Under his nose, he smiles weakly, "Of course, the economy is different for people from Hell. Thank you," he says when he lifts his eyes up.

This time his voice is calmer and even his expression changes, "Noname, I wonder, are you looking for a colleague? Once we get out of the tutorial."

Oh? Interesting character, is he not?

"I will introduce you to Sset; she deals with things like this," I say, deciding to dump him on Tess. It might add a bit of work to her plate, but I will make sure to pay her back. I always do.

"Thank you." Channeler smiles, and I look away. It should be illegal for men to be so handsome. I don't consider myself bad-looking, but this?

I glance at him again, and he still has a small smile on his lips. His blonde hair is messy, but with his face, even that looks good. The lighting is perfect as well as if he were framed in time, waiting for someone to take a photo to put on a fashion magazine.

It pisses me off. Should I take the amulet I gave him?

"Let's go," I order.

Then I take the lead, with Channeler right behind and the other guy from Normal difficulty nearby. Tacita follows at the tail, stopping from time to time, to enjoy the breeze with closed eyes, only to rejoin us with a few nimble steps.

A Dexterity build? Maybe some kind of assassin judging by how subdued her presence is. I just hope she doesn't have an invisibility skill; that would be too much. My plan to declare invisibility illegal is still in effect. Anyone who uses one will be punished, and monsters with Phantom in their name will be killed on sight.

As we move closer, more people join our group, each welcomed in turn by Channeler, who seems to have great social skills and a never-ending well of energy. He is friendly, but not too nosy, and sometimes even mentions that I'm from Hell difficulty, which seems to take care of anyone who might become a problem.

Yup, I need to tell Tess to hire him; this guy will make a great shield... face of... Well, of whatever we need. Maybe Tess will decide to found a guild when we return to Earth. Maybe she'll even take over a country or two. Channeler, as of now, seems like the perfect person to be our public face. Handsome people sure have it easy.

That's also when we meet the first people from Hard difficulty. Two guys in decent-looking armor.

When Channeler talks to them, they laugh at him and push him away before he mentions this growing group of people has members from Hell.

"Nice picnic you guys have here. But aren't you too friendly, walking around and holding hands?" one of them laughs. "This is a tournament, for fuck's sake, so fucking act like it!"

His other friend smirks like a man who's used to throwing his weight around. Coincidentally they stop near Tacita, who has her eyes closed, enjoying the sun's warmth on her face. When they enter her reach, she opens her eyes and tilts her head curiously.

"What are you looking at, scrawny? Want to get punched in the face?" he steps closer, reaching his hand to put it on her shoulder. "People with weak presence like you should..."

Before he says anything else, Tacita's hand moves like a flash; only I seem to be able to follow the motion, and even then barely so.

The surprised man staggers back and opens his mouth to shout something. Instead of words, bloody foam escapes his mouth, and he just now realizes there is a dagger embedded in his neck and grabs it. In sheer horror, his eyes expand.

The guy with him shouts and moves to attack, but Tacita's hand flashes again, and he falls to the ground. Surprised, he looks behind himself to find his legs severed right below the knee.

As they start screaming, Tacita turns to me and shrugs. Then she takes a swift step and pulls the dagger from the man's neck. While the man twitches and thrashes around, she wipes most of the blood from the blade on his clothes before putting it away.

With interest, I watch as the wound starts healing at a high speed. The wound on his neck closes in a matter of seconds, and he quickly regains color in his face. The man keeps holding his neck, looking at Tacita with a terrified expression and gasping for breath.

So it looks like there is something to the statement that it's impossible to die here, but is it really? It seems like you can wound people. So what if you cut off a head or explode their entire body?

The other man watches as his severed legs crumble to dust, leaving part of his pants and his shoes on the ground. From his wounds, a new pair of legs start to grow in a matter of seconds.

When I look at people from Easy and Normal difficulty, they seem to be even more scared than the two men from Hard difficulty.

I turn to Channeler, "Let's continue. I want to rejoin my group in the common area."

Chapter 332: Common area

By the time we reach the common area, our group consists of a hundred or so people. Channeler, meanwhile, proves himself to be even more reliable than I expected and manages to keep anyone from bothering me. He's either seen through my personality or he's scared of somebody pissing off Tacita and I.

At one point, I hear a weird noise from above, and when I look up, I see a drone flying by.

The heck?

Without thinking, I push myself up and fly towards it, and stop to observe it.

It's a drone from Earth, that much I can tell. It's on the larger side and probably represents an investment of a few thousand dollars. As it floats there, making its unmistakable noise, its camera moves and looks right at me. The drone then moves up and down as if I've startled the operator, and then the camera looks down under my feet and then back up at me.

I am willing to bet 10,000 shards that the owner is someone from Easy difficulty. Those guys seem to have the easiest time. What's next? A helicopter? A yacht? I wouldn't be surprised.

So, I snatch the drone, land, and turn it upside down, which causes the propellers to stop spinning. The camera continues to move and look around.

"You can fly?" Channeler asks, welcoming me with a shocked expression on his face.

"A bit. Can you carry this? I will give you an uncommon item," I offer.

As we pass through the tree line and enter the clearing on top of the mountain, the view opens up to reveal hundreds of people already moving around.

The clearing is massive, encompassing a few dozen grassy hills, both small and large. There are plenty of buildings. Some are small, and others are a bit bigger, and not unlike towers in their construction. Perhaps they're meant to be a place for us to sleep between events?

There are more things of note, but just seeing the sheer amount of people having conversations around us is starting to tire me out. They talk, and some even proceed to fight, flashes of mana erupting into the air. Someone screams, and I hear a baby crying nearby. Did a baby somehow find their way into the tutorial, or did somebody give birth in the tutorial?

It's all weird. Even though they are all real people from Earth right now, they don't feel all that different from the natives.

I examine that feeling a bit more but have to stop when I notice a car in the distance.

A goddamn jeep with solar panels on its roof. And next to it are two more off road vehicles with solar panels plastered over the body. They are worn and slightly damaged, but they still seem to be fully operational.

What the actual fuck. How did they even get here with those hills?

As I probe the area with my senses and head toward the signatures representing my group, only Channeler and Tacita follow.

Passing through the people, I hear music playing nearby, either from a smartphone or a stereo. It all makes sense given that the other difficulties seem to be much safer. Some people probably made it into the tutorial while they were camping and got to keep all their gear. Some probably even got teleported while they were in a shop and took a big chunk of it with them.

It's just that for us from Hell, we have nothing left from Earth. No clothes, no phones, not even rings. All of it was either damaged, destroyed, lost, or had to be left behind. Yet there are people with cars, drones, solar panels, and smartphones.

I even notice an older guy moving around with a camera and recording everything. He is wearing clothes similar to the ones I saw on the second floor, and there is a sword on his hip. But he's holding a goddamn modern camera.

Deciding I've had enough, I push further, but after a few steps, I stop and backtrack. My head slowly turns to the right, and there I see a young woman holding a chocolate bar and carefully opening it while talking to the people around her, all of them seemingly from the same group.

I take a few steps and enter their camp, which immediately gets their interest, and a few of them stand up, mana rushing through their bodies.

They are so weak.

"What do you..."

"I will trade a rare item for that chocolate," I say straight away.

"What?"

"Two rare items, and even more if you have anything else I want."

Channeler stares at me with an expression that is almost funny, but I put my attention on the woman.
"So?" I ask.

"Are you serious?" the older man with a beard answers instead of her and moves closer. I identify their group as either Normal difficulty or Easy. Hmm, maybe I could go up to an epic item for trade. I'm totally willing to do that. I still have a few smaller epic items I didn't sell to the shop, so I wouldn't be losing much. I can sell these items for 1500-2000 shards each at most.

In answer to his question, I nod, and their group quickly puts their heads together, and a passionate conversation ensues. It takes a minute, and slowly they become louder, arguing.

When the man turns back to me, he says, "We can trade you three bars. One of them has melted, another is past its expiration date, and the last one has a small hole in the package. We also have a pack of marshmallows, two bottles of soda, and a package of crackers. Those are in perfect state."

Sounds good for a start, but I will get more; let's just flash some of my riches, "Okay, what do you want?"

He seems to be thinking for a while, but before he can say anything, shouting erupts behind us, "That's my drone! Can you..."

Without turning, I use [Redistribution] to grab hold of the man shouting about the drone along with the rest of his group. Each of them freezes mid-movement, unable to talk or move, though I allow them to blink and breathe.

"So?" I say, nudging the man.

He looks between the newcomers and me and gulps, "At least a few rare items. I don't think you will find that many of them..." he tries to apologize for the high price.

But I've already stopped listening, and I take five rare items from my bag. One pendant, two mana stones with interesting defensive inscriptions. Then a dagger I've been researching and a ring that provides the wearer with a weak disruptive attack.

"Here," I say, handing him the items.

His group moves closer, all of them excitedly reading the descriptions. They barely hide how happy they are with the items and hand me all the promised items, even adding an extra package of gummy bears.

Saying goodbye, I turn to the drone man and release him from my skill's hold, causing him to stagger.

After a bit of silence, he just asks, "Can I have my drone back? Please."

I gesture to Channeler, who hands him the drone, and after exchanging a glance with Channeler, he asks instead of me, "Now that you have your drone back, I wonder, do you have any more items from Earth? Sweets, other technology, drinks, foods. My boss over here is willing to trade. He pays in rare items and might offer even more if what you have is worth it!"

With fascination, I watch as Channeler quickly assesses the situation and slips into his new role. Under his social skills and innocent handsome face, the nervous drone owner quickly calms down, and his eyes start glowing with greed as he thinks about what he could trade.

Group 4 can wait. Baller Nat is going to buy some stuff.

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It takes a few hours longer. During that time, Channeler finds two of his friends from Easy difficulty and sends them to scout with the promise of rare items as payment.

While they go through the place, I stand off to the side and observe the people there. There are hundreds of them scattered about. People from every difficulty from Hell to Easy.

There are small fights, there are celebrations, and a number of them just take advantage of the opportunity to speak with each other, no one's gotten too aggressive yet. I also notice groups of people from higher difficulties moving about, to break up the fights in an attempt to establish some degree of order.

It's all fascinating to watch.

Channeler, walking next to me, stops anyone who tries to engage me in conversation, and even Tacita seems content to follow us, enjoying the shield that is the man from Easy difficulty.

I do not talk to her, and that seems to make her more comfortable, and I don't mind. I do keep a tentative eye on her though, I'm still curious about her skills and levels. She's made it into Beyond as well, and her short clash with those men only provided me with more questions.

So, we move from place to place, and I use my bag full of valuables to buy a few more things. A smartphone with a number of songs on it and a small solar panel I can use to charge it, the most expensive of them all. Then there are the sodas, processed foods, and sweets from Earth.

Someone offered to sell me a Jeep as well, but I have no need for it. At the moment, I'm sure most of group 4 can move at speeds higher than that car.

There is also a short conflict when a few guys from Normal difficulty attempt to make similar trades and try to interfere with mine.

Wanting to test them, I only use mana to strengthen my body a bit, and after a short clash, they find themselves on the ground, with broken legs. Their wounds heal quickly, and I learn nothing of note from them.

So, I take over and lead us to my companions, and gradually we reach a nice spot on the edge of the common area. There below a set of nice trees in comfy-looking grass, sit the members of Group 4.

"You're late, Nona," Tess welcomes me.

"I come bearing gifts," I gesture at the things being carried by the guys from Easy difficulty.

They set them on the grass and stand there awkwardly. The poor guys are too shy to ask for their promised rewards! Either that or they are too scared.

"Good job, boys." I take two rare items from my bag and present them with them.

They look at it for a moment and rush away while thanking me.

When I turn to Channeler, I notice that he is looking at group 4. Oh, I guess I haven't introduced them yet.

"Set, this is Channeler, he is super useful. We have to hire him sometime in the future if we have the opportunity." As I say this, I gesture for Biscuit to come closer.

"Is he a model or something?" Maya asks, staring at the guy.

"I wanted to ask that too! Nona didn't tell me the girls from group 4 were so beautiful!"

Half expecting the girls to react with annoyance, I look up. Instead, most of them seem to have an interesting expression on their face, happy for the compliment.

If anybody less handsome said that, it would be extremely cheesy. Yet from this guy, it's been taken at face value.

The world is indeed, not fair.

"Biscuit, look what I bought." While he sniffs near the bags, I take out a small package with a can of high-quality dog food. Just looking at it, I can guess that it's probably more expensive than what most people usually eat on Earth.

At first, I'm worried he won't like it, but to my surprise, he sniffs a few times and then starts nibbling on it, letting out cute wet noises as he devours the ground meat paste.

I sit there for a few seconds, listen to those noises, and enjoy a great ASMR experience. Then I pet him and stand up, heading over to the pair of blonde boys sitting nearby.

Aaron and Dennis have old clothes that are dirty and filled with holes, hell, they can barely be called rags. Dozens of wounds, burns, cuts, and bruises cover their bodies. The kind of things that would usually get taken care of by their natural healing.

I notice a mark on their forearms that seems to affect their natural regeneration, and the system doesn't heal the wounds caused before entering the tournament.

"Is there a reason why Lily didn't heal you?" I ask them.

Aaron answers, "If we return with healed wounds, they will punish us even more and start asking who healed us and how we removed the mark," he shrugs.

"They?"

"Black Tower. The vice guild master didn't like that we tried to escape a few times and likes to... to do this. his mark stops natural healing, and he will notice if we remove it."

"I see."

"I wanted to heal them, but Tess said it would cause more problems. I hate it, but we still don't know where they are on the 6th floor." Lily says as she approaches.

“We also asked her not to heal us, so don’t blame her,” Dennis looks at me, his blue eyes smiling even with the wounds covering his body.

Dennis' disciple died. Aaron followed him to the 6th floor so that he wouldn't be there alone, and then they got treated like this by a piece of sentient trash. Looks like I'm going to be busy after the tournament and someone will be very dead.

“I’m glad you two are otherwise ok. When we return to the 6th floor, we will find you. So just hold on until then.”

The two of them exchange a glance.

“We already have a plan, but we won’t mind the chance to fuck the guy up a little bit more with your help,” Dennis smiles brightly.

“Just that guy? The entire Black Tower is going in the trash,” I say.

“Even better! Maybe we can try to blow it up,” Aaron laughs as if he thinks I'm joking. So silly.

But anyway, “Have a welcoming gift.” I say, handing a snack to each of them. “I’m glad you are safe and... I’m sorry about your disciple, Dennis.”

After spending time with Vega, I have a hard time imagining how I would feel if she died, so the poor boy must have felt terrible.

He thanks me, somewhat taken aback, and then I move around Group 4, giving time to everyone in the group.

Biscuit, done with his food, floats over to me and boops my nose with his front paw. Isabella hugs me, and some of the other members are already stuffing their faces by the time I return to Tess.

“For you,” I tell Tess, handing her chocolate. “You like milk chocolate, right?”

“I would hug you for that, but Lily would get mad,” she says, accepting my offering and putting it away.

“I would not!” Lily protests, sulking nearby.

“In that case,” Tess says, swiftly moving closer and throwing her arms around me for a short hug, with a mischievous look on her face the entire time as she looks at Lily.

She quickly takes a step back after a second. “Anyway, Channeler left to find his group, so you had better pay him back later and throw in some extra. I would like to keep him around.”

“Planning to take over the world when we get back to Earth?”

“Just a few places with nice weather where our group can go on holidays. Will you help me with that?”

“If it's not too annoying. Just point me at anyone you need to be beaten,” I answer, I even mean it.

“Sounds good! Anyway, was that girl following you who I think she is?”

“Yes, that was Tacita.”

To my answer, Tess nods, and Lily becomes curious, looking for the girl who's already snuck off somewhere.

“I met Gareth, and Lily here bumped into Savant.”

Right away, I turn to Lily, who is looking up at me with a smile. “I healed his right arm in exchange for this.” The petite healer shows me a mana stone with an extreme amount of data inscribed inside, “It's from the 2nd floor. Research notes on the use of regeneration-class skills, made by Champion Tristan and his disciple Hella, who was a healer.”

Oh, the guy who, according to the Floor quest, destroyed the world with the Sword of Aeons, the strongest mana battery in the world, and his unique skill [Dawn]. But how did Savant get his hands on it?

Lily smiles brightly yet somewhat shyly, "It's useless to me; I'm already a good healer! But I got it for you; I know you have been trying to get an active healing skill or something similar. Savant asked me to regenerate his arm in exchange for this and I refused at first. Then he said I should agree and give the mana stone to you. He must have seen me complaining about your weak passive in the Community."

Damn, has she been scammed by that guy already?

Still thankful, I take the stone and decide to pay her back later.

"But Nat, if you fight him, be a bit careful. We fought, and I lost. Of course, It was only because I wasn't fully serious; I didn't want to kill him!" she says defending herself and gesturing wildly, before slumping down and sighing, "But I got angry during the fight and used [Disintegration] on a reflex. He let it hit him and..."

That's where I stop her, "No need to say more. I don't want to know." Even this is a big hint, and learning more would take some fun out of it. I would be able to prepare, and I might become able to win just because of that fact. But I don't want to.

That guy has been someone I've wanted to fight for a long time, I'm always wondering which of us is stronger. And now, hearing that he resisted [Disintegration], I feel my hopes rising even further. This tournament will be fun.

Chapter 333: Events for the 1st tournament

"So, as I said, I recommend buying a Detachment token and using it to remove your skill's upgrade. At least for your main skill." I say.

"That shit costs a thousand shards. I'm not paying that to weaken my skill," Maya says, looking up from the smartphone I bought, just to complain.

Then, having said what she wanted to say, she switches to the next song, and from the speaker of the phone, a cheery Japanese pop song starts playing, "Damn, I wish so much I could download something else."

Tess takes the phone from Maya's hand and increases the volume with a lively expression on her face, "I love it!"

When Maya tries to take the phone back, a red and white spark of lightning hits Maya's hand.

That gives me an idea, "Do you think you could charge electronics with your lightning?" I ask Tess.

"Nat... it's Primordial lightning, and I don't think that's how electronics work."

"Not with that attitude."

Aaron jumps into our conversation, "How much did it all cost you?"

"Damn, how many shards do you have?"

"A bit over 60 thousand."

"Oh, 6 thousand, not bad at all..."

"60 thousand."

"6 thousand?"

"Sixty."

"Sixty?"

"Sixty."

(Food!)

"Sixty fucking thousand shards?"

"Sixty-four fucking thousand shards," I say.

The expressions of everyone around are extremely amusing to watch, and I feel my energy refilling. Vega would call me an asshole, but I'm sure she would be proud of her rich master.

"Won't you be able to buy an arcane item soon?" Min-Jae moves closer, looking at me while, as always, a dozen balls float around him as he practices.

"Nope, I'm saving for a passive."

"If you have so many, you should just give me that damaged ax..." Maya tries.

"No."

"Fuck," she deflates.

I still have to study it. Later, I might even try to fix it. I'm curious what a low arcane item is capable of at its full power.

(Food?)

"If you really want it, I can give it to you, Biscuit," I answer honestly.

At that, he burrows his head into my chest, and I continue to pet him. Such a good snuggly boy. The best doggo of the sixth... no, the best doggo of the tournament floor!

(Food.)

"Thank you, I'll hold onto it. If you decide you want it, just ask."

The others ignore our conversation, seemingly used to it already.

"So, what kind of person was Tacita?" Tess asks.

"Very quick, high dexterity. She also doesn't hesitate to attack and snaps back easily. I think she has some kind of skills or traits helping her hide her mana signature, and she is hard to detect. Assassin type, for sure over level 200."

"Sounds fun. Gareth, Savant, and her are probably the only ones capable of causing us any trouble." Tess muses, "The others from Hell difficulty shouldn't be too difficult to deal with, even though I'm surprised the First Beyonder isn't here."

She already knows about most of the things I've learned on the 5th floor, along with everyone else in our group.

My willingness to share seemed to surprise them a bit, but since then, they've opened up as well, sharing as much as they could to help us put it all together. Between the Pairing, the Floors, and the things they've been through.

"You met Gareth, right Tess? Tell us about him." Lily asks.

"He's pretty much the same as he is in the Community. He is friendly and non-threatening, but I think he is a healer. As for his disposition towards self-healing vs healing others, I couldn't tell. His Constitution also seemed to be pretty high. He didn't move quickly, nor did I feel that much strength from him. His mana was fairly normal as well."

“So, a paladin build, perhaps a paladin of justice?” Aaron jokes.

“Or some kind of templar! Maybe he’s rounded out his skills with some disruptive attacks on the side,” Dennis adds smartly.

Tess just gives them a short look and a small smile, “I also met a few people from Hard difficulty. Samuel and some others from a group called Legion. They’re made up of soldiers and the people who follow them. You talked to them too, Nat.”

“I remember the guy. He seemed interested in speaking to people from Hell difficulty. Something about our responsibilities after we return to Earth.”

Tess nods, “Yes, that one. It looks like he took it seriously. He and his group have been moving all over the place, stopping fights and trying to recruit people, but I don’t know how successful he’s going to be.”

“And how many nationalities have you noticed? I don’t think Tacita is from America, and Channeler is probably from Canada. A few of the people from Normal and Easy difficulty were even from Europe or Asia.”

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“Gareth is from Germany, even though his family is from Britain, they moved there when he was little.” Seeing my expression, she just shrugs. “He was really talkative. I also met a few smaller groups from South Korea and a bigger one from India.”

“We met a few guys from Japan and Poland, but most people seem to be from North America,” Aaron says.

Maya throws a piece of chocolate into her mouth and says, “I met a few guys from Texas.” She smirks, “They did have a lot of guns. Apparently, they got summoned while they were at a shooting range.”

“I don’t think guns are going to cause us much trouble,” Min-Jae says, seemingly excited at the thought.

Even then, I can't help but agree with him. At this point, I don't even think jets, tanks, or missiles could do much to anyone from Hell difficulty. It's a fun thought. It could still be dangerous with a surprise attack using armor piercing ammo, so maybe it's something to test out later.

"I saw a few women with a couple of babies, they can't have been older than a few months," Sophie says.

"That's so damn dumb," Maya shakes her head, "but I guess people from Easy difficulty would be like that. From what I saw, it's a game for most of them, and they're rarely over level 40."

"I did talk with a few from Normal difficulty." Sophie says, carefully moving Noodle so that Isabella doesn't jostle him. In response, the white snake thankfully flickers his tongue. "People from Normal seem to be close to level 80, and apparently, people from Hard are a bit higher than that. But everyone seems to be slowing down their leveling."

"With people from Hell being close to 150, and rare cases reaching closer to 200, there is quite a difference," Tess breaks off another piece of chocolate and offers a piece to Min-Jae who's sitting nearby, and he takes it thankfully.

"What level do you think we will be when we get out?" the young Korean boy asks.

Sophie answers, "I don't think anyone will get to Champion rank, we're probably a good way off from that. But I can imagine people from Hell and Beyond reaching somewhere within the range of 350 and 400 or close to it. People from Hard, anywhere from 200 to 300. Normal, 100-150, leaving easy at 100 at the most."

"I wonder how big a difference there is between someone at level 250 from Hell vs someone from Hard," Lily asks. "I saw one healer from Hard difficulty. She was healing people in exchange for items. She wasn't even able to regenerate limbs. Even Nathaniel's pathetic healing passive is better."

"The difference will be massive. We have better skills, we have better classes, and passives of a higher grade. I wouldn't be surprised if we even get better traits. Plus, our skills are much higher in level," I say, chipping in. "I'm willing to bet that I would have been able to beat a level 150 in Hard difficulty pretty easily at level 75."

While we talk, I watch as the majority of the things I just bought slowly disappear, but today I don't really mind. When they hesitate, I even open them on my own, and the bottles of sweet fizzy soda move around the group. Everyone seems to be smiling more than usual, even more than when we looted the kitchen in the manor back on the 3rd floor.

Isabella wakes up to the crackling of a pack of chips, proceeds to stuff her cheeks and moves closer to me while Sophie and Tess joke about the country we should take over when we get back to Earth. Apparently, the weather and the quality of food are the most important factors.

"Can I?" Izzy asks, moving closer as she looks at me.

I nod, and then I feel her [Empathy] connect to me.

Curious, I observe her expression, and the 11-year-old girl smiles at me, her green eyes shining brightly.

When she disconnects, she puts her arms around me in a hug and then pats my back, "You are much prettier than you were on the 1st Floor."

"Really?"

"Yes!" she confirms, acting all smart. "It's still not perfect, but very very slowly, you're starting to feel like a hero."

That amuses me even more, and she seems to notice that even without her skill.

"It's not funny! I saw it on the internet. Some old guy said that Heroes are not born; they are made, and to me, you're starting to look like a hero! You saved Soph and helped us so many times." She explains.

Such a silly girl. One day I really want to see her interact with Vega.

Instead of responding to something so outrageous, I caress her head, almost trying to pull her non-existing horns, something I got used to doing.

“How was Seneca?” I ask her.

A mistake, as I realize quickly, as Izzy spends the next two hours telling me about her adventures on the 5th floor and the time she spent with Seneca, her disciple.

It would be fine if she shared interesting information, but Izzy doesn't know about the Veil, the Ignition Stations, the Champions, and natives. She mostly talks about her adventures and fights, about teaching her disciple, and other silly things. But being in a surprisingly good mood, I decide to let her talk for tonight while I sit back and listen.

At some point, the boys join as well, and Izzy gets Dennis to talk about his disciple who died.

Such cruelty surprises me, yet Izzy keeps asking with her childish honesty, seeming to have some hidden plan in mind. Aaron tries to stop her a few times, but she manages to talk over him with a fast stream of words each time, and slowly Dennis opens up.

He talks about his time on the 5th floor. How he was scared, how he was annoyed with his disciple, and how, as he slowly opened up, they started building a relationship.

He talks about their adventures and all the silly things. In detail, he talks about the time they found a hill with a beautiful view. He talks about getting scared by a tiny animal in the middle of the night.

Then he gets to the point when his disciple dies, and even though it feels cruel, Izzy keeps asking. And Dennis talks. When he cries, and the little girl moves closer, taking his bigger hands into her smaller ones.

Isabella asks again, she makes him talk more and share it all. She doesn't even use her skill to share his emotions with us, but it's all out in the open for us to see.

No one talks over him, no one minds his tears; instead, people offer their support and listen to the quiet words he has to say.

That's how we learn about his disciple, a young human girl called Draya with whom he spent such a short, yet impactful time.

By the time the night comes, Dennis seems as if a weight has fallen from his shoulders, and he hugs Isabella for a long time, whispering quiet words of thanks.

During the night, the two of us keep watch while the others sleep. And one of those keeping watch happens to be me.

The place we've chosen to stay is a bit higher than the plane where the buildings and people are, and I watch the lights down there with abject fascination.

Every single person there is a real person from Earth, not a native of the floor. It's still a weird feeling.

I listen as some cheer, celebrating late into the night, and making contact with others. Over two thousand people, are all in the same situation. They share information, they trade.

Of course, there are some fights, flames light up the sky, projectiles fly, and mana blazes up, but never anything too serious, they're just small conflicts aiming to establish a pecking order.

Even then, a small group of stronger mana signatures moves to the conflict, stopping it and building up recognition early. People devoted to taking on that role even after returning to Earth.

I wonder if they are truly selfless or if it's just a cold calculating move with the hope of saving work and time later.

When morning comes, half a day remains until the 1st event, but we finally get a notification from the system with the schedule.

Events for the 1st tournament of the 5th round of the Earth tutorial have been decided. They are as follows:

1st event - The Survival Domain

2nd event - The Siege of Aether Keep

3rd event - Avatar Confrontation

4th event - The Arena

5th event - Chronicle of the Past

The first event will start in 12 hours. More information will be shared soon.

Chapter 334: WhiteWing

“So, the events are Battle Royale, Tower Defense, Raid Bosses, Duels, and whatever the last event is,” Dennis declares confidently.

“You and your theories. Just wait a few hours, and the event will start,” Maya stretches, and we continue to walk between the buildings and the camps people have set up.

We’ve already found a house with a nice view to stay in, and Aaron, Sophie, and Izzy have stayed behind to watch over our things. The rest of us have decided to look around and gather some more information.

I secretly hope to meet BenDover and Sami, the guys from the Hell and Easy difficulty Communities. Finding them among so many people could be challenging, but a man can dream, right?

At some point, Tacita joins us as well. She appears out of nowhere, walking with our group, and scaring a few of our members when they notice her.

After I tell Lily who she is, Lily rushes to her and stops an arm's reach away, “I’m Grumpy! I can heal you! Na... Noname said you can’t talk, and I’m a healer; I should be able to do it easily.”

At that, Tacita shakes her head.

"I don't want anything for it; it's really simple, and it doesn't even hurt," Lily then reaches her hand to touch the slim girl and stops, with a dagger held at her neck.

Quickly the mood changes, and the smile disappears from Lily's face.

For a moment, she and Tacita look at each other before the mute girl smiles brightly and takes the dagger away.

To that, Lily calms down and says, "Sorry for trying to heal you without your consent."

Tacita lifts her hands in the air, seemingly gesturing that it's okay, and she gives a single short pat on Lily's shoulder. Her mood improves even more when Lily gives her a piece of candy from my hunt.

Watching this exchange, I'm once more validated in my belief that I'm the most normal person here.

Also, as we walk, I'm validated that Biscuit is the most handsome boy in this round of the tutorial. We see some animals, and some of them even feel somewhat strong. A white cat, a crow following a man from Hard difficulty, a big pitbull. We even see some monsters. A horse with six legs, a bird with a wingspan more than twice my length, And a pack of six weasel-like creatures.

When Biscuit approaches them, seemingly out of curiosity, and then the animals and monsters start screeching out of pure fear. They tremble and don't even try to run; instead, they step back and cower, growling quietly.

Each time, Biscuit just looks at them and then leaves.

It seems to disturb some of Group 4's members, but I'm only proud. His greatness is showing even now.

"Did you notice that field?" I ask Sophie.

“Yes, and to be honest, it's trash,” she says. “I can sense that multiple people collaborated on it, and it's likely that they're all from Hell difficulty.”

And I agree with her. The field covering the clearing is pretty weird. It's nothing like Veil and it's not even comparable to the barrier protecting the Bastion. The field in question is basically some sort of mana detector, meant to detect emissions over a certain level and send a signal and location to the creators.

“It's probably Gareth,” Tess joins. “He said he was going to speak with Samuel, and that he felt like he had a point. So they, 're probably using it to police this place.”

We give her a questioning look, and she sighs, “Gareth told me before, like I said, he's very talkative.”

“Well, it's not like it is hard for them to take care of a few people. From what I've seen, I could deal with tens, maybe hundreds of Easy or Normal difficulty people fairly easily, and I could probably handle a good number of people from Hard as well,” Maya says.

The way she underestimates her powers feels weird. I myself am sure that I could wipe out everyone from Hard difficulty even if all 200 some odd people joined forces against me.

Following Tess, we reach a spot where a large group of powerful individuals have gathered. I can feel that much from their mana signatures. I switch to Sneaky Mode and observe like I used to back on the fifth floor.

The central part of this clearing is occupied by a huge white spacious tent with multiple open entrances. The inside seems to be well illuminated though it's shielded from anything that might overwhelm the eye. It seems cozy, and the tent is big enough to fit a hundred or so people.

“Sset, my friend. I'm glad you made it,” a man says as he emerges from the tent, seeming to be the strongest in the group.

He seems to be around 40 years old, though he's muscular and fit. There is a friendly smile on his face, and his jaw is probably sharp enough to cut glass.

The next thing I notice is the beautiful silver armor he is wearing. The armor looks heavy, made of thick plates of metal, and yet the man moves naturally.

“Hello Gareth, these are Noname, Grumpy, Knight, StrongestOne, and NotAaron.”

The man’s eyes turn to me as he examines me for a moment, and then he smiles. “I’m happy to meet you as well, Noname and Grumpy. It’s always nice to see my fellow Beyond explorers. I also welcome you, Knight, StrongestOne, and NotAaron. Jakub and Maximillian seemed to speak with you quite often, and I’m sure they would be glad to meet you when they return.”

I once again have to remind myself that Jakub and Maximillian are Lootenant and Brainiac from the community. Gareth surely loves to continue to doxx everyone he meets. What a guy.

When he stops in front of me, I observe him and the hand he offers. He is doing it all so naturally, with a big smile on his face. I already feel his extrovert passive leeching off my reserves of social energy.

“I would like us all to be friends, Noname,” he says, pushing his hand even closer.

In the end, I shake hands with him just to make it stop, and he turns his attention to other members of group 4. He quickly greets everyone, gives out compliments, and asks about their experiences. And he does it all as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

What a monster.

When he moves to Biscuit, I expect our future animal overlord to growl at the man. Biscuit is really good when it comes to judging characters, and Gareth seems like a clear-cut B-movie villain pretending to be a paladin of justice. All so he can reveal himself as the villain in the final act.

But to my surprise, Biscuit barks softly and lets the man pet him a bit.

I... I don’t understand. As I start to use black mana to power [Focus] and think things over, Gareth turns to us all, “In the past few hours, the system has unlocked a number of buildings near the center of the common area.”

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“Anything interesting?” Tess, sits opposite Gareth in a similarly comfortable position, as the rest of us plop down beside them.

At this point, it's our extrovert against theirs, and I focus on listening.

“There are living quarters with plenty of rooms. They seem to be more luxurious than the ones on the edge, but they require payment in shards per night. The more expensive ones can run as high as several hundred shards per night. Some houses come with facilities for enchanting, smithing, and other basic needs. You can also rent more specialized facilities independently, without the house.”

Good, as it should be. A few hundred shards per night? I was worried the system lost its way. Being reminded that the system is a scamming asshole is always nice. Later, I will fly over to check the buildings and prices. It might be worth it to shell out a few shards as long as the view is nice.

Gareth continues, “There are also facilities that can be unlocked. These facilities provide access to basic metals and materials at a better price than the system shop. People from Hell or Hard difficulty have already made deals and combined shards to unlock facilities and purchase materials.”

“You can put your shards together?” Min-Jae asks, surprised.

“Oh, sorry for the confusion! It’s more like one person will pay for one day, another one for another day, and a third one might buy materials while they try to balance the expenditure.”

“That’s all good. So the system is giving us a chance to craft and smith items for the tournament, maybe even an opportunity to fix and create items to bring with us after the tournament?”

“Yes,” Gareth agrees. Even sitting there in his silver armor, he looks somewhat majestic. “There is also a tournament variation of the system shop that only allows items created, with materials from local shops to be auctioned off and sold to tournament participants.”

“How big a cut does the system take for the item sold?” I ask.

“How did you know the system takes a cut?” Gareth turns to me, surprised. “Did you already know about this?”

Knew it! System, you greedy little shit. Is it because the Ruler of Greed has something to do with you, or are you just set like that?

“I guessed from my experience with the system,” I respond.

“That makes sense, but nice catch. As you said, the system takes a 10% cut, which isn’t that bad considering the reduced cost of materials.”

I detect two presences moving closer, and two men enter the tent. One of them is slim and short with messy brown hair and seems to be somewhere around the twins' age. The other appears to be somewhere around my age, maybe a bit younger, and he enters with a smile on his face.

The smiling red-haired man turns to us. “Group 4, the biggest Hell difficulty maniacs!” he declares.

“Maximillian, please, be nice to our guests,” Gareth says softly.

“Don't worry, Gary, they’ve heard worse from me! I’m Brainiac, and this must be the best doggo of the... what is it now? The best doggo of the tournament floor? That’s what you guys have been calling him, right?” he moves and squats in front of Biscuit, offering him a hand for Biscuit to sniff.

Then I sense an exchange between them, and Brainiac, real name Maximillian, stands up, shouting, “He really talks!”

“Hello,” the boy with brown messy hair says, as he moves in with a friendly smile.

“Which one of you is Noname? I wanna see the legendary mana maniac.” Brainiac looks around, then following the looks of others, he stops at me.

He takes a few steps, "So, all the things I said before, I was joking, you know that, right? No hard feelings." When he offers me his hand, I can't sense any ill intent or dishonesty in his actions.

Taking another big blow to my social energy, I stand up and shake his hand. "It's fine."

"So, how much mana do you have?" he asks curiously. "Six, seven hundred?"

I check.

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1015 + 1015

So I nod, "Something like that."

"Max, it's rude to ask about that," with a sigh, Lootenant moves closer and pulls his red-haired friend away, "I apologize for Max. He's a good guy but he can be annoying sometimes."

"That's okay." Tess says, standing up with a smile on her lips, "I'm Sset, it's nice to meet you in the flesh, Brainiac and Lootenant, or would you prefer Maximillian and Jakub?"

It's amusing to see the two young men react to the pretty, tall, and blonde Tess. Lootenant seems to even blush, and Brainiac is taken aback, his eyes moving up and down Tess's figure.

With interest, I wait to see how long Tess will let him continue before she zaps him, but unfortunately, it doesn't get to that point.

Tess introduces Lily, Min-Jae, Dennis, and Maya.

Unsurprisingly, the young men are happy to meet the other boys given the way they spoke in the Community, and they get sucked into a conversation like old friends.

“Tsk, I wanted to see Tess zap him,” Maya says, moving her chair next to mine.

“Me too,” I murmur in agreement.

“Want to bail and check out the houses they mentioned? Tess can take care of the rest,” she offers.

“You just want to find a nice house and have me pay for it.”

“Yes I do,” Maya agrees shamelessly. “You are rich, and it might make you more attractive in my eyes. Don't you want to look reliable and capable in the eyes of a pretty young woman?”

Well, Maya used to be a professional trainer, and after her time in the tutorial, her body has become even more athletic and she's not wrong, she could easily be called pretty, between her dark skin, wavy black hair, and dark brown eyes, but.

“The ax is now 55 thousand shards.”

“Fuck, why! You said 49 thousand before.”

“I need to make more money to seem more capable, apparently.” I stand up. “Take Dennis, and we'll head over. He can connect to Aaron and tell the others to move in.”

Before I can change my mind, she quickly exchanges a few words with Tess and pulls Dennis away from the group, and we head outside and deeper into the center of the common area.

The deeper we go, the nicer the houses are. The common area isn't exactly flat; there are a few small hills with houses at the top. Some houses even seem to have been built into those smaller hills. The common area is massive.

Walking through streets made of cobblestone and passing by beautiful houses, we reach the center of the plaza, at which point I take the opportunity to look around.

Finding a house that I like, I head there; it's on the smaller side with a workshop nearby. The house sits at the top of a hill that is shielded on one side by a forest, leaving the front of the house as the only part facing the rest of the place. And by being at the top of the highest hill in the area, it offers a nice view of the town.

As we approach, a barrier stops us, and a message pops up.

Would you like to rent Forest Edge Retreat and the accompanying facilities?

500 shards/day

Well, it looks like Gareth wasn't joking.

"Yes, I want to pay for the entire length of the tournament."

Would you like to pay 3000 shards to rent the Forest Edge Retreat and the accompanying facilities?

Yes/No

I confirm, and the shards disappear. After that, the barrier disappears, and Dennis sends a message to the others to move in.

"How much?" Maya asks curiously.

"Three thousand for the full duration of the tournament."

"Damn," she gasps.

Unlike her, I don't mind. Opening the tournament system shop and checking items and their prices, I already know I will get my shards back with plenty of extra.

About ten hours remain until the start of the 1st event, so that's plenty of time to cook up something nice.

Chapter 335: [Restriction]

The first thing I bought was a bar of metal, which is floating in front of me now, held there by the mana I've surrounded it with. To that end, I'm using my crown to increase my level of control. At the same time, I'm releasing thermal energy and melting it, allowing me to mold it into the shape of a dagger. All things I've learned from Nevan.

I would like to use better materials or even kinetic energy to pummel the metal more or experiment with alloys, but that's currently out of my reach. Those are goals for the future. For now, my goal is to create a rare item and sell it through the tournament's auction system.

The materials must be bought from the tournament shop as well, but their prices aren't very high, which of course means that the quality isn't all that high either, but it should be enough for me to make some rare items.

I allow the dagger to settle on the facility's worktable and take a moment to look over at Isabella and Sophie, who are experimenting in the corner. The sisters seem to be having fun together. Isabella creates flames which Sophie helps her shape and they use the resulting effects in an attempt to mimic my techniques.

It was Isabella's idea and the mind manipulator, Sophie "siscon" Martinez, of course, agreed.

"Flames need to be more even at the edges and slightly hotter in the center," I warn her for the fifth time.

"I know. You told me already!" the little girl complains.

Turning back to my dagger, I absorb the rest of its heat, accelerating the cooling process, and observe the results.

It's made of simple gray metal with a core composed of a more conductive metal, creating rough pathways, connected to a mana stone embedded in the metal dagger. The dagger is entirely made of metal. If someone has a problem with that, they can modify it later.

The result is ugly as sin but it should be functional enough.

Manabound Stiletto (rare) -This dagger is bound with mana, sharpening its edge as mana passes through. It can slightly disrupt magical armor or barriers.

Should be fine for now.

"I want to sell this and the other five daggers I made."

To be able to sell the items in the tournament shop, register as a seller. Please, pick your alias.

Huh? This again?

For a moment, I think of just using Noname, but then I change my mind and pick a different name.

Would you like to register as "Fuckyouintentbitch"?

"Yes," I confirm. I hope that the stalker is watching. This one is for you, Duplicaniel. I know you would have appreciated it.

Congratulations, you have been registered as "Fuckyouintentbitch", you can now offer items made by you for sale.

What starting price do you wish to set for Manabound Stiletto (rare)?

The low rare items are usually 200 shards outside of the tournament. As for this one, it did cost me around 50 shards worth of materials.

“150 shards,” I say, and then set the same price for the other 5 daggers I made and then close the window.

I should get a 600 shards net profit if they sell for the price I'm asking. If someone bids more, my profit will be better. After the 1st event, I plan to make a few more to while away time here and make some shards. Others can have fun with people.

Next, I move closer to where Isabella and Sophie are experimenting and observe the process. I don't say anything but watch.

Sophie is still using her [Manipulation] to help Izzy control her flames while her little sister tries to copy the techniques she saw me using. They are practicing on a piece of metal I brought here from the 6th Floor. The result can't be sold in the tournament shop, but it's good for practice.

Curious, I observe Isabella's blue flames and try to compare them to my golden ones. As of now, I still haven't gotten what the exact difference is between flames made with thermal primordial energy and normal ones so I'm curious.

Could it be that I still haven't seen the true power of thermal energy? Are there any steps I've missed? Is the difference great or small?

Isabella's flames are the result of her [Pyrokinesis] and they are beautifully blue, with no hint of another color no matter how strong she makes them. With her subclass, Kindness, she can even control them. It's to the extent that she can burn the monsters in a big area while her flames don't hurt anyone she doesn't want them to. Not even heat touches them.

I'm also fairly sure that her subclass strengthens her [Empathy].

When she makes a mistake and more than the intended amount of flames leaks from her, I absorb some so she won't destroy their project. Then I depart while holding blue flames over the palm of my hand and observing them, leaving the sisters to experiment.

Entering the house, I meet Brainiac, Lootenant, and the boys in the living room.

The red-haired Brainiac shouts, "Nice place, Nona! I always knew you were rich."

"Yes, yes," I wave at him and continue to the next room.

I can't help but overhear the conversation behind me as he speaks to Dennis, "To be honest, I thought he would be leaking mana all over the place but he seems... normal? Was he just trolling us with all that mana stuff?"

Escaping the range of his extrovert debuff zone, I plop into a chair seated next to a big window with a nice view. Outside the window, Lily and Maya seem to be having a light sparring match, while conserving mana before the 1st event. Even then, they move with surprising agility, both the healer and the athletic Maya.

Once again, I'm reminded that I'm in big trouble if I lose control of my mana. Even with my Active Tempering, their physical stats are just that much higher than mine. Especially Lily, who's upgraded her Constitution and still puts a lot into physical stats. There is also the weird thing she's been doing to slowly strengthen her muscles and bones.

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"Aren't you going to spar?" I ask, looking at Tess, who's sitting nearby, reading some papers.

I notice that her haircut has changed once again. Her back length blonde hair has been woven into a neat braid. She seems to enjoy changing it up every now and then.

"I have no time," she says, gesturing at the papers. "We are exchanging information with Gareth. Oh, did you know there are only 31 people here from Hell difficulty? 10 from Gareth's group WhiteWing, 4 from IDK, 9 from our group, Tacita who is apparently alone in her group, Savant who is also alone in his group, and 6 from TheGuild. So 7 people decided not to join. The ones that never engaged with the Community."

"We are also missing the 1st Beyonder guy, remember that."

"I do, it's hard to forget the guy."

"I wanted to fight him."

Tess sighs, "Of course, you did. But don't worry, you still have Savant, Tacita, and Gareth. Oh, and there's Lily and I too so be careful." She smiles before looking back at the papers. "We tried to share more information about the 6th and 5th floor with Gareth's WhiteWing but the system censored the words, muted them."

"Well, no surprise there."

"Yes. We tried to set ciphers, we tried telepathy, and we tried to hint or write the information down. But the system is adapting and censoring the words no matter what we try. Even when we tried to leak information by 'mistake' or allow them to barely hear from a distance."

"Have you tried anything like sign language?"

"Yes, the system even blocked that."

So very annoying. Before I can say anything we get a new system message.

The 1st event - The Survival Domain will start in 1 hour!

In one hour everyone will be transferred to a randomly selected map, all difficulties will participate together. The terrain will be picked from those within the system's database.

You will be facing the environment, other competitors from the 5th round of the tutorial, and a shrinking domain.

The 1st event will take place over the course of 5 hours, and the contenders will be rewarded according to their performance and final proximity to the center of the domain.

Note: You can't restore your mana or stamina during the duration of the event.

Note: No equipment is permitted to be brought inside the Survival Domain.

Note: There will be items of different rarities randomly placed within the domain to be used during the event. The items are:

1 low arcane grade item

10 low epic grade items

50 low rare grade items

100 uncommon grade items

500 common grade items

Note: You can use [Restriction] for this and the remaining events.

Placing [Restriction] allows you to restrict your status to the state from the end of a certain floor you decide. You may break this [Restriction], but doing so after accepting it will be counted as a loss and you will be immediately removed from the event.

To place [Restriction] you need to call out to what Floor level you want to limit your status. The stricter [Restriction] you impose upon yourself, the larger the improvement in your rewards.

“Fuuuuck, is the rarity after epic arcane? How crazy must those items be?” Brainiac shouts from the living room.

Well, it seems like everyone got the message.

“What do you think?” I ask Tess who seems to be reading the notification again.

“I like the part with [Restriction].”

I knew she would like that. “What if you restrict yourself to your power level of the 3rd Floor and someone like me chooses to stay on the 5th or 6th Floor level?” I ask.

“That makes it risky and fun, doesn’t it?” she smirks.

“Oh yeah, it does,” I agree.

This is fun. Being able to put an [Restriction] on myself could make even a fight against lower difficulty people fun while also giving out better rewards. For example, Gareth and his group are in the middle of the 5th floor and Savant is at its end, so the members of group 4, having made it to the 6th floor, with rewards from the 5th floor should have an advantage.

But with [Restriction] in the mix?

“Dennis, you were right, it's a Battle Royale,” I call out to Dennis who’s sitting with the other boys in the living room.

“Told you!” he shouts back.

“Aren’t you worried about your mana running out?” Tess looks at me with interest.

“With my reserves, I should have the advantage against anyone with less than me.”

“That’s true,” she nods. “So what if you meet someone from Beyond or someone from our group?”

“No holding back,” I answer simply.

“Maybe I’ll throw something your way when I spot you,” she muses with a cheeky smile, “should be easy enough.”

“Are you sure you want to risk missing with your pitiful mana reserves?”

“We will see about that,” she declares.

Now that I think about it, a good number of people will probably group up to survive until the end and last the full 5 hours before fighting among themselves. I could ask Tess now, but somehow I don’t feel like it, seeing how competitively she’s been looking at me.

Well, I’m sure it won’t be so easy for her to snipe me in a crowd of almost two thousand people. The map will surely be massive.

With a few minutes remaining, group 4 reaches the center of the common area. There are lots of pretty trees planted to create plenty of shaded retreats surrounded by flowers and benches. There is even a fountain and a small lake nearby with their own seating. It’s massive.

There are people everywhere, excitedly checking the timer. It almost feels like some kind of celebration.

I wonder what the mood will be like after the 1st event? Will fighting each other sour the mood? Will they be the same after seeing what people from other difficulties are capable of? I’ve already noticed but Easy and Normal difficulty are fairly soft. I can tell just from the way they look at me or how cluelessly they move around, without paying attention. They’re either incompetent or the lack of danger hasn’t made the effort necessary.

They grill outside, they drink, and they trade. There are even a few babies barely a few months old. I saw them fight among themselves too, but being under level 50 for Easy or 100 for Normal, they are not that strong. Even weaker when I consider group 4’s power during that period.

In ten seconds, you will be moved to the 1st Event's area!

The countdown starts and I look around, meeting the eyes of the others in group 4. I even notice Gareth as he waves at me.

Quickly averting his gaze, I notice another man looking at me and turn to him.

The man has a slim face and pale green eyes. His long black hair is tied into a ponytail that rests on his back. Under his left eye, there is a beauty mark. He doesn't avert his gaze and my eyes meet his.

I feel my mana rouse up and my heart pumps Primordial Energies through my body. Instinctively, I feel myself collecting my mana.

That man is dangerous.

You will be transferred to The Survival Domain. You have three seconds to place [Restriction] if you wish to do so.

I watch as he mouths a few words, and I do the same.

"4th Floor [Restriction]," I call in tandem with him.

Then both of us disappear together with 2,355 more people, and the 1st event of the tournament starts.

Chapter 336: Start of the 1st event

Flashback Savant - 1st Floor

"We will throw that cripple to the goblins!"

"You can't do that! Are you even human!?"

“Shut up if you don’t want to find yourself being thrown to them instead. There is no way he will survive the remaining duration of the Floor quest, so he can at least help us this way.”

“We shouldn’t...”

“Just close your goddamn eyes if you don’t want to see it! And you remaining dickheads better keep quiet or I will fuck you up!”

I watch as the rest of our group does just that and no one else tries to voice a different opinion. When he turns to me, he isn’t even smiling. He is scared. No, he is terrified, even more than he lets show.

“Hear that, cripple? In the next attack, you will hold the monsters back so we can run.” He looks briefly at the stick I’m using to walk after I lost my prosthetic leg in one of the previous attacks.

My classmates, my professors, everyone avoids my gaze when I look at them.

I feel [Restriction] envelop me and it's a disgusting feeling. My stats are lowered and my skills are as well. There is that feeling of resistance when I try to access skills I didn’t have on the 4th Floor. The resistance feels like it would be easy enough to push through, but that would mean breaking [Restriction] and I don’t want that.

My level has only been reduced by 20, but a good number of my skills have been reduced to a much lower level and my base mana is at 782 instead of over 1000. It's still good enough to deal with anyone who chooses to attack me.

Most importantly, my Thermokinetic Mana Heart has been downgraded. Vortex Core is also gone and with it, the improvements to my Mantle. The Cognitive Fortress and Mana Overload Absorption are gone too, and my healing passive is capped at its rare version.

Annoying, but very doable.

But one thing amuses me. It looks like this event is better for people who went for Amplification instead of Regeneration. Regenerating mana or stamina seems to be impossible here so the builds that rely on a small mana pool with quick regeneration are at a disadvantage.

Amplification is indeed superior as I knew so long ago. Small pewpew builds can only shake in fear.

I look around and find myself standing in the middle of a big plain. There are mountains in one direction, and in another is a black wall of clouds with lightning flashing inside that seems to be moving fairly quickly, passing through areas and devouring anything inside. In another direction, the white towers of a small city dominate the sky, and in the last direction is a forest with trees that seem to reach the clouds.

A warning from [Perception], a flash of lightning, and I push my body away with kinetic energy to dodge the attacks. It happens again, and I continue running, strengthening my body as efficiently as possible.

Watching the direction the attacks come from, I start to predict their trajectory which doesn't seem to change once they leave the caster and I avoid them without wasting mana.

Of course, I can't see the attacker, but that white and red lightning is unmistakable.

Tess's barrage of attacks is aggressive, she's infused the rocks she's shooting at me with her primordial lightning, damaging the area around me. However, they're only intended to confuse me and make me let my guard down. A real attack will follow the moment I do.

I expand my domain and focus on using [Perception] while I jump behind the huge rock nearby.

More than sure that Tess is capable of piercing it, I keep my attention up aware of the possibility of her trying to reposition. At long-range, Tess has always had an advantage over me, especially now when I can't afford to waste my mana in some ill-advised attempt to catch her. I'm also not sure what kind of [Restriction] she's put on herself, if any.

My senses sharpen, looking for any sense of danger, and I feel my heartbeat quicken even when I'm not using it to generate any energy.

It's exciting. It's thrilling.

Looking to the side, I watch the black wall of lightning move closer and closer to my position, the thunder roaring and the lightning tearing anything it reaches. There is also a new notification window, and I check it for a moment.

FoodFood (Hell, 6th) → LightAbove (Normal, 6th)

Is this the kill feed? And damn, Biscuit, did that guy try to kidnap you because he thought you were cute, and give you the opportunity to kill him mercilessly?

Good boy!

I watch as more notifications appear and the number of people inside seems to decrease quickly, barely a few minutes in.

2210 / 2357

Finally, the storm reaches the place somewhere between me and Tess, and I move from the rock and run toward the city I can see in the distance.

A terrifying piercing noise reaches me and I rush mana through my body, creating a barrier around my forearm while launching myself away.

Yet still, the thrown shield boosted by [Psychokinesis] and covered in Primordial lightning strikes the barrier, sending me spinning, and following it a stone crashes into my chest, the sheer force sending me rolling over the ground.

Damn it, Tess! That's not how you use a shield! How the hell did you find an item so quickly?

The attack stops, and I hear a small explosion from Tess's direction, either someone's attacking her or the storm's forced her to move.

I use more kinetic energy, moving towards the city. A bruise is already forming on my chest and I'm sure at least one rib is cracked. Between trying to conserve mana and being surprised by [Restriction], I wasn't able to strengthen my body quickly enough.

While on my way, I grab the shield she attacked me with. It's already crumpled, useless, just a common grade item, so I throw it away.

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Reaching the gate, a pathetic excuse for a fireball comes right at me, and I don't even bother absorbing its heat and disrupt it with a little bit of mana.

Quickly detecting its origin, I shoot an orb toward the attacker.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Potato (Easy, 5th)

The name sounds familiar, but I don't know why. But 5th in the name probably indicates the level of their [Restriction].

Pushing myself up, I check the body that is already turning into particles, but I don't find any items and head deeper inside the city.

Down on the street, three men are fighting each other, ice-based attacks crashing against hastily constructed barriers, and projectiles made out of stone erupt like they were launched from a shotgun.

I create three small mana orbs and spin them around my body. To save mana, I make them move faster before slinging them.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → George (Easy, 7th)

Noname (Hell, 4th) → IsThisHell (Normal, 5th)

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Cheesus (Normal, 6th)

This is getting fun!

Curious, I say, "Leaderboard."

A new window pops out.

1st (40 pts) - Grumpy

2nd (26 pts) - Savant

3rd (22 pts) -

4th (18 pts) - FoodFood

5th(15 pts) - Brainiac

6th (12 pts) - BenDover

7th (11 pts) - GoodBoy

8th (9 pts) - Tacita

9th (6 pts) - Noname

Okay, first, what the fuck, Lily. Second, I really like it; it's almost like a game.

So, I "killed" 4 people, 2 from Easy and 2 from Normal. The points are probably different for each difficulty, so does it mean Easy is 1 point, Normal is 2 points? That would fit.

But the requirement for winning this event is to survive for 5 hours and be as close as possible to the center of the Survival Domain, and I know where that center is. It's marked by a tall pillar of bright white light that reaches and pierces the sky. I can also see the barrier far, off in the distance. It's hard to say if it's shrinking, but it's either started the process or it will in time.

Detecting another presence, I move, and see another man sneaking into the city. He is sending detection waves into the surroundings, and I look at the text over his head.

ManaShallPrevail (Normal, 6th)

Damn, I like the name, but I'm sorry, buddy.

Once again, I shoot a dense mana projectile, and it reaches his head, about to pierce it.

I curiously watch as the orb disappears just a millimeter before killing the man, and his body immediately turns into particles, teleporting him outside.

So that's how the system deals with that kind of wound. The attacks that just hurt will most likely pass and cause damage that won't be healed by the system during events, and any attacks that would kill are negated, and the target is disqualified.

A few more presences appear on the edge of my detection, and I start hiding my mana, using Mana Cycling as I move over the roofs.

With just a few more jumps and careful boosts, I move behind one of the chimneys of a medieval style city. A few roofs down, a group of 5 men have gathered, two of them from Hard difficulty and three from Normal, discussing something energetically.

The leader is holding a bow that seems to be around rare grade and keeps watch. He stands in the center sending waves of mana outward to scan the area.

They are a bit secretive, but to me, he may as well be shouting in my ear.

How the heck is he even from Hard difficulty with scans like that?

I get ready for combat and reach past them, placing a [Tether]

They do not try to disrupt it. Even when the man's scans washes over the anchor, he doesn't seem to notice it.

They don't sense anything even as I send a strong pulse of thermal energy through, causing it to explode in the middle of their group, killing them all and destroying a chunk of the building.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → GigaChad (Hard, 6th)

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Toastmaster (Hard, 5th)

Noname (Hell, 4th) → MidnightM (Normal, 6th)

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Bobby (Normal, 5th)

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Ellie (Normal, 6th)

My points increase to 22.

So, Easy for 1, Normal for 2, and Hard for 5. And I still can't see rewards for positions, so maybe they're just personalized according to performance? that seems likely.

I take the damaged bow out from under the debris, and it is in fact rare quality. Useless to me, so I just place it in the middle of the clearing to make it seem like a drop, and then I place an anchor near it, all while making everything as covert as possible.

For the following thirty minutes, I watch a constant stream of people moving into and through the city. A large number of them detect the bow and head straight for it after scanning the area. And I'm almost disappointed by how terrible their scans are.

After killing the 3rd group trying to take the bow and hunting two more groups passing through the city, I decide to change location.

People here seem to be from Easy and Normal mostly, and there's rarely anyone higher, and I'm tired of that.

With a pulse, I destroy the bow and head out of the city, entering the grassy land where I limit my output even more while sending my scans out even further.

1st (84 pts) - Sset

2nd (68 pts) - Savant

3rd (61 pts) - Grumpy

The top three are being led by Tess; it's obvious that she would have a nice advantage here because of her skills. I, meanwhile, am 5th with 49 points.

I check the total again, to find that it's been reduced significantly since the last time I checked.

1819 / 2357

As I approach the field, I detect a presence that feels different from any other I've felt until now.

Hiding my mana and carefully placing anchors, I move closer, and on the edge of the forest, I watch two women passing by, both of them holding items and both from Hard difficulty. But there is someone else who interests me more.

A man crouching at the top of a small tree the women are passing under. He has a shortsword barely as long as his forearm but he holds it more like a dagger.

One of the women seems to notice something and quickly looks up but before her eyes meet the man, the air around him flickers, and, like a chameleon, he camouflages with the area. Even his presence disappears, in a manner resembling Tacita's, though it's significantly inferior.

The woman, confused, squints her eyes, but then pokes her friend, and both of them rush away.

Most likely saving mana, the man, who seems like he's about 30 years old, cancels his skill and appears again, this time with a cruel smile on his face.

BenDover (Hell, 5th) reads the text over his head.

My very good friend from the Community. One of the people I've most wanted to meet. I still remember the numerous insults he directed at my family and then at me. I also recall how he mocked Eris and Myrra later, boasting gleefully about helping to kill them both.

The blade of the shortsword he's holding is coated in a sickly yellow substance, something that feels like a combination of poison and disruption, and he becomes invisible again. At this point, I'm willing to bet his class has Phantom in the name.

It's like the asshole is actively trying to make me hate him even more.

Chapter 337: Silent Strike

Well, it seems like my buddy BenDover over here finally made it to the 5th floor. He doesn't even seem like he can detect the presence of my anchors.

I'm long since used to my opponents disrupting them or detecting them and that makes me wonder if it's less common than I thought. Have the opponents I've been facing just been that good, is that not how it usually goes?

Curious, I put an anchor in front of him as he takes a step to follow and kill the women and that's when he finally notices it. He squints his eyes and then to my surprise, he turns around and starts running away, even activating that camouflage skill of his.

Huh?

Before following him, I create two javelins, fill them with a decent amount of thermal energy, and then boost them with kinetic, shooting them at the women.

One of them blocks the javelin intended for her and the other one tries to run away, dodging hers, but the javelins explode into golden flames.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Momo (Hard, 5th)

The other woman starts running away, even dodging the third javelin I shoot but then runs into an anchor and a burst of kinetic energy finishes her off.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Emmmmmm (Hard, 5th)

I find him standing in the middle of a clearing filled to the brim with his traps, almost like my anchors, but worse.

"I know it's you, Noname! I saw the notifications. Show yourself, you dick!" he shouts.

Things like this feel more satisfying up close and personal so I enter the clearing without trying to hide, using part of my mana to strengthen my body.

BenDover is around 30 years old. He has a short pointy beard and creepy eyes. He isn't all that tall but his shoulders are wide. The sword he's holding is coated in sickly yellow mana.

"Finally, I..." he doesn't even finish the sentence before he launches an attack at me from behind, clearly trying to surprise me.

An acid-like attack splashes against my barrier and sizzles on the surface, unable to penetrate it, even with the attack's weak disruptive properties. A light flashes, blinding me for a split second, and when I can finally see again the man is gone and his traps as well.

With a sigh, I enter the clearing, and boosting my body I turn around, grabbing the invisible man by his neck. My other hand grabs the arm holding the sword he was trying to stab me with.

He opens his mouth and tries to spit yellow acid spit in my eyes, only for it to be blocked by a small barrier, then five needle-like mana projectiles strike at my back only to be stopped by [Redistribution].

I disrupt his mana and break his arm, taking his sword. Then I let go and punch him in the face, using more mana to match his speed in defiance of his higher base stats.

When he staggers back I send kinetic energy to the anchor behind him, sending him stumbling back towards me and I punch him again, breaking his nose.

With interest, I take notice of the systems refusal to heal the wounds for now. So it seems like they only heal in the common area, not during the events. That makes sense.

He curses, dodging my next attack and I sense he is boosting his body to increase his Dexterity. So I disrupt his mana, falling back on a tactic I experienced fairly often until I made the Mantle.

His attacks slow, and I punch him again, then kick his crotch, making him... well, bend over, and my knee hits his face, further breaking his nose.

"I remember you said something funny about my parents," I note.

Without giving him the opportunity to talk, I slow his movement with [Redistribution] and then pierce his side with the sword I took from him.

Even then, he somehow manages to concentrate enough to create a blue mana dagger and stab at me at the same time as my shadow moves, trying to grab me and slow me down.

Just a short pulse of disrupting mana ends both of his attempts, and I knee his face again, sending him to the ground where he groans. He is constantly trying to strengthen his body or activate his skill, but I'm disrupting it all with [Resonance].

When I squat over him and grab him by his hair, he tries to say something, but it's hard to understand with his torn lips and broken teeth.

I look at his face, which is a bloody mess. "I do not believe you were able to deal with the Matriarch or Myrra on the 4th floor."

Without letting him say more, I create a small orb filled with kinetic energy over the palm of my hand, and grabbing it with my fingers I push the orb into his mouth.

When I kick him away, I call out one more warning, "I will find you in the common area," and then I let the orb in his mouth explode.

As before, the system doesn't let it happen, and the man just turns into mana particles, being transferred outside.

It seems like the system was prepared for this kind of attack as well and really doesn't want participants to die. Seeing it in the works I guess I can do some hardcore training later.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → BenDover (Hell, 5th)

My points increase to 69, which is nice, but seeing the black wall of the storm, I decide to move away, heading towards the white pillar of light.

I jump behind the tree and shoot a javelin toward a group of hiding people, barely missing the head of a man from Hard difficulty.

His group launches a barrage of attacks at me. Rocks, pale blue mana projectiles, and even some decent fire orbs. At the same time, three more move to my right, trying to encircle me while others keep me busy. I send more kinetic energy to the orb I anchored to my core, making it spin faster around me.

When the first woman with a sword and shield rushes at me, I slings it against her where it crashes into her shield, releasing the golden flames stored inside.

Right after, I rush her, absorbing those flames and reusing them in a thin stream of flame that envelops another man.

Strengthening my body, I grab an ax that the third one swings at me, disrupting the mana coating the blade. My kick breaks through his mana armor, causing him to crash into a comrade who's wielding a shield. I activate the anchor I placed on his chest while kicking him, and golden flames envelop both of them.

Absorbing flames from the man I burned first, I grab him and use his body to block a barrage of attacks and shoot a javelin with an anchor tied to it toward the salvo's origin.

When I appear behind the trio, they notice it, turning around, but I teleport again, appearing near another anchor in front of them. A thin cone of kinetic energy kills the man who launched so many mana projectiles.

The fire mage envelops herself in flames and rushes at me in hand-to-hand combat, only for the flames to die off, as I absorb them. A sword forms in my hand, and I cut her down and transform it into a shield, absorbing a barrage of stone attacks.

I lift my leg and stomp, sending kinetic energy into the ground under me putting a stop to the man's attack.

He turns to run away, but two of my javelins pierce him in quick succession.

Scanning the area with a wave of mana, I relax slightly and force myself to calm down.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Slowly.

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Now repeat.

I have to hold myself back to keep from letting go and embarking on a rampage. I'm enjoying this event way too much.

There are so many people with so many different skills, mostly in groups I have to deal with on my own. I have to do it while conserving my mana and stamina and I still have to get used to my reduced stats. All while avoiding Tess sniping me out of nowhere or Tacita popping out from behind a corner.

"Leaderboard," I say.

1st (168 pts) - Sset

2nd (139 pts) - Noname

3rd (136 pts) - Savant

4th (91 pts) - Grumpy

5th (84 pts) - Brainiac

Of course, that silly blonde still holds the 1st spot. With her [Farsight], she just needs to locate easy or Normal difficulty people to kill with minimal mana and from a large distance. But Brainiac surprises me. I didn't expect him to climb so high up. Lily better be careful too and avoid wasting her mana if she wants to be in a good state at the end.

It makes me happy that Min-Jae made the ranking, currently at the 8th spot, followed by Biscuit in the 9th.

Four hours remain and half of the original number of people remain, just over 1200.

That's also when the barrier, which has been stationary up till now, shrinks for the first time. The barrier seems to be composed of a mass of solid red energy, only allowing light to pass and finally shrinking at the speed of a top runner once exactly 1 hour has passed.

It's eerie to watch it approach at such high speed, especially when looking at the massive area it covers.

At the same time, it starts raining, the raindrops themselves seem to contain a bit of mana. Not enough to cause damage, but enough to make detection class skills more difficult to use as the droplets splash and burst, generating noise in the form of stray mana.

I [Focus] and filter out bits of useless information and the colors around me lose some of their vibrancy as the rain falls, drenching me immediately.

The black wall of clouds expands and the lightning can be heard constantly, its strikes reverberating in the air and the flashes of light serving to light the area.

Indeed, the system is good at setting the mood because a party of 6 men exits the line of trees seeming to have tracked me.

Gareth (Hell, 5th)

Brainiac (Hell, 5th)

Lootenant (Hell, 5th)

Mari (Hell, 5th)

Ghast (Hell, 5th)

Pumpkin (Hell, 5th)

Yeah, this seems about right.

“Noname, are you dumb? You guys are on the 6th floor so why did you place such a heavy [Restriction]?” Brainiac asks the moment they spot me.

“Because I wanted to. Are you guys cheating? How the hell have you gathered so many members of your group so quickly?”

The redheaded guy who seems to be the most talkative member of the group just smiles and shrugs, “Power of friendship!”

“I hope you don’t hold this against us,” Gareth stands in front of the others.

A blue suit of armor surrounds him and he places some sort of mark on the other members of his group.

I make an experimental attempt to disrupt that connection but it holds strong. Either my skill isn’t high enough, I need more mana, or it's just impossible to disrupt.

“Basic formation,” Gareth says simply.

Brainiac immediately moves to the back followed by two others. Meanwhile, Gareth heads in first, two more members by his side. Mari, a woman with a dagger and a sword in her hands, and the man called Pumpkin with mana collecting in his fists, elbows, knees, and shins.

I know I should keep my distance, maybe even fly high into the air and bombard them with ranged attacks. That style of fighting always seemed to be the best option. But as always, I make the decision to stay at medium range, and the reason is simple.

It's more challenging and fun that way.

The first one to attack is Brainiac, and he shoots projectiles that I can't see and can barely sense.

To dodge, I tilt my head, and three sharp projectiles miss me, cutting through the air while the thunder roars as the black wall of clouds moves closer. The projectiles behind me seem to disappear, their presence weakens, and they turn to attack me again, in an attempt to keep me from noticing them.

Acting as if I haven't seen them, I create a dozen projectiles of my own, spinning them around my body, and when Pumpkin attacks me with his mana infused limbs, I dodge to the side, and Brainiac's projectiles disappear before they can injure his teammate.

I launch my projectiles, and the mark Gareth placed on him glows, and a silver hexagonal barriers the size of my fist appears to block them.

The woman with a sword and a dagger senses my burst of kinetic energy and blocks it, and the projectile aimed at her is blocked by a silver barrier.

I infuse my golden flames with disruptive mana, and the darkening area around us lights up, the raindrops evaporating as the flames envelop the man attacking me with his fire. The silver barrier surrounds him, and more and more mana rushes into it in an attempt to fight the disrupting properties of my flames.

Even though I know I just need to keep it up for a bit longer to get through, I stop and dodge a few more invisible and hardly noticeable attacks from Brainiac, and then an even smaller one from behind me.

"Damn, you are the first one to notice that one!" he shouts.

He falters in surprise as I shoot a javelin at him, boosted by kinetic energy that gets barely blocked by Lootenant who's staying close to him. The javelin just changes its direction mid-flight and heads to some kind of weird orb Lootenant dropped all over the place and hits it instead.

Without time to examine the interesting skill more, I boost my body further, dodging Mari, who's clearly surprised by my sudden increase in speed and cut through her dagger and sword with a dagger coated in [Resonance].

The man named Pumpkin launches an attack from behind, but I just shoot a blast of kinetic energy at him that even now gets blocked by a silver barrier, and I disrupt Brainiac's attacks.

In a smooth movement, I dodge Mari's kick, and the dagger in my hand extends and turns into a spear which I burrow into her shoulder, spilling her blood.

Before I can send thermal energy into her through the spear, she disappears, Gareth taking her place, my spear embedded in his shoulder.

A silver light flashes and my barrier blocks it, throwing me away.

I absorb my inertia mid-air, confusing Pumpkin, and his attack misses. Boosting my body, I stab my spear into his leg, but again, he disappears, Gareth taking his place as well. The man in transparent blue armor grabs my spear, and with impressive strength, pulls me closer.

I disrupt a few more attacks from Brainiac, this time needing to use more mana as he seems to be trying to get through my mana jamming, and a mace made of silver mana similar to his barriers forms in Gareth's hand.

It clashes against my dagger, and I send more resonating mana through it, carving the mace apart to the man's surprise, and stabbing the dagger into his chest.

He disappears, and Brainiac appears where he was, and a barrage of extremely quick attacks clashes against me, cutting into my flesh twice before I disrupt them.

Brainiac is smiling, but I do not attack him. Instead, I use the anchor I placed on the dagger I left in Gareth's chest and appear in front of the man who, like me, has made it into Beyond. His wounds have already healed, and his armor strengthens itself even further.

I open my mouth, and a tricolored orb just turning bright crashes into him, and then I teleport away despite his attempts to stop it.

Appearing in the air, I look down at the ground, expecting the explosion. Instead of that, a silver barrier surrounds my orb, and with a grunt from Gareth, it disappears, the explosion of white light, shockwave, heatwave, and following implosion tearing the forest nearby apart.

No words pass between them, but they seem to be communicating. And this time, I really regret this limitation of not being able to restore my mana. I want to fight. I want to throw my all against them.

But I can't, I have placed a limitation upon myself and there are still four hours remaining. There is Tess, there is Lily, and Tacita, and most importantly, there is Savant.

I check my reserves and close to 20% of my body mana seems to be missing already.

My frustration increases even more when the man that was just standing next to Brainiac shoots a lightning spear at me, and I've sensed him charging it the whole time. He even placed a mark on me that seems to serve as a beacon for the powerful charged attack made of white lightning. Something I let happen out of curiosity.

Instead of dodging or using a black orb to absorb it, I just cover the back of my hand in a barrier of disrupting mana, and with a dismissive gesture, I disrupt the attack.

"Fucking monster! You're under a restriction, so act like it!" Brainiac shouts at me.

"Behind you," I call back at him.

"As if I would fall for that..." in the middle of the sentence, he stops and throws dozens of slashing projectiles into the area.

No matter that Tacita dodges them all, a calm expression on her face the entire time. She dodges and parries attacks thrown at her. Lightning and Lootenant's weird orbs either disrupted or flicked away.

When a silver barrier surrounds Brainiac, a wild smile appears on her lips, and her arm moves in a blur. She attacks dozens of times, the mana-coated dagger in her hand tearing through the barrier and turning Brainiac into particles of mana with one last slash that would have separated his body from his head.

One of the reasons why I'm up here is because I noticed her sneaking closer.

The rain continues to fall down, making her messy brown hair wet and stick to her face. Wordlessly, she catches my gaze, and she waves at me with squinted eyes and a smile.

The message is simple.

You are not safe there.

Tacita (Hell, 4th)

Chapter 338: Natural enemy

Out of every member of Hell difficult or person that got into Beyond, there is one I respect more than any other. You wouldn't be wrong to say that's because of the degree of the advantage they would hold if we fought.

I don't know Savant's skills yet, but it's not him. It isn't even Lily despite the fact that she has the most powerful damage oriented skill I've seen so far. It's not even Tess with her extremely long-range and powerful attacks. And it's not Gareth with his barriers and weird form of teleportation.

No, the person that worries me more than any of them is Tacita.

Even now, I'm not sure if I noticed her because she wanted me to, she's just that good at hiding her presence. And her speed does tell me one thing. Tacita is similar to me, a person who also puts most of their stats into a single attribute, and her favored stat is Dexterity.

I'm Mana-oriented and because of what I do, my reactions will never be as quick as someone who goes full into body strengthening. I can reinforce my body with mana, I can boost my strength, and make myself faster with kinetic energy.

But someone like her will always be my natural enemy. The main reason being that, in close quarters, unless I was already reinforcing my body as much as possible, I wouldn't be able to react if she decided to kill me.

It's a weakness, and I already have multiple plans for dealing with it. But for now, there are going to be situations in which I have no chance against Tacita.

I watch as she lashes out at the lightning mage that once stood next to Brainiac and jumps back and to the side, her feet moving nimbly, as she dances around his attacks. Leaping, bobbing, and weaving as drops of rain cling to her skin..

Mari and Pumpkin try to rush her while Gareth and Lootenant keep an eye on me.

As I do that I sow the ground with a barrage of normal mana projectiles, tying anchors to three of them. The first orb explodes through an anchor I managed to place between Tacita and the lightning mage, who, unlike the stabby brunette, dies.

Gareth creates a barrier around the rest of the group, but, being closest to the explosion, the lightning mage's barrier is unable to resist the implosion and breaks. Tacita, meanwhile, just opts to outrun the explosion.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Ghast (Hell, 5th)

Tacita doesn't seem to like that and grabs a stone from the ground, her arm a blur as she throws it at me. The stone crashes against my barrier with a surprising amount of force, and she changes her target to Lootenant, the raindrops seeming to burst outward as she moves at incredible speed.

Mari and Pumpkin actually manage to stand in her way for a moment, keeping pace with her. though I do notice that their bodies seem to be radiating a silver aura, which flares up to create barriers and heal their wounds as needed.

Gareth blocks my second tri-colored orb, once again surrounding it with a silver barrier before sending it to the same spot as before. I wonder if he placed some sort of mark there.

Using the third anchor, I appear on the ground near Gareth, kinetic energy exploding from me, only to be absorbed by his barriers. I send disrupting mana at him right after followed by a blast of golden flames, and yet he reforms his barriers each time, successfully blocking the attacks.

I sidestep a swing of his mace, causing it to crash into the ground and send chunks of muddy earth into the air.

Thunder roars in our ears, and the wind grows stronger as the wall of black clouds moves closer and closer, blotting out all other sounds. The rain also grows in intensity, further obscuring my mana sight with the mana-filled droplets.

Gareth stops holding back, and his blue armor turns silver, and a silver crown appears floating over his head. The hexagonal segments of his barrier orbit his form, and his mace shines brighter as he charges me. Each of his swings bears disrupting properties, and the marks he placed on his party shine brighter, surrounding them in that same silver light.

Twelve sections of his hexagonal barrier move around him, forming larger ones to block my flames or splitting into a multitude of smaller ones to address heavy barrages. Though sometimes they stick to his armor, strengthening some parts further.

The man negates most of my attacks, to my great annoyance, and I feel my frustration rise more and more, and my plan to limit my mana expenditure disappears from my head.

Once Mari joins him, blades made of oscillating mana in hand, I have had enough. A black orb forms in front of my chest, and all of their eyes turn towards it, surprised by the unnerving feeling.

A blast of kinetic energy from behind Gareth pushes him towards it, and silver and black mana clash.

Following the clash, the black orb of mana manages to absorb a few sections of his silver barrier. Gareth moves to block it, though his weapon and crown flicker as the orb sucks in more and more.

When he finally lets go of his weapon and moves back, pieces of his armor are missing, eaten away by black mana, and half of the hexagonal barrier is gone.

Mari is also dead, an anchor placed near her head having reduced her into particles of mana.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Mari (Hell, 5th)

With the mana in my body reduced even more, I float into the air and fire one last projectile at Lootenant.

Gareth finally manages to retake control of his abilities and blocks my attacks by surrounding the man with a barrier, but at the same time, Tacita passes by Lootenant's traps, activating a few along the way, while avoiding their effects and finishing the man.

Then, like me, she takes the opportunity to disappear into the forest as the gradually approaching storm ravages the area.

The first bolt of lightning lands next to us, it evaporates a good chunk of a car-sized rock nearby, causing it to crumble into dust, leaving a small crater in the ground. The wind blows into me, leaving me feeling like I got hit by a truck, and I decide I do not want to get into that storm.

Using more and more mana, I push my body through the air, leaving the thunder and lightning behind me. I remain high in the air, placing multiple anchors along the ground.

When Gareth and the rest of his group exit the storm, a thermal explosion envelops them, and a rain of compressed mana javelins rains across the ground. When the flames disappear, pushed away by a wave of silver mana, Gareth and the last member of his group stand there free of damage, his barrier having tanked a bolt of lightning from the storm, the ground exploding around them, and the mud and rocks that erupted into the air.

Tsk.

Unwilling to waste more of my mana on a tanky target, I boost myself further, floating away when I catch a familiar mana signature behind me. Looking back, I see a figure floating just on the edge of the storm. And that figure's head bears a crown made of lightning, brighter and twice as big as before.

The woman's blonde hair floats around her, shining in a beautiful golden color.

I form a barrier to block a bolt of white lightning that Tess redirected from the storm, and while I don't take any damage it does manage to push me further away.

"Are you only hunting me?" I shout at her.

There is no way she can hear it through all the thunder, but she seems to understand and smirks.

Text reading Sset (Hell, 4th) floats above her head, along with the [Restriction] she's placed herself.

The tale has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

High in the air on the edge of the storm, Tess and I face each other, and I feel my decision from before crumble and disappear. The hold I've kept on my mana weakens and it floods into my body for the first time since the start of the event.

Gareth far beneath us, Tacita sneaking around, Savant waiting somewhere nearby. All of these concerns disappear, pushed far, into the back of my mind.

I [Focus], and [Regalia] surrounds my body, quickly infused with [Resonance]. A shockwave explodes around me, pushing the droplets away, and I charge into the storm.

Tess moves her hand, and two white lightning bolts created within the storm change their course and crash into my body.

I've already seen them striking multiple times and I know what to do. My armor tanks most of the damage and resonating mana tears apart the rest while I absorb the generated heat, collecting it inside my body.

Seeing what I'm doing, Tess assaults me with a pulse of [Psychokinesis], slowing me down while pushing Tess further away, so that she can maintain her advantage.

Dodging to the side, I avoid another bolt of lightning, a few mana arrows filled with thermal energy shine as they pass through the storm, evaporating rain in the process.

Tess lowers her altitude, tearing a few of the smaller trees and rocks from the ground with her skill before throwing them at me.

I dodge through the air, taking a few more lightning strikes and constantly firing projectiles at her, forcing her to reposition in an attempt to distract her.

The crown over her head shines brightly, its mana forming lightning projectiles that wait at her side, these ones formed of the usual red and white lightning. Tess launches them at me, making them move much quicker than the ones from the storm, and forcing them to change direction mid-air.

Placing an anchor further ahead, I teleport past them repeating the process a few times, and reach Tess.

The crown over her head disappears, turning into lightning armor that surrounds her body, and clashes with my [Regalia].

Each of our clashes causes a small shockwave, creating a pulsating sphere devoid of the ever present rain as the escaping energy forces the raindrops away.

I bombard her with mana projectiles at close range, boosted by kinetic energy, and it's impossible for her to block them all, so she tanks most of them, responding in kind with the lightning that constantly flickers around her.

A few lightning bolts get pulled from the storm, hitting her body and strengthening her armor as I pressure her.

I teleport, but the moment I appear, a lightning projectile crashes into my armored forearm, so I try again, only to get the same result. Clearly, Tess is reading and predicting my placement of the anchors.

Finally having generated enough, my armor changes, my golden thermal energy filling it, heat radiating from me. Boosted by kinetic energy, I advance on Tess, the raw power of my flight better at this level, and after a short clash, I grab her arm.

Tess, having expected that, pulls three white lightning bolts toward us, damaging my armor and further strengthening hers.

Her lightning and my thermal energy rage against each other. The lightning piercing through the armor damages me, but my temporarily rare passive heals my wounds with the sheer amount of heat I've surrounded myself with.

My heart beats harder and harder as I barely hold on, avoiding her close range lightning projectiles and enduring the bolts she calls down from the storm. But I hold, and looking at Tess, I can't help but smile as well.

With a strong pulse, more energy collects inside of me as I'm ready to push through, but then Tess slashes with her free arm. Not against me, but against her own hand. She cuts it off, leaving me holding the hand she's infused with all of her lightning.

Pushing further away from me, much less Primordial lightning surrounding her, she calls, "I learned it from you!"

Her severed hand shines even brighter in my hand, and when I let go, it moves and grabs me instead, creeping me out even more than the astounding amount of lightning collected within.

It acts like a lightning rod, leaving me feeling like the storm has been concentrated on me, and me alone, as I find a dozen lightning bolts heading in my direction.

My eyes activate for a split second, and I disrupt the hand's mana, quickly deactivating the eyes afterward. I tear the hand apart with [Resonance] and watch as all the white lightning passes by, reverberating the air.

When I look around, Tess is gone.

You silly blonde. What are you, a gray lizard? Leaving your limbs behind like that.

Checking, I find that I've managed to spend ten to twenty percent of the mana left in my body.

Forcing it back under my control, I fly out of the storm.

Three hours remain, and the rain stops as if it's been cut off. The air grows colder, the water from the rain starts freezing over, and heavy snow starts to fall, quickly covering the trees and the ground.

Walking through another post-apocalyptic city, I listen to the snow compressing under my feet, tracing the footsteps in front of me.

The barrier shrinks once more, and even fewer people remain.

980 / 2357

A few of the slots on the leaderboard have changed as well:

1st (193 pts) - Sset

2nd (172 pts) - Noname

3rd (169 pts) - Savant

4th (168 pts) - Tacita

5th (124 pts) - Grumpy

Sensing a trap ahead, I avoid it and move to a rooftop where I disrupt a few mana sensing triggers and find a group of ten people, most of them seem to be from Hard difficulty. One of them holds an epic weapon, an ax made of ethercrystal. A transparent white crystal capable of absorbing mana.

A few well-placed anchors go unnoticed and half of them die before they are able to defend themselves. They activate defensive shields but a wave of disrupting mana crashes against them, negating the shields before a highly compressed barrage of javelins finishes the job, destroying part of the roof and their fortifications.

I take a short moment to check the leaderboard and savor the feeling of seeing myself in the first place. It's hard to find large groups of people from higher difficulties.

Amid the falling snow, I examine the rare and uncommon items that were in their possession, collecting a defensive amulet with a single use of a spherical barrier remaining, and pick up the epic ax.

Ethercrystal War Axe (Epic): Crafted from Ethercrystal, this war ax absorbs part of any mana it touches. Each attack channels the absorbed mana to momentarily increase the user's physical strength.

I test the feel of the ax in my hand, swinging it a few times to get used to the heft. I used to have a similar sword and the ax could help me conserve some of the mana I would otherwise be using to strengthen my body.

While on watch, I check the notifications.

Sset (Hell, 4th) → TheStrongestOne (Hell, 5th)

Damn, Tess. Did group 4 do anything to piss you off? Did I do anything to you?

And a few more.

Savant (Hell, 4th) → Gareth (Hell, 5th)

Savant (Hell, 4th) → Pumpkin (Hell, 5th)

Detecting something that feels like tunnels under the ground, I place an anchor, teleporting below while keeping my eyes on the notifications.

FoodFood (Hell, 6th) → Two (Normal, 5th)

FoodFood (Hell, 6th) → One (Normal, 5th)

FoodFood (Hell, 6th) → Sami (Easy, 6th)

FoodFood (Hell, 6th) → Eve (Normal, 5th)

FoodFood (Hell, 6th) → Overlord (Easy, 5th)

FoodFood (Hell, 6th) → Snowman (Easy, 4th)

...

And the notifications continue, proclaiming the names of almost two dozen participants who've been defeated.

Biscuit, what the heck did you even do? Did they anger you? It might be awkward back in the common area if you scare them too much.

Anyway, clearly the best doggo of the tournament floor, no, the best doggo of the 1st event and Survival Domain!

I start heading towards an area containing multiple presences, I trigger a few alarms on purpose, and when I exit the tunnel and enter a big underground area a dozen people are there, weapons out and mana ready.

Quickly I locate two epic items and two people from Hell difficulty, respectively from group 8, TheGuild.

AnotherOneHere (Hell, 5th)

Swordmaster (Hell, 5th)

In the shadowy darkness of the tunnels, golden thermal energy surrounds me and I take a step towards them.

Chapter 339: 6 / 2357

I have been thinking lately, and my build is a big mess, to say it gently. Sure, I have a lot of skills, but no matter how hard I try to master them all, it's impossible, and not often does each of the skills shine. They are all pretty situational and often countered by stronger or more skilled opponents.

Sure, I'm extremely versatile, and I can switch up the way I fight, but at least to me, it feels lacking. Currently, I would say I'm at my strongest against multitudes of weaker opponents. The amount of mana and multiple skills I can use are good for bombardment and large-scale damage.

When it comes to fighting a single, strong opponent, they can almost always pull off some kind of counter, forcing me to try to either surprise my opponent or overwhelm them with the sheer amount of bullshit I can throw at them.

It's not bad, not really. I did it all with the future in mind. I'm building a strong base to build upon, picking my own unique way. But until then, it will be a pain in the ass at times.

I dodge a slash from a Hell difficulty man called Swordmaster, and his next attack slips across my armor while he blocks my swing.

He jumps back a few times, and AnotherOneHere does something that changes gravity; causing it to pull me up toward the ceiling, rather than the ground.

Surrounding myself with a barrier made of [Regalia], I tank a barrage of ranged attacks launched by people from Hard and Normal difficulty, as I take a moment to examine the skill disrupting my relative gravity before disrupting it.

I fire off three projectiles in quick succession, each tied to an anchor, and teleport to one as they land.

My ax burrows into the leg of a man who attacked me with a bothersome form of shadow magic. Taking care not to kill him, I absorb some of his mana through the ax, allowing the weapon to strengthen me.

Before his gravity skill can slow me down again, I disrupt it and burrow the ax into another man. Then I teleport again leaving another thermal orb in my place. This time it doesn't manage to explode before being covered by a shield of rock emerging from the floor.

Making distance between us, I send a small tri-colored orb through the anchor, allowing it to explode within the room, the explosion strengthened by its confinement. Dust and rocks fall from the ceiling, shaking the walls and pieces crumble down while the men and women shout.

Four more people from Hard and Normal die, leaving 7 people.

I set up another barrier, deflecting a barrage of attacks that move much quicker thanks to a liberal application of gravity magic by AnotherOneHere.

When I teleport back inside the room, Swordmaster is already there, with a strange form of mana surrounding an epic sword that he holds with the confidence of an expert.

It pierces through my armor and stops only after I add [Resonance] to the mix. His movement accelerates, the same weird mana moves to his feet as he kicks at me, causing the same kind of damage to my armor.

He dodges a projectile I send his way, quickening his movements even more before burrowing his knee into my chest plate and then jumps back, tilting his head to avoid a cone of kinetic energy.

Swordmaster's sword cuts through my flames, and even without armor, his body resists the heat as he attacks me.

When I teleport, he locates me surprisingly quickly, getting used to my style.

I feel a pull on my body, as he changes gravity once more in an attempt to slow me down and he seizes the opportunity, as his sword shines even brighter as he slashes towards my neck.

My [Redistribution] at full power stops him for a moment. The pulse of disrupting mana makes him stagger in surprise as his enhancements disappear, and a sudden blast of kinetic energy tears a large chunk out of his arm. Yet the man still manages to avoid the worst of it.

Before I can follow up, the rock I'm standing on turns into mud, imprisoning my feet, as a golem-like creature as tall as me climbs up from the ground, reaching toward me.

When the golem grabs my armor, I find myself unable to teleport, the last anchor disrupted. I'm honestly surprised it took them so long to get around to that.

More mana radiates from my body, the armor around me expanding and surrounding me leaving me twice my normal height and towering over the golem.

With a single kick, I send the golem flying toward its creator, before returning to my normal size and teleporting to an anchor I left on the golem. A few teleports and kinetic blasts later, only two men from Hell difficulty remain, as my body is strengthened by the effect of the ax.

"Noname, you're on the 6th floor, right?" AnotherOneHere asks as I face the remaining duo.

Seeing no reason to be rude, I nod; the man has been rather polite in the Community.

Swordmaster, with his sword on his shoulder, gives me a look before shrugging and nodding towards his group member, "We always knew group 4 wasn't exactly normal."

"It's still disappointing to see such a difference between people from Hell." Finishing his preparations, AnotherOneHere raises his hands and claps.

The sides of the room I'm standing in tear apart, huge pieces of rock heading towards me in an attempt to crush me between them.

They expect me to teleport, so I create an anchor and activate it halfway. Then, instead of teleporting, I send a tricolored orb that I've been forming in my mouth. It explodes the moment Swordmaster reaches the anchor.

I, meanwhile, create a barrier around myself, mitigating any damage from the rocks and the explosion that takes out Swordmaster. The poor guy was too incompatible with my fighting style and my skills made countering him simple enough.

AnotherOneHere uses his gravity skill, slightly compressing a portion of the explosion and redirecting it. Wounded and exhausted he rests against the wall, breathing heavily.

When my axe cuts into his leg, he looks up at me, "That's cold as fuck," he breathes out as the axe starts absorbing his mana to strengthen my body.

"There are a few more people not that far over us. I will go after them right away, so I need to save a bit of mana," I respond.

He laughs unbelievably and shakes his head, "Well, good luck then."

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

I nod, "Thank you."

A few moments later, he turns into particles when the system judges that he's started to die.

Only then do I allow myself to crack my mask and breathe out in a long, shaky breath. Then I concentrate and examine a few of the smaller wounds Swordmaster managed to inflict that are still healing at a slower rate than they should. These guys did have quite a few decent skills; they weren't Hell difficulty for nothing.

I lift Swordmaster's sword from the ground. An epic item with the effect of making wounds slower to heal the more mana is used to power it while increasing its cutting force as well.

I decide to keep it along with my ax and proceed to look for the second epic item. It is a small ring that served as a consumable type of item, bearing three activations that would heal its bearer. All uses were probably gone even before the fight.

In the future, I will have to get cooking with Lily and create my own version of the mana stone from Savant proves useless.

When two hours remain, the weather changes again. The snow disappears, and earthquakes ravage the area while the barrier shrinks again, evaporating anything that touches it.

Moving to the middle of the Survival Domain, I fight more people.

I encounter a group from Easy difficulty that has somehow managed to survive until now, though they quickly surrender.

Another is a group from Normal difficulty that tries to fight back only to be flabbergasted even as I use the slightest amount of the mana generated by my body. Their attacks can't even reach me, and most of the time, just the strength of my body boosted by the ax's effect is enough to do the job.

People from Hard are a bit more difficult to deal with and always move in bigger groups, sometimes they even travel with one or two remaining members of Hell difficulty. Fights against them are always enjoyable. Their skills are better, their stats higher, and their traits are more interesting. I examine them and take note of the way they make use of their skills, but in the end, even they find themselves defeated with a blend of skills that always surprise them.

I, like a few others, have been through Beyond trials. Even if others could've gone, they have decided to not use the upgrade token that way or failed to fulfill the other requirements. So there's as much difference between me and a person from Hard difficulty, as there is between me and most other people from Hell.

I still haven't touched my Mana Reservoir so it contains three times the mana produced by my body, so I tap it to increase my speed towards the middle of the domain.

One hour remains, and the barrier is slowly and surely shrinking from the size of a large city to who knows what ending point.

In the distance, I see the lightning flicker and the terrifying sound of Tess's projectiles and then a new notification.

Tacita (Hell, 4th) → Sset (Hell, 4th)

I feel a disturbing gray mana move to my right, an explosion of it, and another notification.

Savant (Hell, 4th) → Grumpy (Hell, 5th)

Savant (Hell, 4th) → FoodFood (Hell, 6th)

That already makes me the last remaining survivor from group 4 other than Sophie, who is God knows where. I can only feel the ghost of her presence in the web of mana constructs she's left behind.

6 / 2357

We have a much smaller leaderboard now.

1st (431 pts) - Noname

2nd (375 pts) - Savant

3rd (333 pts) - Tacita

4th (256 pts) - Soph

5th (167 pts) - Bard

6th (1 pts) - Adam

A man with black hair tied into a ponytail and green eyes jumps up and lands on the roof opposite mine. He's wearing a simple-looking glove over his right hand that radiates an extraordinary amount of strength, even when not in use.

"I guess you found the arcane item?" I ask him.

"Yes, I had hoped to find it earlier and get more points, but even so, the timing is fitting. It uses a lot of mana, so you would probably like it better, though," he answers.

Interrupting our conversation, a man stumbles to the top of the roof.

Bard (Hell, 5th)

He's missing an arm and he does something to his body to keep himself from bleeding out. Just looking at his state, I guess he won't be able to last much longer.

Looking at me and Savant he staggers and stops. Then he sighs, "Fucking corgi, tore my arm off. He was so goddamn cute..."

Before he can say more, Tacita appears behind his back at a speed unique to her, epic dagger in her hand slashing down and turning the man into particles. Tacita then stands there and sweeps her messy brown hair from her eyes. Her lively eyes meet mine and Savant's.

Tacita (Hell, 4th) → Bard (Hell, 5th)

Other than Sophie, one last man remains. The one with a single point. A member of Gareth's group. He walks up the stairs to the top of the building and reaches the roof after opening the creaking iron door.

Adam (Hell, 5th)

The blonde sixty year old looking man with long wavy hair is in a pristine state, wearing something akin to a suit. He holds no weapon and there isn't a single mark on his body. Either he's avoided fighting or he's just been hiding up until now. But it's clear that he's barely used any stamina or mana, unlike the rest of us.

The man in the suit turns to Savant, "Hey youngster, wanna get rid of that glove and make things fair?"

"No."

"Understandable."

A silence ensues and all of us stand there nearly feeling awkward, no one wanting to be the first to face the arcane item.

"Hey, really, let's get rid of that..." I try to say as well.

"No."

Damn it, "Do you not want to fight properly? Using an arcane item is cheap as fuck."

“I will fight one versus one during the duels. I know you would gladly use the glove as well.”

Well, he is not wrong. Unlike him, I would’ve probably used it a minute ago.

“So why don’t you attack?” I ask him.

“Your friend is still sneaking around. She keeps trying to get into my mind and the glove requires a lot of concentration.”

This time the man in the suit asks, sensing an opportunity “So you can't defend against her and use the glove at the same time?”

“There is only one way for you to find out.” Then his expression changes and his mana flows into the glove, “Found you,” he says simply and moves his hand as if swatting away a fly.

The part of the city he gestured towards explodes in a single yet impressive show of telekinesis, destroying multiple buildings and a big part of the street.

Savant (Hell, 4th) → Soph (Hell, 5th)

The moment Sophie dies, the web and constructs that she’s been planting all over the place all head for Savant, in a last act of revenge.

Tacita disappears.

A purple circle forms behind Adam's back.

And I, for the first time, reach into my mana reservoir, as all that mana floods my body. There is no more hesitation, no more conserving mana, and with an ax and a sword in my hands, black mana seeps into my body and my eyes activate.

Less than thirty minutes remain, but I don't think I will be able to last more than a minute before the system judges I'm dead.

Should be enough.

Chapter 340: It's MY mana

With my eyes activated and strengthening and pummeling my body, I jump from building to building, prepared for Tacita to attack me.

Even then, Savant doesn't use the arcane glove and stands there, his mana surrounding his body as he fights the aftereffects of Sophie's skill.

Two tri-colored orbs shoot at him, one of them disappearing the moment it enters his reach, the other one redirected at Adam. The man in the suit repositions before the orb explodes, sending a shockwave and heat into the area. Purple mana flickers around Adam's body as he does so.

Keeping an eye on Savant, I try to find out what happened to the second orb, but it's gone.

Where did it go? I can't sense anything.

Like a flash, Tacita appears near Savant, a dagger in her hand slashing down only for her to freeze on the spot as he squeezes his hand into a fist, using the arcane weapon.

Unbothered, Tacita's presence becomes even fainter, and she disappears from the spot where she stood. A big chunk of the building implodes into a small spot as Savant fully closes his gloved hand into a fist.

Purple mana erupts from Adam, moving like water and crashing against Savant in huge waves. The air flickers under its influence, and the pressure of his weird skill grinds the building around Savant to dust.

Without even using his weapon, Savant does something, and even though the attack continues, it doesn't touch him at all. Then he moves his hand, and all the anchors I've placed disappear.

With my mana around me like a brilliant flame, I endure it all, floating in the same spot in the space. My eyes are bleeding as I read his movements and tactics. My domain expands even further, and Savant's domain pushes against mine, a gentle orange light radiating from him.

Within my domain, my mana becomes easier to manipulate, and within his, mana radiation slowly ramps up, attempting to crush me.

I know that skill. It's hard to forget. The skill that Champion Tristan, controlled by mind mage Emperor, used to wipe out his world.

[Dawn]

In my domain, dozens of mana projectiles form a constant barrage to harry the man. Weaker ones disappear within his domain, and the stronger ones disappear an arm's reach in front of him because of his other skill.

Tacita moves to attack him again, but Savant, while defending against me, sends a pulse of telekinesis from the glove. The brown-haired woman tilts her body, taking damage and spinning around before lowering her posture to avoid another attack. Her body moves even quicker than before.

Before he can attack her, I push against him with my domain, [Redistribution] and [Resonance] at full power crash against his body, trying to stop his movement and disrupt his mana as I read its flow.

But all of it is pointless in attempting to match the arcane item. His hand moves and a big chunk of his mana disappears with it.

The air reverberates, and I layer barriers in front of me when a huge area surrounding him explodes, all the buildings blown away as if by a powerful wind. Another pulse sends all dust away, revealing Savant standing on an untouched building and the tons of debris floating around him.

Tacita is there already, her knife embedded in his side and pointed at his heart, yet she is unable to push deeper, her movement arrested in the same way as the debris, at a high cost to Savant's mana.

He looks at her, the arcane weapon glowing. "How?" he asks almost curiously.

I bet if Tacita could move, she would just shrug.

Then he squeezes his fist and she disappears, turning into particles, unable to escape this time. Her dagger glows once more before that, damaging her target further, making him stagger and spit out some blood.

Immediately after, even wounded, Savant moves, lifting his hand with the glove in front of him. A javelin made of black mana stops an arm reach in front of him.

He tries to absorb it like he did with the attacks from before, but it doesn't work. It did cost me a lot of focus and damage to my body to make that javelin in my current restricted state, so what will he do now?

With curiosity, I watch as he looks at the javelin and then at me.

Then a gray mana I know so well emerges from somewhere within him to war against the javelin.

When black mana and [Disintegration] meet, they clash for a short moment, and then [Disintegration] destroys part of the black mana javelin before the skill weakens enough for the remaining black mana to absorb it.

Seeing that, Savant tries to absorb what remains but is unsuccessful.

Having a good idea at this point what his skills are, I put my body and mana into overdrive. My attacks strike him once more, a barrage of thermal, kinetic energy, or pure mana constantly assaulting him and destroying the building he stands on. Adding to the mix, orbs filled with disrupting mana pop near him, pressuring him to keep up his domain and waste his mana.

Adam and his wave-like purple mana shoot into the area, crashing over it and pressuring Savant even more. And the entire time, I keep collecting mana inside my body.

This isn't all, I know.

Savant uses another chunk of his mana, and the glove on his hand glows, destroying more buildings and throwing the debris at Adam. The circle behind his back changes, and the purple mana surrounds him, defending against that all. Adam seems to be confident and he still has big reserves, so he will last longer than Savant, I'm sure of that.

That's when one of my small black orbs crashes into his purple barrier, touching it and immediately starting to absorb it. Unable to stop it his defenses are sucked away, the barrier crumples, and the debris compresses on him.

Another orb explodes inside of his barrier.

Noname (Hell, 4th) → Adam (Hell, 5th)

2 / 2357

The rooftop explodes under my feet as I use my strengthened body and a push of kinetic energy to fly in a circle, rows of buildings crashing behind me caused by the arcane weapon Savant wields.

When he stops his attack, I examine my body.

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That's not good at all. But it could be worse, I guess. Looking at it, the system will consider me dead in ten to thirty seconds, maybe?

"Not enough mana for the glove?" I call to Savant.

"It's more fitting for obstinate people like you. It uses quite a bit." He sweeps some hair from his face, and his domain skill shrinks even more.

He is not capable of resisting my [Mana Domain]

Another of my compressed javelins crashes against him, only to disappear to god knows where. A skill similar to the one the last king had on the 3rd Floor.

Increasing pressure with my domain, I place anchors closer to him to distract him and charge ahead, squeezing the ax and sword in my hands.

When I teleport, he moves his hand and activates the glove once more, all three of my anchors are damaged by telekinesis. But I don't use any of them and just reappear on the same spot.

When he lifts his arm towards me, I'm already in front of him, and telekinesis crashes against my crossed weapons, as I launch a few projectiles at him.

As the epic weapons crumple and crack, I let go and teleport to one of the projectiles I had tied an anchor to.

Losing control over the black mana, I force it out of my body into the shape of a black dagger, and my vision blurs out as my eyes finally deactivate, unable to keep them up.

Sounds come rushing in as my mind loses hold over [Focus], and with a last stumble, I stab the dagger into the forearm wearing the glove.

His absorption skill activates, trying to get rid of the black mana or send his mana to the glove, but the black dagger absorbs it all and starts sucking in more.

Decisively, mana takes shape in the palm of his other hand, and he cuts off his arm at the elbow. An orange light shines around him, and he is blown away instead of getting killed by the kinetic energy I was able to collect.

Once he's further away, he stops, blood dripping from his arm. Looking at him, I reach down and take the glove off his severed arm and put it on my hand.

The moment I do so, I feel something eating at my hand, and I quickly identify the skill.

I intentionally destabilize kinetic energy inside of my body, blowing off my hand with the glove on.

I watch as [Disintegration] eats up my hand inside of the glove, and I laugh shortly. "Well, that was kind of stupid of me. But I really wanted to try that glove."

When I turn to him, he stands there wordlessly, his [Dawn] defending him against my attacks. His eyes calm and sharp, calculating, observing my every movement, and that annoying skill of his flickers in the air, ready to drive me back.

I glance at the black dagger that's already turned into a black orb, floating there, trying to absorb any mana that comes close, eating at both of our domains. I don't think I can play it safely and try to pressure him from a distance until he is out of mana. He will probably be able to last that long.

Ten seconds at most remain, and my body will crumble. I would die, but the system won't let me; instead, it will send me away. So, let's be stupid and check how far the 4th-floor me could be pushed before dying.

All the mana I was releasing up until now gets pulled towards me like into a vortex, and [Focus] activates once more, forcing my trait to activate as well.

One of my eyes loses its sight, and the other one is blurry, and I feel more wounds opening across my body. Then I reach out to all my remaining mana, all around me and in my domain, to pull it...

I stop.

"You poisoned my mana."

"So you have noticed. However, it doesn't matter, you are done anyway. You won't be able to control your mana anymore."

Me? Done?

Because you decided that?

It's MY mana.

POV Tess Hansen

As always, when pushed to the corner, Nathaniel becomes the most dangerous. At the point where there is only a sliver of his life remaining, he throws all his failsafes away and becomes like a dangerous animal.

He was always like this. Even when he got ganged up on by a group of boys who called him the brother of a murderer, he fought back. And then, when they pushed him to the point of losing, pummeled, and bleeding, he started biting, scratching, and fighting dirty.

Just a few fights like that were enough. Even if he lost, the boys just became too scared, and decided that it wasn't worth the attempt anymore. That, and the fact that Nat hunted them when they were alone, beating them to the point where they were always moving in groups.

Even now, he has the same expression as we watch him on a giant screen in the common area. The screen that allows people who left the Survival Domain to watch what's happening inside.

Nathaniel says, "You have poisoned my mana," and Savant answers.

Even knowing that the poisoned mana, his mana, continues to rush back into his body, his other eye losing sight, and wounds savaging his body.

When he charges this time, the leg he uses to leap breaks in a dozen spots, turning into a floppy sack of shattered bone made of skin.

He moves quicker than even Tacita did, destroying his body in the process. Yet, somehow, he's still capable enough to use that black mana of his to pull this off without immediately killing himself.

We can't die during the tournament, but being able to push yourself to the point where you know you will die requires a special kind of mind.

When he crashes into Savant, the man, surprised, has time only to tilt his body and avoid most of the attack. Both of them roll on the ground, and in Nat's arm, a nail made of black mana forms; he stabs it into the arm the Savant uses to cover his eye.

The nail absorbs Savant's attempt to push Nathaniel away, and Nathaniel smashes his head down, breaking Savant's nose, and blood spills.

Savant dodges another attack, his arm still somehow coated in pale blue mana; he stabs into Nathaniel's side.

In exchange, Nathaniel stabs the exposed jagged bone that's left of his exploded hand and forearm into Savant's neck. He has a cold expression on his face as he does so.

The entire time their domains clash, Nathaniel's easily overpowering Savant's, as his mana radiates from his body, forcing the other man to shrink his domain more and more until it's barely covering his body. And anything outside of it is destroyed immediately.

Heat, vibrations, and mana itself move around, trying to tear Savant apart, only stopped by the gentle orange light surrounding him. But it's clear he won't last much longer.

Unfortunately, neither will Nathaniel.

Savant observes him calmly, and when Nathaniel attacks him, he blocks the strike and stabs Nathaniel again.

Ignoring that precise mortal wound another black nail forms in Nathaniel's hand, and with a swing, he stabs it down towards Savant's eyes. In the middle of that movement, his body turns into shiny particles, and he disappears.

Silence fills the common area, no one says anything, and everyone is staring at the screen.

While holding his palm on his strongly bleeding neck, Savant stands up and looks at the spot where Nat disappeared. For a short moment, he stares there, the meaning of that look is hard to decipher.

The winner of the first event has been decided.

The air next to our group wavers, and Nat appears, outside of the Survival Domain. He is fully healed, his clothes fixed as well, and his mana restored to the levels before the event started.

Nathaniel blinks a few times, looking around with wild eyes, ready to attack. Mana radiates off him in waves that wash over the common area, causing some people from lower difficulties to throw up and others to faint.

I watch him, curious what expression he intends to put on, but his expression just returns to his usual neutral face and his mana disappears as if it never existed, barely a whisper.

"I will get the fucker during the duels," he declares simply.

Even with his hard-to-read face, I can tell how dissatisfied he is.

Then he turns around, passing by the groups of people and heading towards our house. Dozens of people flee from his path, some looking at him like some kind of demon.