

Tutorial 341

Chapter 341: Better than a stick

Congratulations, you have placed 2nd in the 1st event - Survival Domain and you have also reached 1st place in points collected - 441 pts.

You can exchange your points for shards. 1 point = 5 shards.

The reward for placing 2nd overall is 3 thousand shards.

You may, either, receive the shards and choose one of three rewards, or forfeit them to choose from a selection of higher quality rewards.

I close my eyes and lean back in the massive armchair I've claimed for myself and moved to the terrace, offering a decent-ish view of the common area and the houses on the grassy hills surrounding it.

So 2nd place it is.

Tsk.

If he hadn't gotten that goddamn arcane item if he hadn't absorbed a bit of Lily's [Disintegration]...

And what the heck even is that skill and how long can he store the absorbed skills? I'm pretty sure his skill does something like that after seeing it at work.

Did he get chummy with Champion Tristan back on the second floor?

Biscuit! I need emotional support. I'm frustrated!

As if he heard me, the best doggo of all tournament floors comes floating my way to lands in my lap. He also got defeated so he is quiet and just rests on my lap while I boop his nose a few times and then pet him.

"We will get our revenge in the other events," I whisper to him.

He woofs in agreement and I focus back on the notifications.

Should I try to gain as many shards as possible or try for better rewards? The rewards seem to be personalized so improving them in exchange for a few shards could be well worth it. I can also make shards by selling items in the tournament shop and it's not like a few thousand shards are going to do very much for me.

"Biscuit, shards, or better rewards?"

(Food.) He says cleverly before closing his eyes again, stretching, and continuing to rest.

Cute.

Rewards it is.

You have decided to not receive your shards. Please pick one of the three following rewards:

Epic grade passive skill

Epic grade item

Summon disciple (24h)

Looking at the rewards, the passive and the item, which must at least be mid-grade if not upper grade, to be listed here, but I'm not even thinking of them.

"Give me the last one."

The window disappears and my slowly souring mood immediately improves. The item is called a disciple summoning, not a minion summoning token but I can live with that.

Grabbing Biscuit and holding him to my chest, I stand up and head towards the living room where the others are. A lively conversation immediately cuts off, leaving me staring down a number of awkward looks.

Are they worried about my mood because I lost... because that asshole cheated and got 1st place?

"I'm fine, like I said, I'll get that dick in the other events. But more importantly. Tess, get Channeler and see if he can't find frozen pizza or someone who can cook pizza for us. I'm offering an epic item for that."

I let the stream of questions pass, already planning.

The 1st day was a free day without an event so now after the second day and first event, 5 full days and 4 events remain. If the events take as much time as 1st, that leaves us with one more free day, probably before the last event to let us rest.

I need to confirm, but if I'm right, that will be the day I introduce my very first minion to group 4.

Flashback Savant - 1st Floor

They fight the small green monsters and I watch as a few of them die, pierced by the primitive weapons.

The wounds caused by their weapons are severe, of the sort that would kill them anyway without access to antibiotics and modern surgery. There are already a few people with high fever and sepsis from earlier attacks.

As they scream and cry, I do not pity them. They left me to die.

It's a reasonable decision, without my prosthesis I can't move as quickly as them and would only slow them down. That much is confirmed even now as three goblins surround me, two grunts and a shaman. All the warriors went after the group.

I watch as a shaman comes closer and even though it's smaller than me, it smiles in glee, fire flickering in the palm of its hand before forming into a small orb.

It's captivating. I know it's possible thanks to the existence of something called mana, but that doesn't explain much. Is this some kind of technology so advanced that I can only describe it as magic, or is it just a force we don't understand yet?

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

And why is my group so slow to adapt to its presence?

When the shaman pulls me down by my hair and reaches to push the flame orb into my eye, his guards snicker. The flame is about to touch me and I can feel its heat scorching my skin. I use my skill and absorb it.

Seeing it disappear, the shaman squawks and I move a bit of the mana I got from the system and burrow my middle and index fingers into the shaman's eye as deep as I can. The length of my fingers should be enough to reach the monster's brain, judging from its size.

When the body starts twitching, one of the remaining goblins charges at me. It moves at a speed comparable to other goblins of the same level. It also opens with the same kind of attack, aiming at the middle of my body below the rib cage.

I avoid it and throw my body forward, crashing against the little green monster, both of us falling to the ground. The monster's body feels tougher than I expected and it attacks, biting my neck and scratching at my arms. While it does so, I find the dagger on its belt. It's still in the same place I saw it before the attack.

As I grab the dagger, I intend to slide the blade in between its ribs and stab it in the heart but change my mind, unsure of the anatomy. Instead, I burrow the dagger into the underside of the monster's jaw.

The other goblin only seems to have a dagger, so as expected, it moves closer and jumps on my back. They often use their bodies first when they're enraged by the deaths of their clanmates.

Before the second goblin stabs me, I use my skill and release the flame I absorbed from the shaman, striking the attacking monster in the face.

While it thrashes and screams on the ground, I crawl closer and stab it in the neck a few times with the dagger I stole.

I level up and my skills do as well.

Crawling back to the corpse of the shaman, I take a dagger and burrow it into the monster's leg, cutting, slashing, and tearing through the flesh and tendons until I sever it at the knee.

I invest stat points into mana, then take the severed leg and place it on my stump. The length isn't perfect, but my leg ends somewhere in the middle of the shin, and the shaman's under the knee so it should be comparable to my normal leg.

Then I use my skill and observe as my body absorbs the monster's leg into mine.

It looks awful, a thin green leg connected to my skin, they have smaller feet, with no shoes, or hair. Even as I stand up, it's hard to keep my balance.

But it's better than a stick.

Congratulations, your items have been sold through the tournament shop! You have gained 1120 shards. Ten percent will be taken by the system.

And there it is. Taxes at last, indeed one of life's certainties.

But even then, the revenue isn't bad. I offered 6 items at an asking price of 150 shards a piece and received closer to 200 for each, that's what I'd pay for a low tier rare item in the system shop. Did they like my items that much? I'll have to look into it.

With net profit being around 800 shards, it's not that bad for a few hours, but damn, I miss the ease of looting the Veil Ignition Station.

After crafting five more items, I put them in the shop as well. Two daggers, one small shield, a spear, and a short sword. Each is a rare grade item, but it's hard to say if they're low or mid grade. All I know is they are ugly as hell and sold by Fuckyouintentbitch. But the effects are nice.

I set the starting prices a bit higher now, 160 for the daggers and shield, and 170 for the spear and sword, and I set the auction's duration at 3 hours.

Satisfied with that, I stretch, but now that I'm done, an annoying thought about the result of the 1st event comes rushing back. So I try to think about something else for a bit. It's fine, my time will come.

Once outside the facility, I meet Lily in the garden, currently throwing her gray mana at the poor trees.

"Are we fighting the trees?" I ask her.

She doesn't seem to be amused, "I hate that Savant was able to absorb my skill; it shouldn't be possible."

I agree with her. His skill didn't absorb my black mana, but it succeeded with her [Disintegration]. The interesting thing is that the system allowed it even though he put the same [Restriction]

More to think about. I already have plans to properly experiment with the black. My current immortality has given me some amazing opportunities, and after seeing that it really is impossible to die here and that my body and mana will be restored after the event, I can do just that.

“He probably had to use a shitload of mana for his skill to be able to absorb yours. Maybe his skill is just higher level than [Disintegration], or perhaps it has some means of countering yours to some degree,” I tell her.

“Or maybe I’ve just grown overconfident. I kept leveling my other skills and somehow thought [Disintegration] would remain powerful.”

“That’s also an option. But your skill is capable of damaging someone a hundred levels higher, with a high constitution, so it’s not just that. But as you said, a bit of leveling won’t hurt.”

“And you? Are you ok?”

[Focus - lvl 48 > Focus - lvl 49]

“It’s okay,” I pinch Lily’s nose. “By the way, I’m going to introduce you to someone important to me in a few days.”

As I say it, Lily seems to start panicking, “Someone important?” she whispers.

“Yes, you’ll like her.”

“H-her?”

“Yup, anyway, I’m going to train on my own for a bit, so later.” Before she can say anything, I teleport to one of my anchors and fly for a while, reaching a clearing in the forest without anyone nearby.

Checking my surroundings once more, I then move my mana to test something I’ve wanted to do since the start of the event.

A pale blue orb forms over my palm, quickly changing its color multiple times until it’s pitch black. But unlike the event where I was restricted, I can control the black mana quite comfortably.

I let it seep into my body and use it to power [Focus]. Then, as the world slows around me, I create a bigger one than before, using quite a bit of the mana in my body.

In this state that feels so addictive, I let that black mana permeate me, and this time I feel the pressure. It makes it much more difficult to control as black mana inside of my body reaches a certain amount, but I pay it no mind.

Ignoring the pressure and wounds, I let it all seep in and then use it to power a different skill.

[Mana Domain]

Immediately my domain expands, and then more, and again. The size is unlike any I've used before.

Observing it with fascination, I try to understand and learn as much as possible before I lose control. The black mana even inside of my body threatens to slip, and even controlling the mana I used to power my [Focus] has become much more difficult.

Through the domain, I sense the mana of every being within it. It feels like I should be able to do even more, but as I make the attempt, the world blacks out, and I die.

I died...Confused, I look around, still in the same place, though my skills have been deactivated and after checking, a chunk of my mana is missing.

The feeling is extremely disturbing even though I quickly reactivate [Focus], this time powered by normal mana.

It takes a few moments to calm my beating heart as I replay what just happened.

Well, that's a good start. The system didn't let me die, which can only mean one thing.

Let's try it again.

First, to see how black mana reacts with my other skills and then learn how much I can control it. I have a lot of time before the 2nd event starts.

Chapter 342: (¬_¬)

[Perception] powered by black mana isn't that special, or at least it's not at my skill level. I'm not as good at using that skill as I am at using [Focus], so black mana makes it, well, more perceptive. I still prefer my eye trait, but it's not terrible and could be used to improve my scans.

I might even be able to locate Tacita right now and quite easily at that, but it's kind of hard to control. I died three times before I got any actual results.

The second skill I've decided to test is [Resonance], mostly for the bits that used to be [Oscillation] rather than [Disruption].

[Resonance] powered by black mana easily tears through the trees and rocks in front of me, it covers quite a large area as well. It's like using highly concentrated, high-frequency kinetic energy but it feels sharper.

Knowing I can't die, I can afford to be less careful, intending to learn even from the way my body gets damaged. I died twice before getting the result I wanted from the skill.

I also try to use [Resonance] with a burst of black mana to send a massive disrupting wave, as big as I can make it, and after examining it I'm almost sure it hit everyone within the common area. It's almost like a wide range EMP for mana.

With that one pulse, the black mana I used for the skill is gone. It took up a lot of it, but the area is huge so I'm satisfied.

So what if it scared a few people and messed up the web the others from Hell and the Hard difficulty people have been constructing over the common area? It's a price I'm willing to pay.

Next, I decide not to test it on more skills. The event is still a bit off, but I need to get there with my mana topped out.

I move that mana to certain parts, like to my feet or arms, and attempt at independently strengthening them. Then I manipulate mana to create a black dagger before reabsorbing it.

Each of these attempts would be extremely dangerous given that a single spike can tear my organs and mind apart, but here I'm not that worried.

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 0 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 38]

Huh? What?

Confused, I ignore the black mana for a moment and check my status and the skill is there.

I've reacquired one of my original skills.

Didn't the system say it would be extremely difficult to get the skill back? And I was already getting used to training without it, and why the heck is it so high level? The other skills I've gained are mostly in the single digits.

Is it because I had it before, and more importantly, does that mean I can use [Mana Manipulation] in another skill combination? Is that even allowed? If so then maybe, in the future when I use it for skill combination, I can get it back again.

This is a total scam!

It's still surprising, but I can't complain. It must mean that I have a great talent when it comes to mana, right? Hehe.

I notice that my body is starting to take too much damage, and overjoyed over the new skill, I send kinetic energy into my brain and blow off my head. I die again, my body returning to its normal state.

From testing, I know that if I had waited any longer the system would have restored me to my wounded state even if I wasn't dead. I'm still not sure what the exact time limit is, but it's something that can be found out with a bit of testing.

After "reviving", the first thing I see is Tacita squatting in front of me and looking at me in a way that I can't quite describe. Is it amazement? Admiration? Did she stalk me and see me testing the black mana and dying?

She lifts her pointing finger close to her temple and makes a circular movement while looking at me.

Oh, come on! Everyone normal would do that! You can't die here, so it's not a problem to destroy your body a few times.

"I'm normal. That was entirely reasonable," I protest.

She blinks a few times and then gestures at the ground where she quickly draws something with her finger.

(¬_¬)

"I'm normal."

She wipes it off and pats my shoulder once before drawing again.

(ಥ_ಥ)

"Did you come here just to make fun of me?"

Tacita shakes her head.

“Do you want something from me?”

A short nod.

“What is it?”

(>^_^)> ☆° *° °

There is NO WAY she is more normal than me.

“Explosion?”

She nods excitedly a few times but then gestures to indicate that I’ve missed something.

“Do you want me to cause an explosion?”

Tacita shakes her head.

“Did you find me because of an explosion?”

She shakes her head again.

Hmm, this is a fun game so I plop on the ground opposite of her and think.

“Did you maybe feel my disrupting wave?”

(^ ▽ ^)

Carefully, she touches her shirt which I now realize is black.

Oh.

“You want to see my black orb?”

(^ ▽ ^)

“What do I get in exchange?” I ask.

To my surprise, she thinks about it for a while, and seriously at that. Then she pulls out a small brooch in the shape of a leaf and puts it on the ground.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

Examining it, I learn that it's an epic item with two uses left. Each of these uses increases dexterity by 200 points for 10 seconds. It's the first time I've seen an item like this and can't help but think about how scary someone like Tacita would be with something like this.

I wonder how she deals with the attribute imbalance I'm sure she's experiencing. Without enough Constitution, each of her quick movements likely threatens to tear her apart. Is it some trait? Epic passives? Active skills? There are plenty of options.

The item is nice, but I would rather try to build a good relationship with her. That would be much more valuable.

“I was joking, I'll show you for free. Just don't attack me or my group without a good reason.”

Tacita looks at me and then seems to be thinking about it for a while.

A minute passes like that.

Then she looks at me again, into my eyes and I return her gaze. She smiles gently and gestures with her hand.

Maybe.

"That's enough."

She takes the brooch and gestures at me impatiently.

As I reach out and compress mana into a smaller orb that quickly turns black, I am already used to the process. She watches it all with fascination like an excited little girl finding a new toy.

Her hands move in sign language, but she quickly remembers I do not understand and then points at the orb while looking at me with a question.

"Yes, you can."

Tacita nods quickly and a barrier forms on her skin as she reaches her finger towards the black mana orb. It starts absorbing her mana the moment it enters her range.

At this point, I know showing her this will help her understand my black orb a bit better and maybe even learn how to counter it.

But I also know she realizes that, and yet I'm still showing it to her. That much should help her form a better image of me. After all, I'm the guy who showed her his secret weapon even though he didn't have to. Obviously, just that won't turn her into a friend or anything, but just a little bit, just a first step is enough, and to me, Tacita looks like someone worth keeping close. Well, maybe not too close.

I lean against the tree with my back and observe her as she continues to examine the orb. She changes her barrier, she tries to move her hand so quickly I can't even track it, probably trying to figure out if she can stop the orb from absorbing her mana by moving quickly enough.

She pokes it with a mana-coated dagger as well.

It's like she is a curious cat playing with a new toy.

In the end, she seems to be satisfied and stands up. Looking at me, she shows a thumbs-up.

The heck.

Then after waving her hand, she runs away at a speed that would probably look like teleportation to someone with worse senses.

I head back to our house when a notification informs me that all the weapons I put into the shop have been sold. After the system takes its cut, I get 1200 shards. Plenty more than I was asking.

Something seems to be amiss here. Why would they sell for so much? Looking at the price, people from Normal and Hard should be the only ones buying them, but with what they bought them for they could've gotten items from the system shop instead.

Very suspicious.

When I reach the house, Channeler is there as well. Unlike before, he is wearing much nicer clothes and he is slightly tidied up which makes him even more handsome.

Again, the hell. It should be illegal for a man to look like that.

“Noname! I trained using the stone you gave me. It's amazing! Someone from Hard even tried to steal it from me.”

Oh boy. "Did he get it?"

"Nope! Sset saw it and zapped him and the group who was trying to help him." He moves closer and continues in a whisper. "Sset is scary. A few of the guys from Hard difficulty cried and begged her to stop, but she was like: 'Channeler is with Group 4.' So goddamn cool, I tell you!"

Oh nice, now even Tess is spreading Group 4's name to other participants. But I'm curious about where she's going with this.

"Good, if someone bothers you just tell us. It should be easy enough to deal with them."

"Will do, boss! By the way, did you hear about that creep selling rare items?"

Huh, creep? I know multiple people registered as sellers and I even saw some rare items in the tournament shop, but who could have caught enough interest by now for anyone to be talking about them?

"Anything interesting?" I ask.

"Yup! He made a few rare items and was selling them at a ridiculously low price! I'm friends with some of the guys from Normal difficulty and they've already started talking about it. They say his weapons are being sold at the price of a low rare item with the performance of a mid rare! Apparently, not many people have realized their value yet."

Heh, what a loser, getting scammed already.

Channeler continues, "The items are ugly as hell and sometimes they're hard to hold and the shape's all wrong."

Wait a moment.

He laughs shortly, "The guys complained a lot about them being ugly, but the performance and effects are amazing for such a high grade so they've been selling like hotcakes. I even heard some were trading them in for other, more valuable items with crafters from Hard difficulty who wanted to examine them.

Please no.

Channeler explodes into laughter, "But best of all is the guy's name. Everyone calls him Tent Creep who apparently wants to... well, you know... Anyway, if you see any tent you better avoid it."

T-That's not it!

I try to correct him, "Isn't his name 'Fuck You Intent Bitch'? I think I saw it."

Channeler just shrugs, "What even is "intent"? Anyway, they don't care. Since the name has caught on, they're likely to keep using it," he smirks. "Obviously no one will make fun of him to his face. It would be dumb to make fun of someone with that level of skill!"

"Yes, that would be really stupid."

"Maybe you could buy some of his stuff, creep or not."

"Yes, maybe. Hehe, such a stupid name."

"Right? I have to go to Soph. Gareth and others are getting annoyed by the web she is setting up around the common area. It interferes with, and has apparently been taking over, parts of their own web. They've already sent Brainiac to talk to her, but apparently, he's just been messing around with the other members of your group."

Group 4 indeed, everyone seems to like stirring trouble.

"Sure, I think she is in the workshop with her sister, you can check there."

“Thanks, I’ll see you later, boss!”

As he leaves, I watch him for a bit longer. It’s nice that his behavior in regards to me hasn’t changed much after the end of the 1st event, unlike some of the others.

When I enter the house, I find Tess alone in the smaller living room with all the furniture floating in the air.

“Tent Creep!” she shouts by way of greeting.

“Oh, come on.” In quick succession, I shoot a few mana orbs at her, and she destroys them with her lightning.

“If you want, I can find out who started it, and you can have a talk with the guy. But that would reveal your secret identity as Tent Creep, and they would laugh behind your back. Or you can keep it secret.”

“Let's keep it a secret.”

“Sure! By the way, flying is much harder than you make it look. Other than you, Kim, and I, I’ve only seen two guys flying briefly. Maybe there are a few more, but they are all terrible in comparison to you.”

That improves my mood, and I know she said it on purpose. Such a cheeky blonde.

“They just don't practice enough. I wanted to ask you something.” I move closer and sit in the armchair that starts floating with me on it under the influence of her skill. “You went pretty hard on group 4 during the 1st event, is there a reason for that?”

Tess attacked me the moment she saw me, and then again. I also heard she poked at the others and defeated Min-Jae. It's weird to me, considering she was the one who wanted to create this atmosphere of camaraderie, yet instead of grouping up during the event she went off alone, even attacked a few of the members of our group.

Slowly, the items float back to the floor along with Tess, who ends up on the couch opposite me.

“I attacked you because I thought it would be fun and I knew you wouldn’t mind.” When she looks at me, I nod and after a short smile, she continues, “I poked the others to remind them that it’s not just you who’s stronger than them in Group 4. I want them to know I’m here as well and they should not forget that.”

“Want to be their mom?”

“Actually, that might not be so inaccurate.” A plate with snacks floats over to me, and I grab one before it floats to Tess who takes some as well. “I want us to be friends, but at the same time, I took on the role of leader for the most part so I need to remind them once in a while. As for Kim, I defeated him because he’s getting cocky, Nathaniel. I saw how harshly he was treating some guys from the Hard difficulty. It was getting awfully close to bullying.”

“Just that?”

“Of course, that alone wouldn’t be enough, it’s just that since he got his new eye, he’s been getting more and more confident. Kim is still young and he doesn’t know what to do with it, so he takes joy in lording his strength over others. But lately, he’s been pushing it.”

“I could look into it,” I offer. Having Min-Jae act cocky and overconfident could cause him some trouble in the future, so I could help with that.

“That would be great, just please don’t be too cruel. I will talk with him too so you can do it later.”

“Sure. That’s fine.” I gesture and head back out.

Chapter 343: Start of the 2nd event

The 2nd event - The Siege of Aether Keep will be starting in 1 hour!

In 1 hour, everyone will be transferred to the Aether Keep.

All difficulties will participate in the same instance.

You will be facing a gradually increasing number of enemies trying to destroy Aether Keep. The numbers and strength of the attackers will grow over the duration of the event. You will have 5 hours to prepare your defenses and then 5 hours to defend Aether Keep.

Participants will be rewarded according to their performance during the defense.

Note: You can leave the event at any time you want.

Note: Cooperation with natives from Aether Keep and with participants of the tournament is required and fighting among defenders, be it tutorial attendees or natives, may decrease your points.

Note: You can use [Restriction] for this event.

Well, the event seems interesting. The only thing I dislike is the part about not fighting other participants, but it says that there “may” be a punishment. So maybe a bit of infighting is allowed? It also makes me wonder who or what the attackers are and what kind of place Aether Keep will be.

The question is how difficult the second event is going to be. If it's easy and I placed no [Restriction], it could end up being overkill and earn fewer points.

If it's difficult and I placed one, I may regret it, and find myself hamstrung during the defense.

Well, I'll have to leave that to future Nat. He can decide a few seconds before the event starts.

Closing the window, I open another and put three items up for auction. Each one quickly made and apparently, according to the assholes who give me funny names, graded at mid rare. So this time I set the starting price for each one at 300 shards and set the time of the auction to 30 minutes. Let's see how they do.

As I did before the 1st event, I create a small orb inside my body and start filling it with my mana, trying to smuggle it in again.

Entering the house, I find everyone already inside, spread out over the living room. The most notable is Biscuit who is facing Noodle in a staring contest.

The white snake feels a bit stronger now. Did one of our animal overlords have a breakthrough in his training and is trying to fight for the position of Absolute?

Well, in the end, it doesn't matter. Biscuit doesn't even release any mana, just looks at Noodle with his usual silly expression. The one that makes him look like he is smiling with his tongue slightly sticking out.

Even that is enough and Noodle lowers his head and leaves in a clear state of defeat.

(Asshole,) sounds proudly through everyone's mind as Biscuit announces his victory.

That makes the introverted snake lower his head even more and burrow under the blankets on the couch.

It might seem harsh, but Biscuit is cute so he can do anything he wants.

"Yoo, can you lend me the ax for the event?" Maya asks shamelessly as the fight between two animal overlords is over.

"One thousand shards per hour."

She blinks a few times staring at me.

"You can't afford to buy it so a subscription might be a good idea. Even if it's damaged, it's an arcane item. It performs at the level of a mid to upper epic item and sometimes even a bit higher."

"I heard you were offering an epic item to find someone to help you make a good pizza in a few days. We are teammates, right? You can be nice to me too."

I shake my head, "That pizza is for my precious minion. She deserves it."

I still remember Vega asking me about my food, and now that I have a token that will allow me to summon her for a day, there is no way I wouldn't prepare a nice welcome for her. While the 5th floor wasn't all that long ago and it's only been a few days since I saw her, this is too good an opportunity to waste, given that we are currently in the middle of a somewhat safe tournament.

Maybe I could let her fight some of the people from Easy and Normal difficulty. I kind of wonder how my minion would do.

"Can I become your minion too?" Maya tries again.

I ignore her and pick up Biscuit from the floor, setting him in my lap and grab his lolling pink tongue, pulling it gently.

Shaking his head, he woofs at me and calls me an asshole.

In exchange, I pull his whiskers and whisper, "I'm going to introduce you to someone in a few days."

(Asshole?)

"No, she isn't an asshole like me." I boop his nose.

(Food?)

"No."

(Food food?)

"Hell no. It's a friend."

(Friend?)

"Yes."

He tilts his head as if thinking and then looks at me.

(Food!)

Goddamnit Biscuit, can't you at least be normal.

"Any plans for the 2nd event?" I ask Maya.

"Tess is talking to Gareth. Dennis, Aaron, and Sophie managed to set up some kind of telepathic conversation web or something, so we are waiting," Maya answers.

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"I heard Gareth complained about Sophie's web?" I turn to Izzy, who is still trying to make Noodle come out from under the blankets.

"Soph kept talking about how bad their web is and they refused to fix it. So she created her own with Dennis and Aaron and then started taking over parts of the other web when they complained about it," Izzy sounds somewhat proud.

That makes me wonder if I shouldn't create a third web and take over both of them.

"Soph can be spiteful if she wants. One guy told her to keep her mouth shut and let them work when she tried to help with their web," Maya giggles. She seems to be enjoying the situation a lot.

I get a notification and ignore Maya to check it out.

Congratulations, all of the items you put into the auction were sold off for 1500 shards. After the system takes 10%, you will receive 1350 shards!

Congratulations, you are currently the 1st in the crafter rankings of the tournament shop.

Rankings:

1st - Fuckyouintentbitch

2nd - Miwa

3rd - Adam

4th - Jonathan

5th - Athena

Okay, 1st. The asking price I set was 300 for each of the 3 items, so how the heck did they all get sold for around 500 each? They were only rare items and apparently ugly even with their decent performance. There is something very suspicious here going on. I need to up my prices for sure.

I'm curious about the rankings too. Do they exist to give those with crafting classes the chance to earn some nice rewards too even if they don't place in the events? Very interesting.

Around thirty minutes remain 'till the start of the event when Brainiac and Lootenant return, led by our three boys. They are a rowdy crowd, but the moment Brainiac and Lootenant see me they shut up.

"What?" I ask the red-haired boy who is looking at me.

"How did you sense my attack? Only the most powerful natives have managed that up until now." His behavior is slightly different from before too.

"I'm not helping the party who attacks a single guy six versus one."

"Oh, come on! How the hell did you even fly? You were restricted to your stats on the 4th Floor, were you already flying back then? What is your level? By the way, Adam wants to talk with you, he is a bit annoyed at the fact you killed him while he was fighting Savant."

"Adam can go hide somewhere just like he did in the event."

"Right? I complained to Gary but he didn't seem to mind. Apparently, that's just how Adam is."

Min-Jae also joins in, "I warned you that you should look out for Nat during the event."

To that, Brainiac gestures widely, "Who would trust that!? I know he's in Beyond, and he keeps gushing about mana in the Community. But then you meet him and he barely talks and acts like a cat looking down on us poor humans. He doesn't leak any mana at all. I've got nothing against that, Noname," He adds quickly, "Then you meet him in the event and he just does all this weird shit. And at the end of the event, it looks like he's gonna start biting pieces off Savant before he dies. Then once it's all over he loses control of his mana and 357 people from Easy difficulty pass out and 106 more from Normal puke up everything they ate in the past half year and everyone from Hard difficulty with decent mana sensitivity gets scared shitless."

Is... is he complimenting me?

"Noname," Brainiac moves even closer, "people are already betting on the result of the duels. Most of the main bets are between you and Savant, a lot of people have money on Tacita. But I'm betting on you."

“Launch,” I say.

“Huh?” Brainiac asks, confused.

His rambling has put me in a better mood, so I may as well throw him a bone, “The moment you shoot your invisible projectiles you move a lot of mana that makes it super obvious when you will shoot them. I can even read the trajectory that way. Then, the projectiles themselves are unstable and leak mana which makes them more apparent. I recommend using half of the mana you are currently and focusing on making them more dense. If you’re fighting other humans you can make them a quarter the size, they’re too big as is.”

“Noname!” he shouts happily. “You have to train me! I can trade you some items worth a few hundred shards per lesson.”

Huh? He thinks that's enough?

“It’ll be at least 1000 shards per hour-long lesson. And that’s heavily discounted already.” I answer. That much should make it worth it.

“Fuck man, that’s too much.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Brainiac seems to be thinking, “I can get a few guys and we can split the cost. I bet after the 1st event there are plenty who would be willing to join.”

“Four thousand shards worth for group lessons. Five thousand if it’s over 5 people. Ten thousand if it’s over 10 people.”

“What?”

What does he mean by what? There is no way I'm going to let a bunch of people drain all of my energy if I don't have to. Sure, I can endure it for a while, but only for the right price.

Now that I think about it, if I do well during the other events I might ask more. I wonder if there are actually people who would be willing to do that.

"Come on, Max, leave Nona alone," Lootenant jumps in, pulling the red-haired Brainiac away.

As Brainiac gets dragged away to the other room, he keeps shouting that I'm a scammer or some other nonsense.

With less than ten minutes left on the clock, everyone else returns and Brainiac and Lootenant leave to rejoin their group.

While I continue to prod and poke at Sophie and the twins' web, Tess and others have some sort of important meeting which I half listen to. I spend my remaining minutes thinking about what kind of [Restriction] I should set, or if it is even necessary.

In ten seconds you will be moved to the location of the 2nd Event!

The message finally sounds and the final countdown starts. 3, 2, 1,...

You will be transferred to the Aether Keep. You have three seconds to place a [Restriction] if you wish to do so.

Everyone else disappears, followed by me.

Entering the area of the second event I look around. All two thousand tutorial participants are spread out across a massive courtyard, surrounded by a tall wall.

Off to one side is a mountain rising into the sky with windows carved into its faces. Telling me that the mountain's insides are filled with rooms and buildings. There are also more walls like the one currently surrounding us.

The air here is slightly colder and the clouds almost seem to be close enough to touch.

I give myself some time to examine the place. It's simple, yet its architecture gives off the impression of old strength and power, and there are rough and fascinating mana-powered inscriptions.

Interestingly, there are thousands of humans all around. Both armored and not. Each one scrambling to prepare the defenses. A dozen well-dressed men with guards following them are heading toward the participants whereupon they start explaining the situation.

Well, it seems like we won't be defending this place alone.

Looking around I spot and check in on a few people.

Gareth (Hell, 4th)

Tess (Hell, 4th)

Grumpy (Hell, 4th)

Tacita (Hell, 5th)

And then there is also this guy.

Savant (Hell, 3rd)

I see. I think I know his reasoning and I had the same thought. The event has all of the tournament attendees participate and even calls for cooperation. It's very logical to assume that the event will be

somewhat made to reflect that fact. Forgoing a restriction would probably be overkill and far from worth it.

But, the system isn't always logical.

The system is an asshole.

That's why the text the others see over my head reads thusly.

Noname (Hell, 6th)

And as far as I can see it's the highest out of any Hell difficulty participant.

Chapter 344: A low price to pay

Welcome to the 2nd event, the Siege of the Aether Keep. You now have 5 hours for preparations. Cooperation with other participants and natives is preferred, and doing otherwise will lead to a deduction in points.

After 5 hours, the attack will start. The attack itself will last 5 hours with a gradual increase in difficulty.

The longer you defend, the better your rewards will be.

Enjoy the second event!

After a few minutes of just looking around, I look for Tess and move towards her. Unlike me, the blonde started with with people and natives the moment we arrived here. Scary.

"I think you made a mistake," Tess tells me when she moves closer, reading the text over my head.

I see, the poor blonde is still underestimating the system. But she will learn, she's a smart girl.

"Don't look at me with that patronizing look in your eyes," Tess complains.

"How are the natives?" I ask her, changing the subject.

"Sounds interesting, so what are we defending?"

"Aether Keep is a bastion carved into an extremely tall mountain as you can see. You can do a fly over later and learn more. As for the reason, there seems to be a deposit of arcanadium and other materials in this area."

Before I can say anything, she interrupts, "Yes, we already sent people to find out if we can take it out of the event. We're locked out of the system and tournament shops, same as the 1st event. I did ask a few guys to go and try to craft some stuff with the materials. Maybe that could help us smuggle out some materials, but I don't think the system is going to let that slide."

That's such a shame. "Anything you want me to do?"

"Maybe set up some traps for now. You'll know what to do." Having said her piece, she leaves to live her busy life as an extrovert.

I, meanwhile, continue to fill the orb inside my body with mana. I could do it with my crown, but I still don't want Savant to see it. Flying a bit up, I locate someone else instead of scouting, and when I land, I find my good friend waiting there.

Bendover (Hell, 4th)

Surrounded by the rest of his 4-man squad from group 2, IDK, he is as charming as always, welcoming me without any fear. He is even smiling. One of the members of his group I know. The man called Bard, he actually managed to survive quite a while in the 1st event.

"You said you would find me after the event, did you change your mind? It won't be quite so easy now," BenDover smirks.

Huh?

Oh. I remember now, I told him I'd find him after the event, right? But then I got distracted by my experiments with black mana and crafting, and I forgot. But seeing him up close now quickly reminds me why I wanted to do it.

"I forgot," I say simply.

"Sure. I will be waiting," he smirks and waves at me with a dagger in his hand, the same one that Lorven guy had on the 4th floor. I remember it being quite a decent epic item.

I don't like it. It feels like he is looking down at me because it's impossible to die during the tournament.

His teammate tries to calm him down, but he just pushes him away and fearlessly takes a step closer to me, "You keep looking at me that way like you want to do something. But you won't do shit. The event..."

Using my much higher mana reserve, I grab and hold him with [Redistribution], preventing him from moving or speaking. Without an active [Restriction], I manage it easily, especially with the amount of mana I can use.

"When I feel like it, I will find you in the common area," I say simply and then a concentrated blast of kinetic energy hits him, the system turning him into particles and sending him away.

You have killed one of your fellow defenders.

100 points have been deducted from your score as punishment.

Current score: -100

A low price to pay to ruin that guy's day.

"Any problems?" I turn to Bard.

"Would it matter even if I had any?" he sighs. "Just go and do your stuff. We don't have to fight now that he's gone."

Poor guy, having to deal with that asshole because he's stuck clearing Floors with him.

"Later then," I say, waving to him before flying off.

For a moment, I consider being petty and taking down Savant, but in the end, I decide against it. That would give the impression that I'm scared of him and need to slow him down. That would be okay with nearly anyone else, but that guy is going down even without resorting to that. Plus there is no need to be an asshole.

Yet.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Flying high above in circles, I examine the area. It looks pretty much like I expected. The mountain in question is a lot taller than Mount Everest though the slope isn't all that steep and there are multiple roads winding up the face, and framing the mountain's wide base.

At least I think it's taller; I've never seen Mount Everest with my own eyes, so who knows? It just feels tall and imposing.

The Aether Keep stands at the top, surrounded by a series of three tall walls, with a huge empty plane behind each. After the last wall, there are buildings and structures carved into the mountain itself. All of this has been strengthened with mana and made out of materials tougher than anything known on Earth.

The architecture is simple and rough, but it gives off an impression of power and impenetrability. I also take notice of a three-layered barrier. Each layer encompassed by a wall. Reminding me of the Bastion on the 5th floor.

Flying a bit further at my top speed, no message pops out and the system doesn't try to stop me, meaning I can probably abandon the event and fly around. But even flying so far, I don't see any enemies, meaning, either the system is going to spawn them at the beginning of the attack or that they have some means of teleportation.

Now that I don't have to conserve mana, I fly back at the same high speed.

I could activate the crown and use it as storage for my mana, but I'm not sure if I want to at the moment. The others would see it and try to analyze it the same way I'm analyzing them. Especially Savant with that clinical examining look he turns on everyone.

Then there's that huge screen in the common area. Even if everyone dies and leaves the event, they would still be able to watch from the common area. But how much does that even matter?

When I land, the surrounding participants cut their conversations short, as everyone takes care to avoid getting in my way.

It seems that slowly, the attendees from Normal and Easy difficulties are realizing the difference in power between themselves and the participants from higher difficulties. I can see it in the way they glance around and tense up when someone stronger approaches.

Unsurprisingly, some stronger guys seem to be enjoying it and there is a bit of bullying going on. Currently nothing too bad, but knowing human nature it will only become worse.

Of course, it's nothing too prevalent; most people just want to compete and enjoy the event with others who are stuck in the same situation. But even a single guy from Hard difficulty could mess up the day for everyone else.

"I'm with group 4! So knock it off," someone says calmly.

Recognizing the voice, I head that way and find Channeler facing down two other men and a woman. They feel weak to me, but they're probably from the lower floors of Hard difficulty.

I get ready to step in, but to my surprise, even the mention of group 4's involvement is enough to defuse things.

"Fuck, okay, okay, man! We are leaving, it's our bad, okay? Just don't tell on us."

"It's fine! Everyone makes mistakes," Channeler smiles. "But please, apologize to him."

With interest, I watch as they do just that, all three of them.

Then standing by the side, I listen to them as they pass by.

The woman pokes the man, "I thought you were a tough guy and you guys are getting scared of them just mentioning some random group?"

"Shut up, Karen! They have that fucking lightning maniac. She would zap your ass off if she heard you or worse throw you to their dog."

"A fucking dog? How..." their voices weaken as they walk out of my range.

"Noname!" Channeler notices me and comes rushing with a bright smile. "I used your group's name like Sset told me to, again," he says, looking somewhat ashamed. "I know it works, but it feels... you know." He shrugs.

"It's fine, but what was that all about? What is Sset even doing?"

"Oh, that? She's butting heads with Gareth. He and Samuel want to play sheriff and keep the strong from bullying the weak. They set up webs in the common area and have been defusing fights." He looks around and moves closer.

Channeler continues in a quieter voice, "Sset told me she doesn't like it. She and Soph favor a different approach, something along the lines of: if anyone fucks around they get put down and the others step in

line out of fear.” He smiles. “Normally it wouldn’t work, people would get pissed and push back, but Sset is very strong and Soph’s web is already much better than anything Gareth and Samuel’s people could put together.”

How oh, so fun. Infighting and conflicting ideals! Tess seems to be cooking something up and Sophie’s involved too.

“So what’s her plan?” I ask. It’s a bit weird but I did tell Tess to do anything she wants and then point me at anyone who complains. After all, that’s the least I can do.

“Sset has been using your name to scare people into compliance and when anyone does anything too serious she personally beats the shit out of them. No matter what difficulty they are. With Sophie’s web, she gets to the troublemakers quicker than Gareth. She’s also been throwing Group 4’s name around in the process.”

Oh, so she’s been doing some brand building.

That sounds like a lot of annoying work, but if that’s what she wants to do then she’s free to do it. If Gareth and the others complain I will still be by her side. It would be fun to see Group 4 fighting against the opposition. Even though Tess, Lily, and I could probably handle a combined attack from most of Hell difficulty. Probably.

“Well, see you later,” I say, waving to Channeler as I lift off, locating and flying towards Tess and the others.

On the way I spot and stop by Tacita who’s leaning against a tree, watching the arguing group from a distance. She waves shortly and without a word, I plop down on the wall nearby, also observing them from a distance.

Gareth and Adam stand opposite Tess, Maya, and Sophie, discussing something. Behind them stands Samuel. He’s from Hard difficulty, a marine or something. His posture is straight and his clothes are well-kept. A sword as big as he is tall hangs from his back, though its weight doesn’t seem to bother him.

(Food?)

Biscuit moves closer with his wobbly step. He notices Tacita near me and stops. Then he sniffs at her and throws a confused look my way.

(Food!)

I guess he couldn't smell her? What an interesting skill or trait she has.

"It's fine," I say as I lift him from the ground and set him in my lap.

Tacita doesn't react and glances at the best doggo of the second event. It's really hard to tell, but I could swear it seemed like she wanted to take a step forward and try to pet him.

I wait for her to gesture at me, but she holds back and returns to observing the others.

Well, it's her loss.

Maya also notices me and moves closer, handing me the damaged arcane ax I left in her care, and just waves at Tacita who ignores her. Rather than attempting further communication, she pokes Biscuit in the rump at which the doggo perks up and woofs at her a few times.

Ignoring his frustration, Maya pokes him a few more times while Biscuit twists in my lap. Thankfully, he's patient with dumb people and deigns not to punish her for the offense.

Maya then glances at the text over my head, "I wonder who's right, you with no [Restriction] or Savant with the most severe [Restriction] out of Hell difficulty."

She pauses and looks at me, "Can you create a barrier around us? So no one can listen."

I do just that and she continues, "Tess will be busy for the next few hours, dealing with the natives, arranging the defenses, and hammering things out with Gareth. She told me to ask you to make a show

during the event.” Maya gives me a serious look, “No holding back. Go all out and make sure that even people from Hell difficulty are scared shitless.”

Chapter 345: Why do you care?

I stop and look at her for a moment, and she actually seems to be serious. Tess probably wants to cement Group 4’s strength in the minds of everyone here, whether they’re from Easy or Beyond.

I take a moment to ensure that the barrier around us is still functioning before I note, “I would be showing my hand before the duels. Tacita, Savant, and Gareth would see all of my skills and other abilities.”

“Yes,” Maya agrees. “Tess already considered that. She knew you would object so she told me to ask: Why do you care if they see? You’re on a higher floor than any of them so just fuck them up anyway.”

Those two sentences from Tess, despite coming from Maya, make me think for a while, and though Maya continues to speak, I filter it out.

Yes, Tacita might counter me. Yes, Savant’s full abilities are still a mystery, but why should that stop me? I used to be more cocky and confident.

It’s as if I’ve placed them all on the same level as me. Even if it’s true, I shouldn’t be thinking like that; I should be an arrogant piece of shit. My subclass is Pride, isn’t it?

“Okay,” I respond, “I’ll do it.”

Tess must have realized it as well, even during the 1st event when I was conserving my mana for the final confrontation. So now that silly blonde is pushing me where she thinks I want to be.

She really is good at reading people, isn’t she?

Even then, the empty space inside the crown barely fills. What a scary mana battery this skill makes.

I make my Thermokinetic Mana Heart compress the mana it generates as much as it can and redirect the stream of generated mana into the crown. My body's store of mana is full, and my reservoir is full too, so all newly generated mana will flow into the crown. In five hours, a nice amount should be generated.

Vortex Core is also full, compressed Primordial Energies swirling inside of it.

That is amusing enough. The Armorer said as much on the 5th Floor. My body is extremely mana-conductive. All thanks to my Mana Circuit, my passives, and my constructs. It's almost as if I'm turning myself into a mana battery, the rest of my body serving as a conduit to direct and shape that mana, right down to my second trait.

Let's just try not to end up like Armorer's former Lord, imprisoned and used as a mana supply.

"I'm gonna go prepare then. See you later." I wave to Maya and carefully set Biscuit down.

The best doggo decides to do his own thing and wobbles on his way as he follows Maya away.

Tacita is observing me with her lively eyes, still leaning against the tree, brown hair falling over her forehead. Her eyes flicker towards my crown a few times and I watch the thoughts flash behind her gaze. As if she's already picturing our confrontation in her mind. I can tell, I've done the same so many times already.

"Do you think you can take me down?" I ask her.

She pauses for a moment, though it's only a short one. Tacita smiles brightly, her eyes squinting into a dangerous gaze.

"I see." There is no need for more words.

Even as I walk away, I start already preparing ideas on how to best use my mana here.

I like the idea of using ethercrystals they mine here. With a few good inscriptions, I could probably turn the entire mine into a bomb. But the quest is to defend the place' not blow it up, unfortunately.

Or I could turn myself into a bomb, in a bid inspired by Lissandra's actions at the end of the second floor. The system would surely keep me alive.

The problem with that is that I don't want a permanent construct like that, and I don't know if the system will remove it. Any alterations I make to my body during the event will probably stay even after I leave.

We've already learned that it's probably impossible to level a skill during an event, though they tend to level up at the end of the event as if the experience were being collected and applied in the common area.

There is also the fact that after I left the 1st event, my body was fully restored and my mana was returned to the state it was in before the event, but would that happen to the constructs made during the event? Especially now when I don't have a [Restriction] active?

Well, let's not risk it and go with a single-use method; it will be a bit more difficult without mana conductive paint, but it should still be manageable.

"Mind if I join you?" Lily asks, as she nimbly rushes to my side, leaving the others to their discussion.

Grumpy (Hell, 4th)

"As long as you don't distract me too much, sure."

"Are you saying I'm distracting?" she shoves me playfully, a smile on her face.

I have a feeling of déjà vu. I'm sure she said that same sentence a long time ago, but this time it feels different. It feels more like a joke rather than her being pushy.

“Yes yes, by the way, do you want my left arm? You could use it for [Sacrifice] later. After you restore it, we can find out how much it costs and how long it takes to regenerate your mana before the attack starts to find out if it’s worth it,” I offer.

With her being restricted, my arm could give her an impressive boost. And who knows, maybe this will count towards my points.

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

“Sure!” the petite healer answers without hesitation.

I might have offered it, but please, at least pretend to be a bit shocked and hesitant.

“Are inscriptions difficult?” Lily asks as we sit at the edge of the outermost wall with our feet hanging over the edge.

A massive clearing is stretched out beneath us, descending from our position. Despite the chilly air, the view of the surrounding mountains and valleys is breathtaking. It just has that sort of rough untouched natural beauty.

All of it is so big, so unreal. Alien even. “Most of the time I just go by feeling while remembering the things that didn’t work before,” I answer her.

“But isn’t that boring?”

“Is your plastic surgery skill boring?”

“It’s not plastic surgery!” she pouts. “I did it to improve my fine control. But I think I know what you’re getting at.”

“Simple as that. Do you like any of this, Lily?” I ask curiously.

Even while engaging in conversation, I make sure to keep filling my crown with mana and continue to inscribe a thin layer of my skin with pathways. I do it in this way so I can just use [Resonance] to scratch a thin layer of my skin, and make it all disappear. Or even if I just focus my healing passive there.

“This event or overall?” Lily asks.

“Overall.”

“I love it, Nat.” Lily smiles while looking at the giant mountains that fill our surroundings, swinging her dangling feet, “It doesn't matter how much it hurts or how sad it gets at times, I wouldn't change any of it.”

Curious, I observe her and devote a bit more attention to our conversation, “What do you like so much about it?”

She opens her mouth to say something but quickly closes it.

She looks at me for a second and smiles as if she's changed her mind about something, “I like that I'm not alone more than anything. I like that I'm not weak anymore and I like being useful. I'm changing, Nat, I'm not how I used to be and it's scary at times.”

Quietly waiting, I let her think and I listen.

“I'm not talking about the stats, or the skills, and traits. What I mean is that I'm not the same person I was on Earth and I think the old Lily would be scared of me. But at the same time, she would also be happy for me. I think I've improved a lot thanks to the others.”

“Most of it was probably thanks to Biscuit.”

That makes her laugh out loud. “Yes, Biscuit did more work than anyone else. Seriously though, most of it is Tess, she's like my friend, leader, and mom all combined into one.”

“She does a lot. You guys should help her and show her how grateful you are, at least once in a while. No matter how she acts, it’s difficult for her too.”

“Yeah, I think Maya noticed it first. Though Sophie realized it a bit later. They’ve become really good friends. I’m the one who’s slow when it comes to stuff like this.” Leaning back, she sighs. “I think I’ll have enough mana to restore your arm again and replenish it before the attack starts.”

I nod and, lowering my defenses, coat my hand in resonating mana and cut off my arm at the shoulder, putting it on the wall next to the other.

Lily touches me right after, her healing mana closing the wound and slowly regrowing my arm. She can do it faster, but she’s either taking things slow to conserve as much mana as she can or for the opportunity to touch me longer. Either could be true.

I bet it’s the second option.

To break the silence, I challenge her, “Guess what my subclass is.”

“Pride.”

“Close enough, you can try...”

“Pride.”

Dang it.

“Nat, it’s quite obvious and I think most of the group knows. But I think it suits you. I know pride is generally viewed in a negative light, but yours is comforting. It’s like you have this unshakable confidence in yourself. I often find myself being jealous of you. How easily you seem to deal with situations and events that bother me for days.”

She's restored my arm up to the elbow by the time she continues, "For example, that thing with Tent Creep, I know I would be cringing for days, but you already seem to be over..."

She stops as I pinch her nose and shake her head, and a playful laugh escapes from her lips.

"For the future Ruler of Lust, you really are quite the comedian, Miss Lily."

"One day I will have to beat the crap out of Aaron for coming up with that. But you can try to guess my subclass too. Do you think you can do it?"

"Wrath," I respond, much to her surprise.

Seeing her expression, I must have hit the nail on the head.

"How?"

"I guessed what you would pick back then. We spoke and you told me you wanted to learn to control your skills. I did have two more guesses but that one seemed like the most likely option and you just confirmed it."

After a minute of silence, she asks quietly, "Was it the right decision?"

"It was a decision you made on your own, that's all that matters. You just have to do your best to follow through." I stand up and stretch. "We humans have to try hard to avoid being left behind by our future animal overlords. Biscuit and Noodle are here and ready to take over the moment we show the slightest bit of weakness so do your best."

"What?" she blinks, confused.

Oh, I don't think I've shared that part of my theory with the others. Well, I'll have to do that at some point in the future, slowly to avoid scaring them off.

"I'll explain later. I want to go and place a few traps, but I'll be back before the attack starts."

"I'll pass that on to Tess... and our future animal overlords," she says carefully.

Sometimes people don't appreciate me as much as they should.

Waving at her, I jump over the edge and fly away from the walls.

The traps will be simple. A number of anchors inscribed into mana stones to make them last longer and keep more of them active than I could with my skill alone.

Obviously, I won't be using my materials and mana stones. I bet the natives have some nice stuff stashed away somewhere. Sharing is caring, isn't it?

I can also string up some extremely dense, hair-thin threads of mana across the terrain; that would be nice too. Running into one could cut an enemy apart before they ever realized what was happening, and the amount of mana is minuscule. I'll need to find out how long they can last and how strong I can make them.

There are a few more surprises after that too. Maybe I can prepare an avalanche or something that Min-Jae can help along with his gravity magic.

There's the question of whether or not I should be using these traps in the first place. I might just wait it out and join the fight near the end when everything seems lost. That could look cool; I bet Biscuit would be proud of me, and it would give me the opportunity to do something flashy.

Anyway, whoever does attack will receive a warm welcome.

Chapter 346: That maniac

By the time I return, thirty minutes remain until the attack, I spot Tess next to the rest of group 4; everyone else is already gone. As I land beside her, she seems tired.

So, even the extrovert class can take damage from prolonged exposure to another extrovert's leech aura.

"Don't look at me like that, Nat, it pisses me off. I swear some people are straight-up stupid."

"Surely you mean Gareth. Has he already revealed his true colors?"

"Gareth is fine, he's probably the most reasonable goddamn person in Hell difficulty believe it or not. Group 4 included," she sighs. "Savant keeps calling Gareth disgusting and then leaves to do his own thing while calling you dumb for not using [Restriction]."

"Well, his face is stupid."

"Then there's Tacita. Anytime I try to ask her for anything she just draws her emoticons and shrugs when I ask her anything. By the way, good job killing BenDover, the others from his group refuse to cooperate."

"I can go smack them around if you like."

"Please don't."

"They're mostly ok. According to them, we've been sent here by their Champion to help with the defense so they mostly listen. The one with the highest level is close to three question marks, and the others are level 200 and below. There are a few civilians, but we've sent them to hide in the mines. We'll probably be rewarded based on how many natives survive and how much damage the mines take."

"Did they know anything about the Pairing, the 1st Generation, or the Tutorial?"

"Nothing, they feel more like machines, they're not quite as human as the residents of the other floors."

"And the attackers?"

“Tens of thousands of monsters controlled by a neighboring kingdom that specializes in the taming and controlling armies of monsters.”

“Damn, Sophie's in for a treat.”

Tess nods, “She’s already setting up her web with the twins. If you have any free time, try to make some improvements. How’s your crown?”

“It's as full as it’s going to get, but it would take days, not hours to completely fill it.”

She points at her own [Storm Crown] that floats over her head, “It’s the same for me, but it’s nice to have some preparation time and this event seems to be more fitting for those of us who focus more on regeneration rather than amplification.”

It’s hard for me to abide by such heresy but I may as well let it slide, this time, “Do you still want me to go all out?”

“Yes. Blow up the mountain, burn the valley, and just do your thing. I want to scare the others a bit. Samuel’s too cocky for my taste. He keeps forgetting how much more powerful people from Hell difficulty are compared to his group from Hard difficulty. It should also make Gareth more cooperative since he seems to think that his group can deal with anything, so prove him wrong and you’ll make things a lot easier for me.”

So interesting. “Are you planning to take over?” I ask her.

She looks at me for a moment and sighs, “I wanted to take it easy and delegate a bit. But Gareth is too soft. I mean, even that could work, he and his group are powerful enough but it's painful to watch how slowly he’s been moving. Meanwhile, Samuel’s trying to recruit us all into the army so we can serve the greater good the moment we step out of the tutorial.”

“Anyone else?”

“A few guys from Hard difficulty but they’re too weak to mess with anyone from Hell difficulty. Group 3 with your friend BenDover seems like they just want to leech off the others and group 8 with AnotherOneHere and Swordmaster showed a degree of interest before the 1st event. Apparently, you kicked their collective asses and they’ve been mostly neutral since.”

“It sounds like you’ve been super busy, but Tess, what do you want out of this? You know we can easily ignore all this and focus on our own group. Between us, we’ll be fine no matter what happens here or after the tutorial.”

“I agree.” She gestures for me to come closer while she creates a field around us to prevent anyone from listening in on our conversation. “But you’re too antisocial, Nat. Sure, we can make it out on our own and threaten people with [Disintegration] and whatever fucked up bomb you develop by then. That would be doable, but things become much simpler if we can get a few more guys on our side. What if the other rounds end with one person at the helm? What if we return to Earth and someone else has already seized control? Some of us could die if it came to this.”

“It annoys me that you’re right.”

“Yeah, me too. I just want to make a place for our group so we can stay together and bring our families with us. But for now, let’s make some connections. Do you mind?”

I shrug, “Not really. Just ask and I’ll do what I can, I know I make you deal with a lot of annoying stuff so that’s the least I can do.”

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

“You are reliable as always, Nat. Do your thing and I’ll do mine. I can’t help but notice that Tacita seems to like you if we can call it that. She ignores me so maybe try to get her on our side. That girl is scary. Don’t take it personally but if you don’t pull something out of your sleeve she will be the one winning the duels.”

“Yeah, I know, but have some faith in me, I already have some ideas to work on. By the way, what the fuck is Izzy doing?” I point at the 11-year-old girl sitting on the stairs with Noodle coiled around her.

There's some kind of weird construct floating over her head that seems to be manipulating the light around her in some weird way, and two blue flame orbs float at her side. They're as big as basketballs and I can feel their heat increasing.

"Oh, that was Sophie's idea. She did some mumbo jumbo and manipulated the light, and air around Izzy to work like a magnifying glass. Izzy can absorb heat like you but in her case, it's easier to take it from natural sources while you can take yours from skills. So she's charging it up."

Oi, I'm jealous now. I know I shouldn't be since my skill still seems to be stronger, but I can't help it after seeing Izzy's new shiny toy.

"I'm going to hang around a bit, I'll join you before the attacks start," I tell Tess, already on my way over to Izzy.

Tess waves me off as if she had expected that response, she has a look on her face, almost like someone having to deal with a silly child, but I decide to let it go.

As I stop in front of Izzy, she opens her eyes and shouts, "Stupid Nona!"

"Yes yes, so what has Sophie prepared for you?" I point at the construct hanging above her head.

"I don't know, but it makes the sun warmer and I can absorb all of the extra heat."

Well, warmer is an understatement. I'm fairly sure that if Izzy wasn't absorbing the excess heat the concentrated light would be melting through the stairs right now. It would certainly be more than enough to burn a normal human alive. However Sophie's construct is also very fragile, I'm sure it's ready to crumble at the slightest touch. It's also connected to her web and seems to be receiving power from it. The mana cost to maintain it isn't very high either, it's honestly pretty efficient.

Maybe I should sit down with Sophie and the twins when I find some time. Lately, they've been cooking up some really nice stuff.

“And what is Noodle doing?” I look at the pearl-white snake with green eyes. The beast with an ancient bloodline or something.

“Noodle eats mana.”

“I know that; he’s always done that. Has he become any stronger, or gained any new abilities? What else can he do?”

Izzy starts thinking and then adds, “Noodle sleeps a lot too!”

I exchange a glance with the aforementioned danger noodle, and he flicks his tongue at me.

So eating and sleeping. What a life.

I'm jealous. Not even joking.

POV Sophie Martinez

“That maniac is at it again!” Aaron says out of nowhere, and I look up from the table where the three of us have been drawing our web.

By maniac, he can mean only one person. With a sigh, I connect to our web, and he’s right, the maniac is there. He’s going through the entire web of extremely delicate mana pathways I created as if it's nothing. He’s reading them at a speed that still shocks me, even now. How does he do that?

“Shhh, he might hear you,” Dennis says quickly and turns to me. “Should we try to push him out?”

“Just let him be, he’s done it before. He’ll get bored eventually,” I turn back to the table.

“But how does he do it? We are using [Connection] so we can cooperate, and he just cuts in. Oh, wow look! He made a change!”

“He’s infusing his mana into our web, though he’s not connected to it. I could spend more time on defenses, but there is no need for that now. And it’s okay, he’s creating a backdoor so he can connect to our web more easily next time.”

Dennis takes a moment to connect to the web and observe what the maniac is doing, “I wonder if it would be the same if we hadn’t restricted ourselves.”

“Yes, it would,” I respond. “Focus on your work. Though that does remind me, you guys are getting better at this, you should speak to him after the event. Maybe you can learn the coordinates from him and sell them at ten thousand shards a pop. He’ll probably want a portion, but you can still earn a decent amount.”

“A few thousand shards is nice, but after hearing how much he has, it feels depressing,” Dennis sighs and connects to my current project to help me with it.

The skill he shares with his brother is a boon when it comes to connecting the smaller webs of my design. Both of them have already acquired [Mana Manipulation], and I’ve agreed to teach them a bit.

I am just happy that they don’t blame me for failing to fight the First One back then. I wouldn’t blame them, and they were angry, but after what happened to Aaron’s disciple on the 5th and to them on the 6th, they’ve opened up a bit. Things here are complicated.

It’s a new experience for me as well, but for now, I think I’ll go along with Tess’s plans. It’s not so bad, and most importantly, Izzy seems to be having fun. She’s finally stopped pestering me about befriending the others.

Her [Empathy] is something else, it makes for a really scary skill, and my precious little sister is slowly growing up. Surrounded by danger she shines so painfully bright, constantly reminding me how much I love her.

The same is true for the twins; I can see the constant messages they exchange and the care they show for each other.

“So what do you think?” I ask them as they examine my preparations.

“We probably won’t be able to finish it before the attack starts, but somewhere in the middle, we should be able to convert your webs into a single unit for a short moment. The communication part is easy.”

“That much should be fine; Gareth and his group's pathetic web can fuck off.”

“Yeah, fuck off Gareth!” the twins smile happily, “Our skills work well together. Maybe we can be the psyops unit of group 4.”

“Tess will be the leader, and Lily will be our healer, Biscuit and Noodle will be the mascots. Izzy, well we’ll come up with something for her to do, and Kim can be long-range artillery with Tess while Maya tanks for us.”

“How about the maniac?” I ask curiously.

“He’s the person we call when we need to blow shit up.”

Chapter 347: Still considered human?

Unlike the 1st event, we haven’t been stripped of our items. In my case, I brought a voidsteel blade, the damaged arcane ax, and a few smaller things. The axe's performance can't compare to the glove Savant used, and I'm jealous.

Savant was restricted and, in my opinion, had pathetic mana reserves. Yet the glove still did such impressive damage. That’s why I rushed to put it on. If I had gotten the glove instead of him, I'm sure I would’ve torn the others apart in that event.

Damn, and that glove was only low arcane. So what does that make my ax? Low, mid, or upper? Nevan was really skilled and he collaborated with Champion Niall to make it, so maybe mid? And how high is the difference between the mid and the other tier? Surely it’s a wider gap than one would see when comparing rare or epic items.

I heft the ax in my hand. It feels heavy but not overly so, and it's warm even though I haven't fed it any mana. Its inner flame pulsates slowly like a beating heart.

During this event, I've decided to channel most of the thermal energy stored in my Vortex Core through the ax to put it through its paces.

The inscriptions on my skin are also going well, and the crown over my head holds quite a nice amount of mana at the moment. It also seems that I'll have no trouble keeping the crown active indefinitely. It does require a bit of mana for upkeep, but it's barely noticeable and my regeneration easily covers the cost.

Of course, the crown will require a bit more mana if I use it more heavily, but it'll be well worth it.

I've also been trying to infuse it with my other energies, but it doesn't seem to work. It only accepts mana, thermal, and kinetic energy refuses to enter at all. It is in the name though, so I can't be too mad.

During this event, I could send black mana to it, the way I did when I first got the skill, but even back then it felt like the explosion wasn't as strong as it could be. It was just the after-effects of two things clashing, and the resulting explosion was highly wasteful.

As I pass a group of the other participants one of the guys from Easy difficulty quickly jumps out of my way, apologizing as he rushes to avoid me.

There are whispers and people are glancing at me. It's something we've all had to deal with to some extent. The people from Easy difficulty are slowly beginning to realize the true difference between them and the higher difficulties. I've already overheard some of them questioning whether or not we can still be called humans. It's an interesting thought.

Am I still considered human? Do I care?

Some people seem to enjoy the rise in status while others seem to be worried by the prospect. Both positions are understandable. And it will be even worse when the tutorial ends and we encounter normal humans once more. Even now, there have been accidents caused by people from higher difficulties interacting with low level individuals.

A single hug can crush someone with a weaker body. Accidentally releasing a bit too much mana. The heat from a skill can burn people. These things happen.

People from Hell difficulty seem to do a better job controlling their powers, while it seems that those from Hard difficulty have a harder time. And people seem to realize it, every single one of the 31 people from Hell is being tiptoed around.

There are men offering their services as assistants. People trying to make connections. Groups asking us to intervene because of the power we hold.

Lily, who's clearly the strongest healer in Hell difficulty, has it the worst, a constant stream of people have been coming to her with old wounds, asking, begging, and offering to pay for her services. They want their limbs restored, or their hair regrown, or their scars healed and pain relieved.

They keep asking and asking. Even if there are over two thousand people and most of them are reasonable, there's also a group of people that are shameless. Even brave enough to ignore the difference in strength, wanting to take advantage of our kind hearted Lily.

It annoys me, they're doing it right now; when they should be focusing on the event with mere minutes remaining 'till the start. But healers are sought after and this is just the start.

Some people want their youth back, it's mostly meant as a joke, or at least I hope it is, but I don't think it's going to stay that way. We've seen it and looking at Lily's talent I actually think it will be possible for her, later. Just a few hundred more levels and making some normal human feel and look decades younger should be easy. Hell, there were people who lived thousands of years kept alive by the dead Saint's aura.

At her full power, the Saint Absolute was probably capable of holding that aura over entire cities, making its citizens almost immortal beings. Something like that is hard to fully grasp.

What would a power like that cause on Earth? Even if it was much weaker? Lily would become nobility instantly. One of the most powerful and important people on the planet.

I saw other healers too, mainly Gareth who can heal with his aura-like silver light. Even he is not at her level, not even close. His healing is much slower and more gradual.

Reaching the top of the wide stairway, most of the “leaders” are already present, and Gareth is arguing with Savant.

I observe for a while and, even now Savant seems to be a loner. Untrusting of others, only here to hear their plan to inform his own. But I notice an interesting item on him. A beautiful sword with half a blade. It's broken cleanly and yet even so, he wears it at his waist.

What is it?

When I try to extremely carefully send my mana there, a field around it detects it and pushes my senses away. A weaker version of [Dawn], meaning that Savant had learned the skill even before the third floor or at least sometime during it.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

He stops talking to Gareth and without a speck of doubt turns his eyes to me. Did he trace it back to me or was it a guess?

Calling Gareth and his way of dealing with things disgusting, he turns around and leaves with a clinical look on his face. It's like he is dissecting everyone he looks at.

I could go bully him, learn more about this sword he values so much, or perhaps as revenge for the 1st event. But that just feels cheap. Plus, I'm sure he would just leave the event rather than sit there and let me.

The others don't antagonize him either. Even if he has the strongest restriction right now, he was also in Beyond before any of us. He also climbs the Floors alone. No one underestimates him. And neither do I.

From the end of the first event, it felt like I should be able to fuck him up fairly easily. My domain is equal to or just slightly weaker than his, but with my reserves, I could just wait and brutally overpower him.

But I saw his expression during our last clash. He knows it and the same as me, he's planning countermeasures. He now sees my crown and more of my abilities.

But who cares? Prideful and cocky, Nathaniel is back. That guy is going down no matter what. Well, at least as long as I don't get matched with Tacita—that could be a bit problematic, to be honest.

"How much time do we have left?" I ask when I rejoin the group, slightly to the side.

"Five minutes," Tess answers simply.

Curious, I check her crown and she lets me do it. She has a fairly decent amount of Primordial lightning squared away. And a few javelins hanging in the air behind her, two of them epic. At this point, she has no problem making items like that float without a noticeable drain to her mana reserves.

Maybe I should do something like that, it looks cool.

Biscuit wobbles in at that point and for a moment I imagine him with some sort of crown of his own. I really like that idea. The corgi would look great. But knowing him, he's going to copy me without my interference.

We decide to make some last-minute changes. The groups that intend to cooperate with our little alliance will man the first wall and the field between it and the second. The plan is based around the theory that the difficulty being easiest at the start will provide an opportunity for those from the lower difficulties to score some points.

Currently, they are in place, their mana painfully slow to activate, and their skills at the ready. A lot of them seem to be taking this as a fun and friendly competition while they do their best to ignore the other difficulties. Some uncooperative groups are also on the walls, with their goal to gain as many points as possible.

The natives move about, following the orders of their leaders. Men and women in armor. Their levels rarely exceed a hundred, only a few manage to break two hundred, and only a single individual has a level approaching three hundred.

There is no notification as the five hours of preparation give way to defense. Just the earth shaking and far down the mountain, the ground begins to bulge out, and pieces of stone and dirt explode into the air. Revealing a deep dark hole and a head poking out.

An ant.

This one is smaller than the bus-sized monstrosities I remember. It's probably only as big as Biscuit. Almost a cute little thing. Almost. But the reaction is unsurprising.

In group 4 alone, most of us are wearing murderous expressions, and they are not the only ones. Some of the other participants from Hell difficulty are the same. Our hatred for the species seems to be unanimous.

So as the ant rushes out and behind him hundreds more ants start climbing out, they are close to abandoning our plans and attacking right away. Not caring that the monsters are only level thirty at most.

There is no invisible connection connecting them all, no hive mind. These ones seem much more normal, communicating only with pheromones.

"We are sticking to the plan," Tess says simply and I can sense one of the twins connecting to the web and sending communications to the leaders of each group.

Tess has a cold expression on her face as she says this, unlike many others. But just that seems to be enough and most of the people seem to calm down.

Sometimes I will have to learn how she communicates with them. I know Tess is scary at times, but she's wound the others around her finger too quickly. Is she using Lily, Sophie, and I as threats?

Well, let's check something first.

I use one of the anchors I've maintained with the help of a mana stone and appear on the spot closest to the hole in the ground which continues to spew forth ants.

The monsters notice me right away, dozens of them crawling my way while shooting acid at me. I just form a suit of armor around my body and ignore them while burning the ones that make contact.

I pass through them to reach the hole, before squatting and looking down the bore as the monsters surround me.

As the attacks crash all around me, I send my senses into the hole, seeking its origin. I would go down myself, but it's not very wide, and I refuse to crawl through there.

My senses detect thousands more monsters, most of them around level thirty or a bit higher. I do not detect anyone controlling them, not even another kind of monster.

For a moment, I think of creating an atomic bomb and throwing it in but decide against it. It would make Tess look silly, having others not attack while I do this as her group member.

Sure, it would be funny and satisfying, but... actually, just a tiny bomb wouldn't hurt anyone, right?

(Nat, if you do what I think you want to, I will stop keeping these people from bothering you,) I hear through the connection Sophie and the twins set up.

(All the people?) I ask.

(Do you think you're being left alone just because you went a bit wild during the first event? Tons of people wanted to talk to you. People rich outside of the tutorial, asslickers, people who wanted to become your disciple, or the ones that wanted to befriend you. There were also plenty of pretty young women and even a few men. I kept them all back.)

Well, I was a bit surprised that I wasn't being bothered more.

Disappointed, I use my anchor and reappear next to her. She just nods and smiles imperceptibly. Standing there tall and proud in her armor, her golden hair fluttering and crown floating over her head, Tess really looks regal and reliable as always.

"I will rely on you to run interference from here on."

She nods, "It's my pleasure. Let's just watch the kids play, and when the stronger ones pop out, you can do your thing. And Nat, be flashy when you do so."

That much was obvious, wasn't it?

"I have a good idea, you're going to like it." As I say so I get rid of all the traps I placed. All the anchors, all the threads, everything.

The others can have some fun comparing themselves to each other. Then after they're done I will show them something really nice.

Chapter 348: Under attack

I wave at Tess and leave the wall, heading to the generator that powers the barrier.

There I grab one of the natives by the shoulders, "Soldier! I have noticed that this part of the wall and defense is damaged. You are a scribe here to make sure it works smoothly, right? Explain the process to me so I can relay it further to our leadership."

Confused, the man looks around, trying to get anyone to help, but there is only me.

"We do not call ourselves soldiers, sir, but I will sir!" he answers in the end. "If you move over here, you can see the hidden control panel. You said there is a problem with it?"

"Yes, the enemy is attempting to disrupt the barrier on the first wall."

“That would be terrible! Let's quickly confirm everything's working as it should.”

“That's a good idea, soldier!”

“I'm not a soldier, sir. Please, right this way.”

The barrier is a much rougher version of the barrier the Bastion on the 5th floor had, so I don't spend much time checking it out. I just take note of some interesting ways they deal with this kind of construct, it will be useful in the future.

Yup, just thousands of level thirty, corgi-sized ants.

They are under the wall, nibbling on it at places while the lower difficulty participants shower them with attacks. Some of them do have some mildly interesting skills like hot water, a weak variation of hypnosis, some wider area sleep debuff, and snow attacks that seem nearly useless.

Then there are traditional mana projectiles, fire, and ice attacks, some kind of shadowy nonsense, weak variations of lightning, gravity, and telekinesis. Most of the people from Easy difficulty seem to be using their weapons as a crutch. Either as a focus for their mana or as damage amplifiers.

So far, the atmosphere is light and people laugh, joke, and smile as they compete to slay as many of the little monsters as possible. They find this easy as the ants struggle to climb the wall in spite of the barrier coating its surface.

Do they really think it's all going to be this easy? Actually, that may be what they're thinking. The weirdos.

I just continue to fill my crown and observe it while doing so. I haven't tested it properly yet and looking at it, it's still pale blue. From what I know, my mana changes colors the more dense it is. I'm not sure if it's the same for the others as it tends to change under the influence of skills, passives, and traits. I've seen plenty of variation, that's for sure.

For me, it's pale blue, followed by dark blue. As I push further it starts to develop pale blue streaks and beyond that, some of the streaks turn purple. And then it goes boom.

The crown is still at the light blue stage, hungrily devouring my mana. At this point, I start thinking this thing might be even scarier than my Mana Reservoir.

Moving a bit further from the others, I put my damaged arcane ax on my lap and send my senses inside it with the support of multiple skills.

During the tournament, I saw what an arcane weapon did in Savant's hands. The guy doesn't even have all that big a mana reserve and yet the weapon did such a great deal of damage and was even able to ignore natural barriers to some extent and have enough power to spare to hold people in place.

What would someone like me be capable of doing with that glove? With my mana reserves? I would easily win the 1st event, I believe.

So here I have a weapon of similar or maybe even higher rank. The glove was low arcane, meanwhile, the ax could be mid arcane at its peak. Even now, damaged as it is, it's at least upper epic in terms of power.

My goal is simple: to bring it up to par with a low arcane artifact, at least for a little while. It probably won't be anywhere near full power, but it should be more than enough to pull off the kind of flashy stuff Tess wants to see. And I will gladly oblige.

Mostly because I think it sounds like fun. But also to show others how dumb they were to restrict themselves. Tacita's the only one who stands out, either she has the least severe [Restriction] or she hasn't made it to the 6th floor yet. She probably hasn't made it, but I can't be sure.

As I observe the ax, it's the same as before. A myriad of twisting lines, and things I can barely perceive even as I use [Mana Domain] supported by [Mana Crown] and my Mana Wavelength Iris.

The interesting part is that I can't change these lines. I can't scratch them out as I could with other weapons. I can't connect new lines to them. I'm just not at the point where I would be capable of doing that with an arcane weapon.

Well, maybe that's not fully accurate. If I used a lot of mana, at full force, I should be capable of making it happen. The problem is that I lack the control required to do it properly and would probably just fuck things up instead.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

So the plan is simple. I will try to make use of my [Infusion] and recreate the missing lines. I won't even be etching them into the ax, rather I'm going to try to make a temporary connection, using thin threads of mana infused throughout the weapon in an attempt to reconnect the damaged parts.

My lines will be much weaker than the ones engraved in the weapon. They won't be able to bear the output the weapon requires. Well, not for long. If I do a good job, I should be able to use the weapon for a few seconds. Something between 5 to 30? It's really hard to say currently as I have no idea about the true power of the weapon.

Janky, just the way I like it.

A thin hand touches the blade of the ax, a presence I never felt until she got too close. It's obvious who it is.

When I look up, her lively eyes observe me and the ax from a veil of messy brown hair.

"110 thousand shards for the ax. Two thousand shards if you want to use it for one hour. I do not offer subscriptions to use during the events," I tell her. The more I observe the ax, the more I like it. Not for my personal use like the other weapons, but just for the opportunity to learn from it. So the prices have doubled.

Tacita points at the damaged part of the blade and gestures at me.

"Yes, it's damaged, but 100 thousand is for the cheapest low arcane weapons. This is more likely mid-grade."

She stops her gestures and pokes the ax a few more times. A gentle pulse of her mana rushes from her finger and through the surface of the weapon. Then she just shrugs and plops down on the grass, her back resting on the wall nearby.

After ten minutes, when I take a break from my work, I ask, "Are you waiting for stronger monsters too?"

A nod.

"Me too. I think others are being dumb if they think the system isn't going to throw some kind of bullshit at us. The increased rewards for the restrictions aren't going to be worth it."

Tacita energetically nods again, her hair flying around her head. Then she taps her temple a few times and smiles.

Thirty more minutes pass.

"Do you not like Tess?" I ask.

She looks up at me, thinking for a while.

A gesture with her hand.

"Not really?"

A nod.

"Yeah, Tess is scary."

Another nod.

“It shouldn't be that easy for someone to deal with people.”

Two quick nods.

Escaping Isabella's clutches, Noodle also appears nearby. I notice him sensing my mana and he quickly changes direction and rushes towards me at high speed. His tongue flicking towards my mana. Even from where I am, I can sense him absorbing tiny bits of the mana I release into the area around me for threat detection.

The amounts of that mana are incredibly small and even most people from Hell difficulty can't sense it. Yet here's Noodle nomming away at it.

When he gets closer, he freezes. Slowly his head turns to the right and he spots Tacita. He stares at her as if surprised by the fact he couldn't sense her up until now, nor even see her as she sits stock still and has probably managed to hide her heat somehow.

He quickly slithers towards me and then stops a short distance away, waiting.

“You can come.”

Once I give him permission the polite snake moves closer and gently coils around my arm, his head resting on my shoulder looking and following my gaze. Carefully, I release a bit of my mana which he starts absorbing.

Separating part of my mind, I observe as he absorbs mana, and with another part, I send senses towards the first wall.

Most of the folks from Easy difficulty are already starting to get low on mana, resting to the side, and groups from Normal difficulty are replacing them. Even now, an hour in, no monster has even reached the top of the wall; the barrier feels weaker, but it's still going strong.

So far, I've only sensed a few stronger attacks, mostly from bored people from Hard difficulty.

There is also a new kind of monster now. Spiders averaging around level 50. They emerge from the same holes as the ants, several having opened since last I checked. The ants and spiders do not fight each other, attacking together instead. They throw themselves against the barrier and sacrifice their lives to weaken it even a bit further.

So far, it seems to be working; as the mana from the batteries powering the barrier is slowly exhausted.

When exactly one hour has passed, the mood changes and the battle comes to a pause as the earth starts to shake.

Curious, I fly up, but something grabs my feet. When I look down, I see Tacita holding onto my feet, hanging in the air to get a better view.

I pause mid air and look down at her.

She looks at me.

“What the fuck.”

A shrug.

With a sigh, I fly us both higher and look beyond the first wall. As I scan the area another hole opens, much bigger than the others. Much, much bigger. From the hole, emerges a lizard-like monster, rising with slow, lazy movements, as it tears through earth and stone, before stomping and shaking to shed the rubble.

The monster has orange eyes with vertically slit pupils and a snake like head, with a body covered in gray scales. It stands on four thick legs, and its tail is long and very thin at the end. It almost reminds me of a Komodo dragon.

[Quake Serpent - lvl ???]

It doesn't feel as strong as the Gaiathra I saw in the Valley, much weaker actually, so maybe it just entered into the range of three question marks. Level 300 and some change perhaps?

It's earlier than I expected, but I can say that I was right. I would love to see Tess's and Savants' expressions right now.

The monster takes a few steps, killing hundreds of ants and spiders as it does so. Then a rumbling pulse of sound emerges from its body and appears to move through its strong legs and into the ground. The earth around it explodes, causing thousands of the small monsters to die, as the earth shakes. They eventually reach the wall, immediately cracking the surface.

It repeats, the barrier weakening even further as chunks of stone coming loose and taking some of our people with them. They either die from the fall or get killed by the monsters that continue to attack even as they are dying of the same damage.

Finally, screams fill the area, as people start to realize that the wall has been lost and rush to abandon the post.

Looking at the giant lizard, I have a single thought.

I can take it on easily.

Chapter 349: Have fun

At some point, Tacita lets go of my feet and lands nimbly like a cat, running somewhere else already with her incredible speed.

I look at Noodle, who is still coiled around my arm, "Why aren't you that big?" I ask, gesturing at the giant lizard. Noodle seems to understand and flicks his tongue a few times rather than answering.

Okay, you're cute, so you can keep your secrets. But remember good ol' Nat who fed you his mana when you're the size of a skyscraper.

I take a moment to locate our leadership and push myself over to them, a cacophony of frantic discussion assailing me as I land.

“Yes, I can fight it, but I believe it would cost me my life or render me useless afterward,” a man clad in simple armor says. The highest level native I’ve seen, the one approaching level three hundred.

“How is it possible for there to be such a strong monster? This event was supposed to be inclusive of all the difficulties, this just doesn't make any sense,” Samuel asks, looking around confused.

Oh, but it does.

I meet Tess's gaze, and whisper, “I was right.”

The system is an asshole.

I was right.

“Noname, do you think you can take it? You don’t have any restrictions,” Brainiac asks, he and his group close to Gareth.

“Who knows.”

For the first time, Savant joins the conversation, “There is surely a way around it. The system is usually fair, so it wouldn’t have done this without giving us a way to deal with it.”

Oh? So that's how he sees the system?

“Maybe that guy is meant to take care of the lizard?” Maya gestures toward the strongest native knight.

“Maybe.” Tess pauses, listening to an invisible voice, and then continues, “Dennis says the monster stopped attacking after it broke the 1st wall, and more of the stronger monsters are approaching the second.”

“Maybe it's just here to break the walls? A mechanic by the system?” Brainiac wonders, “Or it is on cooldown and needs some time to recharge its ability to break the walls and barriers.”

“This is not a game, Max,” Gareth says.

“Oh, come on, Gary, even these natives are nothing like the ones on the standard floors. This feels extremely gamey. We just need to CC the lizard when it tries to destroy another wall. Or we can try to kill it before that?”

“CC?” Gareth asks, but Brainiac ignores him and continues speaking to the others.

Through the Connection the twins have prepared for group 4, I send a message, (I'm sure the lizard isn't the end. I'm going to lay low until the end, either that or I'll do something flashy when you guys flunk out.)

(You don't want to help?) Aaron asks, somewhat surprised.

Instead of me, Tess answers, (Just let him do his thing. This is a nice opportunity for us to develop some teamwork.)

A number of messages are exchanged, but I'm already lifting off, as I feel Savant's piercing gaze settle on me.

I head deeper into the fortress, even beyond the first wall, and there I sit on top of the tower, my legs dangling over the edge with a view of the remaining two walls and the one that was destroyed.

Even from this distance, I can see the lizard lying near the rubble of the 1st wall and waiting. Maybe Brainiac really is right, or perhaps the lizard is there as a challenge for the stronger participants and will move either to face them or destroy the walls.

Just as before, thousands of monsters, ants, and spiders proceed to scuttle across the debris. These ones are slightly bigger, and their levels are starting to get closer and closer to 100.

I watch as they catch up with groups of stragglers from Easy and Normal that failed to escape quickly enough. The groups face them while pulling back with support from Hard difficulty.

A single spider the size of a motorcycle catches up to five of the weaker members, and I have fun watching as they face him with their might. There is something enthralling about seeing a group of people facing down an opponent stronger than themselves.

They are giving it their all, bleeding, screaming, using the last bits of their mana. There is no escape as the monsters surround them, and they are scared of dying, not having tasted it yet. So, they fight, giving it their all.

When the spider dies, impaled on one of their spears, they seem proud. The fear they felt until now is replaced by the elation of victory.

The feeling fades as a group of bigger ants reaches them, turning them into shiny particles as they disappear from the event.

Similar sights are happening all over.

One group is swallowed by a larger group of monsters as they try to aid the others. A lonely woman surrounded by yellow flames fights an entire group of monsters. The group running and barely escaping to the wall where someone stronger faces the monsters that were following them.

And the entire time, I keep working on the ax in my hands.

More time passes, and three hours remain.

Easy difficulty has been mostly wiped out, though few members still remain contributing with a ranged attack every now and then, unable to do more.

The second wall has already been surrounded and battered by the endless hordes of monsters, we've even seen a new type. An octopus-like monster that crawls over the ground, always surrounded by dozens of other monsters which move to protect it.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Their role is simple, getting close to the barrier and slowly corroding it with the cooperation of others of its kind. The method of attack is surprisingly effective, and quickly drains the barrier.

That's when Hell difficulty decides to move, throwing ranged attacks at the monsters while letting Normal and Hard difficulty mop up the rest with the natives.

Once again, everyone knows the difficulty is increasing, so they are saving their mana, only using amounts they know will regenerate quickly.

After another thirty minutes, the Quake Serpent moves. The giant monster stands up, the immense mass of its body moving alone threatening.

Pausing my work, I turn my attention down to the others and do it just in time.

The crown floating around Tess's head shines brighter, white and red lightning surrounding her and an epic javelin hangs in the air at her side. She makes an inaudible declaration, lightning seeping into the weapon. All eyes are on her as she stands on the second wall, her golden hair floating, lightning cracking around and through it.

She grabs a javelin and takes a stance, her leg moving back as she twists her body, the wall cracking around her. Then she throws the weapon.

Like myriad birds chirping, the lightning crackles as it passes through the air. Its flight accelerates half way through, having been boosted either by Min-Jae or Tess herself.

The lizard doesn't even have time to react, and the javelin lodges itself deep into its eye, disappearing somewhere inside its head.

As it does so, the monster starts thrashing around while emitting a scream that I feel in my bones. The monster releases the energy it was collecting, in an explosion with itself at the epicenter shaking the earth, creating holes in the ground, and even without being aimed correctly it manages to damage the wall.

The monster twists, twitches, scrambles, scratching its own head into a bloody ruin in an attempt to get rid of the piercing pain of Tess's attack and the lightning that now burns within its skull.

More and more mana radiates from the monster until the lightning stops. The lightning that flickered in its eye is now gone, drowned in the monster's mana.

The silence is almost eerie, followed only by the sound of falling debris caused by the thrashing of the wounded monster.

Then the lizard turns its remaining eye toward the source of the attack. Its tongue flicks out a few times, and something changes. The scales of the monster change color. From dark gray, they turn lighter, and like a wave, a shockwave radiates from the monster at the center. The attacks landing on its body now barely damage it, either sliding off or dispersing upon impact. Like pebbles thrown against a wall.

The attack has clearly revealed something about the monster's skills. I don't think Tess actually made an earnest attempt at killing it. They would have used Lily otherwise. This was just a probe to see what they were facing. They are unwilling to give their all, as they have a growing suspicion that the Quake Serpent won't be the end of it and might just be the start.

They could throw their might into trying to kill the giant monster quickly so they have fewer opponents to deal with later, but they can't be sure the monster doesn't have some other trick to play. It does have three question marks after all, the thing's over level 300. And there might also be another enemy waiting just for that.

Using the distraction, someone touches Sophie and the twin's web. It's a sharp, smooth movement. Hard to notice, clinical, using the fact that nearly everyone was focused on the lizard.

(Was this you?) a message sounds in my head. Sophie obviously noticed it as well.

(Nope.)

(I thought so, this felt different. Someone absorbed a small part of my web, creating a weak connection to it. It was him, right?)

(Probably.) From where I sit, I track the person who did it.

Savant, noticing the touch of my mana, pushes against it, a gentle orange light radiating from him. But before he does that, I notice that he is doing something with the broken blade he brought here. He seems to be preparing something as well.

I could stop him. I could even fly down there and forcibly take the sword off him. He would probably leave the event rather than let me, but even that could be a win for me.

What stops me is simple curiosity.

I want to see what he can do with the [Restriction] he placed and with his skills and the sword. I already have a suspicion of what the latter is.

So I just let it be and sneakily, to avoid leaving any tracks for Sophie, I clear the parts Savant messed up so she can't cut him off easily.

Then after seeing that the giant lizard doesn't attack, I return to the ax on my lap.

Two hours remain, and I have a theory.

As the natives said, there is a group of people attacking who specialize in taming. That group is controlling the Quake Serpent and using it only to destroy the walls when they are weakened.

This could be a setup made by the system or the fact that the group just doesn't want to throw the Serpent into an attack against the nearly level 300 human who defends the Aether Keep, who would probably kill it with his advantage as a defender.

So currently, it's a game of chicken, one side waiting for another to make the first step while weaker forces fight each other.

Moving for the third time, the Lizard destroys the second wall and, once again, stronger monsters start rushing out of the tunnels. Many of them are over level 150, ants, spiders, octopuses, and now even termites, in huge amounts.

Once again, the strongest people participating in the tutorial hold back and wait.

Hard difficulty people are fighting now, along with a few of the people from Hell difficulty, for the first time a large amount of mana blankets the area, and high damage skills start activating.

I observe things for a while, curious to find out what level the others are operating at and the kinds of skills they use. As I do so, I continue to dabble with Sophie's web, watching what Savant does to it. I find it interesting, and some of these things inspire me to the point that I decide to change my plans a bit.

Savant's interactions with the web feel clumsy but the progress and improvement he shows is nothing less than amazing. His clumsy first attempts quickly become much more confident and sneaky as he analyzes parts of the web and, while he's hiding from Sophie, he manages to absorb parts of it.

That's what they call a genius.

Some of the things he does are eye-opening, in ways I haven't even thought of, honestly, it'd probably take me dozens of attempts before I had the same idea. And he's doing it all with such a severe [Restriction].

But even then, he's far below my level and if I used my [Focus] and eyes, I would blow him out of the water easily. My skills and traits are just so much better when it comes down to it, and I'm sure they would continue to be so even if we were at the same [Restriction]. Even so, I'm not blind enough to not accept a simple fact: Savant is more talented than me.

However, it's something I never cared too much about. I've seen people like him my entire life. People born with talent, people born with stronger bodies and other advantages. In the end, it's about who is crazy enough to push themselves further.

Standing up, I stretch and take a glance at the fight taking place down there. Thousands of monsters are climbing over the destroyed walls, throwing themselves against the people standing their ground under the final barricade or those shooting from the top of the wall while the barrier flickers around, being attacked by the octopus-like monsters.

Screams, cries, and noises of skills burning through the air fill the area as blood is spilled.

Two hours remain until the end of the event, but my preparations are already done.

To be honest, watching them fight down there is getting annoying. It's frustrating to see how hesitant and careful they are. Sure, there's some logic to it, but if it were up to me, the giant lizard would have been nuked out of the event the moment it appeared. That would probably screw things up, and I would end up losing a limb or two, but it would feel more satisfying.

So while others are having fun, let's check on the Aether Keep.

(Have fun,) I send through the connection kept up by the twins and head towards the mines.

Chapter 350: Without a single speck of doubt

Landing on the balcony, I encounter very few people. Everyone from the tutorial is already fighting down there, and the explosions can be heard even at this distance, and I can feel the tremors in the ground, the vibrations shaking clouds of dust from the ceiling.

Once inside, I meet very few guards, only the bare minimum, along with some people in the uniforms of different workers. Further deep inside, the civilians lie in hiding.

Pushing through them all, I slowly pass by the rooms, scanning the area.

Like the exterior, the inside of the Aether Keep feels rough, yet it gives the impression of solidity and safety. There is a cozy feeling inherent in the tons of tough stone blocks surrounding us and the flickering orange light playing across the walls.

After a few minutes of walking through empty hallways, I pass through the door leading to the mines, and the atmosphere changes. The walls become rougher, the tunnels narrower, the lights brighter and the air isn't as well ventilated either.

After some time, small crystals seem to start growing from the walls, along with thin veins of mana-conductive metal. All mere chaff, left behind, not worth bothering with in comparison to the larger deposits deeper in the tunnels.

Surprisingly, the mines are constructed in the same pre-industrial style we once had on Earth, and probably still do in some places. To be honest, I expected something different.

Sure, the walls are rather smooth, compared to those on Earth. The light is sharp and emits no smoke. Even parts of the tunnels were probably constructed much quicker than their counterparts on Earth. There is also no need for wooden supports, it's all been reinforced with the help of skills. And the ventilation works surprisingly well.

Yet... I don't know what I expected. Wouldn't a single high-level individual be able to do this much, almost, on their own? That probably creates its own issues but it also raises more questions.

Maybe they have regulations to prevent materials from being mined too quickly, and flooding the market?

That is more likely.

How interesting.

The more I learn, the more I find out how little I know. An entirely new world is constantly being opened up to me.

I expand my domain and place an anchor further ahead to which I teleport, and then repeat this multiple times in quick succession.

In a few seconds, I pass a much greater distance than I did in ten minutes of walking, and I continue until I reach the smaller cave that seems to serve as storage.

There are massive and, from testing, extremely heavy iron boxes. After cutting them apart, I find them to be full of chunks of the mana-conductive metal arcanadium. Something I have some experience with.

In its rough state, the metal is darker, and there are imperfections in it, unlike the ingots I found in the bunkers on the 5th floor.

(You are not going to join? I thought Tess wanted you to be flashy?) I hear Sophie say through the connection made by twins.

Holding a chunk of arcanadium in my hand and examining it, I answer, (You guys have some fun. I'll do something flashy after you all die.)

(You better not regret it when we kill the serpent and you don't get any points. Check the leaderboard; you are dead last.) After that, Sophie cancels the connection.

I do not even bother checking it and send another pulse into the area.

Locating another stockpile, I move there with a few teleports, and this time open a box containing ethercrystals, a material capable of absorbing mana in its vicinity when properly prepared. A sword I once had on the 4th floor and the ax I found in the 1st event were made of the same material. Both weapons turned absorbed mana into physical enhancements.

As with the arcanadium before, the ethercrystal here hasn't been processed, a number of the crystals are milky, cracked, or are simply an inferior product. It also seems to make them less receptive to mana.

The ground under me shakes, and dust falls from the ceiling, and the roar of the monster reaches me even down here. A loud crack erupts, and I teleport away as the place I stood ends up buried under a mass of stones.

I teleport a few more times, finding a cache of mining tools. Clothes, masks, and tools suitable for excavation.

Once again the ground shakes and the dust starts falling from the ceiling as if it intends to fall on me, but this time I create a barrier and support the walls, stopping the stones from burying me.

Then I continue to examine the inscriptions on the tools. They're really simple, yet there is beauty in their simplicity. A great deal of focus seems to have been given to improving their efficiency and reducing mana consumption.

The protective gear is similar. Some parts of it even have inscriptions to keep you warm when fueled by mana. The inscriptions on the clothes have been woven from threads containing bits of conductive material that I have a hard time identifying.

Putting it away, I sit on the ground and look at the barrier holding up the stone around me.

It's a shame that the shop is locked; I could sell a lot of stuff. It's also a shame we can't take items from the events, we've known that since the 1st event. But I guess it would be too much if someone took a low arcane item out of an event or tons of materials from the mines.

I release the barrier and watch as the stones start falling, about to bury me there, and at the last moment, I use the anchor I left outside and teleport to it.

Appearing at the tower behind the last standing wall, I sit at the top looking down upon the pandemonium.

The Quake Serpent is now shining a brilliant shade of white, though one eye is still blind. But the monster is moving extremely quickly, belying its size. The lizard rushes towards Lily who avoids its attack, and once in a while, a burst of gray mana pours out from her. She's still carrying the bag of our limbs on her back.

Great holes have been rent in the monster's flesh, eaten away by [Disintegration]. Even the monster's head hasn't come away unscathed, signs of a failed attempt at destroying the brain I would imagine.

Chunks of metal the size of large cars fall from the sky, pulled by an invisible force, striking the monster and dumping an immense amount of kinetic energy from the sheer speed and weight.

I locate Min-Jae who seems to be controlling them. His attacks do cause some damage, but not enough. There is also Brainiac who keeps taking potshots at the lizard's good eye with his invisible projectiles.

With a horrifying noise, three javelins come flying down, burrowing into the Quake Serpent's head, immediately followed by red and white lightning crashing from the sky and flowing into the weapons.

The monster roars again, thrashing around, killing any monsters and people that get too close.

Even so, there's not much in the way of damage. The monster still moves, quickly approaching the wall, only to be stopped by a man with a silver barrier surrounding him.

The earth shakes, and the wall is cracking and about to break apart when the strongest native finally moves. His mana surrounds him like a cape and he draws a sword wrapped in a brilliant light as he enters the fray, confidently facing the monster.

The monster rears up, towering high in the air, its white scales seeming almost indomitable.

That's when purple tentacles explode from the ground, each as big as the monster, crawling over its body, tying it down, surrounding it, the tips piercing into the lizard's body.

The monster roars, falling to all fours as the tentacles envelop its face, hooking themselves to its maw and forcing it open.

There Biscuit floats nearby, a purple ball of mana floating over his form. The orb destabilizes, turning bright white, only to be shot into the monster's mouth just before the tentacles weaken and disappear.

Biscuit starts fluttering in the air about to fall down when Min-Jae reaches him and pulls him into his arms, flying away as quickly as he can with his clumsy method.

As the monster tries to spit out the orb, it explodes from within, its jaw reduced to a bloody mess. Blood drips from the gaping hole, and the moment that blood touches the ground it melts the stone, creating a toxic mist.

Even that kills multiple people, even a few of those being protected by Gareth's silver light.

The native knight attacks next, his sword extending much further as he thrusts the blade at the Quake Serpent.

The ensuing fight goes on for quite a while.

Natives, and the people of Hell difficulty come together to defeat the Quake Serpent. More monsters appear to help, separating the groups and forcing them to deal with weaker monsters as well.

Isabella unleashes the orbs she's been charging all this time, the two of them manage to consume one of the Quake Serpent's legs in its entirety, taking a big chunk of the beast's torso with it. The sheer heat generated by the skill kills some of the defenders and forces Lily and Gareth to heal a few of the more important fighters.

The web covering the entire Aether Keep activates finally, strengthening Sophie's skill and its reach. Thousands of ants turn against each other, tearing their fellow attackers apart, some even start crawling up the giant lizard.

And then she takes over more ants. And more. Between the web and her cooperation with the Twins, Sophie controls thousands of monsters, forcing them to fight their own forces, defending even against the opposing army's attempts to wrest them from her control.

With one final burst, Tess releases a stream of lightning into the giant lizard's head, and finally, the giant beast stumbles.

Its body crumbles as its maw continues to move, trying to bite at something, anything, its toxic blood splashing over the ground, the fumes killing indiscriminately.

The survivors stare, unmoving, not knowing how to react as the massive creature falls.

There is silence that slowly breaks into a loud shout, the ones remaining celebrating the victory.

The monsters taken over by Sophie through her and the twins' web turn to attack again, clearing the remaining forces. Gradually, others join the fight.

An hour remains.

Tacita and Savant are nowhere to be seen, and under Tess's orders, group 4 goes to rest, preparing for what is surely to come.

Thirty minutes remain. The silence is unnerving, and some natives disperse, celebrating already with their families hidden in the mines.

Lily refuses to heal, conserving her mana and the bag of limbs on her back. An army of a few hundred ants stays off to the side, under Sophie's control, and Isabella is once again charging her fireballs. The silence is eerie, the wind quietly blowing over the battlefield.

Unauthorized duplication: this narrative has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

Twenty minutes remain and nerves are frayed, some of the surviving tutorial attendees quarrel with each other, constantly looking for a danger that they can't see or feel.

A few smaller fights erupt, but neither Tess nor Gareth can be bothered to interrupt.

Everyone is saving their energy and when some of them look towards me with nervous expressions, I return their gaze.

Fifteen minutes remain and one of the corpses on the battlefield starts twitching. A big spider with a myriad of symbols all over its skin. The corpse moves from inside, skin stretching and limbs bending until the chitin splits, and another form crawls from the dead monster.

A domain envelops the area and the remaining members of Easy, Normal, and Hard difficulty die nearly instantly, their bodies turning into shiny particles.

As they die, the monster covered in blood and gore from the spider stretches. A human-like figure with eight eyes. Its skin seemingly replaced with a black carapace and two additional pairs of spider-like legs protrude from its back.

[Rotweaver - lvl ???]

It's somewhere between levels 320-340. If I had to guess.

In that moment, multiple things happen.

Savant takes over the web, the gentle orange light of his domain surrounding the area and pushing against the monster's domain while attacking it at the same time.

After a long while, Tacita also appears. Out of nowhere, she is just there, standing by the Rotweaver's side, her dagger coated in mana.

The monster moves, reacting to her but it's too late. The dagger in Tacita's hand turns into a blur, and green blood explodes into the air. The severed head and limbs of the monster fall to the ground and silence ensues.

Tacita disappears again and at the same time another corpse on the opposite side of the battlefield starts moving, twisting, and from its inside, the Rotweaver steps out. Before the monster has even fully emerged, Tacita is already there, a hand turning into a blur and its head flies off.

The Rotweaver dies and another corpse moves.

When Tacita reaches it this time, her attack deals no damage, spraying sparks into the air as the dagger skids off the carapace.

Swiftly changing posture, Tacita stabs instead, her dagger burrowing into the monster's mouth and she moves her hand, cutting the head open.

A new corpse twitches. Then another and another. A dozen corpses move.

The others join in this time, fire raining down, lightning erupting, and a mental attack probing here and there, but to no avail, there are too many corpses and the Rotweaver stands up again and again.

Its domain expands, as Savant's shrinks, unable to resist the monster any further. Gareth is forced to surround his team with silver light to fight its influence, and Tacita is gone again, waiting for an opportunity.

Thousands of corpses left outside start twitching. Natives, monster corpses, all of them get back on their feet. No matter how damaged the monster is. It doesn't matter how many of their limbs are missing, or if the head is gone, or if half the body's been destroyed. All of them rise at once, reanimated by the Rotweaver.

At last, even the corpse of the Quake Serpent stands up, both of its eyes missing, covered in wounds. The ground shakes under its feet.

The fight starts anew.

Sophie fights, trying to maintain control over her ants while Savant decimates the enemy forces with the help of his domain and the web he's partially absorbed, even with his [Restriction].

Tess, Lily, and Gareth face the Rotweaver. Tess supports the duo from a distance, Gareth tries to take as much attention off them as he can, and Lily finally sacrifices the limbs in the bag, her speed equalling Tacita's, and her gray mana obliterates the monster.

The monster is powerful, but not that powerful. Its strength lies somewhere else. No matter how many times they kill it, it always pops up anew, growing more resistant to their attacks and learning more.

Others fight the giant lizard and thousands of monsters radiating an energy that seems to make the domain of the Rotweaver even worse the more monsters surround them.

10 minutes remain when Swordmaster dies along with a few people from the other groups.

9 minutes remain when Bard and AnotherOneHere die under the assault of the Quake Serpent.

8 minutes remain when Sophie and Isabella disappear, killed by hundreds of monsters, drained of their energy and their blue flames dying out.

7 minutes when a few members of Gareth's group disappear.

6 minutes when Min-Jae and the twins get overrun after Min-jae deals significant damage to the Quake Serpent.

5 minutes and Tacita appears again, in quick succession killing the Rotweaver five times. Then dying as the monster's domain focuses on her.

4 minutes and Savant's domain disappears and immediately after most of the remaining members die, Savant is one of the first.

3 minutes and Gareth runs out of mana, his silver light and crown disappearing. Tess disappears too with Biscuit who was trying to help her, dozens of purple tentacles tearing monsters apart and his gentle purple light pushing against the domain.

Lily, now with one arm remaining, falls to the monster as well, her mana gone and the domain taking its toll on her.

2 minutes remain as Rotweaver pulls out the heart of the strongest native, the man unable to do anything.

Rotweaver increases its output, the monster seemingly much stronger than it was when the fight started. Growing stronger as the end of the event closes in.

Terribly wounded, Quake Serpent moves quickly, a charge collecting in its body and animated corpses of humans and monsters crawling all over the battlefield, a sickly light radiating from them.

The Rotweaver eats the still beating Mana Heart of the knight it just killed, and its eight eyes turn to me.

It's dark outside.

One minute remains and I stand up, my domain expanding as I take over the remains of the web, using it in the same way as Savant, something I learned from his example.

My Vortex Core empties, thermal energy flowing into the damaged arcane exe, and the crown over my head starts flooding my body with mana.

This won't take long.

POV Channeler

The fight taking place on the screen in the common area is hard to comprehend. I knew the people from Hell difficulty were strong, but this is too much. Facing monsters stronger than anything I knew could exist, they hold their ground, using skills in a way I can't imagine.

I and everyone already outside are once again reminded of the sheer difference between us. It's not only stats or skill levels. It's also the way they fight.

People from Hell difficulty are hungrier, wilder, and more aggressive. From the way they're fighting, it almost feels like it's just another day for them. They do not hesitate when that powerful monster attacks, throwing everything against it.

The silence that fills the common area is eerie, and through the screen, we can even feel a portion of the pressure being generated by the monster. It's not quite like a monitor, it's more like a screened window allowing "air" to flow through.

Though the system is limiting it, I feel myself getting sick just from the mana being released by the monster.

Even being so strong, people from Hell difficulty die one after another, all of them appearing in the common area, their bodies restored, clothes fixed, and mana replenished. None of them seem satisfied like they're eager to jump back in and face that horror inside.

So this is why they are where they are.

When a minute remains, I check the leaderboards.

1st (689 pts) - Soph

2nd (576 pts) - Savant

3rd (553 pts) - Sset

4th (551 pts) - Tacita

5th (501 pts) - Grumpy

6th (490 pts) - Gareth

7th (471 pts) - Brainiac

8th (469 pts) - TheStrongestOne

9th (401 pts) - NotAaron

10th (389 pts) - FoodFood

And there is one name right at the bottom

2357th (-99 pts) - Noname

The last remaining person inside the second event finally moves, seemingly unaffected by the pressure that caused the others so much trouble.

Noname is wearing simple, almost casual clothes; he wears no armor, and no visible equipment other than the ax and a weird blade on his belt. Standing there, he seems out of place, careless even. He moves his hand, sweeping the hair from his eyes, and I can see the gold circles appear around his pupils on the screen.

Even now, he maintains his neutral expression.

Some people start talking, complaining about why he hasn't helped until now, but an orange light radiates from a single man, the pressure bringing the babbling masses to their knees.

"Shut up," the man says simply, his eyes glued to the screen.

Noname, as if he knows we're all watching, stretches, and for the first time since I've met him, a smile overtakes his face. It's an eager smile, careless, and full of honesty.

He is happy, and it is terrifying.

Noname floats into the air in that unnervingly stable flight of his, almost as if the world is moving around him rather than him moving through it. The ax in his hand glows brighter, and I can swear I feel the heat radiating from the system's window.

Rotweaver screeches for the first time, the sickly aura it radiates tries to expand again but it can't, held at bay by something else, something even stronger.

As he swings the ax, golden flames explode. Like a wave, they pour from the weapon's blade. Small at first, but quickly expanding and crashing into the monster below.

The stone burns red now; corpses are set ablaze, burned to ashes nearly immediately. The flames reach the Quake Serpent, setting even this monster ablaze. They climb up its massive body like a living being.

20th (299 pts) - Noname

Quake Serpent roars soundlessly, a shockwave exploding through the earth as it rushes towards Noname who isn't even flying all that high, about to take a bite at him.

Something black moves around Noname, and inconceivably the monster freezes in place, its mangled bloody maw wide open around him.

With calm movement, he lifts the ax and once again the flames explode, flowing right into the monster's face and mouth, burning it from inside. The flames feel alive as they eat the monster, turning its giant body into a charred husk while it can't even move.

6th (499 pts) - Noname

The air around him flickers from the sheer heat and the remains of the monster get blown away.

Rotweaver screeches again, the limbs behind its back weave and glow, a more sickly aura radiating from the monster. The remaining reanimated corpses move as one in their offensive.

The ax swings again, the rest of the monsters burned by a flame that envelops the entire area. At the same time, Noname lands on the ground, all around him his golden flames burning, the ground cracked and turned into magma.

Wounds cover his body, but they are slowly healing. The flames closest to him get pulled into the ax.

1st (798 pts) -Noname

After a few steps, he stops, a silence so deep the only sound is the breathing of the people in the common area. All gazes are on the screen as that man stops in front of the monster, surrounded by that hellish landscape. It's dark and only his flames serve to light the area.

The Rotweaver is burned, the left half of its body missing, three of its eyes are burned out and the aura it had radiated so intensely is just flickering. There are no more corpses to escape to.

On its own feet, the monster tries to run, but with a speed that rivals Tacita's, he reaches it. He grabs the back of its neck and burrows the monster's head into the molten earth.

The smile on his face grows even wider as the crown over his head loses most of its shine, mana flowing into an orb the size of a basketball. The floating orb changes colors in quick succession, from pale blue to dark blue, then gets streaks of light blue and purple all over, and then starts shining bright white with a shimmering of golden light. The sheer amount of mana it contains is hard to imagine.

"That dumbass," someone whispers, and when I look up I notice it's Sset. "That fucking dumbass," she repeats.

As if hearing, Noname blinks, a bit of his usual casual face returning, and he glances towards the Aether Keep just nearby.

"Oh," his mouth moves as if he just remembered something.

But it's too late and the orb explodes, instantly evaporating what remains of the monster.

1st (1298 pts) - Noname

A burst of flames erupts from the center of the ball, in a shockwave sending the remains of the wall and earth into the air. They expand at great speed, destroying everything in their path.

As they are about to reach the Aether Keep, they freeze. The flickering air immolating everything in its way stops, and the heat disappears. The shockwave, nearly visible, flickers in the air.

All of this held at bay by that single body that produced it all.

In that moment I realize that it's only been one year since the tutorial started and that nothing will ever be the same, even if we return to Earth. Our lives have changed, and the Earth will change, all because of him and people like him.

Noname, looking like he is about to break apart, finally disappears, appearing in the common area. With his clothes, and mana restored.

The living weapon and winner of the second event without a single speck of doubt.