

Tutorial 371

Chapter 371: Sparring

The first stop is Channeler, who I've had preparing a few opponents for Vega from the lower difficulties. In part, so that she can gain some experience in a relatively safe space, though I mostly want to see how these guys handle the little half-demon.

I locate one of my anchors opting to fly over instead of teleporting. I head over to the anchor until I reach Channeler who's surrounded by almost a hundred people.

"Sorry, they were curious and wanted to watch. Most of them have been cooperative," Channeler says by way of greeting.

"That's fine," I tell him before turning to Vega to get one last confirmation. "Are you ready, minion? The plan is for you to fight until we find someone about as strong as you, and then for you to spar with them."

"Can I stop holding back? Like with that girl where I couldn't hear her heart?"

"Sure, go all out. I'll interfere if it's going to be too much."

Having her answer, Vega stretches in imitation of me, staring in the direction of the hodgepodge of people from Easy, Normal, and a few curious individuals from Hard difficulty that Channeler's managed to round up.

"We can start with George and Susan; they are both from Easy difficulty."

"Yeah, I don't think that's a good idea," I say, examining them.

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh," his expression turns serious. "Then give me a moment."

While Channeler goes to the group of people, I turn to Vega, "Change of plans, minion. Start slowly, and if they are weak, stop fighting. Find out if they can keep up before putting in too much effort."

"Why? If they're really that weak, they need to know!"

"Channeler spent a lot of effort pulling these people together, and I don't want them to think he did this just so a 6-year-old girl could curb stomp them."

"Minion Channeler should just be happy that master keeps him around!" Vega says.

"I know where you are coming from, minion, but try to think about the future. If I cause too much trouble for him, he'll find someone else to work for."

"You should let him if he's really that dumb," she says, "there's no reason for you to work with people like that!"

"Minion, you're being too naive. There are situations where you want something, and you can't avoid people. Having someone who understands you and deals with them in your place is invaluable."

"Is that true?" Vega asks, seeming to suspect me of lying.

"It's true, minion," I say, ruffling her hair out of habit. "So respect these people and keep them close. They won't work for free, so make sure to make it worth their time. Otherwise, they may leave you in the lurch at the first opportunity."

"Demons wouldn't do that! They only follow the strong, so I need to become strong enough that they don't leave!"

"That may be minion. But I still want you to think about it, okay?"

After my minions nod in agreement, the Channeler comes back, just in time.

"We've decided to start with George and Susan from Easy. I already explained everything to them." He says.

"Sounds good."

I give Vega a push, and she steps forward, even now I'm keeping my full suite of senses focused on her. I might really be paranoid.

Once the woman and man from Easy difficulty finally square off against her, the fight starts.

It's Vega who attacks first, and 5 seconds later, the man and the woman roll on the ground. Nothing seems to be broken, except maybe their pride.

Good minion, she did what I asked her to.

"Please, Noname, can you tell your disciple to hold back a bit? I didn't know she was that strong," Channeler whispers, coming to me after checking the man and woman over for injuries.

"She did hold back. A lot." I whisper in response

"But you said she was level 62."

"Yes."

"But... okay, forget about it. Let's try Jon from Normal. He is one of the stronger ones there and should at least be higher level than she is."

After I agree, the short, muscular, and wide man moves to face Vega.

There is already a weak, almost transparent mana armor around his body with a deeper shade of blue around his forearms. The palms of his hands are darker yet, covered in a strange form of mana.

Once again, Vega charges first, not even creating a dagger in her hand.

She dodges under the man's kick altering her speed multiple times in quick succession. In an effort to confuse the man and throw him off. She then closes in on him, burying her knee in his crotch in one smooth movement.

Unfortunately for the man, her knee sends a weak burst of kinetic energy through. The mana armor around him flickers as he almost loses control over his skill, and with a groan, Jon stumbles back.

Before he can say anything, Vega kicks him again hammering away at the same spot, breaking through the stronger armor around his forearms and piercing his last defense.

For a moment, I think she might attack again, but she stops and looks down at the adult man rolling on the ground with a confused expression on her face.

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"Master, he isn't even hurt that much. It's just a little pain. Why is he lying down? He would be dead if this was a real fight." She asks, turning to me.

While Channeler rushes to the man, she rejoins me, and I quickly create a barrier around us to keep anyone from hearing her and thus preserve what remains of the man's dignity.

"He is older than me and has more mana too. But he's weak and slow. And he gave up so easily. I didn't even use the kick at its full power so it couldn't have hurt that much." Vega sighs disappointed.

Even though she tries to hide it, I notice a hint of a smug smile on her face as she watches her defeated opponent.

Damn it, minion.

The last hope of protecting the tutorial attendees' dignity is the man from Hard difficulty.

Well, there are three of them, but Channeler only picks one while the remaining two talk and laugh.

I think I heard something interesting, so I try to strengthen my hearing in that way that some members of my group can. But I'm only able to hear bits and pieces of their conversation. Being able to listen to others isn't an ability I've ever found to be worth the time investment.

In the end, I turn back to Vega and her opponents as they take their places. His level should be closer to 100, so he should have a good shot at defeating my minion.

Unlike the others, he also radiates more mana, and his body strengthening seems better. Another melee build, seemingly, though he does seem to have a weak sheet of weak lightning arcing across his body as he seizes the initiative.

Vega waits until the last moment, and with her body boosted by kinetic energy, she dodges to the side, launching a single mana projectile at the man who dodges it and charges her again. Vega creates a dagger in her hand, and the man also radiates more mana, the lightning around him flickering even beyond his body which he uses to ward her off.

The minion used to melee range doesn't seem to like it. It's clearly a barrier between her and the kind of fight she enjoys.

Even so, she doesn't hesitate and releases more mana, forming a weak imitation of mana armor.

With a strong push of kinetic energy, she reaches the man even as his kick lands on her arm, leaving a scorched mark behind.

For a short moment, the man looks towards me, expecting me to stop the fight. It almost costs him, and he barely blocks the kick aimed at his nether regions.

As an answer, a burst of lightning shoots towards Vega, and the armor around her body moves, all the mana concentrating on her forearm which she uses to block it.

She launches another orb of mana, boosted by her kinetic energy at the man who hastily avoids it, only for Vega to use the opportunity to close distance, with a knife in hand. The move seems to be an imitation of Tacita's style, with a hint of my minion's aggressiveness and her skills as a crutch to get her out of any tricky situations she happens to land in.

But before she can even connect, the man moves at a higher speed, and his kick sends Vega rolling on the grass as she clumsily tries to absorb her own momentum.

The man once again checks with me, and seeing I don't mind, he sighs. Then he follows my gaze and notices a mana knife lodged in his calf.

An expression of surprise is quickly replaced by pain, and he pulls it out, the mana dissolving once Vega's dismissed it.

Getting back on her feet, my minion smiles with determination, despite the burn marks on her skin, and the scratches covering her body. Her shoulder also seems to be dislocated.

So cool.

"Minion, say 'I can do this all day.'"

"I can do this all day!" she shouts and charges the man again.

They clash shortly multiple times, leaving another small wound each time, barely a nuisance to the man in question, and more burns for Vega. But my minion keeps coming back for more.

The man isn't even holding back, and despite being at a higher level, he seems to be having trouble dealing with the nimble half-demon, who's been using kinetic energy to move erratically and weaken his physical attacks.

It goes on for a minute or two, but at some point, the fight starts getting too heated, so I decide to interfere.

"That should be enough," I call.

Vega refuses to stop, continuing to charge the man who stopped the moment I called.

So I use [Redistribution] and grab hold of my silly minion, who freezes mid-air, moving slowly toward her opponent. A wild expression has overtaken her face, and in each hand, she holds a dagger. The daggers at this point are nearly transparent, a clear sign of her depleted mana.

I boost myself closer with my kinetic energy and poke her nose a few times, my minion locked in place.

"Thanks for helping," I tell the man from Hard difficulty. "My disciple seemed to be having a lot of fun."

Unlike Vega, the man has already healed. A result of the healing aura in the common area. Vega's state only serves to confirm my suspicions regarding the protections afforded by this place.

"It's fine." The Hard difficulty attendee says smiling weakly and turning to my minion. "She's very strong. Your name is Vega, right? Thank you for the duel."

Vega still doesn't move as I hold her in my skill.

"She won't answer. I need to punish her for being so stubborn. Can you thank Channeler for me as well? I'll meet up with him sometime in the other events."

"I'll pass it along."

I touch Vega and transport us both to one of the more private spots I discovered. It's a clearing pretty far away from the common area, surrounded by trees and a small stream of clear water passing through.

It's comfortably quiet here.

"Do you know what you did wrong?" I ask her.

Vega blinks a few times, still bound in the air. She can't defend herself even as I touch and push the tip of her nose, tilting it upwards, "I wouldn't expect such a dumb way of fighting from someone with [Concentration]. Do you agree?"

Silence.

"I mean, some aggression is fine, but to go to the point of acting more like an animal than a thinking human? Isn't that too much? If you want to be aggressive, go into it with some strategy in mind or at least be strong enough to get away with it."

I give her some more boops on the nose and move her hair, covering her face until she can barely see me through it. Then I tickle her.

"Some opponents are weak against rapid attacks and aggressive opponents. Others are weak against ranged attacks. Another group isn't good at physical combat. Yet I have noticed that my silly disciple still fights the same. No matter how much I try to change it."

I pull a patch of grass from the ground and put it on her head.

"I wouldn't say anything if you were strong and excelled at a single type of combat. In that case, you might be able to make it work. But minion, you aren't there yet."

Lastly, I move her body over the stream of water and release my skill, leaving her to fall into it.

Quickly jumps out spitting water and sputtering like an angry kitten, shaking and letting out a series of hissing noises. Then she stands there, angry, wet, and wounded from the duel.

"Have you any defense, minion?"

When she stands quiet, I move closer and touch her, teleporting us over to Lily, who didn't expect to see Vega after already saying goodbye. And especially not in such a state.

Before we return to Miwa, Vega changes into new clothes and gets fully healed.

Then I teleport us back to Miwa. Between my experience using [Tether] and Vega's improved level, I clearly don't have to worry about hurting her anymore.

Chapter 372: What were you talking about

"Hello, I'm Miwa," the woman says, introducing herself to Vega with a small bow.

"I'm Vega!" Vega replies.

"It's nice to meet you, Vega."

My disciple and I look around the small but cozy kitchen of Miwa's house. Unlike the smithy she's rented out with and shares with several people from Hard and Hell difficulty to use at set times, the house we find her in now is hers alone, and spread out on the table in front of us are the ingredients she's prepared.

Vega's already been told what her surprise will be and seems all the more excited for it. After saying goodbye to group 4, she was overcome with joy the moment she heard what we would be making.

Meanwhile, group 4 got only a few short words, Biscuit and Noodle being the only exceptions. Though maybe Tess and Lily were exceptions as well, after all, Vega seems to have recognized them as the top dogs of our pack.

"We will prepare the dough first. Do you want me to do it, or do you want to do yourselves?"

"We'll do it. Vega, sleeves up, and let's wash our hands before we start."

"Yes, master!" The little half-demon says, washing her hands as I lift her up to the sink, and then I do the same, waiting for Miwa's instructions afterward.

"See the bowl I prepared? Add a bit of sugar and yeast and mix it with warm water. Then we let it sit for anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes. The yeast might not be very good anymore, so the dough may not turn out all that well. But there is nothing we can do."

"Not a problem, you already warned me. Vega, you're in charge of mixing, okay?"

"Yes!"

I take the yeast and sugar and put them into the bowl with warm water following Miwa's instructions.

Vega gets off to a clumsy start, so Miwa steps in and guides her hands in a more stable motion. She then has to stop Vega from eating the raw dough.

Once she's done mixing the dough, Vega washes her hands again, making me lift her up to the sink, and Miwa covers the bowl with a towel.

"While we wait, you should add flour and salt to a bowl and we'll blend it with the dough when it's done." Miwa gives Vega the proportions, though Vega manages to spill some flour on the table.

When the dough is ready ten minutes later, I take it and add to the bowl with the flour and salt.

Vega sits on a chair, watching nearby, fixated on my every movement as I blend it all together with some oil. The mood between us is still a bit awkward because of what happened during and after her sparring match, but being so young, she quickly shrugs it off and starts enjoying herself in fairly short order.

This time it's my turn for Miwa to teach me the proper methods, and I knead it on the table which she coats with a dusting of flour to make it less sticky.

Somehow I can't help but find it relaxing, I even take a small chunk of dough and fling it at Vega.

The little half-demon giggles and shoots a mana projectile at my face which I disrupt. Though playful, her attack is strong enough to kill someone from Easy difficulty.

I continue kneading for 5 minutes, and Miwa corrects me multiple times, even asking how it's possible to make a dough so stiff and ugly. Behind her back, Vega furrows her brows and forms more projectiles, but I disrupt them before she can send them rushing at Miwa.

Next, Vega oils the bowl, and we put my kneaded dough inside, cover it with a damp cloth, and put it near the heated oven so it can rise. This will take an hour or so.

While we wait, Miwa talks to me about crafting, her expression extremely lively as she speaks. Meanwhile, Vega noms on some kind of snack she found and now that I think about it, probably stole from Miwa.

An hour or two later, we are done and the pizza is finished, and we have the result we expected: the Perfect Pizza.

"Master, should it be so black on the bottom?"

"It should not," Miwa says carefully.

My minion and I made this pizza. We topped it with cheese, a few pieces of salami, and a tomato sauce base. It was Vega's idea to use my flames to cook it, so I tried to mimic the temperature of the oven-like thing Miwa set up with a few mana stones inscribed to produce heat.

I just surrounded the entire pizza with the heat while keeping it afloat with an arm made of mana.

The result is impeccable.

"Master, it's very crunchy." Vega says as she bites into it.

"If you're not careful, you're going to break your teeth," Miwa warns.

I never made pizza before, but my first attempt turned out much better than I expected. Maybe it is because I had my minion to help, and a tiny bit of assistance from Miwa, yup.

"Master, why are you not eating?"

"You shouldn't be eating it either," Miwa says, pointing out useless things.

In response, Vega scoots over to me and offers me a bite of her pizza, which I accept. That makes her smile, so I take a piece off my plate and eat it as well.

While devouring the crunchy pizza, Vega makes satisfied noises and wears a smile even more radiant than the one she wore when she was eating candy back in our house. It's the same smile she wore when I invited her to eat with me for the first time. I did invite her to eat with me even now to Miwa's confusion and Vega's happiness.

Yes. The pizza might be somewhat lacking. Some of the ingredients are a bit stale, especially the cheese. There's not a lot of tomato sauce, and the salami is too greasy, not really suitable for use a topping. The dough is pretty good, but it didn't rise enough, so the pizza is dense and now burned as a result of my inexperience.

But at the same time, it's a meal that Vega and I prepared together, and that seems to make the little half-demon happier than if it was a perfect meal.

Together we devour it all, and when we are done, we leave, saying goodbye to Miwa.

"How long?" I ask, walking side by side with my minion.

"Five minutes."

"I see. Take this." I say, pressing a small bag of inscribed mana stones into her hands.

Most of them are basically a series of cyphered trials; she'll only be able to access their contents if she can solve the intricate inscriptions I prepared and fix the parts I blocked.

It's a form of training that will serve to improve her control and open up new lessons to help her on her way as she's ready to master them. Most of the stones are tiny, smaller than my pinkie nail. It's the stones we got off Nevan's dead friend in the Veil Ignition Station, and I still have a lot of them. Their size will make it simple for her to smuggle them as needed.

Vega freezes on the spot, and I follow her gaze.

There at the treeline, Is Savant, casually passing through. His long hair tied into a ponytail, his green eyes fixed in their typical expression. Clinical and sharp as a scalpel.

At that moment, he notices my signature and looks towards us. At me and then at Vega.

My minion stiffens and moves behind me, her arm reaching out and grabbing the hem of my shirt. I can sense her heart beating wildly out of fear.

Savant turns his eyes away and disappears into the trees, and only once she's sure he's gone does Vega relax a bit. An expression of shame marries her face as she realizes what she's done.

"Are you fine?"

"Yes, master, but that man... he is..."

"It's fine. Just another person I need to deal with."

"Is he?"

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"Yes, it's nothing you need to worry about." I place my hand over hers, and she lowers her natural barrier, allowing me to teleport us further away. We reappear in a place with a nice view of the entire common area.

We wait in silence as her timer ticks down.

"Thank you for inviting me here, master. I know you could have gotten more training if I hadn't been here."

"It's fine. I still got plenty of training even with you here."

"Is it really ok?"

"Yup, it was me who invited you here so why should you be worried? I'd rather you told me how you liked the other members of my group and my favorite food?"

"Pizza was amazing."

"Liar."

"It was! As for your group, I liked Biscuit, and wolfy was fun. Maybe Lily was ok too; she would be a great demon."

"Possibly yes but don't say such scary things."

"But I'm happy that my master seems to have people they can trust and that you are doing well in the tournament. You have to win the remaining events and then the entire tournament."

"That's the plan." I grab one of her horns and shake her head gently, "This time it'll probably be a while, years maybe until we see each other again. I might contact you or send a message when I get 6th-floor rewards, but until then, do your best."

"I will be much stronger the next time we meet."

"Kaboom?"

"Kaboom!" Vega nods happily.

"Sounds like a plan."

In response, Vega turns her eyes to the side, and I know she is looking at the portal back to her planet.

Minion rushes to me and gives me a quick hug, squeezing as hard as she can. When she lets go, there is a bright smile on her face.

"Master is the first person who ever missed me. You even summoned me so early... Thank you. Now you have to win the tournament, and I have to get stronger. I'll make sure to find a good healer and reliable minions, just like you!"

"I wish you all the best, minion. Take care."

"Yes!"

With one last bright smile, she disappears, passing through the portal.

After she does, I reach into my pocket and pull out a folded piece of paper she must have placed while she was hugging me. Slowly I unfold it, revealing a clumsily drawn picture. An image of several stick figures standing next to each other.

One of the figures has two big red dots instead of eyes and is seemingly standing on the body of a giant black something. Probably a wolf. With a pool of red around it, probably meant to represent blood.

And off to the side, stands another stick figure. This one is much more delicate and detailed, showing off the time she must have spent on it. It has black spaghetti-like hair, and by way of eyes, it has two dots, one brown and the other gray.

Yellow flames burn around it as it stands in a heroic pose. There is even something floating in the air next to it. a burrito-shaped blob.

Well, I guess I know what Isabella and Vega were spending so much time working on in secret.

Very carefully, I fold the paper and put it back into my pocket.

Now then, I have someone I need to speak with.

I activate an anchor I left on one of the men from the Hard difficulty group Channeler invited to the sparring match. When I appear beside him, I find him in the presence of the other Hard difficulty attendees from the match with Vega.

"Hey," I greet them.

None of the three seems to have sensed my anchor or my use of the skill, so they jump in place. Their expressions change from smiles to nervousity.

"Hello."

"Oh, hey."

I ignore them and turn to a quiet man who appears to wear the most nervous expression, "What were you talking about during the sparring matches?"

"I... ehm... just about people we know."

"Were you? Who exactly?"

"You heard, right?" He laughs awkwardly.

All trace of the bravado he had while Vega was fighting dissipates, and his arrogant expression has faded, and the man grows extremely tense.

"Go on, tell me." I invite.

"I... I was telling Blue and Jai about how your teammate, that Korean boy, how he atta... spoke with us after the 3rd challenge against his Avatar." He shifts from foot to foot, and unconsciously, he moves mana inside his body.

I laugh, "Oh, I saw it too. It was quite pathetic, right? He almost cried after losing those items."

The man's expression warps into a look of pure shock.

"I've been keeping an eye on him for a while, and he's always like that. Wallowing in confusion and trying to imitate the people around him. Then acting like a little kid anytime something goes wrong. And damn near constantly comparing himself to the others. It's pathetic, isn't it?" I say, smiling at him.

"Yes..." The man laughs awkwardly, but I notice that he is calming down.

The smile he gives me is more honest now as he continues, "Man, I didn't know you had the same experience. But it makes sense seeing how you deal with other people. Of course, I don't mean it as an insult!"

"It's fine. I guess it does make sense others see me like that. I don't like people all that much. Well, most of them."

"Yes. But it was amazing what your Avatar did, even though it lost me some shards." He laughs, and his expression reverts to the expression he wore while talking about Min-Jae, "And that boy, yes, such a crybaby. Man, I swear we laughed at him for an hour..."

His body turns into shiny particles as he dies.

Reappearing a few steps away, he has a confused expression and throws up right after. Cold sweat pouring down his forehead.

Hyperventilating, he falls to his knees with a pained expression on his face.

"F-fuck... what..."

"I killed you," I say, coming to a stop in front of him. It's interesting that Hard difficulty attendees endure it so terribly.

"What?! But why!"

"Well, 'killed' might be the wrong word since you can't die here, but you know what I mean." I take a step closer, and he turns into a cloud of shiny particles once again, reappearing a bit further away.

I place an anchor through my extended domain and teleport in front of him.

Just like he did before, he throws up and falls to the grass, shaking and squirming in pain.

"Man, this is pathetic. It's not even that bad, so man up or something, okay?"

"P-please, stop. What did I do!? Tell me!" he coughs.

"Nothing terrible, really. Min-Jae kind of deserved it. But something about the way you're trashing him pisses me off. Anyway, I have to go. After I kill you the third time, the system's going to teleport you

much further away, and I'm too lazy to look for you. But if you want me to find you again, keep talking shit."

I don't even wait for his answer, and I release another highly concentrated kinetic energy from my Vortex Core tearing his body apart and he explodes into a cloud of shiny particles.

Using one of my anchors I teleport away and watch the countdown until the start of the fourth event.

The 4th event - Duels will start in 1 hour!

Participants will be sorted into 16 groups. 12 containing 148 participants and 4 containing 147 participants.

The winner of each group will advance to the final round, and have a chance to be crowned winner of the 4th event.

Note: No [Restriction] can be placed during this event.

Note: It's possible to forfeit your duel by giving or focusing on the command "Forfeit."

Finally, the duels are starting soon, and I decide to check my stats one last time.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 6 - Astral Prison

Time left until forced return: 3y 359d 23h 58m 51s

Traits (2/3):Mana Circuit 2/3, Mana Wavelength Iris 0/3

Lvl 237

Strength: 113

Dexterity: 110

Constitution: 268

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

Primary Class:Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class:[Initiate of Pride]

Active skills:

Focus - Lvl 49

Perception - Lvl 45

Redistribution - Lvl 48

Resonance - Lvl 45

Mana Domain - Lvl 38

Tether - Lvl 36

Infusion - Lvl 29

Mana Crown - Lvl 22

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 45

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Thermokinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Vortex Core (Construct)

Passive skills:

Mana Reservoir (epic)

Arcane Resilience (epic)

Phoenix Embrace (epic)

Mana Overload Absorption (epic)

Cognitive Fortress (epic)

Titan's Backbone (epic) 1/3

Shards: 123,129

Chapter 373: Start of the 4th event

A new window opens up to me, and in it, I can see all 16 groups. The 2356 tournament participants have been separated into groups of either 147 or 148. I belong to a 148-member group, and after searching, I don't find any of the other members of group 4 in it. There isn't anyone from Beyond in my group either.

However, I do find one interesting face In my group: BenDover.

That reminds me that I forgot about him again, so it's nice to see him here.

Then there's Brainiac, Adam from WhiteWing, and Samuel in another group. Miwa is in their group too, along with a few others from Hell difficulty. Otherwise, it seems like a boring group. The more interesting one is the one containing Tess and Lily, the two of them will probably find themselves jostling for a place in the top 16.

Tacita's group has both Sophie and Isabella in its ranks. Savant got a few people from WhiteWing, Channeler, and Maya. Biscuit's group has Aaron and Ghast, the lightning guy from WhiteWing.

Min-Jae meanwhile has found himself in a group with a few people from Hell difficulty I don't know.

I spend my time focusing my attention on the others from Hell difficulty and ignore the rest, it should be fairly obvious who's going to be coming out on top of their respective groups.

Instead of returning to the house, I lay on the grass and stare at the sky. It's nice to have some quiet after all these busy days full of people. But overall, it was my decision, so it's obvious who I have to blame. Past Nathaniel of course, screw that guy.

Even so, I'm glad I summoned Vega. Sure, we just said goodbye to each other less than a week ago, and I could have used the token later. But knowing the tutorial, There's no telling when I'd have found a safe enough time to do so? It just seemed like the perfect opportunity.

I wait for the countdown to start ticking down I sit on the ground and watch the window.

To win your group, you will need to win 8 duels! Your mana and stamina will be restored after every duel.

When there are 8 participants remaining in each group, you will be moved to a common area where you may choose to watch the remaining group matches.

Good luck!

I feel a pull on my body, and as always, I try to follow along watching how and what the system is doing, and yet I still, I find myself unable to do so.

After being moved, I open my eyes and find myself in the middle of a huge clearing. The floor is made out of gray stone, and the weather is clear, without a single cloud to mar the clear blue sky.

There is even a soft breeze, and other than the two of us, there is no one to be seen.

"Fuck's sake. Fuck's sake. Fuck's sake. What the fuck have I done," my opponent curses.

Such a beautiful day.

"Wanna forfeit?" I ask BenDover.

He doesn't answer, but before he can use any of his skills, I reach through my domain and place an anchor on him.

Sensing it, he tries to remove it, but he is too slow, and I send kinetic energy through. Just a little to throw him to the ground.

I raise a barrier, deflect his ranged attacks.

His wounds aren't healing, though I shouldn't be surprised given the state of current events, and I can't think of anything else I would want to examine, so I just send much more energy through, emptying half of my Vortex Core. It explodes a huge chunk of the floor, sending debris flying through the air.

Congratulations, you have won your 1st duel!

After that, I appear outside and observe my Vortex Core. It seems to have been refilled. So it seems like the system has no problem replenishing the more obscure reserves as well.

My second round is against a young woman from Normal difficulty.

"So that's it," she sighs. "I forfeit!"

Congratulations, you have won your 2nd duel!

I appear back outside, and soon after, I get summoned back in.

"I forfeit!" The man, feeling like a member of Hard difficulty, shouts.

Congratulations, you have won your 3rd duel!

Another match.

"Fuck, not him! I forfeit!"

Congratulations, you have won your 4th duel!

Standing back outside, I feel the calm mood I had before slowly eroding away.

Another round starts.

“Don’t just immediately forfeit, damn it,” I say before the woman can say anything.

“W-why?” she asks. She’s from Hard difficulty for sure.

“I mean, at least try to fight,” I beg.

“Will you hunt me outside in the common area if I don’t?” She asks while taking a few steps away from me,

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“Not really, but...”

“I forfeit!” She shouts and disappears.

Congratulations, you have won your 5th duel!

Appearing outside, I release a chunk of kinetic energy from my Vortex Core and stomp, detonating the soft grassy ground I laid on before.

Congratulations on your placement in the top 8 of your group! You will now be moved to the common area.

The scenery changes again, and I find myself in the common area surrounded by a few hundred people, with more appearing as their groups work their way into the top 8 as well. Being surrounded by the noise of so many people only serves to add to my already sour mood.

Stepping away to catch a break, I boost myself into the air and land on the roof of the tall house we used to watch the other events. As if we had planned the meeting, the remaining members of group 4 follow over the next few minutes.

"Has everyone made it into the top 8 of their groups?" Tess asks.

And everyone responds, issuing their affirmations.

"Good job, I guess we were lucky to not get strong ones right away."

"Or it was planned," Maya sighs. "But why did I have to get into the group with a member of the weirdo trio."

"You can do it, Maya! Just imagine how shocked Nat would be if you beat Savant. So give it your all and don't be such a scaredy cat," Dennis says with a smirk.

"You can do it too! Maybe Sophie will do you and your brother a favor and squish you between her thighs if you take first in your respective groups."

What a terrifying counterattack. It seems to cause a lot of damage. The result is immediate impenetrable silence from the twins and Min-Jae as well.

"Oh, come on, Dennis, why don't you say anything?" Maya seems to be enjoying every moment. "Aaron, why don't you help your brother? And you, Kim? We don't know anything about what you said, so why are you so worried? Are you hiding something?"

Nice combo indeed and the boys, smartly I might add, decide to keep quiet.

In the end, Maya sighs, “Boring.”

The first out of us to get summoned inside is me.

Finally, I’m facing another person from Hell. Someone from group 8, TheGuild. A man I haven’t met before.

The area we find ourselves in is different this time too. A floating island high in the sky, and I move to the edge of it and look down in an attempt to sate my curiosity and find myself gazing into a never-ending blue sky as far as I can see. A few clouds move lazily through the sky beneath us, and yet the floating island doesn’t seem to have any inscriptions that I can find, nor is there any mana powering it. It just floats, probably to make the event more interesting to watch.

I wonder if it’s for participants only or maybe even the Rulers themselves, should they decide to watch. Or maybe it’s possible for other beings to watch. Should I wave my middle fingers at the sky?

Creating a barrier in front of me, I block a barrage of invisible slashes. The attack feels like an extremely sharp breeze, invisible to the eye, leaving me to rely on the movement of its mana to betray its movement. It’s not bad at all, though it’s lacking in oomph.

Above my palm, I create a single mana orb and compress it until it turns dark blue.

More attacks surround me, swirling like a tornado, slashing, trying to tear through, but to no avail.

Reaching into my Vortex Core, I use a stream of kinetic energy, boosting the orb such that it disappears in the blink of an eye.

Even though he was surely expecting my response and after creating some sort of wind barrier, the man is unable to defend himself, and the orb, moving at high speed, pierces through his chest.

Congratulations, you have won your 6th duel!

Back on the roof, Tess sighs, "You could be more considerate. I know the guy, trust me, he's a really nice person."

That makes me snort, "Maybe to the women. He attacked me while I was examining the arena."

"Did you consider that ignoring them and examining the arena during a duel might piss them off?"

"Not really."

The screen lights up before Tess can say anything else that makes no sense, and two figures appear on the display: Samuel and Brainiac. The redheaded Brainiac that our boys have befriended and some other military guy from Hard difficulty. The result seems to have already been decided.

On the screen, a few sentences are exchanged, the sound enveloping the common area from all sides, making it possible to hear even over the noise of two thousand people.

Brainiac teases the man. In much the same way I do, he seems to dislike uptight military men who are good at organizing but to some of the more free-spirited Hell difficulty attendees, it all feels too stuffy.

The projectiles Brainiac likes to use shoot from his body, invisible, and Samuel barely manages to deflect the attacks with his giant sword.

From below, the sound of the crowds cheering explodes, as people hype each other up in support of their personal favorites.

"A few groups have started going around and setting up bets. Mana stones, magical items, food, and items from Earth. They take and write down anything. They bet on winners of groups, winners of duels overall, and a few other things," Sophie clarifies, reading is my expression, as she follows the path of my gaze.

"Damn, they act quick."

“Yes, and some have started selling snacks too. I think Adam’s been helping them with quite a lot. Even here, he is trying to make as many shards as possible. But I guess that’s why he is in the top 5 of the crafter rankings.”

“Who has the best odds of winning the duels?”

Sophie falls silent for a bit, a stiff expression taking over her face as she concentrates.

“There are four people with a few small differences between them. But Tacita comes just slightly ahead. They say that her speed is the biggest advantage when it comes to fighting humans versus humans. You seem to be a bit ahead of Savant, who is third, and they’ve placed Tess in 4th.”

“Poor Gareth and Lily didn’t even get on the list,” I say, being sure Lily is listening.

“I will beat Tess, and they will see! I bet they only picked her only because she goes around zapping people, the guys from Hard difficulty guys are just more scared of her. If I did that too, they would place me there instead!” Lily complains.

“So what’s your plan for fighting Tess? She’s probably going to keep a distance and pick you off from afar,” I become a bit curious.

I wonder how I would fight Tess if I were Lily. Using [Sacrifice] to get as close as possible in an attempt to end it all in a single [Disintegration] attack. But Tess then again would be expecting that, and unlike Lily, she can fly.

Sure, Lily can use some ranged attacks, but they can’t compare to Tess’s range.

“As if I’d say any of that to her face,” Lily snorts much to Tess’s amusement.

“I’m already excited for the fight, Lily,” Tess smiles at her.

With that, the duel between Brainiac and Samuel comes to an end, Samuel loses, unable to get too close even after using his body strengthening and some sort of movement skill that caused his feet to glow and slide across the ground like an ice rink.

Brainiac displayed a great sense of positioning and managed such a massive and consistent barrage of attacks that he seems to have been able to launch almost infinitely.

The next match takes place between a couple of people from Lily's group, It's a mixed gender pair from Hell difficulty. Their arena turns out the same as mine and Brainiac's. A great floating island where they fight for over 10 minutes, trying to tire each other out. Both of them are extremely careful and swift to dodge. A woman with a bow, using projectiles created out of pale blue mana, that move almost as if they have a mind of their own.

The man uses his skill with mana to compress the orb into a disc shape with sharp edges. He then proceeds to move it with the power of his mind alone, the disc easily cutting through trees and stones, and tilting at times to block the arrows.

Yet, in the end, the man loses. An arrow that missed him and stuck in the tree moves out of nowhere and takes the man in the back, the ordeal proves just enough to distract him, and causing him to take a hit by a few more attacks. The woman then takes the opportunity to attack more aggressively, wearing him down quickly and winning the duel.

"That wasn't that bad," Tess says. "Sophie, what's her name?"

"I think it was Alaine from TheGuild. I think she and Swordmaster are married."

"Swordmaster is a nice guy too. They fit well together."

Sophie nods, "Yes, TheGuild so far seems to consist of quite the number of decent people."

Petting Biscuit, I listen with one ear and nibble on some snacks I stole from Maya. Surprisingly, she doesn't complain too much. Maybe she still harbors the hope that I will sell her my ax one day.

This isn't really all that bad. How could a football or hockey match compare to this? Watching people use interesting skills, fighting, and giving their all. Truly, not bad at all.

Soon after, Isabella disappears, a thin figure appears alongside her on the screen, facing her down.

Sophie, who's been speaking with Tess up until now, grows quiet, and I see her clench her teeth, her eyes becoming much colder.

Tacita on the screen tilts her head in surprise and looks at Izzy opposite her.

Chapter 374: So that's why they call you...

Blue flames surround the young girl, not as an attack but in an effort to create an area around her that's as hot as possible.

I can see Isabella staring at Tacita, seemingly in an attempt to read her emotions, something I don't think she'll be able to do given the effects of Tacita's field. But Tacita seems to appreciate the effort and smiles at the girl.

Isabella moves her hand and a dozen thin threads of fire lash out around her, like whips extending to assault Tacita.

The mute girl just takes a nimble step and dodges the first, tilting her head to avoid another, and leaping playfully over another. Her movements are smooth and playful while the environment around her burns and cuts to pieces. Thin blue threads of fire cut through stone, trees, and the ground leaving deep gouges in their wake.

The fire intensifies, and with it, so too does the heat around Isabella. The air flickers and the surface of the stones start to glow an angry orange color with the heat.

Even so, it's not enough. Tacita disappears, her immense speed removing her from sight, and when she appears again, she is standing in a different spot, dagger in hand, its blade covered in blood.

Slowly, Isabella reaches towards her neck finding a long scratch, a whisper of blood flowing from the wound.

Tacita waits until Isabella looks at her and gestures at her, the meaning clear, Forfeit.

Instead of that, Isabella wipes the blood into her clothes, rolls her sleeves up, and slaps her palms together. The veins in her arms become visible through her skin. Glowing with a blue luminescence that seeps through the muscles and skin. The effect slowly traveling up the length of her arms, past her elbows.

The ground continues to absorb the heat until the girl finds herself standing in a pool of magma and fire, her shoes dissolving in the heat and the edges of her clothes beginning to catch fire. Yet the flames leave not a single burn on her body, not a single hair left out of place by that heat.

Dozens of threads of fire, like burning ropes, spin, burn, and thrash around as she faces off against Tacita.

And in that moment, the smile fades from the mute girl's face, replaced by a look of simple acknowledgment. The dagger in her hand visibly vibrates, falling under the effect of her skill.

Once again, Tacita disappears, and when she comes back into view, she finds herself having to dust off her clothes and put out the fire on her sleeve, and glancing down at the burn left on her forearm.

The dagger is gone, stabbed through Isabella's eye who a split second later turns into shiny particles.

"I'm fine, Soph," Isabella says the moment she appears outside. Even so, she lifts her arm and carefully touches her eye. Her hand is shaking and so is her voice. It's obvious she felt a bit of pain before the system bailed her out.

Curious, I look over to Sophie who stays quiet, moving to be closer to her sister. Her expression right now tells me that things are going to be interesting if she ever gets to face off against Tacita.

Out of everyone from Hell difficulty who isn't already in Beyond, Sophie is the one I think would be the best fit for the other weirdos in its ranks. The only thing holding her back is her little sister.

“Izzy, were those blue veins of yours a trait?” I ask her.

“Yes, it’s called Burning Blood.”

“Damn, sounds cool. Is it a boost to your fire-related abilities? Does it buff your heat generation? Or is it your storage capacity?” I try to guess.

“All of the above!”

“That’s even cooler than I thought. Give me.”

“No! But it’s still cool, right? Though I still want to have floating blue hair like Seneca’s.”

“Was that a trait your disciple had?”

She shakes her head and I notice she is getting calmer, “It was more like Vega’s horns.”

“Maybe you can work something out with Lily, she likes to play around with that kind of stuff.”

“Only for training,” Lily corrects.

Isabella says something to Lily and they start a conversation, no doubt hashing out details and I turn back to the screen. Though before doing so, I glance over at Sophie who still wears an expression of cold rage, even stronger now that Izzy’s been distracted.

On the screen, Savant faces Pumpkin, a melee attacker from WhiteWing.

The fight opens with Savant using his domain and the time starts ticking down. Without a good defense, Pumpkin will quickly find himself poisoned by mana radiation and I’m sure Savant is concentrating on making it worse for him.

As the gentle orange light shimmers around them, two men rush together in combat, Savant showing himself to be surprisingly at home with melee combat.

Though to watch, I figure that it's probably a mix of things he saw back on Earth and the lessons he received on the 2nd and 4th floors. Even so, Savant combines these moves together really well and if he makes a mistake, he quickly realizes it and doesn't repeat it a second time.

Even so, Pumpkin is faster and very flexible, he's dual wielding daggers, each moving like it has its own mind. His skin is coated in something like scales that seem to add to his defense without restricting his movement. For a while, he even manages to push Savant back and gradually uses more of his mana as his movements become more and more aggressive.

He is clearly dominating the extremely talented and less experienced man.

Savant's eyes bear a curious expression, but they are otherwise not very lively. It's like he is dealing with an annoying child and soon he reaches the point where he's seen everything he needs. Seemingly oblivious to Savant's tricks, Pumpkin uses his trump card. Two more arms grow from his back and extend to grab Savant.

The limbs are very thin, and longer than normal arms, moving at a speed he thought his opponent wouldn't be able to dodge. Or, and I think this is the more likely option, he knew Savant was playing with him. He must have seen the guy's performance during the previous events just like I did. So he's decided to give it his best shot.

In reaction, Savant's domain shrinks back in the blink of an eye and from that energy, he creates a sword with a thin blade.

That makes me focus on him with much more interest. Using a domain that way is not something I've seen before.

The broken Sword of Aeons in his left hand and the newly created sword in his right. He moves more of his mana to enhance his strength and movement speed increasing them exponentially. At the same time, the sword created from his domain seems to cause Pumpkin visible discomfort. He has trouble

breathing and even moving as burn-like wounds blossom across his skin, caused by the concentrated radiation pouring off the orange sword.

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Four scaly arms are sent flying before the sword made of orange light pierces through Pumpkin's chest, his movements bearing a clear similarity to Pumpkin's own.

Then in a shower of particles, his opponent disappears and Savant with him.

There is an excited conversation going down in the common area as people rush to place bets. Group 4 also starts commenting on that, but I filter it out while I replay what I just saw over and over again in my head.

As I do so, the duels continue and some of them are interesting enough for me to watch. It's interesting to see the kinds of abilities people have developed in their time in the tutorial.

Maya wins her fight against her opponent, a man with a weird combination of body armor and mental attacks who chooses to fight her at melee range. His mental attacks do not seem to work all that well against Maya whose [Focus] and her [Armament] is on a much higher level than his. She quickly shifts between spear, sword, and dagger, and even shoots a bow a few times. Her ability to create mana-based weapons is exceptionally fast.

Then there is Biscuit who made the top 8 of his group.

Obviously.

He faces the lightning mage from WhiteWing, someone called Ghast. Unlike people before, Ghast attacks Biscuit without any hesitation, ignoring his cute appearance. The lightning the man creates crashes against purple tentacles extending from Biscuit's back, while the tentacles either disrupt or absorb it.

I almost start smiling when Biscuit starts running while barking at the man. He doesn't float, no, he just runs on his short legs, jumping over the debris on the ground. The purple tentacles elongate and swirl around his petite form, defending him while two purple orbs float discreetly at his side.

The man has no shame or concern for his image and tries to run away and reposition when that cute dog rushes him. But before he can do so, the ground under him cracks and a single purple tentacle grabs his ankle.

Ghast creates a lightning bolt, which he attempts to send through it, either to destroy it or to reach its creator, but to no avail. Biscuit's creations are shockingly dense and the tentacle holds the man solidly in place.

Looking up, Ghast sees one orb turned projectile shoot at him, elongated into the shape of a spear.

Ghast crosses his arms, and an image of a shield made of lightning forms in front of him blocking the blow. He then extends one of his arms releasing a rain of small lightning bolts, which roar through the air like a minigun emptying its magazine in a fraction of a second.

The ground around Biscuit explodes, dust and the earth flying into the air under the weight of his barrage.

When it dissipates, Biscuit is still there, undamaged.

A mental attack hits Ghast and with it, a purple orb turns bright white which explodes soon after defeating the man, Ghast having found himself trapped in the grasp of the purple tentacle which held him in place.

Indeed he is a merciful future Absolute. Even letting a lowly human show some portion of his skill before showing him his place.

I pet Biscuit who appears back on my lap, "Good job."

(Food!)

“Yes.”

(Food.)

“We will see.”

(Food food.)

“It’s possible.” I boop his nose and turn back to the screen where two lucky members of Hard difficulty merrily beat the shit out of each other. Lucky because they got so far without facing anyone from Hell difficulty.

At the same time, a notification rings about three more items that have been sold, bringing me all the closer to having two thousand shards. It looks like my rank as 1st crafter has been cemented just like that. What remains is to find out if the reward is worth it. Even if it’s not, I don’t think I will complain that much, just having the shards is nice enough.

It takes a bit longer but the fight finally ends, the woman who won standing there, bloodied and tired, screaming at the sky from sheer exhilaration.

“Sometimes I think it’s more fun watching people from lower difficulties fight,” Maya notes, “There is something eye-catching about seeing them give their best.”

“I agree,” Tess chimes in.

Finally, it’s Min-Jae’s turn to be summoned inside, and he finds himself facing off against someone from Hard difficulty. The huge muscular man with a hammer that is probably heavier than Min-Jae. Surprisingly, the man is calm after finding out who he’s been pitted against.

Unlike him, Min-Jae smiles brightly. He is looking around as if trying to find the “camera” that shows it all in the common area. Then he offers the man the first attack, promising to only defend once.

“That dumbass...” Maya sighs.

And as expected, the man seizes the opportunity. He lowers his stance and over one minute his body shines slightly, muscles not bulging quite as much, and the interesting amount of mana surrounding the hammer.

Even so, Min-Jae doesn't seem to be worried and his left yellow eye shines.

The man from Hard difficulty attacks and at that moment the field around Min-Jae activates an immense pull of gravity slowing the man to a crawl after a few quick steps. But that doesn't seem to be his intention and instead of just blindly charging, he throws his hammer.

Min-Jae reaches his hand in its direction, mana swirling around him as he uses either [Gravity Well] or [Telekinesis]. He doesn't even put that much effort into it, not expecting much from someone from Hard difficulty.

But surprisingly, just once, the hammer flashes, disrupting for a second Min-Jae's grab and emptying the mana collected inside of it in the process.

Unable to react in time, the hammer smashes into Min-Jae's left side, breaking his bones and throwing him rolling on the ground.

From there, the boy lifts his head, groaning in pain, and the skills he was using deactivate. His eyes open up in panic as he sees how close his opponent is, just two steps away.

Min-Jae clenches his teeth and his left eye glows, the man's chest caving in, compressed by immense gravity and turning him into shiny particles.

When our teammate reappears outside, no one says anything but I look at him with interest, curious to see what reaction Min-Jae will have.

He catches my gaze and turns away. Was that shame I saw in his expression? Anger? Annoyance?

A few more groups fight and I finally get summoned back inside. Only 4 members remain in each group. After this fight, it will be the group finals. My opponent this time is a guy from Hard difficulty.

"Fuck man, I thought I would climb higher," he sighs. One of Samuel's cronies. I think he's an ex-marine or something like that.

I find it interesting. Wouldn't people with that much experience, real combat experience be more fitting for Hell difficulty?

"Are you going to forfeit?" I ask.

"I mean, probably."

"Would you mind if I try something?"

"Your special attack or what? Will it hurt?"

"I don't know, but if you agree I will have a bit better opinion of you. I will also remember you agreeing to this."

"What's my name?"

"..."

"Yeah, I thought so. I'm Matthew, remember it. And go ahead. If it's some kind of torture or other bullshit I will forfeit."

"I might forget your name so talk to the Channeler or Sset. They are good at peopley stuff."

“Man... okay, damn it, just do it.”

I nod and my [Mana Crown] forms over my head. My [Mana Domain] expands and I use black mana to strengthen my body, something I’m starting to grow quite proficient at, I can even manage to keep it going for up to ten seconds with barely any aftereffects.

Then, having my body strengthened with black mana to endure the strain, I start releasing my mana and filling my domain with it. Like a broken dam, it floods into it, filling the area with more and more of my mana. It floods from my reservoir and my body mana. There is no skill here, just me emptying my reserves.

I barely get started when the man stumbles, his face pale.

A few seconds later, he falls to his knees, seeming to be having trouble breathing.

“So that’s why they call you a goddamn mana maniac.” Even as he says so he clenches his teeth, trying to endure as much as possible.

I barely start releasing mana from my Mana Reservoir and even that seems to be too much and the man faints, soon turning into shiny particles.

Congratulations, you have won your 7th duel!

Chapter 375: Want to spar for a moment?

After reappearing on the roof I start replaying the events of my last match. I knew that too much mana could make people with high sensitivity faint and that enough could overwhelm even the stronger ones.

I’m almost certain that I could create what I’ve heard called mana radiation at a high enough level. And I could probably accomplish the same effect with less mana with the right combination of skills, like Savant’s [Dawn] and my [Mana Domain] if I try to learn it. I’ve already seen Savant using it a few times so it shouldn’t be all that hard for me to replicate.

With a high enough concentration of mana, mana radiation can be created even without having access to a skill. As for how much it would take, it's difficult to guess. I'm sure Champions and Absolutes are capable of it, after seeing zones like the Valley on the 5th Floor.

As of now, I have yet to fully understand the effects. Does it just overwhelm people killing them once the mana density exceeds their body's resistance to the pressure? Does it act like some sort of poison? Does it affect animals or monsters?

More fun stuff to experiment with.

"Congratulations on making it to the finals of your group," Maya says.

"I'm not selling you the ax."

"Douchebag."

Another fight starts, flickering into view on the screen. Adam vs Miwa, who got surprisingly far.

"Adam's been trying to hire Miwa for a while and he refuses to stop looking for the real identity of Tent Creep. Miwa has to refuse him constantly, decrying him as a fake who cares only for money rather than the art of crafting," Tess informs me as she ties Maya's hair into a braid.

"Hehe, Tent Creep," Maya giggles and looks back at Tess who smiles at her.

"For some unknown reason, the price for the ax just went up by 20 percent," I state, as I turn my attention to the screen.

Purple mana surrounds Adam, much as it did in the second event. It moves and looks like waves, surrounding and crashing against him.

Opposite him, Miwa tightens her grip on the katana and takes a well-practiced stance. That katana, held in her prosthetic arm, takes on the same pinkish hue as her arm and she charges, swinging her weapon.

She cuts an opening in the purple wave of mana with her weapon and tosses a metal cube on the ground in front of her absorbing another attack from Adam.

Even so, it's not enough and the man just releases more. The wave-like mana crushes and grinds away at anything it touches.

"I thought she would do better, having that arm from the Champion and all," Maya states.

"She's from Hard difficulty. The Champions there probably weren't as powerful as they were on our floors," Tess points out as she finishes working on Maya's. "She is also a crafter and she spends most of her time on that so it makes sense."

"The arm is upper epic at most," I say, joining the conversation.

"Huh, you have plenty of items like that so why do you want her arm so much?" Maya asks me.

"I believe it can be upgraded to arcane. The base of the arm is amazing, everything from the material, to what I saw of the inscriptions. It wouldn't take much work to push it over the line."

I would need to examine it a bit more but I'm fairly sure that I'm right. The arm reminds me of the unfinished upper rare items I found in the Veil Ignition Station and upgraded to sell.

Even so, Miwa doesn't seem to be that disappointed when she loses. Her movements are smooth and elegant and the weapon, strengthened by her arm, does surprisingly well when faced with someone from Hell difficulty.

Still, the fight ends with her loss and a few fights later Lily faces Alaine, the woman archer we saw not that long ago.

After exchanging a few words with her opponent, the length of Lily's hair shortens and she dashes. Three arrows rocket towards her, each intercepted by Lily's hand, only to be eaten away by

[Disintegration]. Lily boosts her movement further, bulldozing through the stone rather than moving around it. A huge chunk of stone just disappears, eaten away by her skill.

Alaine tries to keep her distance and slow Lily down, all to no avail. Lily reaches her and ducks under the last two projectiles. She tanks the last one as it pierces through her neck, only for the wound to immediately close.

The arrow in Alaine's hand contracts into a palm-length blade, which she thrusts at Lily, who makes her arm disappear with a simple touch, almost as if it had never existed in the first place. Then Lily strikes out again, boring a huge circular hole in Alaine's chest before she explodes into particles and both of the women reappear outside.

Now that both of them have made the finals for their group, Tess and Lily exchange competitive looks. That duel will be fun to watch.

Sophie goes next, facing a woman from Hard difficulty and the fight barely takes a few seconds. The woman's mental barrier breaks nearly immediately and she fails to stop her hand from stabbing her in the neck with her own dagger, causing her to forfeit nearly immediately.

That gets Sophie into the finals against Tacita and when she gets out she has the same expression she did when Tacita defeated Izzy.

In the remaining fights before the group finals, Gareth defeats his opponents, while Biscuit, and Dennis defeat theirs as well.

Then Min-Jae's up. The duel in question deciding who will go into his group finals. His opponent, the scrawny man from Hell difficulty, and unfortunately for Min-Jae, his opponent seems to have a solid counter for him and more combat experience to boot.

The man disappears taking advantage of his assassin-build, either becoming transparent, going invisible, or making use of some kind of camouflage.

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Min-Jae tries to counter it with a gravity field centered around his person and his metal orbs proceed to spin wildly around his person. Each of the orbs in question is quick enough to tear the man apart the moment he moves closer. That's just how dangerous they are.

At this point, it should be easily winnable for him. He just needs to reduce his output. Even half would be enough to deal with the guy and allow him to save his reserves. But unfortunately, Min-Jae doesn't do that.

Shaken by the result of his last fight, Min-Jae is more worried than he should be, he's focusing on useless stuff, and draining his mana quicker than it should. He seems to realize it after some time as well and finally lowers his output and starts randomly moving a few orbs further in the distance, trying to blindly hit the man he can't seem to locate, not even by using his eye to watch the surrounding gravitational waves.

The reason seems simple enough to me and I stare into the air high over Min-Jae. Maybe he saw the perfect opportunity or maybe he's running out of mana, the scrawny man appears in the air, with some kind of weird platform made out of mana under him.

That platform disappears and pulled by the heightened gravity, he falls at high speed, crashing into Min-Jae and likely breaking a few bones in the process. But even so, he stabs Min-Jae about a dozen times, reducing the surprised teen into a cloud of fine particles.

When Min-Jae appears on the roof and then leaves without saying anything, I place an anchor on him and turn back to the screen. But there are still a few fights I don't care that much about before the finals of the groups, so I guess I have some free time now.

"I'll check on him," I tell Tess, who seems like she is about to follow Min-Jae.

To be honest, it's getting on my nerves seeing him act like this. I know I said he is still young and dumb, but this?

"Don't be too harsh," Tess says.

"Sure." I use the anchor I left on the 16-year-old boy and teleport directly to him.

His reaction time is decent and he senses me even before I appear and his skills crash into me before he realizes who I am.

I deflect the attacks and face him. "That was kind of disgraceful."

He blinks a few times and I can see anger behind his eyes, but he holds it back. "Yes. I fucked up."

"Quite a bit. Want to spar for a moment?"

The silence stretches on for a bit longer.

"Nat, I don't know what you are trying, but please, I'm really not in the mood."

"Just for a bit."

"I'm sorry but no."

"A short spar, come on."

"I said no!" he screams. "Do you not have enough?! Did you not enjoy seeing me fuck up everything I could since the tournament started? You're always watching, looking, without saying anything and now you want to spar?! No fucking thanks! I'm not in the mood to take another beating."

"If you don't, I will just attack you."

"Fucking do it then! Beat me up! I hope you have fun doing so like everyone else. Maybe even mention how easy it would be."

"I mean, after seeing today's matches I could use 1st Floor [Restriction] and win. It would be easy, even back then my mana orbs were decent and I could sling them fairly quickly. You tend to get impatient and careless against weaker opponents, so I would take advantage of that, taunting you into making a mistake and then I'd shoot an orb through your legs. Your defenses tend to be a bit weaker around your feet."

I take a step closer and look down at him, "My body strengthening was decent too so I could use your arrogance to get in close. Then I would let you hurt me, maybe tear off my arm or a leg, or blind one of my eyes. After that, I would push through and cut your throat."

I mean what I'm saying. Even though it might have cost me my life, I can't imagine failing to kill Min-Jae before dying. Of course, I would probably run away and try to continue the fight in a way that would allow me to survive, but in a fight to the death, Min-Jae would lose to 1st Floor me.

"Nat, I don't know why you're..."

I don't let him finish and send a burst of kinetic energy at him, sending him staggering backward and almost falling down.

Even through all that, he uses gravity, and the next two orbs I shoot at him crash to the ground at the places he marked.

"Fuck, what..."

More of my mana orbs fly in his direction and he redirects each of them and when I jump back he increases gravity under me. Stones shoot up from the ground to fly at my face. In response, I coat my palm in mana and let them crash into it.

Min-Jae senses me creating anchors behind and above him. His body becomes lighter and he pulls himself with [Telekinesis] just in time to escape a burst of flames and kinetic energy. A dozen orbs pour from his pockets and proceed to spin around him whistling through the air.

He parts the yellow flames I send his way with [Telekinesis] leaving them to flow harmlessly to either side of him.

Every time he tries to say anything or stop the fight, I push more.

Another orb, a javelin filled with thermal energy, an anchor nearby. My attacks do not give him time to think and I push him deeper and deeper into the forest where he resorts to throwing trees at me and changing the gravity around them so that they find themselves pulled toward me.

He levitates into the air but my bombardment continues, yellow glowing orbs and flames exploding all around him, forcing him to land, increasing gravity as I step closer.

Even using [Telekinesis] to move his body he barely manages to dodge my attacks. He knows I'm far from going all out. But he has no time to do anything about it.

I know his skills well. I've seen him fight many times, and I know where he's lacking, and what I need to target in an attack. So as we clash I fight in a way that allows him to utilize his strengths. I let him use the environment against me, I use skills I'm sure he can counter and I poke at his weaknesses, forcing him to react.

Like that, the fight becomes faster and faster. Min-Jae knows the attacks I'm using and I can read the movement of his mana with my eyes so I allow him to use everything he can.

An orb nearly kills him but he redirects it at the last moment, a look of sheer surprise flickers across his face, caused by his own reaction.

My flames surround him and I see him debate running away, but I don't give him the opportunity and he uses his skills to redirect them around himself and push them away. And a smile climbs its way onto his face as he succeeds.

At close range, he keeps escaping my anchors and the explosions that rock the environment in their wake, he's getting better at sensing them as his mind relaxes. He allows his instincts to take over and guide his reactions, allowing him to respond quicker than standing in place nervously.

And as the fight goes on and his reserves drain he smiles more and more. There is no other thought in his mind outside this fight. I don't allow it. He doesn't think of useless stuff like worrying about losing, people looking, or what others might think.

We simply fight for the sake of it.

He finally stumbles and falls to his knees and even then it's not over. He pushes himself back onto his feet, gathering the last bits of his mana he bombards me with the deadly orbs he's bonded to himself.

After I block even that attack, he tries again, but there is nothing left.

Min-Jae stands there, breathing heavily, sweat wetting his hair and making it stick to his face. He is looking at me, wanting me to say something.

I send a soft burst of kinetic energy at him, just enough to make him fall on his ass. Then, while he is looking up at me, I teleport away, leaving him to reflect on his own.

Chapter 376: Tess vs Lily

I return just in time to be summoned for my round in the finals. My opponent is Mari from WhiteWing. She uses a dagger and short sword, falling back on her high dexterity and mana. And she tends to use said mana to further enhance her damage output and speed.

"Being in the top 32 isn't that bad," she notes.

"There are only 31 people from Hell difficulty here in the tournament."

"You sure know how to ruin the mood." Mari lowers her stance and more mana floods into her weapons.

At the same time, lights start glowing under her skin in whorls and patterns reminiscent of tattoos.

There's a short burst of mana and a flash of light as she strikes her sword with her dagger. The effect of which serves to blind me and disrupt my senses.

[Perception] seems to be confused by that, so I fall back on my primordial energies to track her heat and kinetic energy, while boosting my body with normal mana.

She lashes out at me with a thrust, which I avoid with a step to the side, coating my blade in a layer of resonating mana and retaliating with a downward slash, severing her arm.

Mari spins on the spot, adjusting her grip on the dagger, and lashing out at me again as she avoids my follow up strike.

She creates a barrier around herself and endures the flames for a while before I infuse them with [Resonance] to break through her defenses.

Congratulations, you have won your 8th duel and ranked first in your group! You have qualified for the finals. The finals will take place one hour after all finalists have been declared!

Once I've returned I take the opportunity to find a more secluded place so that I can focus on my training. I still watch the fights since they are interesting enough, but I can't forget that the tournament will be ending soon, so I need to maximize my gains.

I keep my crown over my head while feeding it bits of black mana in an attempt to find the tipping point.

So far, I have learned that the crown helps me improve my control over black mana. The real problem arises when the crown turns black. Then it just starts absorbing all the mana it can touch.

My theory is that the black crown doesn't have any stronger mana-absorbing properties than black mana. The reason why its pull is so strong is because it quickly absorbs so much mana. An amount I never use when compressing my mana to create a black orb.

So, for example, if I use 50% of my mana to create a black orb, it will be as strong as feeding the black crown 50% of my mana.

The main difference is that the black crown bears a connection to me that allows it to empty my reservoir, making it more difficult to fight its pull. On the other hand, the black crown tends to crumble faster than the orbs.

Thankfully, there are advantages even though they are theoretical for now. The crown bears a stronger connection to me than the orb. That means it should be easier to use than a black orb. Of course, that only really applies if I can solve the control issues. Right now, it's more difficult to use the black crown than the black orb.

At first glance, it doesn't seem to make much sense, but there is a bit of twisted logic behind it.

My goal is still to make the black crown into a tool to absorb the ambient mana around me and make it my own.

It sounds straight-up broken, too strong, and a project for the far future, but it also sounds like something that should be possible, that's why I'm taking the opportunity to train here. When the tournament is over, I will train something else, maybe I'll find a way to better utilize my massive reserves of mana. That sounds like it'll be important. Constantly growing my mana is nice, but I need to be able to use it in the first place.

I need more skills that increase my damage output. Maybe even a signature move that doesn't require charging or preparation. A single target high damage strike would be nice too, something for the stronger opponents.

There I pull myself from my thoughts as one of the more interesting fights starts. Damn, am I starting to turn into a sports fanboy? Do I need a beer and a hotdog to eat during the fights?

This fight in particular will decide the finalist for their group, Tess against Lily. I have a winner in mind, but it will be entertaining to see it happen.

And it starts strong.

Instead of putting distance between them, Tess stands in place, causing Lily to falter as she moves to charge after her with everything she's got.

Tess can see her surprise, and it only serves to amuse her. A crown surrounded by red and white lightning forms over her head, and her blonde hair starts shining like gold as beautiful armor surrounds her body. Sleek and functional at the same time, with lightning crackling around the edges.

The sky over the floating island they stand on starts turning darker.

Lily lets it all happen, and like me, she must know why Tess has done this. It's simple. The blonde has decided to indulge her pride and show Lily, who's been getting very confident lately, why she's the leader of the group and assert her strength in the process.

Lily is shorter than Tess. Her eyes are brown, unlike Tess's gray, and while Tess seems to be releasing light, Lily seems to be absorbing it. That dangerous gray mana seeps out of her like a cloud of deadly smoke capable of destroying anything. A gray dagger forms out of it, and Lily's hair starts shrinking, her waist-length hair seemingly retracting into her head until it stops at her shoulders.

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Tess simply watches as Lily sacrifices her hair, a few of her organs, a bit of flesh, and most likely some senses too.

Both of them attack at once.

Before they crash, lightning roars through the sky and hits Lily head-on, destroying her leg and burning half of her body.

Without blinking, Lily takes a step, her wounds healing in a flash. She swings her dagger, and smoke seeps out of it, devouring Tess's primordial lightning.

Tess moves to the side, looking more like lightning given form than a human, and Lily follows matching her speed, bolstered by her sacrifices.

Tess pelts Lily with large stones, each one the size of a car. She also pulls trees up by the roots, and a constant barrage of lightning tracks Lily as if it were being pulled by a string.

Like an unstoppable nightmare, Lily passes through it all, her flesh healing with terrifying speed. [Disintegration] devouring lightning as if it were nothing, while she nimbly dodges oversized projectiles and cuts through them with ease.

I can see the surprise in Lily's eyes as Tess stops dodging and crashes into Lily head on, her lightning zaps the girl, causing her to freeze for a moment.

Lightning spears appear from behind Tess's back and pierce through the black-haired healer, then Tess's armor disappears, collapsing into a spear of red and white lightning before piercing Lily's neck.

Yet, the healer doesn't vanish in a cloud of particles.

Gray mana explodes around her, devouring everything: air, lightning, Tess's leg, and the ground she stands on. A big chunk of the area around her disappears, leaving a smooth surface.

And Lily stands there, her wounds fully healed and hair even shorter, even one of her arms gone, sacrificed.

Once again, a gray dagger forms in her hand, but before she can take a step, two stones as big as buses crash into her from the sides, squishing her in between. Still, she almost dodges the blow, only her lower body managing to get caught in between the stones.

Lily swings her arm, cutting herself off from what remains of her body. Then she stumbles as her body regrows, one of her eyes disappearing, and she seems to have gone deaf, sacrificing her hearing.

Tess, standing on a single leg, still dodges Lily, using a lightning-based prosthesis instead of her leg to move. She destroys Lily's leg and dodges a strike from the dagger made of gray mana along with its follow up.

Lily charges her, letting go of the dagger, and strengthening her body instead, but one last bolt of lightning falls from the sky, damaging her even further, her wounds seeming to heal slower as a result of dwindling mana reserves.

Tess hasn't even used her [Declaration] and even chose to fight up close, giving a huge advantage to Lily.

But now, a barrage of projectiles and spears hits Lily for the last time. The black-haired healer continues to push through, her grey mana devouring the attacks and her limbs regenerating, though more slowly now.

Step by step, she moves closer with determination on her face, but to no avail. Lacking mana reserves and running out of things to sacrifice, she hits her limit, which becomes even more noticeable due to her inexperience, impatience, and overreliance on two powerful skills. So, Tess wins.

The black-haired girl disappears in a burst of shimmering particles even as she sacrifices more parts of her body in an attempt to heal.

Under the dark sky, the lightning crown over Tess's head finally flickers and disappears. Even tired, wounded and with her golden hair plastered to her face Tess looks very regal right now.

She then disappears, teleported by the system, returned to the roof with the rest of group 4.

Lily and Tess, fully healed, face each other, but before anything can be said, Maya jumps on Lily from behind, hugging her and calling her terminator. Tess also smiles and compliments Lily, while giving out a few pointers.

Lily doesn't seem too happy about it, but she can use it as fuel for her determination to improve. That and she needs more mana, yup.

The next fight is Brainiac versus Adam. The tall redheaded boy quite easily beats Adam. Both clearly know each other's skills, and Brainiac shows surprising skill not fitting his nosy and extremely cheery personality. He fights cleverly, using ranged attacks that have clearly improved since the second event. As per my advice, they are smaller, sharper, and contain less mana, making them harder for Adam to track.

Brainiac fights from a distance, shooting them through the trees even as they pierce easily, leaving finger-thick holes. Gradually, he tires out the older man, emptying his reserves, and takes the win.

Biscuit is in the finals against Aaron. The best doggo of the tournament floor shows no mercy from the start, bombarding Aaron with mental attacks and tentacles that extend a great distance.

Aaron is quick, often leaving very convincing afterimages of himself that even contain mana, heat, and the feeling of weight.

For Biscuit, they are easy to destroy, but it takes some of his reserves while Aaron moves around, blending with his surroundings by using [Sensory Deception] and relying on [Haste] to move quickly.

That way of fighting has helped him so far, easily dealing with hard difficulty and even one guy from Hell difficulty. He can also use mental attacks, but they don't really seem to work all that well on Biscuit, who merely responds by shouting louder the moment someone tries to connect to his mind.

In a last-ditch effort, Aaron dodges through the tentacles and mana projectiles and reaches Biscuit, only for it to be revealed as a projection, and the real one attacks from the side, a dagger in his hand.

Even so, Biscuit reacts in a flash and envelops him in his purple tentacles.

The gentle corgi then shakes Aaron until the boy forfeits, Aaron surrenders to escape and to avoid throwing up from all the shaking before appearing outside. There, he curses under his breath while Biscuit leaves my lap, wobbles up to him, and nudges Aaron with his small head until the boy relents and pets him.

Gareth faces Dennis in the finals, the second twin sharing a combat style with his brother.

I think it's great they got so far, only losing against strong opponents. But both of the twins are much stronger when they can fight together. When they fight alone, it's like most of their skills can't be used properly. It's a weakness they need to work on.

Gareth, having some knowledge of Dennis, acts gentle but firm and allows some attacks to hit that fail to damage him at all before changing his armor, moving quickly, and defeating the second twin.

Then Sophie disappears with Tacita, and the two women face each other on the floating island. The common area becomes eerily quiet for a moment before the conversations resume at a much quicker pace. People bet as quickly as possible, trying to guess the winner of the fight.

Sophie has a terrible reputation as a mind manipulator, and Tacita is a crazed girl, barely even a young woman, who kills people if they get too close.

Tacita's nonchalant bearing changes one second after the duel starts. Before she even moves, blood seeps out of her eyes and ears, and her arm moves. Tacita stabs at her own neck, only managing to redirect the dagger at the last moment and burying it just over her collarbone.

It becomes quiet once again as Sophie's green eyes shine coldly and dozens of mana constructs as a swarm surrounds her.

Chapter 377: Sophie vs Tacita

Sophie loses control as Tacita changes her field, and the mute girl disappears.

Even while that is happening, Sophie keeps her hands moving as she sets up her web. She works quickly, creating floating constructs the size of bees that roam the battlefield in a chaotic fashion, drawing nearly invisible threads of mana behind them.

Sophie detects something and waves her arm, causing the ground to bulge a few steps away from her before bursting into a large spike and piercing high into the air. She spins swiftly causing another three spikes to burst from three more points.

It's almost impressive to see how little this distraction seems to trouble her as she continues to build her web and more constructs.

For a moment, Tacita appears, dried blood under her nose, ears, and eyes, and the skin over her collarbone bleeding down her shirt. She stands there calmly, dagger coated in her own blood. Did Sophie just force Tacita out of her stealth skill?

Changing her grip mute girl takes a step.

A dozen or so constructs take off after Tacita, each one its own, self contained trap, ready to trigger their effect the moment it's destroyed. The arm holding the dagger turns into a blur and all of the constructs disappear, each of them having been cut to ribbons in the span of a second.

When the spikes pierce the ground, Tacita avoids them gracefully, jumping from side to side, avoiding them with ease, even while dancing between the threads of Sophie's web.

Every second she is moving closer to Sophie, who continues to throw everything she can against her. Her web, constructs, earth spikes, wind slashes, and even the air over Tacita changes, attempting to focus the light and burn Tacita like an ant under a magnifying glass.

When Tacita gets just a few steps away, Sophie shrinks her web, pulling the constructs into a tighter perimeter, before spinning a number of threads together, and attacking the mute girl.

The web actually seems to affect Tacita's movement now, hampering it, as it pulls oxygen out of the air, restricting her ability to breathe, hell It even seems to be altering the temperature, and density of the air.

Seeing all this, Tacita continues to walk slowly, playfully dodging her opponent's attacks as needed, her arms the only parts seeming to move, her speed causing them to vanish in a blur as she deals with each attack. She looks angry as she does. The angriest I've seen her yet.

One step away from Sophie, she moves her arm and jams her dagger into Sophie's neck.

Sophie tries to grab Tacita's arm, which would improve her manipulations, but Tacita pulls the dagger free, before removing Sophie's entire arm and taking a step back.

Then they face each other. Sophie, bleeding from her neck and the stump of her arm, and Tacita watching and waiting for her to die.

There is an invisible fight we can't see or sense, but I'm sure [Manipulation] and Tacita's skill or trait are clashing even now.

Gradually, Tacita squeezes her dagger, blood once again flowing from her eyes as her hand moves. Turning the dagger against herself, the tip of the blade pierces the skin over her heart.

Then the movement stops, and in a lash-out-like movement, the arm swings, sending Sophie's head flying and reducing her into a cloud of shiny particles.

Soon after, Tacita also gets teleported outside.

The crowd under the screens becomes extremely loud, with different groups of people chanting the names of the girls. Some erupting in celebration, and others complaining as they rush to check their bets.

Sophie doesn't seem to be happy but quickly finds herself drawn into a conversation with the others, all the while trying to keep her sister from noticing, though I'm sure can still feel it.

As I wait for the next fight to start, I create a black orb over the palm of my hand and, as always, it tries to fight back while I shape it, creating a projectile, dagger, and other constructs. I've found that Mana Cycling helps here a lot too, though I probably should have expected that from a technique left to me by that cockroach-like Absolute. Not to mention all the progress I've made with the aid of my duplicate and all the training I've been doing here.

As we approach the end of the tournament, I plan to continue my testing. In particular, involving the combination of black mana and my [Mana Crown] and trying to use it to power my skills in interesting ways.

The result will probably be... well... explosive. Excited as I am, I figure I'll need to put it off to work on improving my control, just a bit more before moving on with the attempt.

Lately, I've thrown a lot of effort into trying to master black mana and I can't shake the feeling that my basics are still lacking. It might not be a bad idea to slow down a bit and work on the basics. In the long term, I'll be better off than I would rushing to use powers I barely understand.

Then there is also Miwa and her arm and her desire to meet Tent... the first-ranked crafter, damn it.

"Maya's up against Savant," Izzy pokes me, jolting me back to focusing on the screen once she's done speaking with Sophie who she still calls dumb.

"Why is Noodle growing so slowly, it seems like he eats a lot of mana," I ask as I turn to the screen.

"I told him to not grow too quickly so that I can continue to carry him around and pet him! He's cuter at this size."

I see, that makes sense.

Poor danger noodle.

Meanwhile, back on the screen, dark blue armor starts to surround Maya, and before the helmet can cover her head, I take notice of the cold and focused expression on her face. She must know she doesn't have much of a chance, but that won't stop her from trying.

Maya activates her [Boost], and her high dexterity increases even more as she charges Savant, short swords in hand.

This time, Savant doesn't use his domain and pulls out the broken Sword of Aeons instead, not seeming to care that it only has half a blade. He uses it like a long dagger or a very short sword.

His strengthening combined with the short bursts of mana he uses to reinforce his body are nearly perfect. Better than anyone from Hell difficulty, he strengthens his body with his mana. In very short bursts, he becomes almost as quick as Tacita.

He avoids her attacks with extreme accuracy, sometimes by a hair's width, merely by stepping to the side or jumping back, occasionally moving so little as to simply tilt his head.

He matches Maya's speed, and each time their weapons clash, he uses the bare minimum level of force, preferring to absorb the excess with his skill. He even manages to make use of the absorbed energy and releases it as needed to strengthen his attacks.

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

I think his skill is probably something along the lines of [Absorption], [Counter], or [Redirection], or something with a similar name. Though the skill allows him to absorb attacks and store them for a while, it likely comes at the cost of his mana. The longer he stores it or the more powerful the skill is, the more it's going to cost him.

His skill must be really good too, given the way it was even able to store [Disintegration]. Either that or it was a higher level than Lily's skill and required Savant to use a lot of mana.

It doesn't worry me that much. With my reserves, I should be able to overpower it quite easily. There is no chance he can endure it with his pitiful reserves.

Savant dodges and lashes out with his sword, the blade's edge glowing in the gentle orange light of his domain. It easily cuts through Maya's armor and causes a serious wound.

Without hesitation, Maya creates a patch made of mana to stop the bleeding, and instead of using [Boost] to enhance her healing, she uses it to attack again. She keeps changing her weapons, switching from daggers to hammers to swords, all in an effort to catch Savant off guard.

At times she even creates additional limbs made of mana from her back and attacks with them instead.

It still isn't enough and the fight ends a minute later with Savant barely warmed up and Maya's armor flickering as she starts to lose control. At that point, Savant ends it with a few swift swings of his sword, slicing through Maya's creations like nothing.

"So who do you think is stronger, Nat or Savant?" Aaron asks Maya when she gets out.

Maya, in a state of deep concentration, takes a moment to jolt back to reality, and then a few more as she stares at the blonde boy.

“Savant may be ridiculously skilled, but Nat is crazy to the point of being suicidal.”

“So Nat?”

“It’s hard to imagine Nat losing, but I don’t think that Savant showed everything he can do, so I would expect him to have some nasty surprises in waiting.”

“So Savant is the smart kid who finds it easy to study while Nat is just a dumbass spending his nights brute-forcing the lessons?”

“No, Nat sets the class on fire and then uses the distraction to cheat while getting terribly burned.”

“The fuck?” Aaron shouts, stealing the words from my mouth.

For now, I may as well ignore the pokes at my surely normal personality.

On the screen, the scrawny man who beat Min-Jae wins his fight, becoming the finalist for his group. I think he’s from Bendover’s group. A similar assassin build, but unlike the 30-something Bendover, the scrawny man must be over 50, though it’s not like it matters that much anymore with the benefits granted by our stats.

A few fights later, and the group fights end, leaving us with our 16 finalists.

Congratulations on becoming the finalist for your group. The finals will start in 1 hour!

Group 1 - Swordmaster

Group 2 - Noname

Group 3 - Brainiac

Group 4 - Bard

Group 5 - Gareth

Group 6 -

Group 7 - Wanderer

Group 8 - Zenith

Group 9 - Savant

Group 10 - Rook

Group 11 - Meridian

Group 12 - Sset

Group 13 - Tacita

Group 14 - Vesper

Group 15 - Luminary

Group 16 - AnotherOneHere

Having seen the groups in their full glory, I can't help but think about just how unlucky Group 4 was. A lot of them met someone from our group or Beyond, preventing them from making the finals.

There are even two people from Hard difficulty who were lucky enough to get groups without anyone from Hell in them, Zenith and Meridian.

The duels are announced as well, while the participants are split into two groups.

Group 1 - Swordmaster vs Group 2 - Noname

Group 3 - Brainiac vs Group 4 - Bard

Group 5 - Gareth vs Group 6 - FoodFood

Group 7 - Wanderer vs Group 8 - Zenith

Group 9 - Savant vs Group 10 - Rook

Group 11 - Meridian vs Group 12 - Sset

Group 13 - Tacita vs Group 14 - Vesper

Group 15 - Luminary vs Group 16 - AnotherOneHere

It looks like I need to win against Swordmaster, followed by either Brainiac or Bard. Then that leaves either Gareth or Biscuit. The winner of this mini-group will go against the winner of the other mini-group. Likely Savant, Tacita, or Tess.

"Are you happy with your group?" I ask Tess as we read from our system windows.

“Well, I need to win my fight and then I’m up against Savant. It’s a shame, I wanted to fight Tacita, but there’s nothing I can do.”

“Already giving up?”

“Of course, I will throw in my best, but I think out of everyone you’re the only one who can reasonably face the guy.”

“He hasn’t shown off much. He got an arcane weapon during the first event, and had a high [Restriction] during the second and third.”

Tess chuckles in response, “That’s more than enough for someone like us to make a judgment, right?”

“I guess.” I sigh.

Then I look at the mana stone I’ve been keeping in my pocket. It’s the one Savant gave to Lily in exchange for restoring his arm. The stone contains research on healing made by Hella, a disciple of Champion Tristan.

Knowing Savant had it since the second floor, it’s obvious that he saw the research as well. There’s a lot here about body modification, more than there is about healing wounds or regrowing limbs and organs.

Things like taking parts from someone else and making them your own by “healing” them into place, and simply making your body accept them.

Every bit of it is nasty, descriptions of taking the corpses of long-dead Champions and trying to use them. Changing limbs, transplanting the hearts and flesh of more powerful humans, even body parts containing traits. It also talks about the risks inherent in such procedures. Rejected traits, the body fighting back against foreign organs. Such procedures are extremely dangerous should the new part be rejected.

And I wonder how much of this knowledge that guy has used and how much of that body is still his own.

Chapter 378: Terrifying predator

Min-Jae returns to the rooftop just as the hour-long rest is reaching its end. He's quiet and there's still an aura of disappointment hanging over him. But who the heck knows, it's hard to deal with people. Why can't everyone be as simple as my minion and our future animal overlord? Things would be simpler then.

"Such a good boy." I rub Biscuit's belly. The best-looking corgi that ever existed looks back at me, seemingly confused, but like the perfect being he is, he just accepts it and starts wagging his short tail. Emotional Support Corgi sure is a nice competition to ESM.

"Nat..." Min-Jae wants to say something but I interrupt him.

"You are young and dumb. But it would be nice if you stopped caring about useless stuff. And get yourself together, before the tournament ends, I have questions about your eye."

"O-okay."

I wave and then vanish into the Arena to face Swordmaster. This time the arena has changed once again. We find ourselves in the middle of a huge field covered in grass, tall enough to reach the middle of my shin as it sways in beautiful green waves with the motion of the ever present wind.

However, the stone pillars all over the place do serve to break up the scene somewhat. Some of the pillars are as big as buildings, while others are shorter than me. The sky has a slight orange tint to it, like the earth just before sunset. There are no clouds but the sky makes it look like there is a ring around the planet, like those around Saturn.

"It's pretty, surely the nicest arena so far." Swordmaster, like me, is looking around, neither of us willing to start the fight quite yet. The man didn't attack me while I was looking around so that's a point for him.

"Wanna bet this place actually exists outside of the tutorial? You might have a chance to visit it if you are lucky."

"Not with that attitude it won't."

"I just swing my sword. Space travel is not for me."

As he speaks he pulls out his sword, its beautiful blade formed of ethercrystal. It's not difficult to guess what kind of abilities the weapon will have, or that it's surely an epic grade item.

My opinion of the man having been thoroughly bolstered, I decide to mirror his approach somewhat. My mana seeps into my hand, extending and creating a sword. I push further, compressing it until it turns dark blue with swirls of light blue and purple inside. My Mana Regulator redirects a big part of my mana into Reinforcement and we face each other.

Swordmaster attacks first, silent, the grass around him barely reacting.

When I use kinetic energy to dash, a shockwave erupts in my wake, creating a ripple in the green grass. The grass loses some of its color and the wind becomes more distant as I slide deeper into [Focus].

The air reverberates as our weapons slash, just a single exchange making it clear that he is much more skilled when it comes to handling weapons. I, on the other hand, am stronger and faster thanks to the huge amounts of mana coursing through my body.

Swordmaster soon starts dodging my attacks, trying to predict and read them instead of barely blocking them.

We attack each other, the collisions between our weapons creating small shockwaves, while invisible slashes follow our blades, and sparks of mana explode into the air.

We find ourselves constantly repositioning and using the pillars as cover and angles of attack, we fight simply. Without relying much on mana and skills.

I find myself enjoying this even caught in the depths of [Focus]. There is something satisfying about moving my body and simply reacting to the movements of my opponents while he does the same. Swordmaster is very talented, also realizing that this could have ended long ago, so at times it feels like a lesson as he focuses on my weaknesses. When I fix them at least a bit, he focuses on another one.

Even so, ten minutes later, he jumps back a few times. More mana seeping into his transparent blade as it starts to shine while seeming to ignite the mana around him.

More kinetic energy flows out of my Vortex Core, and we dash at each other, the last exchange reducing him to white particles as the system teleports him out, and I follow soon after.

It takes me a few minutes to replay our fight and I feel my mood improve slightly. That duel was fun, with all this mana I almost forgot how much fun it is just to move my body.

The next duel is Brainiac against Bard, with Brainiac winning, and catapulting himself into the top 8 with me.

After that, it's Biscuit's turn. Before he disappears, I wish him luck and promise a lot of jerky if he wins.

They wind up in the same arena, as I did, leaving a corgi and Gareth to face each other. The grass bends gently under the wind as Biscuit floats into the air.

"This is awkward. I'm going to feel terrible fighting you," Gareth sighs.

Even so, Gareth still covers his body in a suit of silver armor as a crown of the same color forms over his head. Two orbs form over his shoulders. He doesn't seem to be underestimating his opponent this time around.

Dozens of purple tentacles shoot out from Biscuit, surrounding and grabbing Gareth, who tears some of them just with the sheer strength of his body as he cuts through others with weapons of his own creation, setting himself free.

But that little time is enough, and the orb Biscuit was preparing is ready. It's bigger than any I've seen him create before, the purple color starting to turn bright white. It seems like he's decided to put everything into this single attack.

Biscuit falls down from where he was floating, tired. Every ounce of his mana concentrated in the orb making its way towards Gareth, who just got out of the tentacles.

Gareth groans in surprise, the crown over his head shining brighter. Gareth's two silver orbs form into a single one and shoot towards the bright white orb, surrounding it.

As Biscuit's orb explodes, Gareth keeps layering barrier over barrier until his crown starts to flicker, but it stays. The silver light of his barrier surrounding the orb extends further. The explosion stretches, making the barrier bigger before it weakens and Gareth compresses it.

In the end, the light of the explosion inside the orb dies off, and Gareth launches it far away, where it bursts open, and the intense heat scorches a huge part of the field.

Taking a few slow steps, Gareth stops in front of Biscuit, who can barely move, and looks up at the man.

"That was a very strong attack, I have only a tiny bit of mana left," he says, clearly very tired, as he gently reaches out his hand towards Biscuit, who lets the man pet him.

Gareth smiles gently, "Can you please forfeit? I don't want to hurt you."

Rather than complying, Biscuit moves quickly and bites Gareth's hand.

At first, Gareth laughs it off, calling it cute, but soon a shocked expression appears on his face, and he jumps back, blood dripping from his hand before it heals over. His extremely durable body, damaged like that by a simple bite.

Biscuit shows his teeth, his usually gentle brown eyes glowing with a hint of purple. The shadow behind him expands, seeming much bigger than it has any right to be, a myriad of tentacles swirling inside.

Licking his lips for another taste of Gareth's blood, Biscuit seems much bigger than before, even though nothing has changed. His cute little mouth feels more enormous than even his disciple's and his teeth more dangerous.

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

The sound coming from him has a haunting and primal quality to it. Like the raw snarling of a terrifying predator.

Gareth doesn't get a chance to attack, and Biscuit disappears, forfeiting this duel.

Biscuit appears back in my lap, lying so that I can't see his expression or eyes. I can only see the shape of his body and the back of his head.

Slowly he turns around to me, and I get to see it.

His face is back to normal, a cheeky glint sparkling deep inside his eyes.

(Food!)

I quickly take what few bits of deer jerky I have on me and feed them to Biscuit.

Leaning up to his ear, I whisper, "I don't mind if you start eating planets or something. But try to avoid eating humans. They are dirty."

We don't want him to get a taste of that. If he develops the same addiction to people that he has to deer jerky, it could be very dangerous.

(Food!) He shouts, his tone sounding disappointed. How could I dare think that he would eat anything other than high-quality deer jerky?

In the next fight, Wanderer beats Zenith, the lucky or unlucky Hard difficulty member.

Savant defeats Rook easily, and Tess beats Meridian, who is also from Hard difficulty.

Tacita faces Vesper, the scrawny man who beat Min-Jae. From the start, she seems to hold nothing but disdain for the man just from the way she looks at him. When he blends with his surroundings, she just lifts her eyebrow, and her eyes continue to move, clearly tracking the man who thinks he is invisible.

Cursing, he appears again, and she dodges a few thrown daggers before disappearing.

Vesper, with sweat rolling off his brow, continues to look around, swinging his dagger, and trying multiple skills, yet he finds himself unable to do anything.

One of his fingers falls off, followed by his ear, then a leg. All in quick succession, Tacita takes each piece without the man even noticing.

It's clear he is about to forfeit, but before he does so, Tacita appears, standing in front of him, her dagger sprouting from his neck.

Both of them disappear, the victor having been decided.

And once AnotherOneHere wins his duel against Luminary, the top 8 has been decided.

Group 2 - Noname

Group 3 - Brainiac

Group 5 - Gareth

Group 7 - Wanderer

Group 9 - Savant

Group 12 - Sset

Group 13 - Tacita

Group 16 - AnotherOneHere

Warning. It is now possible to die inside the Arena.

Then there is no other message, but even that single sentence is enough for my mood to change. The vague boredom that's plagued me up till now vanishing into the ether.

Just how much can you be excited for a fight if you know that there will be no consequences? No death, no real danger. Sure, it is fun to be able to go all out without worrying about useless stuff like breaking your body or having your brain melted under the pressure of your own mana.

But this? I really like it. This is much better.

Once again, the system gives us an hour before the next duel will begin, but I already feel myself getting giddy.

"Please don't kill Brainiac, he is a dick sometimes, but he's still a nice guy," Dennis says moving closer and nudging my side.

Aaron joins in as well, "I mean you could beat him a bit, the guy deserves it for sure, but killing him would be too much."

"Sure, sure," I say, waving my hand dismissively. These little jerks just love that kind of joke. Or at least I think they're joking. They don't actually think I would kill the guy, do they? I mean, there is no real reason to, and even though he's annoying at times, Brainiac isn't that bad.

Noname vs Brainiac

Gareth vs Wanderer

Savant vs Sset

Tacita vs AnotherOneHere

Soon the event will be over, we just have a few more fights.

The Arena for the quarter-finals is different once again. This time it takes the form of a lake the size of a tournament city for sure. That lake is perfectly calm and the water at its deepest barely reaches my ankles.

The calmness of the lake leaves it almost like a mirror, the surface perfectly reflecting the blue sky. And there, far, far in the distance, stands a giant tree. I can't even guess how tall it is, but it has to be a few miles high at least.

"Want to go check the tree before we fight?" I ask Brainiac, who is already opposite me.

"I don't know, man, it seems really far off, and how long do you think the system will let us stay here?"

"We can test it out. You're going to lose anyway, so you can forfeit in the worst case."

"Ouch... you don't have to be so direct."

"So?"

"Damn it, fine, let's check the tree." He sighs.

I float into the air and stop near him, grabbing him with one of my mana arms. In front of us, I create a pointy barrier and behind us, I leave an anchor to estimate the distance. Then I start releasing the kinetic energy stored inside my core while replenishing it through my thermokinetic heart.

Gradually, I increase the speed of our flight, ignoring the complaining Brainiac at my side. I continue to fly like that for a few minutes, but the tree doesn't seem to be getting closer at all. I even use my eyes to check it, but I can't detect any problem, and when I check my anchor, I land with a sigh.

Turning around, the anchor is just a few seconds of flight behind us.

"See, it's the same in the games, you can't leave the area."

"We could," I correct, disagreeing with him. "The system isn't the problem, it's this place. The lake seems to be causing this, and I can't disrupt the effect or see through it. If I could, we would be able to reach the tree."

"So it's not the way the arena's been set up? It's just an effect of the place the system picked for our arena?"

"Yup."

"Whatever, why are you so interested in that tree in the first place?"

"I think it might be alive like The Living Tree on the 4th floor, so I wanted to take a look. But it doesn't matter if we can't reach it." I take a few steps, each sending ripples across the shallow lake and destroying the reflection on its surface, then I stop and face Brainiac.

He quickly catches on and takes a few more steps back as well, settling at the distance most comfortable for him.

The water around him ripples slightly, and a dozen or so projectiles rocket through the air, directly at me, each one the width of my pinkie and extremely sharp. There are even a few smaller and weaker ones mixed in, in a clear attempt to hide them.

All of his attacks seem to be made of wind, or compressed air now that I think about it, I mean it's either that or something similar. Maybe vacuum now that I think of it?

I tilt my head to dodge two and step to the side to avoid a few more. I let three crash into my forearm without much in the way of strengthening, and blood is drawn, the projectiles nearly piercing through the limb entirely.

When I check the projectiles stuck in my forearm, I find that they do have some weight to them after all, and a sense of mass. Still, I can't quite decipher what they are.

The projectiles that missed me are now returning behind me, and I send a disrupting wave toward them. Half of them disappear, and the other half ignore it. There is no mana on them anymore, and they fly just by their momentum alone, seemingly made out of solid matter in their own right.

I dodge and examine the attack for a bit longer, sometimes letting some hit me to examine them. There are a few more surprise skills Brainiac uses, but these projectiles are what interest me most so I take some time.

When I have had enough, I send a strong disrupting wave and then let a huge amount of golden flames seep out of my core.

At the last moment, I remember something, increase my control and stop the flames mid-air, the water under them sizzling and evaporating.

"D-did you just almost kill me?"

I quickly lower their power, the golden color turning yellow, and reduce the stream to a quarter of its size.

"Noname! Did you fucking forget we can die now?!"

I let the flames continue with a much slower speed toward Brainiac, and after cursing, he forfeits.

Outside of the arena, no one says anything, but Maya chuckles until Tess gently slaps her in the back of her head.

Chapter 379: Before the finale

Gareth scores an easy win in his next fight. Even though it's possible to die now, neither seems to hold back much. The fight still seems dangerous, but also like friendly sparring.

Wanderer is a petite woman using shockwaves. She uses them to attack, reposition, and mimic flying for a second or two. Sometimes she even concentrates them much like I do, but they lack the damage output required to hurt Gareth.

When Gareth wins, there is barely any sign of the fight on his body.

As I wait for Tess and Savant to enter the field, I try to figure out the system's intent behind allowing us to die within the Arena at this point in time. Even during the start, the system said that it was impossible to die during the tournament. Does it mean the rules changed or was this always the plan? Am I just paranoid, thinking some sliver of intent from the Rulers would bother to mess with us?

Either option could be true, though It's not hard for me to imagine the system doing this on its own to shake up the final matches. Whatever it is, it can wait as the two people enter.

Tess with a dozen javelins floating behind her back, wearing armor she got on the 3rd Floor from Edwal and had improved and fitted on the 4th. The javelins are a mixture of a few epic ones with the rest being rare. Mostly made out of endurium.

Savant is wearing a chestplate I've seen him wearing on a number of occasions, a light weight and well fitted scale mail cuirass. Other than that, he enters with a bracelet on his wrist, a necklace, and the damaged Sword of Aeons on his waist.

This time, Tess takes a more mobile approach and rushes to put more distance between Savant and herself. Her [Storm Crown] is already in place and she even uses [Psychokinesis] to move herself faster.

Her opponent doesn't react and stays rooted in his starting position. The orange light is already starting to seep out around him, and he holds the Sword of Aeons in his hand.

The crown over her head grows in diameter, doubling in size, as the lightning lashes out at the air chaotically.

The first javelin to sail through the air is an epic grade artifact. In the blink of an eye, it reaches its target, leaving a trail of red and white lightning behind it.

Instead of piercing his chest, it slows as it gets closer, either the pressure from Savant's domain or some unseen ability slowing it down and weakening the lightning. In the end, he grabs the javelin depleted of its lightning and, after examining it curiously, he lets it fall.

Before that javelin even touches the shallow water of the lake, five more pass through the air, each of them at different speeds and all of them focusing on the same spot.

The result is the same, the five weapons devoid of lightning falling from the sky to sink down into the water.

Seeing that, Tess sighs and drops all but one of her javelins, and all the lightning from her crown and other weapons flows into it over the next ten seconds. The javelin cracks under the amount of energy stored in and surrounding it and Tess launches it directly into the air.

Once again, Savant lets it happen. His eyes watch her like a tiger standing to the side, ready to pounce on its prey.

After a while, that javelin starts falling down like a meteor, lightning cracking all around it as it shines like a solitary star. Its falling speed is further increased by Tess's skills.

Without even attempting to dodge, Savant's posture straightens, and lightning starts flowing from his hand and crackling around the Sword of Aeons. Shining red and white, like the one he absorbed before. It blisters his arm, eats into his flesh, and a few bolts lash their way across his cheek, causing a burning scar. Even so, he somewhat forces it under his control and slashes at the falling javelin.

The water from the bottom of the lake explodes into the air, as the sheer force of the impact causes a large quantity of water to burst into steam. The displaced water rapidly makes its return to earth, falling like rain and rippling out across the lake. Somewhere within the area of impact, Savant remains, hidden by the cloud of vapor, a bit of red and white lightning continuing to arc through the fog.

Tess moves her arm, and the javelins in the water lift into the air again. There is no lightning crackling around them this time. But before she can attack, a javelin flies from the point of impact at a speed nearly equal to that of her last attack.

Even though Tess is not expecting to react, she sends a strong push in an attempt to stop the attack.

A single thump sounds, and shocked, Tess looks down at her chest. There she finds a huge hole piercing through her body, big enough to see through. Clearly a mortal wound.

"I forfeit," she says, evacuating as quickly as she can while her body sways from blood loss, her eyes losing focus and becoming more and more distant.

When she appears outside, the wound is gone, and her clothes and mana are restored. Tess grasps for the air.

If she had hesitated a bit longer, she would be dead.

If Savant aimed any higher, she would be dead.

That much is obvious.

So that's how we play.

I filter out the conversation of my group and watch the next duel. Tacita against AnotherOneHere.

After the last duel, Tacita seems to share my feelings, and the moment the fight starts, she disappears.

Before her opponent can even react, he finds himself staggering back, her dagger piercing deep into his chest, slicing through his armor and ignoring any other defenses he may have had. A mercy I'm sure he knows. That dagger could've easily been placed in his eye and killed him before he could forfeit.

"Thanks," he mumbles while the blood flows from his wound.

He disappears, and a new notification pops up.

Congratulations! You have placed in the top 4 of the Arena of the 5th round of the tutorial. The fights will continue immediately with the final duel happening one hour after.

Death is still possible within the Arena.

Note: The remaining competitors will not be healed by the system after the duel ends, only mana and stamina will be restored.

The duels are as follows:

Noname vs Gareth

Savant vs Tacita

Someone from the group says something, but I feel myself pulled inside and rush to find my bearings within the new Arena.

This is the 1st floor. The clearing we've appeared in is set under a dark sky lit by the northern lights. Blue, green, and pink, they shine vibrant in the sky. Unlike in my memories, this place is eerily quiet, not even the sound of leaves moving in the wind. Nothing is moving; as if we were frozen in time.

"Forfeit." I give a single warning to Gareth.

"No." He answers simply.

Both of our crowns appear at the same time, and he shoots a few of his orbs at me. They reach me quickly and expand, trapping me inside of a bubble as it tries to shrink, crumpling me up inside.

But it doesn't move, the sheer pressure of my mana holding it at bay.

My eyes activate, and I decipher the frequency, using [Resonance] to step through the bubble.

Gareth reaches me quickly, his slim armor covering his form and dagger in hand. For a second, I grasp him with [Redistribution], add that energy to my own, and release a burst of kinetic energy from my core.

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The earth in front of me explodes, sending the man flying through the forest and breaking the trees in his path. I use the anchor I placed on him, and after creating a tricolored orb, I send it through.

Far in the distance, an explosion rocks the forest, followed by two more as I send out more orbs. Then my anchor disappears, crumpling under the amount of mana I've sent through and because I didn't have time to make it stronger.

The explosions stop and a few seconds later Gareth stumbles into the clearing, his body bloody, mangled, and burned. A silver light shines around his body as it heals him and his armor surrounds him again. Huge parts of the forest behind him have been left in a state of disarray not to mention the fire.

I compress a javelin over my shoulder and fill it with thermal energy before launching it at him. As flames explode around him, I use an anchor I placed on the javelin and appear right in front of Gareth.

While he swings his silver mace at me, I absorb the flames around us and release more thermal energy from my core. That forces Gareth to stop his attack, and a shield nearly as big as him embeds itself in the ground as he blocks the attack. The golden flames slide across the barrier, scorching the earth at his side and heating up the air.

Taking a bit of black mana I created, I boost my [Resonance] and disrupt his shield, which causes him to cross his arms in front of his body to block them.

Even so, the ridiculously resilient man endures them, his armor failing in the heat and starting to melt at the edges.

Another disrupting wave powered by black mana dispels his armor, and he continues his attempts to hold the flames at bay with his body alone. His flesh melts away, leaving his bones exposed while his body continues to regenerate.

Gareth takes a step towards me.

Then another as a silver mace forms in his hand.

Before he can take a third step into the flames, a compressed javelin as thick as my leg appears behind him, I launch it at him, boosting its motion, piercing his belly, and anchoring him to the ground.

Exhausted, Gareth moves to get rid of it but then notices the javelin turning bright white.

His eyes glance from it to me.

"I forfeit," he says with a smile and disappears before the javelin explodes.

Appearing outside, I let my replenished thermal energy flow through my body to activate my passive and heal the small wounds I have taken. As the system said, they haven't been healed, only my energies and mana have been restored. Even so, I'm not worried about Gareth. The man will surely be able to heal wounds of that level.

I use [Focus] and force myself to calm down.

While watching the screen, I continue to work on my Flamebearer, the damaged arcane ax. It's something I've been working on ever since the end of the second event. The goal is to create temporary inscriptions like I did back then. Until now, I haven't had a reason to take it into the duels with me, but that's about to change.

Tacita and Savant both appear in the Arena clearly modeled after the 1st floor.

The mute girl takes a deep breath, pulling out a second dagger. Both of the weapons are of epic grade. The first one is shorter and with a wider blade, made out of silver metal. The second dagger, which she's showing off for the first time, is made of black crystal. It looks brittle as if a single attack would break it.

Releasing her held breath, Tacita blows a strand of hair from her face. All her attention is concentrated on what I guess is as quick movement as possible.

[Dawn] surrounds Savant close to his skin, the orange light radiating like armor.

Mana coats the two daggers, and Tacita disappears.

When she appears again, she's only holding one dagger; the black one is gone. Tacita looks at her arm which is quickly changing colors, an orange light spreading from her hand and reaching higher.

Without hesitation, she swings her dagger and removes the arm at the elbow, after that the field around her changes slightly, likely in an attempt to counter or weaken the effect the next time she attacks.

Savant is standing there, a black dagger piercing through the palm of his hand, the attack stopped before going through his eye.

Tacita went for a kill. There was no hesitation at all.

Looking at the black dagger, Savant watches as it crumbles, turning into dust. His arm starts turning black and then crystallizing, and it spreads quickly. If he doesn't do anything, I'm sure that attack will leave his entire body like that.

He pushes at the encroaching crystal with his domain, countering the effect somewhat, and as the orange light seeps through his body, it seems to be reverting it to some extent. Aware of his reserves, he doesn't push more to remove it and decides to save his mana; he just keeps it at bay.

When Tacita attacks again, targeting his head, he barely manages to parry the strike with the Sword of Aeons, and Tacita reappears further away.

It takes a huge toll on him, I can see, but for really short moments Savant is almost capable of matching her speed. Almost.

Once again, Tacita's body is poisoned by his domain. Each clash costs her, even the short exchange they just had was enough to leave her affected. Not showing any hesitation, she charges again, attacking from the side, her arm becoming a blur.

Savant barely covers his vitals, and the dagger stabs him three times: striking his arm, his knee, and the right side of his chest.

Tacita pays a high price for the exchange though. Blisters form all over her body, and her breaths are quicker and shallower. One of her eyes seems to lose its sight.

"You will die if you don't forfeit," Savant says as he shifts his weight on a different leg.

A bit of mana glows at the tip of Tacita's dagger, and she swings it, creating an image in the air just from the afterimage of the glowing mana.

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A crazed smile climbs its way onto Tacita's lips, and more mana seeps into the dagger, its surface vibrating visibly, cracks forming across the surface of the weapon. Her feet bury themselves in the ground, and she lowers her body. The mana poisoning reaches further, blinding her other eye as well, and she just closes her eyelids.

The orange light of his domain dances across Savant's skin, flickering like flames.

Tacita reaches him in a blink and nearly severs his arm, the bone serving to stop the slash that was meant to separate his head from his neck.

I can see how much it surprises Tacita that his bone stopped her attack. She tries to dash back but finds herself unable to. She falls to the ground, her chest barely moving. Her skin starts shivering, and some of her hair falls out as her limbs thrash as they cramp.

Savant watches her. He doesn't attack, but he doesn't take down his domain and Tacita is slowly being poisoned to death.

Then she forfeits and disappears.

For some reason, I realize that I'm about to stand up, grab Lily, and teleport somewhere. It's surprising reaction for multiple reasons, but I stop myself and wait.

The reaction I expected to happen comes quickly.

"Nat, we need to help her!" Lily shouts, grabbing my shoulder and shaking me.

"We need to?" I ask curiously.

"Yes, we need to!"

"She is unstable and dangerous. She could kill any one of you at any moment, so I don't think we need to."

"Nat?" Lily cries, shocked.

"Yes?"

"I thought you were friends, I thought you..."

“Lily, I’ve only known her for a few days. Don’t misunderstand, I care about our group only and I will kill anyone who tries to hurt us. As for Tacita, I don’t mind being neutral with her, but we aren’t friends, and she doesn’t belong to this group.” These words are meant as much for me as they are for Lily.

“Please...” she whimpers.

I look at her. Lily is almost crying.

“Even though you don’t know her?” I ask with interest. It’s a question I want to ask myself as well.

“Please. She’s dying. I don’t think anyone’s going to help her.”

“Okay then if that’s what you really want.” I put my hand on her shoulder and teleport to Tacita’s lair. It’s deep in the forest, a small hideout built around a fallen tree.

There, hidden inside, lies Tacita, curled up, shaking, and clearly dying.

I watch as Lily rushes towards her, immediately using [Sacrifice] and sending a burst of healing through the girl.

I don’t mind helping Lily. She’s a member of my group, someone who’s helped me over and over again. Someone I want to call a friend in the future.

But Tacita? There are things I like about her, but there’s a lot I don’t. And I know she wouldn’t hesitate to kill me or anyone from group 4 if she thought it was necessary.

Why would I want to help such a person? Out of some sense of petty sympathy? Because of pity?

"I can't help her fully, Savant's poisoning is too deep. I can't use [Disintegration]; I would probably kill her." Lily is desperate, and her constant healing is the only thing keeping Tacita alive. The mute girl is on the brink of death because of what [Dawn] did.

With a sigh, I concentrate my mana through [Focus] and force it into the shape of a small black nail. I lower my head and pass under the fallen tree.

In this tiny hideout, a single large blanket full of holes lies, most likely an item from Earth, judging by the design. A few stolen items are strewn about as well, some of them are even ours, Earth food I bought that disappeared. In the corner of this small place, a few daggers lie, all of them extremely clean and well taken care of. Layed out and organized like treasures.

Lowering my hand, I pierce the black nail into Tacita's chest, and for a moment, she opens her eyes that are already healed by Lily. They meet mine, and I can see the stubbornness in her gaze. A strong will clinging to life.

"It wasn't my idea. It was hers." I gesture at Lily.

The black nail starts absorbing the mana that's poisoning her and some of Tacita's own as well. I try to control it so it absorbs only Savant's and I succeed only partially, but it's the best I can do.

When all of the mana poisoning is gone, I remove the nail and turn it into an orb. I will need to get rid of this somewhere.

Lily touches Tacita again and starts healing her. Tacita's breathing steadies, her convulsions subside, and color gradually returns to her face.

The entire time Tacita holds a dagger in her shaking hand. Even in the state she is in she is ready to fight back. It's something I'm sure Lily didn't notice.

Chapter 380: Final duel

We stay a bit longer and I keep an eye on Tacita and the knife she has hidden behind her back.

She is like a wounded animal, growling, and showing teeth, but knowing she is getting help and not biting because of that. I can't help but find it amusing to watch her face while Lily works on healing her, at this point Tacita's probably finding herself feeling even better than she did before the duels.

As we leave she doesn't bother to draw anything for our benefit. She just watches us, clearly having us so close is making her nervous.

Giving her one last glance, I teleport us away and let Lily deal with any questions our group might have. I, meanwhile, take the opportunity to stretch and return to sitting in the spot I abandoned before. I still have some time before my final duel with Savant, so I may as well work on Flamebearer.

I replay the events of the 1st event in my mind, paying special attention to Savant's use of the arcane glove he found there. Back then I wasn't taking anything too seriously, but arcane weapons are probably difficult to control. Very difficult.

Flamebearer is like that even with my temporary inscriptions. It's hard to say how much more difficult it is to control a fully powered arcane weapon.

To hear Savant tell it, the glove tended to guzzle mana, and yet he made decent use of it, even with his paltry reserves. And the restriction he had in place only makes his feat even more impressive.

Hell, he demonstrated his prowess again during his duel with Tess when he managed to force her primordial lightning under his control. I think his skill gives him an edge when he needs to manipulate an ability that he's absorbed.

That explains why he couldn't control her lightning before absorbing it. Even so, the fact that he was able to do as much as he did says a lot.

Tacita showed a rare expression of surprise when he did that. Connecting it with the mana stone he gave to Lily and the knowledge it contains, it's possible he made some modifications.

The question is if he replaced all of his bones or picked and chose. If I had to guess, I would say he went with the latter.

(Would you mind if I asked you something?) Sophie probes, connecting to my mind.

(Go ahead.)

(While you were playing with your ax, Lily explained what happened with Tacita. She tried to not show it, but she was disappointed and surprised.)

(Makes sense. So what's the question?)

(I'm surprised by your reaction. I think it's out of character,) she says.

(Is it?)

(Yes, I would have thought you would try to help just to get her on your good side, it wouldn't have even cost you anything. You already seem to have some small connection with her, and she seems to respect you.)

(Weren't you trying to kill her earlier?)

(A bit, but that was just in the duel. I don't think I truly wanted to kill her if you know what I mean. So can I have an answer?) Sophie pushes.

(I'm an asshole, simple as that.)

(Were you waiting so that Lily could take the blame? Why would you do that? Why...)

(Anything else?) I snap, interrupting her.

(Just one more. I noticed a weird feeling a few times during our conversation, but did you die?)

(Yeah, once or twice.)

Sophie cuts off for a long moment and when she continues, her tone cautious, (Nat, others are coming to me to weaken their memories so they can keep dying while training. Yet you died at least two times during our conversation and who knows how many times before. Are you sure...)

(It's fine. A bit of training didn't kill anyone... well, you know what I mean.) Having had enough, I just cut off the connection.

Two times? It was twice as much.

I'm using this opportunity to examine my heart as much as possible, even cutting it apart inside of my chest to examine its pieces. So of course, there are some risks.

It would probably be safer if I didn't work on Flamebearer at the same time, but it's fine.

As for Savant, I'm curious how he will heal. At the start of the tournament, he appeared missing an arm, which Lily restored, but I can't help but wonder if he did it on purpose so he could examine her healing. Maybe he even absorbed some? What an annoying guy.

Either way, I'm certain that he has some plan to heal the wounds Tacita inflicted. The weird effect produced by that dagger can probably be removed if he's willing to sacrifice a decent chunk of his mana to fuel his domain.

As for me, I don't think the duel will last very long. I plan to go all out fairly quickly and I have no qualms about using the last charge of Titan's Backbone. It already proved itself in my fight against my duplicate.

Once again, I feel myself getting giddy.

Soon.

POV Brainiac

I poke Gary and gesture at the screen. The old man finally stops talking and focuses his attention.

After he got his ass kicked by Noname, he seems even more interested in this fight. He may be trying to hide it, but I can tell that he is deeply dissatisfied with being subjected to such a one-sided defeat.

Well, it's not his fault. Noname—that guy is bonkers, even the twins and Kim can't say any different.

The screen displays an image of the final Arena, where the two stand, face to face. The setting appears to be a generic city from Earth.

They're surrounded by skyscrapers and the sun sits high in the sky. Down on the streets, cars, bicycles, and a myriad of other vehicles stand parked. But not a single human can be seen.

Though the setting is familiar, I can't help but find the image of a city without its multitude of bustling inhabitants disturbing.

"Hey, Adam, know what city it could be?" I ask.

"It looks like somewhere in North America."

"How lazy can the system be? It could have at least set it in New York, Paris, or San Francisco. That's where all the big disaster movies take place, right?" Mari asks, giggling.

"Well, the two of them are definitely going to cause a catastrophe."

I watch as Savant leaps to the top of a skyscraper in a few bounds, his path up the building, marked by a trail of crumbling glass and concrete. Meanwhile, Noname is already waiting at the top. As always, he wears that same punchable expression that's so emblematic of his personality. The one that makes it seem like he is looking beyond you like you're just a bug in his way.

Granted, having known him for a bit, it's probably not intentional, but damn, I would love to punch him. If he was at least a bit less good looking... if he smiled a bit, I bet all the girls would be all over him. Even so, I don't know how big a chance they would have with that mana maniac.

The fight doesn't start immediately. For a moment, they face each other, neither of them using their skills. They are measuring each other.

A few seconds pass and not a single word is exchanged. Then the fight starts.

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Noname takes a step forward and mana roars from his body as that pale blue crown appears taking its place over his head and golden circles form in his eyes. He stomps and the entire skyscraper cracks and starts to collapse.

Orange light flows from Savant and crashes into Noname's mana and for a moment they seem to push against each other, though the blue mana starts to take over as Savant jumps to another skyscraper.

Like a predator pouncing on its prey, Noname charges him and swings that ax of his with both hands.

Golden flames devour the area, burning between the buildings, cracking glass, and reducing the cars below into molten heaps of slag.

Another swing and more golden flames explode into the area.

And then a third evaporates the building Savant was standing on, the man surrounded by his orange light and holding that broken sword in front of him.

Slowly the flames die off, leaving burning streets, destroyed buildings, and molten metal in their wake.

“Well, I had hoped it would do more damage, but at least it depleted a lot of your mana,” Noname says as he floats in the air. Without any hesitation, he throws the ax aside, leaving it buried in one of the buildings.

“Your ax’s output was unexpectedly high.” Savant nods.

Both of them are weirdly calm.

This time it’s Savant who makes the first move and the orange light he’s been radiating increases. It expands further and further, lighting up the sky, like the breaking dawn. It pushes against Noname’s own light and rapidly approaches it, eager to make contact and poison him just like Tacita.

“Sword of Aeons was the best mana battery on Eladore, wasn’t it? I wonder how much mana you stored to push me like that.” Noname inquires, seemingly unconcerned, even as the orange light reaches him.

Blisters start blossoming across the surface of his skin but he seems to be examining them instead of trying to fight back. More and more orange light exerts its pressure on him, surrounding his body like it means to devour and drown him, while it slowly forces him to reduce his mana expenditure.

“Well, not like it matters.” He says, the serenity in his voice making me shiver.

It’s like he doesn’t even care that he can die now. He acts no different than he did when he was invulnerable. On the contrary, he’s even more daring now.

Noname lifts his arm to the sky and one of those scary black orbs forms in the palm of his hand. It grows more and more until it’s the size of an orange and then elongates into the simple shape of a sword.

Immediately, all the orange light surrounding them gets pulled inside. It doesn’t even touch Noname anymore, it just flows into the black sword like water down a sinkhole.

Noname floats into the air again, holding the black sword which absorbs any mana close enough to reach him. His blue crown slowly spins over his head.

Then he starts releasing his own mana seemingly unaffected by his terrifying black sword.

Every time I think he might reach his limit, he pushes more and more mana from his body.

And then more.

And more.

“Fuck... just how much...” Mari sighs.

And more.

Gareth keeps his eyes glued to the screen and I realize that calling Noname a mana maniac was an understatement. How is he not dead? Did... did he invest all... of course... of course he did. He was always telling us in the Community, we were fools to think he might be joking.

What a monster.

Everything is fine, it's even running smoother than expected.

Savant's [Dawn] can't do shit against me. The black sword just absorbs any of his mana that reaches me. It sucks it in like a black hole. Sure I could make it easier to upkeep and maintain the black mana as an orb, but the sword looks cooler.

My training also paid off and with the help of my eyes and [Resonance] I can change the frequency of black and normal mana so they do not affect each other. It's extremely difficult and I'm sure the aftereffects will be severe even with Titan's Backbone. Though I can't keep it up for long, which may be a problem in the near future, but it should be fine for now. No, it's more than fine.

Most of my primordial energies are gone but I can still use all of the mana I've pushed into the surroundings to pressure Savant, his domain is already dissipating and he turns it into that orange sword

that seems to be trying to fight it. So far he's enduring pretty well even under all of the mana I'm radiating, an attempt at mimicking his domain and mana radiation.

Seeing as he's not trying to poison me anymore, I split the sword into three parts, forming each one into a javelin before launching them at him.

Each one crashes to either side of him, pulling on his mana and devouring it gluttonously.

I reach towards all the mana within my [Mana Domain] and shape it. I send it his way in the form of tricolored orbs, javelins, mana wires, and mana orbs. Each attack pierces through a skyscraper as Savant jumps from one to another and I force the black javelins to follow him.

We destroy the city so similar to the one I grew up in, leaving everything trashed. The choice of this Arena is a clear message from the system.

Look and see what you could do to your planet and cities.

Buildings crash. Roads get torn apart, cars bowl over. I unleash flames that melt the concrete and kinetic energy reduces large statues and telephone poles into dust.

Savant dodges, the orange sword made of his domain flickering under the constant pressure applied by my orbs and mana. Yet he still manages to absorb some of my attacks. Some fire disappears here, and a pulse of kinetic energy doesn't hit him as strongly there, and tricolored orbs fail to explode.

His heart beats. At this point, I'm sure it's not the original. Neither is his right arm, one of his legs, and one of his eyes. All of these parts came from different beings, all of them more powerful than his own and absorbed into his form.

So I'm not surprised when all the attacks he absorbed get released, compressed into a single orb, not dissimilar to my own. His poisonous domain, my fire, and kinetic energy, my tricolored orbs and javelins, all of it merged into a single orb, which he sends my way with perfect timing.

Even before it explodes, the orb releases immense heat, setting nearby buildings on fire and collapsing the road under it.

I move one of three black javelins and shoot it through the orb, the black weapon sucking in all that mana, leaving only primordial energies behind, which I reabsorb into my Vortex Core.

The attack disappears as if it never existed.

I move my arm and the three black constructs fly back to me, all of them contained within my domain. In my hand, they connect and reclaim the form of a sword. Moving them now is much more difficult, but they are also so much more effective.

Boosting my body, I reach Savant who meets me head on, his orange sword clashing with mine.

I watch as his sword tries to poison me, to take over black mana. The domain is extremely concentrated in that weapon. But it can't do anything. The black sword just absorbs it all with ease and it doesn't even seem to have enough to resist.

"You won't be able to keep it up for much longer so that's why you are pushing me," he says as if it's a fact.

"Yup, soon it will start wrecking my body. How much more mana do you have stored in that sword?" I ask, gesturing at the Sword of Aeons.

"Enough to keep resisting your domain for another ten to twenty."

I shoot a pulse of kinetic energy at his head only for it to be absorbed, and returned immediately. He does the same with my fire, javelins, and the tricolored orbs I form over our heads. All of it taxes him, I can see that.

In the last attempt, he finally pulls out his trump card. He absorbs his left arm, the one Lily restored at the start of the tournament.

His sword made of his domain disappears with it. The wounds on his body heal, the arm most likely containing some of Lily's healing powers and his strength and speed increase likely enhanced by the biomass he absorbed from his arm.

The orange light ignites again. A light shines from the broken blade, extending it and giving it the look of a normal sword. his domain taking the place of the missing mana.

Savant then powers his sword with the mana remaining in his body and the Sword of Aeons itself.

It's scary how much comes through and some of his domain even pushes through the black sword I made, for a moment escaping its reach and affecting my body. The damage reaches my heart even though my domain and all my other defenses. It pierces through my mantle and spreads through my circuits.

Even then, it's not enough.

It's far from enough.

My heart thumps and I compress the mana flowing through my body. I throw the black sword far away and I grab hold of Savant's hand, holding his sword in place. Then I push further, I compress more and more until all the mana currently flowing through me becomes tricolored before resolving into that mysterious black mana.

In a blink, it devours my mana poisoning and threatens to tear me from inside, until I push it out. Ignoring the damage it causes I form a big nail out of it, the same kind I made during the 1st event.

I then jam said nail into Savant's chest, making sure he understands the message.

He tries to absorb it, he tries to work around it, but he can't. Not currently. With his body in tatters from our bouts and the sheer amount of mana we were channeling and our abuse of powerful skills, he looks at me.

I'm ready for anything. My mind is sharp, my heart is beating wildly, and the world feels so colorful, so alive.

Show me what you can do when pushed to the brink.

"I forfeit," Savant says simply and disappears.

For a moment I just stare into the air and at the destroyed city all around me.

What?

I appear outside in the common area, to the sound of people shouting my username down below.

What just happened?

Some members of my group rush to congratulate me but I don't hear them.

Did he give up just like that? Just because I had an advantage?

I feel myself clench my teeth and my now restored mana starts seeping from my body.

Is he messing with me?!

I send my senses through the common area in one strong pulse and fail to locate him. I can't sense him at all.

As my mana starts to build up I glance at Lily and Isabella who are smiling. Izzy is even holding my hand and I'm sure she can feel my emotions right now. I once again look at the crowd down in the common area, most of them shouting my nickname, happy and celebrating the end of the event.

When I glance at Izzy again, she smiles at me and taps my hand.

Feeling extremely frustrated I sigh and seize control of my mana. I start cycling it again before it can start to leak and reach the people down below.

This doesn't feel satisfying at all.