

Tutorial 351

Chapter 351: Hey babe, are you a nuke?

Holy hell, that felt satisfying, and it was surprisingly easy. Sure, I would have probably died if I had done that outside the bounds of the tournament, but it's totally fine. Sooner or later, I will get to the point where I can pull off stunts like that with impunity.

The amount of black mana I used to keep my body from breaking apart as I channeled all that mana was enough to kill me. However I was able to hold on until the end, and the system ended the event before I crumbled. I don't think the others even saw that.

I need some time to think over my actions. The inscriptions and the black mana strengthening my body helped me channel the force of my mana. I'm surprised how close I am to being able to pull that off even without the black mana to strengthen my body.

My Mana Circuit is really pulling its weight. The new eyes are helping and my passives are helping too. So maybe I should strengthen my Mana Circuit again? A few more rounds of active tempering after we leave the tournament? A few more levels in my skills?

But damn, the [Mana Crown] is really good. I Love that thing. Keep doing a good job. I also love the ax, good stuff. It handled all of that mana like a champ, without picking up a single scratch.

Anyway, it's time to check my rewards.

Before opening the notification, I make sure to act strong and slowly walk through the crowd.

At some point, a group of people from the lower difficulties starts to cheer, "Noname! Noname! Noname!" the chant carried by dozens of voices.

It's surprisingly disturbing, especially seeing the expressions they are making.

Well, it's better than having them shout Tent Creep, so I place an anchor far away and teleport a few times, reaching our house and taking my favorite spot in the armchair near the window.

Congratulations, you have completed the 2nd event - The Siege of Aether Keep in 1st place and you have taken 1st place in terms of points collected - 1298 pts.

No [Restriction] was placed therefore no bonus has been awarded

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

Your reward for taking 1st place overall comes out to 5 thousand shards.

You may choose to receive the full allotment of shards (11,490) and pick one of three rewards or forfeit the shards to increase the quality of your options.

It's here that I hesitate. Eleven thousand shards is a lot and it would be a nice bump to my current total. I don't think I'm going to get an arcane passive anytime soon, but that amount could help a lot.

Yet I still have to question how these shards will actually improve my rewards. Maybe it'll be enough to net me an upper tier epic passive? It could be a high grade epic item again, perhaps it'll be a bit better? I already have a few good passives that fit me, so it would be hard to change them.

Well, let's take out the shards this time.

"I want to receive shards," I state, and the balance of shards I hold increases.

Shards:77,644

I'm still short but I will get there, and when I do, it will be glorious.

Now then, let's check out the rewards.

Please pick one of the three following rewards!

10 levels, skill upgrade token

Epic grade passive skill

Epic grade item

Well, nothing for my minion, but that's okay.

My first complaint is that I should be getting these 10 levels anyways; I killed a shitload of enemies, even two of the stronger ones, so why's the system cheaping out... the fuck am I even thinking, it's the system we're talking about here.

I give the window the bird and check the rewards again. Once again, I've been offered an item and a passive. Maybe they are really good? Upper epic grade?

Whatever, I'll check them out later if I get another offer after the remaining events, but there is one thing I still want to try.

"Can I forgo my reward to improve my final rewards for the tournament and the last event?"

It is possible to forgo rewards to improve any future rewards.

And you didn't tell me that?! This asshole of a system needs a manual. If I had known that before, I wouldn't... never mind, I would have still taken the summoning token for my minion even if I had known. Haaaa... I'm too old for this crap.

"I want to save my rewards and improve my final rewards."

There is no other notification, and the window disappears. Then I check other notifications that flooded my inbox after I completed the event.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 38 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 39]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 39 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 40]

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[Mana Manipulation - lvl 40 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 41]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 41 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 42]

[Redistribution - lvl 45 > Redistribution - lvl 46]

[Redistribution - lvl 46 > Redistribution - lvl 47]

[Mana Domain - lvl 36 > Mana Domain - lvl 37]

[Mana Crown - lvl 17 > Mana Crown - lvl 18]

[Mana Crown - lvl 18 > Mana Crown - lvl 19]

[Mana Crown - lvl 19 > Mana Crown - lvl 20]

Good stuff, I should do stuff like that more often. Damn though, isn't [Mana Manipulation] about to reach the level it was before I used it in that skill fusion? The next time I get a skill combination token, I will have to seriously consider using [Mana Manipulation] in the mix. I might be really able to get it back again.

Screw you, system.

Done with the rewards, I stretch and start replaying the fight in my mind when group 4 rushes into the house.

"Holy fuck, what are you, a nuke?" Maya calls from the door.

"That's a weird pickup line," I reply.

"Hey babe, are you a nuke? Because you've blown me away," Dennis says in response to my quip, and the three boys laugh together.

"Are you a volcano? Because you just melted through my heart." Aaron adds to another wave of laughter.

"Is your name Atomic? Because you just split my heart in two." This time it's Tess piling on with a cheeky expression.

That makes the boys laugh even more.

"Do you work at a nuclear facility? Because you've just caused a meltdown in my heart." Min-Jae also joins.

Do they wanna get beaten?

"Is it hot in here, or is that just the nuclear fusion between us? It's fusion, right?" a quiet voice joins in.

"Damn it, Lily."

"Yeah! Damn it, Lily!"

"Shut up, Maya! You too, Dennis! I will beat you up!"

(Food! Food!)

Go and get them, boy! Defend your friend!

“Okay, okay, this is enough. Let's stop before we cause pun-tamination.”

Damn it, Tess. Damn it.

At least Biscuit rushes into the room and floats into my lap, looking at me with a curious expression. I return his gaze, and for a moment we look at each other.

In the end, he just woofs once and lies down so I can pet him.

Do I look like a villain, sitting in an armchair with my legs crossed and the best doggo of the tournament floor in my lap instead of a white cat?

“Izzy, take a pic!” Lily calls.

“Yes!” cries the 11-year-old girl with the smartphone I bought, as she pulls it out of the dresser she stored it in.

She then cleans the lenses and takes a pic before I can protest.

Quickly running to me on her short legs she shows me the photo, “Look!”

I am indeed a villain. But damn, Biscuit is really photogenic. Then I look at my face and freeze.

What is that expression?

"I'm going to take pictures of others too!" Izzy shouts happily, rushing back into the room to do just that. Some members of our group even pose for group photos.

The atmosphere is nice, my people are happy with the results of the event, and not the least bit surprised by my actions, unlike the others. But I guess it's not the first time they've seen me do something like that.

Tess moves in closer to speak, "Good job out there. You made the right decision, waiting until the end. People could see us struggle to fight the monster and the others from Hell could feel how strong it was. While you wiped it out just like that."

"I will be relying on you to keep the people at bay," I respond simply.

"No problem. You're mine too, so I have to prevent any poaching." She smiles, then looks up and calls, "Izzy! Can you take a picture of me and Nat?"

"Coming!" Isabella shouts and quickly takes a few more photos of Noodle hanging around Maya's neck, while Maya pretends to be strangled and Noodle is clearly not impressed.

Tess plops down on the armrest of my armchair and smiles while Isabella takes a photo of us. That prompts the others to rush in and take a few more photos against my will. There's one with Lily, and the boys surrounding me. And another of Maya forming a victory sign with her fingers.

Some of them notice my growing annoyance and that only seems to egg them on as they continue to bully me.

Biscuit is woofing, and they start talking about rewards, Isabella finally stops taking photos, and Tess and Maya fight over the phone, each wanting to play a song they like from its library.

Lily starts telling me about her experiments with the remains of the Champion's heart. She becomes instantly interested when I show her a bone from the Champion's finger I retrieved from the 5th floor. We make plans to try something together before the tournament ends. There's a lot of testing to be done, after all, we can't die.

The twins then proceed to ask about the coordinates to Lissandra's home world, Eladore, while telling me about the conversation they had with Sophie during the assault. They offer me a nice cut, so we agree to do that sometime after the tournament and put our time here to better use.

At this point, I'm beginning to suspect that the people here are taking advantage of my good mood to get their way and my eyes naturally slide to Tess who suspiciously averts her gaze.

I knew it.

I will let it pass for today, I'm still in a good mood after the event. Even though I almost obliterated the Aether Keep along with the Rotweaver.

A small mistake. A tiny one.

Could have happened to the best of us.

Against my will, I also learn rumors about a guy from Easy difficulty who's reached the highest floor of anyone here. The rumors also say he killed the other 199 people from his group.

At some point, Izzy proudly presents me with a smartphone, and judging by Sophie's look of shame, I can only guess that she somehow has something to do with this. Probably some form of coercion on the part of her little sister.

Isabella shows me a video of myself. It looks like she recorded it from the giant screen during the event. In the video, I'm floating in the air, with a golden circle appearing around my pupils and the crown glowing over my head as I lift the ax.

The video has a number of glitchy effects layered over it and she even added filters, along with some kind of Phonk music playing in the background, trying to make the video's contents, and me by extension, look cool.

Please help.

Should I destroy the hellish device? We haven't seen any smartphones on the other floors yet. Not even on the super developed 2nd Floor. So maybe they shouldn't exist. It only cost me a few rare items, so I could easily do it; it's a cost I'm willing to pay to put an end to this. It seems like Isabella's just getting started and who knows what else she's going to get up to.

She even happily chirps that she saw someone with a laptop while sitting in my lap, her objective clear. Even Noodle's been roped into helping, poor little disgraced guy. Poked and prodded by Izzy, as he slithers closer, the entire time glancing at Biscuit who keeps a close watch on him.

Noodle acts cute, Isabella acts cute. In an attempt to make me buy the laptop for her. She says she could make even better videos for me as if that were something I would want.

Hell, I am willing to pay if she doesn't make them anymore.

With a sigh, I agree to buy it if she promises to be nice to Vega when I summon her here and let me do some small tests on Noodle. She agrees right away.

Poor Noodle.

Vega is still only around level 40 while Isabella sits somewhere over 150. But their ages are fairly similar, and I remember the stories Vega told me. It would be nice if she could have fun with Isabella at least for that one day.

When the snacks start appearing on the table and everyone takes a short break before doing their tournament stuff, I decide to do the same.

I just move to my quieter corner and stay there while experimenting with my mana.

Chapter 352 - The rules of the third event

Tess, Sophie, Gareth, his right-hand man Adam, Samuel, and I have gathered in the living room, sitting together in awkward silence, but I'm enjoying it.

Everyone else is outside doing their own thing and having fun, but I'm stuck here helping Tess. Though I am eager to learn what kind of silly things they have to say.

Adam, who I remember wanting to have a conversation regarding some of the things that occurred at the end of the first event before the start of the 2nd, is looking at me. Even now he wears the same suit, the older man sits ramrod straight. He seems to be somewhere around 60 years of age going by his face, but none of that shows in his movements.

He moves with as much energy as any young man. That in itself has some interesting implications. How might the system influence someone, let's say, 100 years old?

Just throwing a few levels and stats into boosting their constitution would probably go a long way toward improving their life. Even Lily alone is more than capable of making some level of improvement. In the end, even an old man could be brought back from the edge of death and fully rejuvenated.

Now that I think about it, could Lily heal things like cancer and HIV? What about genetic diseases and PTSD? Wait, wouldn't Sophie be better for mental problems?

It's an interesting train of thought.

Now back to the present, I meet Adam's gaze. According to Tess, Adam is one of the richest men in Germany or something like that. Who cares, I bet I have more shards. And it's not like money will be all that useful when we return to Earth.

"Sset, I would like to ask you to reconsider once again. I know you don't like Samuel, but I do not think he is wrong," Gareth says.

Gareth smiles patiently, "This isn't about what comes after the tournament, this is..."

"I know," she cuts him off. "But you need to stop acting like an idiot. And you, Samuel," she turns to him, "you're too weak to be ordering our group around."

"Yeah, Samuel, don't do that," I add.

“Noname, this is serious. We need to establish some kind of order here. It’s calmer now, but we still have problems that need to be solved. We need to have rules in place when we return to Earth. Even the slightest touch of our mana has the potential to kill a lot of people.” I don’t like Samuel’s tone of voice. As if we should follow his orders because that’s all he’s ever known. He’s the kind of person who always has to do things by the book.

“Why bother? We can leave that for future tournaments and our return to Earth. Some of us, not you Samuel, will be powerful enough to give orders to those from the lower difficulties if you want to keep order.” I say.

Isn't it simple?

“But what about Hell difficulty and Beyond?” Adam asks for the first time, his calm eyes on me.

Tess continues instead, “We’ll deal with that as we go. We might not have a Champion before the tutorial ends but we should have a few candidates to set some ground rules. Plus, we’ll learn more from our experiences in the tutorial; that’s what it’s there for, right?”

As the conversation continues, they seem to be taking her more seriously. Tess is only around 20 years old, so even though they’re trying, it’s going to be hard for Gareth, Samuel, and Adam to take the young woman seriously right away.

Yet, Tess and, by extension, group 4 cannot be ignored. We have three people in Beyond. We have Sophie and her mind-blending. Now that I think about it, Lily’s a Beyonder too but she’s also the strongest healer in our round of the tutorial, and I don’t think that will change. We have Biscuit and Noodle too, and best of all, we have me, hehe.

Group 4 is scary indeed.

“See you later,” I say, already bored of the conversation, and teleport to the anchor I placed on the roof. There I meet Lily, who holds a twisted chunk of flesh, with a finger bone next to it.

“Have you gotten bored already?” she asks.

“Samuel was about to start talking about great responsibility coming with great power. Or call me a teleporting atomic bomb or some other ridiculous thing.”

She smiles, "He's not so bad, just uptight."

“Obviously, he would be nice to you, you are very important. But you should watch how he treats people from lower difficulties. The man would be happy to declare martial law if he could. But he’s weaker than us so he has to tread carefully when we’re around.”

"The people from Hard difficulty aren't that weak."

"They're very weak, Tacita here has already killed Samuel once or twice when he bothered her," I gesture.

“Tacita here?” Lily turns to the side to find Tacita sitting beside her. She almost jumps out of her skin, surprised by the girl who’s clearly been sitting there for who knows how long without being noticed.

"H-how long..." Lily whispers.

"She was there when I got here," I say and wave at Tacita who returns the gesture while looking at the bone and scrap of heart Lily's been experimenting with.

"You can't do that! You have to at least let me know when you are nearby!" Lily complains.

Tacita quickly carves her response into the roof.

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Well, it's not like I don't understand her reaction, "Learned anything interesting from the bone? The guy used to be pretty tough." I ask Lily.

Lily's eyes shine excitedly as she turns back to me, "Yes! That bone is perfect!" She pauses before asking, "Should I talk in front of her?"

"It's too late for that, she knows a lot of things and already knows most of our names from all of her sneaking around. You guys didn't notice her most of the time."

Stolen story; please report.

"Oh..."

Tacita's hand turns into blur and she carves something else into the roof.

(; ⊙_⊙)

"It's fine, just don't spread it around."

(^ ^) ♫

I gesture at Lily to continue.

"I've been having some trouble with the heart though, it's a lot more complex, even as damaged as it is. But with the heart, I could maybe help you with your Therm... with your heart. Not now, but sometime in the future, when we don't have to deal with that annoying healing aura from the tournament grounds."

That sounds really promising, it should be possible to upgrade my heart with Lily's help, but I don't really know how much we can influence my mana generation, honestly, it would probably be at least as difficult as using ambient mana. But maybe we could get it to compress my mana a bit more. Even now it's only around 10 to 20%.

“But the bone is much better,” Lily continues. “It’s fairly compatible with my skill so I should be able to make my bones even stronger. And I should be able to do the same for you. It will take some time given your garbage Constitution, I mean I don’t want to hurt you, but we can make it work.”

“There is a question if I want to. I saw some interesting traits that influenced skeletal framework and making them stronger could make it more difficult to use them.”

“We can try to do both, but not here. The healing aura is annoying and heals me before I even make proper changes.”

I start thinking, “Maybe we will be able to make some nice stuff for group 4 together. We can try to give one of my eyes to the others. If it’s too strong, we can dampen the effects and let them ‘awaken’ gradually. It will probably never be as strong as the original, but a healer on the 5th floor did the same thing for my disciple.”

“That sounds difficult. Oh, I also tried to create a mark to leave on people so that they could heal as needed. The one you told me about. It’s really bad right now, but in a few weeks, I should be able to create stronger ones.”

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“No problem! You can get rid of your pathetic healing passive and I will give you a lot of marks.”

My healing passive is trying its best!

While pinching Lily’s nose to punish her, I turn to Tacita, “Do you need something?”

She shakes her head.

“Just hanging around?”

A nod.

“Well, I will leave you guys so you can have some fun together,” I then place an anchor and teleport to the workshop where Isabella’s already waiting.

The little empath stands in the corner over a table, her blue flames melting the metals I gave her and trying to make things from them.

I head over to my table without disturbing her. It's time for me to make a few more items.

In the end, I create five more items over the next few hours, and set the starting price higher at 500 shards each, even though the materials for each item only cost me about 50 shards.

I set the auction’s duration at an hour and close the window.

After a bit of waiting, a notification pops up.

The 3rd event - Avatar Confrontation will start in 12 hours!

Everyone from Hell difficulty will have the opportunity to create an Avatar, for which they may set a [Restriction]. The Avatars will be placed in separate arenas.

Hard, Normal, and Easy difficulties will then be able to challenge these Avatars. Each difficulty will have to pay a different amount of shards to challenge the Avatar.:

Easy difficulty - 5 shards

Normal difficulty - 10 shards

Hard difficulty - 30 shards

The Avatars won't have emotions and won't have any memories beyond those required for combat and managing their abilities. The only goal of the Avatars will be to defeat their challengers.

For defeating the Avatar, the challenger will receive suitable rewards according to their performance and the strength of their opponent.

Note: There will be no cap on the number of participants in a challenge.

Note: A Hell difficulty attendee can create a single Avatar, with any [Restriction]. The Avatar in question can be challenged three times at most.

Note: If an Avatar defeats the challengers, the creator of the avatar will receive rewards as well as all the shards paid for the right to challenge the Avatar. The system claims 10% of these shards.

Note: The creator of the Avatar can add additional rewards for beating the Avatar to entice more challengers. The additional rewards can be shards or items. The additional rewards will be lost in case the Avatar is defeated and split among the challengers according to the challengers' performance.

The Avatars can be placed in 12 hours and it will be possible to challenge them during a 24-hour timeframe.

Okay, that's a lot.

Opening the notification again, I jump up to take a seat on the table I've been working at and read it again. I'm glad the Avatar won't possess any of my memories or emotions. If it did I don't think I would be willing to set one, not after the 5th floor.

This is not the kind of event I would have expected but it sounds fun enough. The most important things are, Hell difficulty people will place Avatars so there can be 31 Avatars at once, with or without [Restriction]. Each Avatar can be challenged three times, which means people from other difficulties can join up to 93 fights against someone from Hell difficulty.

The interesting part is the lack of restrictions on group size. This means that over 2 thousand people can challenge a single Avatar at the same time, provided each of them is willing to pay.

That makes deciding the level of [Restriction] a bit more fun. Alone, no one from Easy difficulty would be willing to challenge someone like Tess or Lily, but if they create a big enough group and the girls place the right [Restriction], they might get some challengers. Placing additional rewards could also help.

However, there is a bit of a problem for me. A very big one.

Is there going to be anyone dumb enough to challenge my Avatar? Especially after the last event?

Damn.

But it's too soon to give up already. I already have an idea. It's time to make use of the group 4 psyops unit and the uselessly handsome man. Reaching out, I touch the web covering our house and Sophie responds.

(What?) she asks.

(I need you to get the twins and connect with Channeler. Tell him to come here and to bring as many of his friends as he can. Useful ones only.)

(Will do. But what are you planning? You saw the notification, right? You're screwed.)

(Worry not. I just need you guys to help me with a disinformation campaign.)

This is gonna be fun.

Chapter 353: I want him dead

The living room was too small, so we decided to meet in the garden. It's a nice change of pace, seated at a group of tables loaded with snacks, surrounded by a variety of lovely shade trees, and vibrant green grass, with a nice breeze to bring it all together.

Even Biscuit's in attendance, floating around and sniffing at the gathered people. Some of them almost seem to be terrified; I guess they saw his performance in the prior events. Now that I think about it, didn't Biscuit kill a bunch of people from Easy and Normal difficulty during the 1st event?

As for the people milling about, we've managed to gather about twenty men and women from Easy and Normal difficulty. Channeler, Dennis, Aaron, Sophie, and Izzy are also here. Off to the side, there's Tacita, sitting on a branch high up in a tree, nomming on some kind of snack she's stolen and observing us down here. I don't think she's been noticed by anyone other than Sophie and I.

I've already brought Channeler up to speed on the situation, so he starts, "So, the goal is simple. We need to make Noname look as weak as possible."

Someone giggles before being silenced by two of her friends

"Good fucking luck with that," I hear before they cover her mouth.

Channeler, unbothered, smiles at the gathered people, his handsome face projecting a calming aura.

As he continues, even I find myself starting to believe his words, "You guys have got it all wrong. During the second event, Noname waited for the others from Hell to weaken the monster so he could steal the rewards."

"No one's going to believe that!" someone shouts.

That... that sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

"Plus, Noname's Avatar won't have the ax," Channeler adds.

Someone else asks, "What about the first event? He didn't have that ax then and he almost won!"

The handsome man shakes his head, "Once again, Noname was lucky, he even got his hands on an arcane item that's why he got so far. It's insane how lucky this guy is. Even then, he lost against Savant."

“Didn't Savant have the arcane glove?”

Channeler looks confused, “Has anyone confirmed that? Savant won't deny it, he'll pretend he did because he's trying to hide his true power until the duels, right? In truth Savant fought with skills alone.”

This time a small group of people starts mumbling among themselves.

(That guy is good,) Sophie sends.

(He's mine,) I return.

After waiting for everyone to quiet down, Channeler continues, “Obviously, we're going to lead by example and challenge Noname. Don't worry about the shards. Noname promised to reward us accordingly. Each of us will get an uncommon item and we get five rare items. But,” Channeler lifts his finger, “The items are from Tent Cre... from Fuckyouintentbitch, and Noname was able to buy them. He might throw in some extra if we do well.”

A few people giggle and Tent Creep gets called out a few times.

Maybe I should beat them up.

They do seem more enthusiastic after hearing that though. It looks like the performance of my items has spread.

Continuing, Channeler explains, “Noname will place a high [Restriction] on his Avatar and place a few decent rewards. Of course, the first few groups of challengers will probably lose. We need to be in those groups to downplay it as much as possible. Then for the third challenge, we're going to get as many people as possible. I will take time with each of you to go over the things we expect people to say and our excuses.”

Watching everything go down, I almost feel like a villain and I love it, it's like having my own minion to enact my evil plans. The group asks a number of questions and Channeler answers each with patience

and a smile. He even knows all their names and after watching them I'm sure half of the people here are only helping because they're into him, men and women.

(Handsome people sure have it easy,) I send through the twins' link.

(I wish women would look at me the way they look at him,) Dennis sighs.

(Maybe we can have Lily use [Plastic Surgery] on our faces to make us look better,) Aaron tries.

(You guys are all dumb, none of you are that bad looking.) Sophie replies as she observes the crowd while testing a few adjustments.

She seems to make a bit of progress, so I ask, (Well?)

(I could probably influence people from Easy, without being noticed, normal too if I push it. But it wouldn't be all that strong, just the tiniest poke towards them deciding to challenge you, nothing more. It would be like a friend giving you advice. People from Hard difficulty would notice that and it wouldn't affect them. It would cause more trouble than it's worth.)

(Fair enough. Let's not do that then. How about you?) I turn to the twins.

(No problem, boss!) Aaron sends with a smile. (We're happy to trash you a lot. We'll even see if we can't get Brainiac to help. It's good you didn't call Kim, he is terrible at lying as is Lootenant.)

(It will be easy, but you have to teach us coordinates on the 6th floor in exchange, without taking a too big cut!) Dennis reminds me.

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(As promised,) I agree.

For a while, I watch Channeler and while some of the things he's saying kind of annoy me on an irrational level, I appreciate the effort. Not only that, but he's making Savant look that much stronger, maybe that will keep people from challenging the guy and stop him from earning any rewards, that would be a nice bonus.

I don't really think it will help very much. People aren't that dumb, but it is fun to watch.

I spend one hour crafting the items to serve as rewards for the people Channeler managed to rope into helping. Yet I still think it will be worth it.

To avoid connecting my name with Fuckyouintentbitch, I've already hinted at buying some. For the rest, I'll drop a few clues and leave it to their imagination, I'm hoping they'll think I know the guy.

After finishing my crafting, I walk through the common area, heading towards WhiteWing.

Surprisingly, I can already see some people looking at me. Some try to hide their laughter while whispering some private joke to the person next to them. It's not many, but it's already spread enough to be noticed, and every once in a while, I see some of Channeler's helpers going around and talking to people. He really picked some good helpers, they don't hesitate in the least as they strike up conversations.

Is this the true power of people from lower difficulties?

Noone from the higher difficulties is quite that friendly, though we did have to get used to floors where people were ready to stab you in the back at any time.

As I approach the big house Gareth's group has been using, I stop to look at it for a while. It has multiple floors, their yard is bigger than ours though they don't have a workshop.

Our house and the view it provides are definitely better. Group 4 wins once again.

"Noname, you're slow as hell. But I guess that's why you're in Hell difficulty," Brainiac says welcoming me with a lame joke.

I ignore him and proceed to enter the house, and he quickly follows behind, “And what the hell are these rumors I’ve been hearing in the common area? I’ve already had like five people ask if it's true that you got an arcane item during the 1st event and that I beat you in a duel.”

“What did you say?” I ask instead of answering.

“It sounded fun so I said I beat you three times in a duel and the arcane item was found by someone from Easy difficulty and you still almost died while stealing it,” he says with a bright smile.

Nice, free labor.

“Ask the twins if you’re interested; they’re in on it and wanted to speak to you anyway. But if you do anything to ruin my plan, I will find you.”

“Sure, no problem! Gary and Sset are already waiting, so go upstairs; I’m going to find Dennis or Aaron!” Once again, he’s ditched his responsibilities in the pursuit of fun and leaves the house. I can’t hate him for it either; the guy clearly has his priorities straight.

As I’m walking upstairs, I detect three mana signatures in the room and knock before entering. There in the small room, I find a man tied to a metal chair. With a weaker version of the Null Collar around his neck. It’s not epic, it’s probably rare at best. It clearly won’t allow him to use his mana.

Even that is enough, this guy’s clearly from Easy difficulty. Though a short examination tells me that he’s probably the strongest person from Easy difficulty I’ve met hell, he’s probably stronger than most of Normal.

The more I observe him, the more interesting it is. Maybe he’s stronger than some of the weaker people from Hard difficulty?

The man tied to the chair is around thirty years old. He has a short beard and brown hair and a wild expression in his gray eyes. He is of average height and quite muscular. Meanwhile, Tess sits in a chair nearby, and Gareth stands in the corner of the room.

"So that's the guy?" I ask.

"Yes," Tess nods.

"So what if I am? You can't do anything. Once the tournament's over, I'll be freed, and you won't be able to reach me," the man's voice is calm, despite his wild expression.

There is something chilling about the way he looks around and speaks.

"That would be quite a wasted tournament for you," I mention.

"I can live with it," he responds coldly.

"What's the name of your skill?" I ask.

"Noname, you can't be serious!" Gareth says, speaking for the first time, and the usually calm and compassionate man sounds like he's on the edge. "This isn't the time or place for that."

"Does it matter?" I step closer and send mana to the man, forcefully overwhelming him and breaking through his natural barrier. Sending my mana through his body, I examine it and his mana.

Other than a token attempt at the start, he doesn't bother trying to defend himself and watches me with eyes that tell me he would stab me if he could. Or something much worse.

Such an amusing guy.

"So how many?" I ask Gareth.

Tess answers instead, "It's hard to say exactly, but we think he killed all 199 members of his group, sometime during the 1st Floor."

"How did he do that? It couldn't have been that easy."

"We don't know for sure," Tess says, shaking her head. "Maybe he poisoned them. He seems to have the skills for it. We spoke to a few of the people he defeated in the 1st event, and they seemed to confirm that he had some kind of poison smoke and acid that melts through low density mana. Both of them cause a lot of pain as well."

"Maybe he just poisoned their water or something and killed them slowly," I ponder as I examine his body.

Other than being surprisingly high-level, it seems normal. I'm not an expert, but there is nothing remarkable. The guy just seems to be some kind of sociopathic mass murderer. Maybe he wanted to level up or take their equipment. Or maybe he's just a murderer and a twisted person who found himself in a place without any rules.

I stop using my mana and look at him. The entire time, and now even more so, he watches me with those eyes of his. I've met plenty of psychos but this one seems to be a special case.

"Any idea what floor he's on?" I ask.

"If he went no [Restriction], then he's made it to the 11th floor, that's what a few guys saw," Gareth joins.

"Oh? Isn't that the highest floor out of anyone here?" I ask.

"Yes, and before you ask, yes, we've tried to get info out of him, but he refuses to cooperate and the system censors everything else as always," Tess leans back on her chair.

Such an interesting situation. So, how do you deal with a murderer like that? Do you even want to? He can't be killed during the tournament. Sure, he can be fake killed, even tortured, but after a few more days, he will be back to doing whatever he wants.

Even if he goes back to the Floors, anything he does will be limited to fakes created by the system their not actual people. The question is if Gareth and Tess want to punish the guy for what he has done. More interestingly, do they even have the right to decide that?

Curious about what they'll do, I turn to them.

Gareth is silent and indecisive, unwilling to show his darker side, which I'm certain he has. There is no way the guy looking like a hero, with shiny armor, healing skills, and speeches about protecting others isn't evil.

Tess, on the other hand, returns my gaze easily, her eyes unwavering as she declares simply, "I want him dead."

That's why I like her.

Chapter 354: Expectations and consequences

"Are you sure?" I ask Tess, my curiosity growing. I want to see how she responds.

"Yes," she says simply.

"Do you have the right to decide that?" I ask though I don't care what happens to the guy. I want to know what the young blonde in front of me is thinking.

"Who cares if I have the right?"

Ok, that's a good answer.

So I ask again, pushing her, "I killed a real human, I threw that guy on the 1st floor to the Cinderbear."

"Yes, you did."

"Soph and Hadwin also killed the guy who wanted to kill Soph after his friend died."

"Yes, they did."

"I will not." A simple answer.

"That's hypocritical."

"Yes, it is."

"So you want others to follow your rules while acting as judge, jury, and executioner without following the rules yourself?" I continue to push.

"It's not about rules I want them to follow. As I told you before, I will be leading this round of the tutorial. I will take over so our group will be safe when we return in four years. Yes, it's still far off but it will be better to start right away."

Gareth is just listening and the murderer tied to the chair is forgotten. Only when the bound man tries to say something do I hold his mouth shut with [Redistribution].

"No one will want to follow a woman who sets rules she won't follow herself," I note.

"They will have to," another simple answer I like.

"So this man is an example?"

"Yes, we will make an example of him. A lot of them think they can do anything they want during the tournament because they can't die. A lot of them also know about this murderer, rumors have been spreading for a long time and he even bragged in Community."

"Sounds good," I can't help but be fascinated by this version of Tess. And yet that can't be all there is to it.

Her subclass is Chastity and now here she is, greedily trying to pull everyone under her control. Gareth, other difficulties, and even the people from Hell. All in the name of protecting her friends and maintaining the camaraderie she's always wanted. It feels greedy but pure at the same time. Such a twisted combination.

So I don't mind helping, "I could forcefully inscribe a construct inside of his body. The kind that would trigger gradually a few days after he leaves the tournament. I could make one that constantly disrupts his mana or one that will make his heart explode. Something impossible for someone of his level to deal with. With a bit of help from Grumpy or Soph and some testing to learn what the system will allow, I should be able to do it fairly easily."

"We can't do that," Gareth finally joins in. "I know where you're coming from, Sset, but this, this is too much. You won't fix anything if you become a murderer as well."

"I've told you before Gareth, but you're too soft. We saw it all over the previous floors, there was always someone strong keeping the others in check. The second floor had the Champions. The third floor had a king. On the fourth floor, the lynthari kept the order and no one dared to step too far out of line. Even what we learned about the fifth, the Absolute, the Champions, and their powerful guilds," she gestures around.

"I know where you are coming from. But there has to be another way."

"Probably? Maybe we'll find a utopia on one of the higher floors. But Gareth, Soph, and I looked into his mind, albeit briefly. I felt flashes of his emotions when he killed people. This man is nothing more than a rabid dog to be put down."

She takes a step towards the bound man and looks down at him, her voice turning darker, "We've all done things we're not proud of and I'm sure we will continue to do so. And probably worse. We will kill natives, we'll even kill people from Earth. Hell, some of us might end up like this man. But right now I want him dead because of the things I saw in his memories. Later I will learn more about the way I want to walk. Then I might regret it, or maybe not."

Instead of talking to Tess, Gareth turns to me, switching his strategy, "And how about you? Have you accepted the idea of killing him so easily?"

"I have," I affirm.

"Would you kill so easily no matter who asked?"

"I only agreed because Sset is the one asking," I clarify. "I trust her," I say, focusing on Gareth, and returning his gaze.

The man seems to be distraught. But he doesn't feel weak or indecisive. It's like he's honestly trying to find a better way.

Gareth takes a step closer to me, his voice more urgent, "What if she's lying? You only have her word, and it's a big decision. You should think this over. What if she's using you or intends to in the future? Perhaps she's twisting the truth to make you do what she wants."

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think I might kill her."

That shocks Gareth into stunned silence. He keeps looking back and forth between Tess and I.

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

When I look at the blonde, she is smiling at me, gentle and understanding.

"How can you say that so easily, isn't she your friend?"

"It's not easy," I tell Gareth. "Isn't a betrayal of that magnitude a good enough reason on its own?"

"Even though she's your friend?" Gareth asks, refusing to let go.

With a sigh, I continue, "Wouldn't that just make it that much worse? I do things she asks of me without questioning her. I gave her my trust and she knows it and can make use of me. But that comes with expectations from my side and consequences should she betray them."

Stepping closer to the bound man, I collect my mana and touch his head, sending it through his natural barrier. I break through easily and place an anchor directly on him, infusing it with enough mana to last for days. It might disappear if he enters the event, but I've remembered his mana signature so I should be able to find him quite easily.

Turning to Tess, I reach to the anchor I placed in the common area, "I will return home and will come up with something later."

"See you later," Tess says.

"Sure," I activate the anchor and disappear, appearing in the middle of a crowd.

My sudden appearance makes some people jump, while I continue towards the house where I felt Min-Jae's signature. Walking for a minute I reach the patch of trees and start cycling mana to hide my presence. Min-Jae has become better at detecting people lately.

Silently I enter a small patch of trees and when I hear his voice I slow down, carefully stopping as the view opens up. There I can see him. Min-Jae is around 16 years old I think and at the moment he's facing down a few men from Hard difficulty. Three to be exact.

Lootenant is with him or Jakub if I want to use the name Gareth doxxed.

The Korean boy seems to be excited about something, though Lootenant looks like he doesn't want to be there.

"We told you you're wrong," one of the men from Hard difficulty group tells Min-Jae threateningly. "We cursed at that lightning bit... woman, but so does everyone else. So what do you want."

"I don't like that you call her that. She is my friend," Min-Jae doesn't seem to be impressed at all and faces the three men easily.

I'm sure he wouldn't be able to do this without the powers he now possesses. Thanks to them even a thin boy can face three adult men.

They seem to realize it as well. They aren't exactly weak, but people from Hell difficulty are just different so they hesitate.

"Look," their leader says in the end, "I got it. I'm sorry, okay? I understand that she is your friend so I apologize." The man is surprisingly reasonable.

Min-Jae, on the other side, seems to be disappointed. I can see how he watches them. The stance he takes is something that reminds me of mine and I could swear the expression too. He is even releasing a bit of his mana.

I can see a thrill in his eyes as three much older and bigger men apologize to him, but immediately I can tell it won't be enough. I've known people who acted the way Min-Jae is now.

"That's not enough," Min-Jae calls to them as they turn to leave.

His skill activates and his gravity field surrounds the men, slowing them down as they fight to keep standing.

"Enough Kim, we don't..." Lootenant tries to stop him, but Min-Jae shakes him off.

Taking a few steps towards the men he says, "I don't think you were honest enough. As you said, she's my friend." Even as he is saying so, I can see a tenuous smile on his face.

That smile and the way he pushes away their efforts to escape his gravity field tell me enough. I don't even have to watch as he uses the excuse of defending his friend to put these men under his boot.

Especially now that he is also angry because they insulted Tess and probably called her even worse names. I already know the reputation she has.

As Tess said before, Min-Jae is young and because of his past, it's no surprise he turned out this way after getting all these powers.

Having seen all I wanted to see, I use an anchor I left in the common area to teleport away. There, I start walking around and checking for some things I could buy. Maybe some interesting stone that would prove to be a damaged arcane item, a ring with the personality imprint of someone powerful, or a talking sword.

Bored and wanting to take my mind off my useless ponderings, I gesture for a young boy who's watching me from a porch nearby to come closer.

"Do you want something?" I ask. The boy was following me for a good minute.

"Are you Nomenclature?" he asks.

The boy sounds even younger than Isabella, and he feels much weaker. Easy difficulty probably.

"Yes," I say.

"The Cheater Nomenclature?" he asks curiously.

Damn, some people just really lack survival instinct.

"Why do you think I'm a cheater?" I ask just in case, knowing it's most likely the result of Channeler's efforts.

"I heard your group got an arcane item and you stabbed them in the back to take it for yourself. And even then you lost to Savant who was tired because he already defeated like 20 people from Hell difficulty."

Oh. My. God. I love you, Channeler my dude.

The boy doesn't let my silence stop him, "During the second event too! You have some leech skill you used to steal mana from other people. Mom said it would be impossible to have so much mana otherwise! You also stole mana from the mines and the natives. All while you waited for the others to weaken the monsters and because you were scared!"

"Be careful," I add with some urgency in my voice. "I don't want people to know about my cowardly [Mana Steal] skill," I say, stealthily handing him some candy I traded for a common item.

"I knew it! A nice lady was telling my father about it and I overheard! Is it true that you also have an item higher than arcane, but to use it you have to sacrifice 10 years of your life?"

This is getting ridiculous.

The boy doesn't stop, "And you are such an asshole that you are sacrificing the life of your group instead!"

There I pause him, "Kid, wanna learn something funny?"

The weird kid nods and steps closer.

How the hell can you talk about me in such a way and then just listen?

I lower my voice to add more dignity, "There is one word I heard the most powerful Absolute I've ever met say. That word bought her the respect of her enemies and the love of her friends."

His eyes expand, "There is such a word?"

"Yes," I gesture for him to come closer and whisper. "Don't tell anyone. You promise?" I hand him another candy.

"I promise! My dad said to never break a promise!"

I nod and look around, like I'm making sure no one's listening, "That word was 'nya.' She added it to the end of every second or third sentence she said, gaining the respect of everyone who heard it."

Then, unable to resist, I flick his nose and teleport away.

Silly kids.

Chapter 355: Miwa

I teleport back after the auction ends, I check the result and receive just over three thousand shards for the five items. The tournament shop has already covered our rent for the house and workshop, and a few days still remain.

It's not as good as looting the Veil Ignition Station, but it's good enough that I should be able to make a few thousand extra shards before the tournament ends.

As I check the crafter ranking, I'm still first, with the second person being someone called Miwa and even Adam is there. For a moment, I consider buying their things to examine them but then decide not to. Looking at my results and 1st place, it's obvious I'm doing better. So, there probably wouldn't be all that much I could learn from them. I still might do it before the tournament ends.

Sensing a few signatures on the roof, I boost myself into the air and land on top of it. Lily and Tacita are still in the same spot, and Maya and Sophie seem to have joined them. The women observe Tacita while talking to Lily.

Maya is closer to the mute girl. Maybe too close. Unlike me, she doesn't seem to notice the tension in Tacita's body every time someone moves too quickly, gets close, or speaks too loudly. It's obvious to me after dealing with her for a bit, but Tacita seems to be about as twisted as the rest of us.

Maya, being as straightforward as she is, smiles and holds out her hand by way of introduction.

When Tacita ignores her, Maya makes a bit of a mistake. She presses closer and reaches out to her with a kind word.

In a flash, her hand is severed, and Maya staggers back, a dagger sprouting from her neck. She coughs, blood spraying from her mouth and soiling her clothes.

Maya doesn't panic and her face takes on the deep calm of the skill we share. Before Lily or Sophie can move, Maya puts a hand on the wound after pulling the dagger free, blood seeping between her fingers. A blade made of mana extends from the stump of her severed hand. Even bleeding, her expression turns dangerous.

Then the three of them stand there, skills at the ready to launch an attack on Tacita.

On the other side, the mute girl is calm, her slim body relaxed, arms hanging along her body, and fingers slightly bent. Her feet are placed just so, priming her for a sudden burst of speed.

Not to escape, but to attack. Even facing three powerful members of Hell difficulty, Tacita doesn't hesitate.

It might be sociopathic, but I want them to fight. I bet Sophie and Maya would go down, almost without a struggle, and only Lily could defend herself. However, the knowledge of our immortality in this space takes the sting from such thoughts.

But I don't forget to warn them, "If you damage the house, I will expect an item equal to the damage caused."

Tacita lifts her hands and gestures at the trio opposite her after meeting my eyes.

"You too, I don't go around destroying your stuff, so I would expect you to extend the same courtesy."

That causes her to deflate a bit, and her stance becomes more relaxed.

"You saw what she did to Maya," Lily says through clenched teeth. Maya, unlike her, maintains a mask of calm, her eyes on Tacita.

Have they forgotten who this girl is? She's been solo climbing the floors, the same as Savant. She has time and again proved herself to be an extremely dangerous individual and she's unstable to boot. Maybe the way she acted made them forget? Tacita's behavior tends towards the playful, most of the time, not to mention the silly emoticons she uses instead of speech.

It's amusing, to be honest. How little it takes for people to let their guard down. Just a few smiles, a bit of childish behavior, and an innocent face.

Unlike them, I strengthen my body every time I see even a shadow of Tacita and keep a barrier under my skin, ready to activate. Not even once have I forgotten to do so.

I also know that Tacita has taken notice; she knows that I'm ready to fight her anytime. But being twisted as she is, she doesn't mind my lack of trust. No, it almost seems like she prefers it, she's actually more comfortable when I try to keep her at arm's length.

Tacita looks down on those who've grown complacent. But I guess that's the inevitable result of her climbing the floors alone and being on constant guard.

So I just tell Maya, "Dennis told me you know about someone who can make pizza."

While keeping her eyes on Tacita, Maya says in a calm tone, "Yes, I've already spoken with her already and can arrange a meeting."

"Sounds good. Can we go?"

Maya glances at me and then at the mute girl. Her expression slowly returns to normal, and she examines her bloody clothes. Her expression clearly shows that she realized she made a mistake and that she's really dissatisfied with the result.

Cursing, Maya says, "Yes, just let me change clothes." She then jumps off the roof and enters the house.

For a while, I sit there observing the standoff between Sophie, Lily, and Tacita, but in the end, it looks like there will be no fight.

"Boring," I mutter and jump off the roof, and take a seat on one of the benches outside, waiting for Maya.

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

Maya and I enter the common area and only then does she turn to me, "I fucked up."

"A bit," I nod. "Do you know where?"

"I thought of her as harmless and allowed myself to get lulled into a false sense of security by the safety of the tournament."

"I agree, you have [Focus] too so you should keep it running in the background constantly. Use it to keep your strengthening just a blink from activating or to monitor your surroundings. Whatever you like."

We pass through the plaza as she leads us through the crowds.

After a while, she asks, "Would she still act this way outside the tournament? If there was no field preventing us from dying?"

"Yup," I say.

I know that without a speck of doubt. Tacita's actions would be the same even out of the bounds of the tournament. Whether it be a native or a real person. It doesn't matter. That's how she is.

My answer seems to strike the usually straightforward and talkative Maya silent, as she retreats deep into her thoughts.

I, on the other hand, try to look as weak as possible. There are even a few people trying to probe my mana, in an attempt to scan me with their skills. Even Maya notices them, but I act as if I haven't and merely reduce the amount of mana leaking from my body.

All in an effort to help the disinformation campaign.

It's in this fashion that we reach a smaller house, carved deep into a nice grassy hill, covered with colorful flowers. Outside of that house is a small workshop, issuing the constant ringing of a hammer striking iron, along with a lot of heat.

"Let's wait outside, apparently she's sensitive about being interrupted," Maya says.

Though it leaves me curious, I plop down on a stone nearby and Maya does the same, and we wait.

I do not send my mana sense toward the blacksmith Miwa's workshop. She is the second ranked crafter in the tournament shop and it looks like she may be the person I need to help me make pizza for my minion.

It takes about an hour and in that hour, I die four times. All caused by black mana turning my brain to mush as I experiment with it. It's mostly part of my experiments with [Focus], It's either that or directly infusions into my brain. All the while I keep a field around me to stop mana from seeping into the area and keeping as much as I can inside of my body.

At this point, I start thinking that before the event ends I will have to be a bit more careful and stop relying on passive healing of the tournament. It would be unfortunate if I tried something like this outside.

Anyway, I'm learning a lot and the control I've refined with the help of my Duplicate improves even further. Now even more so than before, I realize how much time experimenting with him saved me. Months, half a year, maybe even a year that I would've needed to practice on my own, slowly to avoid blowing my head off.

Maya also trains as she sits next to me, a focused expression on her face while she moves mana through her body.

Another hour passes before a woman in her forties finally exits the workshop. She has a youthful face and seems to be Asian, Japanese if I had to guess. The heat seems to radiate from her skin while she wipes the sweat from her brow and glances at us, then taking a few steps she greets us with a nod.

A few seconds later she coughs and tells me, "Hey, my eyes are up here."

Maya seems to be shocked for some reason and pokes me.

I lift my eyes from her right arm, which is made entirely of metal. It's clearly some sort of heavily articulated prosthetic, covered in delicate inscriptions. Looking up at her I ask, "You didn't make it, where did you get it?".

The metal itself is an alloy I do not recognize. Possessed of a silvery color with a pinkish luster.

The arm is beautiful and I'm unable to take my eyes off it.

She looks at me, "I'm Miwa, I would like to hear your names first."

"Noname."

"Knight, nice to meet you, Miwa."

Miwa nods, "Thanks, even if they are aliases. Now then, I thought you wanted help with pizza, offering an epic item in exchange?"

"I have a healer in my group. She can restore your flesh and blood arm. I will add two epic items in exchange for your metal arm," I offer.

"I apologize, but no."

"Five epic items and my healer will make your new arm stronger than the original should be."

"I already said no," Miwa repeats decisively.

Should I try to steal it later? I mean, she's only in Hard difficulty, it should be easy enough. It might be worth the hell Tess would raise or Gareth's complaining. I've seen a few prostheses, but this arm is something else, there's only one floor where she could have gotten it.

"You got the arm on the second floor, right?"

Seeing no reason to lie, Miwa nods, "I got it from a man called Keiron." She lifts her arm, it moves perfectly, fingers reacting immediately and nimbly as their natural counterparts. Even the metal seems to bend slightly at the required places.

The arm is a masterpiece and more so given by Champion Keiron. Maybe he was nerfed on Hard difficulty or not, no matter what it's not something to ignore. More so him being a descendant of Lissandra.

I want to offer another trade, but Maya pokes me before I can and when I look at Miwa I do realize that if I ask again she will send us away. Even now, this polite reception is little more than an act.

I will think of something later.

"Yes, we came here because of pizza. Apparently, you can make one."

Miwa gestures to us to follow her and heads towards the house, "I like to cook so when we reached the common area I traded with other people and got a lot of ingredients. With what I have, I should be able to make pizza as well."

We enter the hallways at which point she takes off her shoes and puts them to the side. We follow her example and wait for her to invite us in.

She leads us to a small, but lovely kitchen, and the woman, still in her work clothes, starts preparing tea, her metal arm as if not more nimble than a normal one. Me and Maya both sit there awkwardly. Even Miwa seems to be somewhat cold because of my offers.

Well, I think I know what will make her more friendly.

"I can give you an item for the pizza, but what do you think about this instead?" I put a few pieces of metal on the table.

Turning back to us, Miwa sighs, "Please, do not try to change..." she cuts off. Miwa quickly puts the kettle away and takes a quick step towards the table from which she grabs a small piece of metal.

It's voidsteel, not a blade, just a few pieces of the metal I found in Veil Ignition Station.

As expected, the woman seems to be even more interested now. Voidsteel is extremely expensive in the system shop and is mostly sold in ingots for one or two thousand shards. Then there is the problem that they are difficult to work with, especially for us from Earth with only a year of experience. So the pieces I gave her should be even more enticing given the way they should allow her more freedom to experiment.

Then I decide to push more, "I also have a damaged arcane grade item." I lower my voice, trying to make my offer sound as enticing as possible. "I will let you look at it if you let me look at your arm."

Chapter 356: Just give me the goddamn robotic arm

After being told to fuck off, we leave the place. It's the nicest way anyone's ever told me to fuck off, and I don't realize what's happening until we're already outside, and she throws our shoes out behind us.

HOW! How is she not enamored by the chance to examine an arcane weapon? Just show me the goddamn robotic arm!

"Maya, I'm annoyed," I complain to the woman next to me.

"You should run [Focus] in the back of your mind to..." Maya swiftly dodges my mana projectile and deflects another by creating a barrier over the back of her hand.

She smiles playfully, "Just let it be before you make it worse. We can ask Tess or Channeler to talk to Miwa and at least get you your pizza."

"But the arm..."

"Oh, come on! What's even so fascinating about it?"

"It was made by Champion Keiron, the dude with [Avatar] skill and the descendant of Cockroachsandra. That alone makes it interesting."

Her eyes burn on my skin as she asks, "Please tell me you are not planning on stealing that arm."

She snorts, "Only Lily has any use for your arms, please act like a normal human. You shouldn't be so laidback about losing an arm. I mean, what are you, a lizard or something? Having Lily on hand is making you even worse."

Grabbing my hand, she pulls me away from the house, "You have that arcane alloy you keep babying. Maybe she would like to examine that more, she seems like a blacksmith."

She lets go of my hand and I shake my head resolutely, "She would want a piece of it. I know that. I'm not willing, not even if she offers to give me the arm."

"Is it that good?" Maya wonders.

"Yes. It was made by someone who worked with the Champions on the 5th floor and was rewarded for it by their Absolute. His life's work."

"But it's only arcane." She pauses, giggling. "Only arcane," she repeats. "You already have a damaged arcane ax."

"That's not how it works," I offer my hand to Maya and she puts hers onto it. Then I teleport both of us, appearing near our house, and I continue, "It's arcane even in its raw form. If you have, let's say, upper rare materials like metals or stones you can, with a lot of work, create low or maybe even mid epic items."

She pauses me there, "But I saw arcanadium, endurium, and some other metals and that's not including the rare crystals she had, some of them were even epics.."

"Yes, that's the difference in the purity of the material. I don't know that much about it, but these metals are rarely found in their pure state, so they usually need to be purified. Nevan told me about a method he had to categorize the different grades of ore, but I ignored it back then."

"So that arcane alloy can be turned into a mid or upper arcane item?"

"Probably? There is a low chance that I may even be able to make something better than arcane, but probably not. Even Champions tended to carry arcane weapons and items. If the system hasn't been reducing the grade of these items, then it means that mid and upper arcane are usually what the new and weaker Champions would have."

"And the system's already been putting low tier arcane items in the tournament?" she asks unbelievably.

"If I'm right, there is a huge difference between grades within arcane." It makes a lot of sense, in my opinion. As the rarities will grow, the difference between low, mid, and upper will only increase.

Maya smiles out of nowhere, "When you have the funds, buy me some arcane armor or something. I'll be your personal minion if you do. We [Focus] holders have to stick together, right?" she pokes my side.

In retaliation for her shameless declaration, I ask, "So what level is your [Focus]?"

That silences her for a moment, and she sighs, "That skill is scary to level. Anyone who makes it to the higher levels can't be normal," she says, repeating her favored excuse.

"But I turned out just fine," I say, in defense of my favorite skill, and myself by extension.

She doesn't answer, so I turn to her.

Huh? Why is she looking at me like that?

A few more hours remain until the start of the third event when I notice Biscuit returning from outside. It seems like he's been doing that lately, going out alone to do Biscuit stuff somewhere in the common area.

At this point, I'm more worried about the people than the little corgi, but so far there have been no complaints, so we let him do whatever he wants.

Most of the group are outside, around a campfire they've set up. A few trees have been felled as a sacrifice, so we probably aren't good renters, but screw the system.

They're roasting the marshmallows I bought along with some other things, like meat from some of the higher-level animals they fought on the 5th floor. Even Brainiac and Lootenant are here, leeching off us once again. They seem to have really hit it off with our boys and can often be found hanging around. The atmosphere seems to be cheery and very noisy. Ew.

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It's at this point that Biscuit floats in through the second story window.

Activating my eyes and crown, I observe him, wondering what he's been up to. I do have to be careful to avoid his detection; he's getting better at it. Biscuit moves from room to room and for a while, he even stops next to Noodle; I can sense their signatures close to each other.

The future Danger Noodle is sleeping there on the couch and Biscuit floats over him. He does something and then leaves the snake alone, entering my room before leaving after a moment.

He floats at his terribly slow speed out of the window to rejoin the others while shouting something about sustenance. I'm just happy he got bored of shouting "bitch," I was worried it was going to be his new favorite word.

Placing an anchor, I teleport into my room and look around the place where Biscuit stopped. The sounds of people sitting around the fireplace are muffled and fade into the background, and there on top of the nightstand, I find a small piece of dried meat. It is clumsily wrapped in wrapping from the candies we've eaten. Biscuit must have seen how much we liked eating the cheap candy after a year in the tutorial, so he thought the jerky would taste better for us if he wrapped it.

Did he also carefully collect all the wrappers?

In quick succession, and ignoring the privacy of Min-Jae and the twins I check their rooms. In each, I find the same. A small piece of dried meat clumsily wrapped in pink wrapping.

For a moment, I imagine the little corgi using his mana tentacles to do that.

Teleporting to the living room with Noodle, I find him in his usual spot on the couch. And sitting there, In front of the little snake, is another wrapped hunk of meat and there is a blanket awkwardly thrown over his body unlike when he first went to sleep.

Noodle isn't sleeping anymore, and when I enter the living room, he looks at me and then at the candy wrapping and the blanket.

These two cute animals often clash, fighting for dominance. So the awkward form of affection on the part of the silly dog seems to surprise the white snake.

Noodle looks at me again with his green eyes, as if trying to understand the meaning of all of this. Why would the corgi do that?

"Figure it out on your own," I tell him before leaving the house.

Instead of teleporting, I walk over to the campfire where the others have gathered. The fake stars are in the sky and the night air is refreshing and warm accentuated by the crackling of the fire.

I pass by Brainiac, who is once again hitting on the girls, and bend down to pick up Biscuit.

(Asshole!) the corgi shouts, surprised by my actions, moving his paws and twisting his body in an attempt to escape.

Holding him under his front legs, I straighten up my arms, Biscuit's hind legs hanging and swinging slightly, the corgi turned towards me.

(Asshole!) he repeats in my head.

As a reward, I shake him slightly, but the doggo seems to be enjoying that.

I lean closer and touch his cold nose to mine, much to the corgi's surprise. But he quickly gets out of it and licks me while repeatedly shouting his first and favorite word.

(Food food food!)

Only an hour remains until we get the notification for the third event. It's still night, yet from the hill where our house is, we can see thousands of lights shining in the common area. People moving around, lights of the houses, campfires set.

Nobody here is a normal human anymore, and that applies even to the weakest among us. Even a few levels are enough to put the average person on a footing with those who've trained their whole lives.

We are stronger, we can move faster, and our stats make us more resilient. It's easier to go without sleep for some time, and after the body upgrade, a lot of us require less food, water, and rest.

Even with that, only a few things would change if we returned to Earth. But it doesn't end with this.

Some people lack the proper scope. They see people from Hell as tactical weapons of mass destruction. Weapons to be used as deterrents by their respective countries. But that's straight up silly.

We're in the process of the Pairing, we will be forced to fight a whole other planet and face its natives, who are likely to be much more experienced than us and have had more time to build their forces.

We've just been introduced to the system, everyone in the tutorial is our First Generation. People who went through the tutorial while learning as much as possible. The goal here seems obvious now.

We're being groomed to lead, protect, and set the order once we return to Earth. Some of us will need to serve as teachers.

Every time I think about it, I feel the excitement in my chest. The boring life I had on Earth has been left behind, replaced by something new and grand. The pursuit of power in the name of taking on opponents who want to see me dead, and the opportunity to explore the powers we've received.

Champions, Absolutes, and their Disciples, Rulers, and maybe something over that? The mystery of what happens after reaching level 99 in a skill. The final Beyond trial and Beyond itself. And more.

Thinking on too small a scale is straight up stupid. This won't end with Earth.

Back in the common area, I examine the window that pops up announcing the event.

Please, create your avatar. You can decide the severity of your [Restriction] as well as any additional rewards.

Warning, if your avatar gets defeated, the additional rewards will be split between the challengers.

Warning, once you set a [Restriction], it can't be changed.

Looking at the window, I think of the love and hate relationship I have with the system and the tutorial. From a certain point of view, it also makes sense that Savant thinks that the system is fair.

But, the system is still an asshole.

I set my avatar and look around the common area, Lily next to me has finished setting up hers as well.

Then after a minute a notification appears for the difficulties under Hell and everyone starts scrolling through their windows. Then like clockwork, a conversation starts. Slowly growing shocked calls and hundreds of people looking around, some people look almost like their eyes are bulging out of their heads.

Some of them find me, poking their friend, and like that, hundreds of pairs of eyes are looking straight at me.

The reason is obvious, a simple small window they've all been shown.

Avatar: Nname, group 4

Restriction: 3rd Floor

Additional rewards:80,000 shards

Chapter 357: Pump these numbers up

For a short moment, I bask in the gazes of the people, but when Brainiac comes rushing, screaming about where the hell I could have gotten so many shards, I teleport away.

I appreciate [Tether] more and more, the way it allows me to avoid people is amazing.

Through the [Connection] twins set up I receive a call from Channeler, (Boss! Good job with the shards! I don't know how you tricked the system, but that's going to help a lot!)

(Tricked the system?)

(The amount of shards. Did you bug it out somehow? We could use it maybe or...)

(I didn't have to. I have the shards.)

The silence that ensues is quite long, but it warms my cold heart.

Actually, can I even say that? My heart can generate a lot of heat, so maybe it's not all that cold.

(Are you serious?) Channeler's voice is quiet.

(Are you maybe dumb?)

Okay, someone's asking for a beating.

Before I can send a message, Channeler adds, (Do you realize what you have done?! With such a high reward, I wouldn't be surprised if over a thousand people challenge you at once!)

(That would mean thousands of shards for one challenge, after the system's cut. That's not bad.)

(Noname, please... you set a 3rd Floor restriction! I know you're strong, but your restricted Avatar can't defeat hundreds of people from Hard difficulty!)

(It'll be fine.)

(It won't be fine! You're going to lose all those shards. So many!)

(Channeler, my dude. Don't worry, just keep to the plan and let me know when people challenge someone interesting so I can come and watch.)

(Will do.) Channeler says, sounding deflated as he does, and I end the conversation.

It's a bit after midnight, and yet the common area is lively enough for me to take notice even from afar. A giant screen dominates the center. Well, not one. Four of them, arranged in a cube for people to watch from every direction. So far, there's not much to be seen, and it seems like only one Avatar can be challenged at once.

That's interesting and it adds a degree of complexity, given the 24 hour limit. Still, with 31 Avatars that leaves room for 93 challenges. Joining all of them would cost a massive amount of shards, so I don't think anyone is going to be joining all of them. Especially if they're from Easy difficulty, they usually have 50-100 shards at most. The fact that Channeler has 150 is a feat in and of itself.

Now that I think about it, I should probably feel bad for trying to get shards out of these people.

Nah, screw them. Anyone fighting my Avatar is after my shards, so I have no need to pity them. Plus, I can always think of it as a form of patronage, after all these shards will go a good way towards making myself stronger, which will, in the end, help the people of Earth.

Probably.

I still haven't decided what to do once we get out, but I don't think I'll like whoever winds up attacking us in the pairing, so I'll probably join the fight. Even if it's only to level up and acquire some nice loot.

Pushing these thoughts away, I place a few more anchors, and teleport until I reach our house. Once there I sit on the roof and wait for Lily. We're meeting to collaborate on a few experiments. We've decided not to sleep for the next 24 hours, and we shouldn't have any problem staying up for that long. Plus, I don't want to miss any interesting Avatar fights, so I maintain an open connection with Channeler and the others to stay so they can continue to feed me information.

It takes a few more minutes but Lily appears on the roof with a big smile on her face, "Thanks for the warning! You were right, Savant and others were extremely fun to watch when they learned about your additional rewards." She laughs, a memory flashing behind her eyes. "Brainiac even started calling you sugar daddy Noname and insulted us for keeping you to ourselves."

Lily plops down on the roof next to me, a smile still on her face. Her eyes seem to glow. "Dennis said Savant looked like someone told him they pissed into his drinking water for days."

Oh boy, maybe I should have stuck around longer.

"Tess said Gareth and Adam think you managed to bug out the system." She stretches and lays on her back, "I haven't laughed so much in so long! Seeing the expression on Savant's face was priceless."

"Screw that guy," I note.

"Yeah, screw that guy!"

I give myself time to enjoy the image of the pissed-off savant, and silence ensues.

Quietly after a minute, Lily breaks the silence first, her words careful, "Nat, I can fix your arm. Make it so it isn't pale anymore."

As she says so, I glance at my left arm which is pale no matter how many times I restore it or how much sun it gets. Lily's left arm shares its pallor. She probably could have fixed it at any time, at least I think so. It's obvious why she hasn't. But her decision to make the offer has left me curious.

"Why?" I ask, turning to her and our eyes meet as she lays there.

"I..." she starts and falters, "I've been speaking to Tess, Sophie, and Maya a lot and I think I was wrong to push that on you." She looks at me as if waiting for a response, but I stay quiet.

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So Lily continues, still somewhat awkwardly, "It was unfair of me and I shouldn't have tried to force myself on you that way. The girls told me they were surprised you hadn't been more upset."

At this point, her emotions may as well be an open book. The more time I spend with group 4, the easier it is to understand them. The same way they've learned to understand me. The experience is interesting.

"So I'm sorry," Lily finally gets out, sulking over my silence and finding it increasingly difficult to speak.

But I think it's important for her to say this in her own words. Sometimes it can help one understand their emotions better.

While she waits for my answer, I notice that even as she said so, she seems worried. This black-haired healer of ours is still scared of being abandoned. It doesn't matter that she understands that it won't happen or that making my arm pale hasn't changed anything.

For her, it's a connection she bears to me, and like the rest of us, she can't help but be scarred inside by her past traumas.

"I see," I say simply.

Lily nods and reaches, "Then I will fix it."

"I see, but I refuse," I say, pulling my left arm back, much to her surprise.

While she stares at me with her big eyes, I say simply, "I like my arm the way it is. I think it looks cool."

That silly healer of ours looks like she is about to cry.

"You're going to like my minion, she's a crybaby too," I note.

"I'm not a crybaby," Lily says, quickly wiping her eyes.

"Something in your eyes?"

"Yes, the dust. This tournament floor is terrible."

"It really is."

A bit longer silence ensues and I add, "Don't misunderstand."

At that, Lily only nods, "I know."

Looking at her and remembering the way she was a year ago, I can see that she's really changed and grown up. But who among us hasn't? And going through all of it together has somehow brought us closer together.

Thinking about it, it was the start of the 4th Floor where I decided to give this group a chance and I still remember the conversation I had with Lily. Even then she almost cried. Crybaby indeed.

As I thought it over, I don't think it was a bad decision, it's not bad at all, being surrounded by this far from normal group of people. At times and with limitations, of course.

Weirdos, all of them. And poor old me having to deal with them.

Anyway, I turn to Lily, "Let's try cutting my chest open and see what we can learn about my heart before the system heals the wound."

We have to give up after an hour of testing and a few lame jokes about Lily being close to my heart or holding my heart in her hand.

Not because of jokes but because of the healing of this floor. No matter how hard we try to slow it or keep the wound open by stopping it from closing, it always heals after a few seconds.

According to the severity of the damage, it can be nearly instant or slower when the wound isn't severe. Me or Lily causing it doesn't change anything, the healing is the same in both cases.

Well, it's not like I didn't expect that. This healing aura is also the reason why Active Tempering won't work here. For it to work, my body needs to be infused with a special frequency of mana and get damaged. Any sort of healing prevents Active Tempering from doing its work.

It's almost like working out. You need to lift enough weight, enough times to damage your muscles. Then, while you sleep or rest, the damaged parts heal and become stronger provided they have the nutrients to do so. Well, it's not exactly that, but it's similar to Active Tempering.

So, cutting my chest open, I was able to see my heart for the first time. A beating Mana Heart, slightly modified to serve as a medium to generate thermal and kinetic energy in exchange for mana.

The heart was surprisingly normal. It didn't glow. There was no change in appearance.

Sure, there was some mana radiation as if the chest cavity were acting like shielding, and each beat of the heart creates mana, but that's probably all that's different. Other than the inscriptions surrounding it from my constructs, it was almost normal if you can call it that.

At least it allowed me to gain a bit of knowledge I can use in the future when I try to upgrade it again.

(Noname, they're challenging your Avatar!) says a message from Channeler.

How interesting. Was it the additional rewards and severe restriction? Or do I have the rumors to thank?

"Somebody's challenging my Avatar, wanna watch?" I ask Lily, who's returned to studying the Champion's bone.

Hearing me, she quickly puts it away, "Yes!"

I offer her my hand, and after a bit of hesitation, she takes it in hers, and I teleport us away. Like most of the people from Hell difficulty, Lily is more than capable of enduring the process with her enhanced body and mind well adapted to powerful skills.

Appearing to the side, we move even a bit closer.

(Your Avatar is the first to be challenged,) Sophie sends through the web with the aid of the twins' connection.

She has chosen to sit with some of the other members of group 4 and Hell difficulty taking up benches around the central plaza of the common area. Some of them have occupied the terraces with drinks and food close at hand. It's all being treated like an event to be enjoyed.

(I would expect them to test it out on someone else, no matter how much we tried to make me look weaker,) I reply.

(Eighty thousand shards is a lot, Nat,) Lily says, joining the conversation. (A lot,) she repeats.

(Lily's right. Plus, it's not that expensive for Hard difficulty, so even if they die, it's worth trying once.)

(So how many of them are going in?) I ask.

(They've gotten greedy, so only twenty members from Hard difficulty. The group is being led by Samuel of all people, would you believe that.) I can hear Sophie smile through the link. (He threw his weight around and tried to limit the number of people who could enter.)

(How does it work exactly?)

(One person challenges the Avatar and a countdown starts. The countdown is 15 minutes, and within that time, anyone can join the challenge, and then they enter together. At first, there was only Samuel and his handpicked group, but the more time passes, the more people join. You should have something in your notification. It's as much our event as it is theirs.)

(You're right,) I reply while checking the window.

Challenge 1/3 - 9 minutes remaining until the start

Number of challengers:

Easy - 10

Normal - 26

Hard - 33

Collected challenge fees: 1300

We're going to need to pump these numbers up.

Chapter 358: This one is for you

It really looks like a fun event. Seeing so many people all around, some of them sitting on the grass in groups like they're on a picnic, others occupy the benches surrounding the plaza, while still more watch from the terraces of their houses.

The four screens are more than big enough to see what's happening from that distance.

It's just after midnight, and yet I don't think many people are sleeping, not with all the excitement over the event. It's an opportunity to compare themselves against others in the same situation. To group up and challenge them together without needing to worry about dying.

Maybe they can win and stomp in the face of some person from Hell difficulty that managed to annoy them. Maybe they can earn enough shards to buy a higher grade passive.

I can totally understand that.

(What have people been saying?) I ask through the link.

This time Dennis answers, (They are excited and worried. I don't think many people intend to challenge you, and Channeler and his harem are being careful, I think they're saving most of their persuasive efforts until the third challenge.)

His brother follows, (They also know the challenges will be there later so they don't mind watching others try it first before wasting their shards.)

(Are they not worried about some early bird beating my Avatar?)

(You might lose! What level were you at the end of the third floor?) Aaron asks.

(Around 120, I think.)

(What? Are you serious?)

(Yes.)

(What the fuck.)

(Yes, what the fuck!) Dennis follows it. (There are people from Hell on the 5th floor who've barely reached 150, and you were 120 during the third floor?)

(Did you think I lost all those limbs just for the fun of it?)

(Do I have to answer?)

Little twerp, just wait.

(Anyway, I can't imagine my avatar losing, even if they have a few hundred people challenging me,) I say.

(But there are 231 people here from Hard difficulty, your avatar might not be able to face them all. They don't have a [Restriction] and some of them are decent,) Sophie notes.

(It will be fine.)

(If you say so...)

With about Five minutes until the start of the challenge, the screens flicker before lighting up. A forest appears on the screen, pocked with a multitude of big clearings. The trees of the forest seem to be fairly normal in size, with vibrant green leaves, all the same variety of oak.

It's a bright day with few clouds in the sky.

My Avatar finally appears in the shot, standing in one of the clearings, unmoving, devoid of expression. Though it feels different from my usual self. As if there were no glimmer of life behind his eyes.

The most interesting part about him is the colors. He looks as if he's been drained of all vibrance. His skin, clothes, and hair look grayish. Only his glassy eyes retain their color.

So, third-floor.

Back then, I still didn't have my subclass and I didn't have my skill upgrades removed. I only had the Mana Circuit trait and my mana stat was around 400, and then doubled by my attribute upgrade. There was no [Regalia] or [Mana Domain] or [Infusion].

If I remember correctly, I had [Focus], [Mana Manipulation], [Perception], [Redistribution], [Armament], [Mana Surge], [Mana Infusion], and [Resonance].

As for my constructs, all I had were my Kinetic Mana Heart, Reinforcement, and Mantle. And most importantly, no epic passives.

It's interesting, I'm fairly certain there won't be anyone in Hard difficulty at that level. There is something I think will happen after reading the rules of this event and if all goes as planned, I have no need to worry at all.

Three minutes remain and too many people start moving around, so I offer Lily my hand and place an anchor, before teleporting us onto the roof of a nearby house.

More lights appear around the common area. Some from skills, some from items, even some normal lights powered by batteries. Though we've been here for a few days, it still feels weird seeing the latter here in the tournament.

The chatter is playful and groups of people are fixing their clothes, doing stretches, and preparing weapons. Some are even seemingly planning formations.

On the screen my Avatar stands in place, unmoving.

When just a few seconds remain, I end my conversation with Lily. We can work out the process of giving me a second heart later.

I check the notification.

Challenge 1/3 - 5 seconds remaining

Number of challengers:

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Normal - 41

Hard - 80

Collected entrance fees: 2,965 shards

That's a lot more than I expected for the first challenge. Not like I'll complain. Their entrance fees will be mine and they will get a lesson in greed for going after my shards.

No lesson for me, but that's fine after all I've been put through by the system and past Nat, screw that weirdo.

All of the challengers disappear as the event starts and the common area grows quiet, people starting to whisper as all eyes turn to the screens.

The moment they enter, my Avatar uses his kinetic energy and lifts himself high into the air. I know he is using [Perception] to judge the danger.

Afterward, he returns to the ground, finding no reason to waste mana on flying. He moves with calm determination, emotionless with a single objective in mind.

On the other side, the group of just over 150 people quickly splits into multiple smaller groups and starts using their detection skills.

I find myself unable to take my eyes off the screen and continue to watch.

Back on Earth, I was never a fan of sports like football or hockey. I didn't find it interesting and didn't understand what brought so much joy and frustration to so many people. Yet, right now, I feel like I might understand, if only partially.

Watching my Avatar walk under the trees while knowing they've found and surrounded him excites me even though I'm not the one fighting. It has nothing to do with the shards at stake. Just being around so

many people and seeing the challengers at the ready allows me to take in some of their emotions and excitement.

As they are about to surround him fully, my Avatar sets the forest on fire. A burst of thermal energy explodes outwards with him at the center, burning dark yellow.

The challengers, knowing what he is trying to do, have groups dedicated to jamming any method of scanning they think he might have and push themselves to rush him all the quicker.

Like a flamethrower, my Avatar pours flames on his surroundings as he moves through the field.

When the first person attacks, my Avatar doesn't hesitate at all, launching an orb through the head of a challenger from Normal difficulty who appears outside. The challenger curses but quickly joins a group of his friends in the common area who laugh shortly and turn to the screen.

In quick succession, ten more challengers, all from Normal and Easy difficulty, appear. Lashing out with grape-sized orbs, my Avatar spins around himself while setting the forest on fire. The heat doesn't touch him at all, on the contrary, I know it only serves to fuel his flames.

"Pyromaniac," Lily whispers nearby.

"Back then I really liked my thermal energy," I note.

When I think about it, back then I also liked making use of the upgraded form of [Redistribution], Symbiotic Transference, to use kinetic and thermal energy to strengthen my body. And that's without throwing in the stuff from [Armament], my experiments with disrupting mana, and some early testing with the thermal orbs.

Damn, I've grown quite a bit. The third floor Weirddaniel was quite scary, experimenting with his heart, but in comparison to me now, he feels so weak.

But even that seems to be enough to trouble the challengers. My Avatar is picking them up one after another, the flames growing bigger and hotter, a huge patch of the forest has been set ablaze, and that

seems to cause trouble for anyone caught without good perception skills and those found lacking in their physical stats.

Once in a while, my Avatar absorbs heat from the flames, turning them into speed and strength, brutally smashing the heads of his challengers with a mace-like weapon of his own creation.

As the system said, my Avatar's single objective is to defeat opponents as effectively as possible, so he does just that.

When a group of 10 Hard difficulty challengers find and attack him, he ignores their attempts at slowing him down and disrupting his mana. The Mantle takes care of that easily.

Flames close to him weaken and disappear and he moves at a much higher speed. The mace in his hand turns into a sword, the blade resonating and cutting through any barriers they make. It doesn't matter if it was made from mana, stone, or wood.

Their skills fail to damage the Avatar as he disrupts them or blocks them with armor made of mana. Even now, he's not going full out, he's saving most of his mana, while he steamrolls through the attacking group.

Ten Hard difficulty challengers appear outside.

They launch their strike at range, bombarding him with attacks, but they're either too slow or too inaccurate with all the smoke, then my Avatar rushes them. The flames in the forest die off as he passes by, his speed increasing further, as he pushes himself to the limit with kinetic energy.

He disrupts the barriers they try to stack, his flames rushing ahead. He concentrates them more and a laser-like stream moves through the battlefield, cutting multiple people apart.

Someone attacks him up close only for my Avatar to sling orbs he's been spinning around himself at the attacker. A few of them get blocked, but the skin of the attacker is unable to endure more, and he soon succumbs to the barrage.

The following fight doesn't take that long, and my Avatar hunts down the remaining challengers, without once going full out, nor examining opponents' skills, or trying anything fancy.

Just like a machine, he mows through them, and when the last one appears outside.

The screen flickers, settling on one last shot of my gray Avatar standing in the burning forest before the screen turns off.

Channeler and some of his group were inside, also challengers, and now they move around, laughing and waving their hands, downplaying what my Avatar did.

They do it carefully, and I feel a bit of admiration. I think after a minute of that I would be drained of my social energy. Hmm, maybe there is a primordial version of it?

(I keep forgetting how scary you can be,) Dennis notes.

(You dumbass, he just nuked an army of monsters during the second event, how can you forget,) his brother replies for me.

(But look at him. You can't feel any mana coming from him and other than looking around like a cat, he seems like a grumpy grandpa rather than a walking bomb. Then he does all this weird shit like the thing with Tent Creep. The more you know him, the more he feels like a very very grumpy grandpa who has trouble showing his emotions. That, or a cat.)

(Dennis,) I call.

(You fucked up, you dumbass,) Aaron immediately pokes.

(Yes?) Dennis asks carefully.

(This one's for you, little jerk. Sophie?)

(Don't you pull me into this, Nat. I'm not interested in childish...)

(A few days ago, Dennis said you have a smaller ass than Maya, but that he would let you squish his head in your thighs or something like that. I listened with only half an ear because I was practicing.)

Someone tries to destroy the connection with a very strong hint of panic. Over and over again, attempts are made to disconnect, but Sophie pushes them away, keeping the web and her connection to it alive.

I continue, (He also said group 4 girls have disappointingly small chests with the exception of Maya and maybe Tess.)

The attempts increase.

(Oh, he did?) Sophie's voice is cold.

(Yes.)

After that, the connection cuts off, the web having been silenced by its creator.

When I look to the side, Lily is staring at me with big eyes, "You are evil."

"I didn't lie. They often sit around in the living room with Brainiac and Lootenant and forget that I'm there training. So I tend to catch a thing or two. You would be surprised to hear the things I've heard."

Then I check the rewards.

Congratulations, your avatar was victorious in the 1st challenge! You have received 2,668 shards. The final reward will be delivered at the end of the 3rd event!

Not bad. Is this what they call passive income?

Chapter 359: Hypothetically

Over the next few hours, there are three more challenges.

One of them is against little Isabella. A group of people from all three difficulties, around 60 people in total, most of them from Hard.

They enter expecting an easy win against the kid but get welcomed by unrestricted Isabella.

Within seconds, blue flames devour them all, burning through their barriers, and heating up the environment enough that some people die from that alone.

The girl easily dodges their attacks. Her Avatar predicts who will attack and when by tracking their emotions through [Empathy].

To be honest, it's not even close, and Isabella cheers for her own Avatar the entire time. There is no shame to be found and when the challengers get out one after another she makes fun of them.

That's something I can get behind, it's entertaining to watch all these adult men and women avoiding her gaze. They can't even say anything back, just her Avatar was enough to show them a clear difference in their power levels.

The next challenge is against the lightning man from Gareth's group. I think his name was Ghast. A group that attacks him does so because one of their members is capable of redirecting lightning with some sort of metal manipulation, using it to create lightning rods.

Obviously, that group doesn't fare much better.

For their last challenge, they've decided to take on someone from BenDover's group, only to lose once again.

Then they stop, leaving a few people behind in case there is a challenge so they can inform their groups, and the remainder slowly goes to sleep.

Before leaving, I take a moment to listen in on Channeler and his group. The uselessly handsome man is aware that a few people have already connected him with Group 4 so he lets his friends talk most of the time, only joining the conversation when necessary.

"Strong?!" he laughs pretentiously while talking to someone from Easy. "He clearly abused the fact there was a forest and burned it down around us. Had we been fighting on an empty plane, we would have probably won. He probably has some kind of passive or trait that makes him stronger around the fire." he postulates.

The woman from Easy difficulty says something and he smiles at her sweetly.

"Of course, I'm helping group 4, they're paying me." He leans closer and whispers, "Most of them have no idea how much shards are worth so they tend to be ridiculously generous. Noname is also less than... bright, so I got a lot from him."

Dude. I know you're just trying to help, but you didn't have to go quite that far.

Another man shoves Channeler and throws a few insults at me while he's at it, catching one of Channeler's helpers in the crossfire.

Channeler just nods in response, saying, "We just need better terrain, maybe a few more people and it should be doable."

The conversation quiets down and they disappear into the distance.

Lilly and I move to the side, to join Tess, the twins, and Sophie.

I feel my cold heart warm inside when I see how awkward Dennis is around Sophie and Tess, unable to look up. His brother seems to be enjoying the situation as well, but he doesn't dare to push it for fear of retaliation. I know he said some interesting stuff himself, back when they were showing off for Brainiac and Lootenant.

"Do you think anyone will really fall for it?" Lily asks when we join them.

Tess answers for me, "People aren't that dumb, Lily. Some of them might, but the rest will likely be acting on their greed. Nat offered a LOT of shards as additional rewards so it's worth the gamble even if the chance of winning is low."

"But Nat and Channeler spent so much time preparing, he's even paying them in items. Is it all for nothing?" Lily asks, looking up at Tess and I.

Knowing me, the lightning blonde smiles, "That's just how Nathaniel has fun. He just likes messing with people."

I mean, she is not wrong. It's annoying, but there is a lot of humor in watching others make sad attempts at trash talk. Even though I don't expect it to do much, it's worth it just from an amusement perspective.

"You're weird," Lily notes and I shrug, copying Tacita. Unfortunately, It doesn't quite have the same effect.

Walking under the dark sky lit by stars, the sound of conversation fades away, and we find ourselves at our house, with only the six of us for company.

"How do you know that maniac so well, Tess?" Sophie asks and yawns. She seems bored, but I've noticed the way she enjoys gossip.

"We used to date on Earth," Tess says, carelessly dropping a bombshell of revelation.

That gets any number of interesting expressions from others. Especially the twins and Lily.

Seeing that, Tess smiles, "We were both really young. He was my first boyfriend," she smiles.

I stay quiet.

"Then after a few weeks, he tried to use me as an alibi." Tess stretches a slight smile still on her face.
"Back then, it really broke my heart. Did that handsome bad boy date me just so he could use me later? Did he even care about me?"

The others are stunned into silence, and we continue to walk in awkward silence.

"Now that I think about it, you never apologized, did you, Nat?" Tess asks.

"I did not," I agree.

"Fuck, that's brutal." Sophie breathes out finally.

"Right?" Tess turns to her. "Poor innocent me betrayed by the first boy she ever liked."

"You said alibi, what happened?" Lily asks quietly.

"That's not something for me to say," Tess says clearly, and a few of them turn to me.

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For a moment, I have an inkling of an urge to say something. To explain what happened and share it with the others. I almost open my mouth to say it, but in the end, I stay quiet. When my eyes meet Tess's, she returns my gaze calmly.

I know what she is trying to do, and she isn't even trying to hide it.

Still, in the end, I stay quiet.

A few hours later, I'm finally done crafting the items for Channeler and his group. Even though they aren't helping much, I don't mind. I honestly think of it as an investment, Channeler recommended them and that's enough for me to think that they might be useful in the future.

Biscuit, who's been lying on the table, and watching me the entire time, stretches, reaching out his tongue, which I grab and give a tug.

I totally deserve the look he gives me, but I don't mind. When I let go of his tongue, he continues to stretch.

I boop his nose and show him the last item I made. Biscuit sniffs it and loses interest because it's not food.

"One day I might make you some equipment as well."

(Food?)

"Not food."

(Asshole.)

"Am not."

(Friend.)

"Don't try to blackmail me!"

(Food!)

"You just ate!"

(Food, food!)

"You'll get fat."

(Sustenance.)

"You won't die from not eating for a few hours."

(Asshole.)

"I'm not letting you die of hunger. How can you say that!"

(Sustenance.)

"For fuck's sake, okay. Maya's in the house, she knows where I'm hiding the deer jerky."

(Food!)

"Just go, damn it."

When Biscuit floats away like a burrito-shaped blimp, I sigh. I miss my minion; she listened to me most of the time. Meanwhile, dealing with Biscuit is like dealing with a kid. A terrifying kid who can create mana bombs.

It's not my fault.

"You've been feeling weird for the past few hours," Isabella notes from her corner as she continues trying to melt the metal I've been giving her. She seems to be really enjoying it.

I run a quick check, just in case, but she isn't connected to me with her skill, nor is she reading my emotions.

The little girl smiles, her green eyes shining, "I'm getting better at my skill. I can feel a little even without connecting to you."

That's a scary thought. I will have to come up with ways to counter it.

"Are you okay?" She jumps my way a few times, bouncing on her short legs. "I'll be happy to listen. I promise not to tell anyone, not even my dumb sister Soph!"

"It's fine," I wave it off.

She hugs me shortly, "If you say so. But please be careful with that skill. Don't overuse it."

As if, [Focus] is too good to let it waste away on the sidelines.

"You've already told me that, more than once," I note and push her away.

"And I'll keep saying it because you do not listen. Any more and you'll be dumber than Soph! At least she listens to me sometimes."

"So anyone who doesn't listen to you is dumb?"

She looks at me, somewhat disappointed, "Dumb people are dumb, not just the ones who don't listen to me," she says as if it's obvious.

I see, makes sense.

No, it does not. I do not understand how kids work.

"Do you enjoy melting stuff?" I ask.

"I'm not melting stuff! I'm practicing smelting!"

"I see."

"Don't laugh!"

"I'm not laughing."

She kicks my shin in response, dealing no damage, "I can feel your emotions."

"Yes, yes." I pause for a while. "I wanted to ask you something."

Isabella's face turns serious and she sits in the chair nearby, her full attention on me. It's quite funny seeing the serious expression she is trying to make.

What I want to ask her is a bit silly and may be the result of my own cowardice. I could also ask someone else, but there aren't many people I feel comfortable enough around to ask for advice.

So yeah, better to ask an 11-year-old girl, right?

Maybe I really am dumb.

"So, I did something bad to someone I know. It was a long time ago, but lately, around a year ago, I met that person again. Oh, it's all hypothetical. So let's say, hypothetically I met that person after a few years, just a year ago, hypothetically."

Isabella just nods and waits.

"So how... what should... I..."

"Just apologize," Isabella interrupts me.

"It's not that simple."

She shakes her head like she's dealing with an idiot, "It's simple!"

"There is no way it is that easy. She probably hates me for it even if she's not showing it. Hypothetically, of course. Betrayal is one of the worst sins you can commit, especially when someone trusts you and never wished you any ill."

"Just apologize."

"I mean, betrayal like that is beyond pathetic. Sure there might have been a reason and it was always part of my plan long before I ever met her, but who would have known that person would prove to be so important to me."

"Apologize!"

"Back then it wasn't even something I would have thought about, but in the past year, still hypothetically, a lot of things changed. So how to say it? It feels right to do something about it?"

"Dumbthaniel."

"I've decided to make some changes and set rules for myself, to avoid being a savage. I know now that what I did isn't something I can abide by. Not long ago I threatened to kill someone if they did the same."

Isabella stands up and starts kicking my shin and I strengthen my body further.

"I even said it in front of her. Damn, do you think she smiled because she remembered what I did? Did she get pissed off because I did something to her, that I had just said I would kill her for? Is that why she mentioned it in front of others? Oh, and don't misunderstand, Izzy, it's all still..."

"Still hypothetical!" she kicks me, blue flames creating a small explosion at the place of impact.

"Yes, still hypothetical." I pause and then look down at Izzy who, at this point looks like an angry kitten.

She isn't an ESM, but she'll do.

I cradle her in my arms, putting her in a similar position to the one my minion likes. Ear against my chest and her tiny horns poking the bottom of my chin.

Isabella struggles, trying to get away, but in the end, it's not quite right, and I let her go.

"Thanks for the help, Izzy," I tell her, ruffling her hair.

She pushes my hand away and while I head out she shouts something about all the dumbasses she has to deal with.

Chapter 360: Challenging the Avatars

Sitting on the roof, as I observe the group of poor guys who thought it was a good idea to challenge Lily's avatar.

Lily decided to go with a mere 4th floor restriction, and it's fun to watch as she tears through men who are probably thrice her weight and twice her size. She takes them on in a style similar to the one she used to fight the Fallen Hero.

Her Avatar is using its [Sacrifice] to boost its movements and it doesn't bother wasting any mana on [Disintegration]. The sheer strength of its body is enough to allow it to go berserk.

The event is fun for us and an interesting learning opportunity for those from other difficulties. For them, there's a difference between seeing people from Hell doing all these things and then having to face them.

Sure, they got a taste during the 1st event, but they still thought they might stand a chance in a group only to fail regardless.

Each Avatar can be challenged 3 times, and 1st and 2nd challenges are mostly limited to smaller groups, hoping to get a better reward.

No one from Hell difficulty interferes, and the remaining attempts are slowly getting more organized, and bigger groups are being put together, a lot of planning and information sharing is going on. Samuel, being the annoying guy he is, is behind most of it, and he even has a few more guys to help him.

In the end, it seems like the first 2 challenges are to test the Avatar, and they are saving the last ones for their real attempts.

Tess' Avatar is challenged as well, and the group gets wiped out before they even reach her.

Even Min-Jae, the twins, Brainiac, Lootenant, Adam, Maya, and others take easy wins against the smaller groups.

The restrictions are mostly around the fourth floor, Tacita also being fourth. But there is that one annoying guy who's restricted himself to the 3rd floor as well.

Savant.

His Avatar has five epic items and 20 thousand shards offered as additional rewards, and other than my Avatar, his seems to be the most frequently eyed one.

My Avatar still got challenged only once, and his Avatar not even once. Channeler told me that there are a few dozen people going all over the common area, trying to look for anyone who's faced me, in an effort to gather information on my abilities.

It's entertaining to watch. They're taking it much more seriously than I thought they would, and a big part of it probably has something to do with Samuel.

Seeing how effective he is, I guess it makes sense that Gareth's been keeping him around and to a certain point, Tess as well. He seems like a useful guy.

What's also fun is that the murderer guy from Easy difficulty is also accepting some challenges and entering the arenas to face the Avatars.

After each attempt, they take him away, tie him up, and put the null collar back on his neck. Yet the guy seems to have a decent amount of shards and accepts nearly every challenge, joining with all challengers.

Seeing others having to keep grabbing him because the system is teleporting him away is amusing enough.

I also watch as he generally tries to take advantage of his stealth in an attempt to damage the Avatars with his poison-like attacks.

The guy clearly thinks a lot of himself and sometimes he gets into clashes with other people; in one situation, he even attacks and kills one careless guy from Hard difficulty and multiple people from Normal.

It's like he's doing it on purpose just to make fun of us. Especially when in the challenge against BenDover's Avatar he just attacks the other challengers immediately, standing there and smiling while they scream in pain from his poisonous attacks.

He gets outside and it's Tess who pacifies him, grabbing him by his neck and pulling him away like a dog while he tries to attack her.

Then, when thirty minutes later another challenge starts, he accepts it again and this time attacks other challengers right away.

While others expected that, some people seem to have a lot of trouble dealing with his poisonous mist, not to mention how quick and hard to catch he is. Even though he's from Easy difficulty, he has to have some degree of skill to have made it to the 11th floor, so there must have been some decent rewards.

Samuel, the killjoy, takes him out with a swing of his giant sword and the murderer appears outside, laughing as Gareth approaches him with a dark expression.

"The system does allow some changes, I can probably make his heart stronger. The system might even consider it beneficial. But it will continue to get stronger and stronger and once he's out of the tournament, it will explode in a week or two," Lily says with a surprisingly angry tone.

"We can give it a try," Sophie nods.

She, Min-Jae, and Biscuit are sitting on the roof with Lilly and I as we watch the event.

"I could give him a [Geas] that would suppress his survival instincts. Or if the system allows it, I can ensure that he decides to end it on his own. Sophie offers"

Only Min-Jae seems to have any doubts regarding the topic of our conversation. "Is he really that bad?" he asks carefully.

"Imagine the worst you can and then double it. That's what that man is. I saw hints of his memories when we were looking into whether or not he really killed all those men, women, and children. He's the lowest of the low." Even Sophie, who usually only cares about her sister, seems determined to end him over what she saw.

I, on the other hand, watch a group of 100 people face down Biscuit.

Some of the Easy and Normal difficulties still remember him tearing them apart during the 1st event so they are careful. However, Biscuit has no restriction, and even his grayed-out version looks cute. It even moves like the original, slowly wobbling on its short legs.

Avatar Biscuit doesn't really hesitate much, and it creates two purple orbs which turn bright white, before shooting off towards a group that gets in his way.

Their attempt is good, and it even seems like they might be able to pull it off, but that's when tentacles form around Biscuit, extending to the length of a football field. They whip through the air in a blur of motion, cutting cleanly through a huge patch of trees.

When the tentacles crash into the group's barriers, they either slice through without resistance, or shatter them with sheer force, and concentrated fire.

Biscuit also uses a mental attack to scream directly into their heads, as it turns out most of the challengers aren't quite skilled enough to block it out.

The orbs explode, wiping out half of the group. A few mana projectiles snipe the injured members and tentacles finish off the rest.

"Good boy," I say, looking over at Biscuit and handing him a piece of deer jerky.

He tilts his head, slightly confused before he quickly noms the offered treat. The defeated challengers meanwhile group together once they're outside and start trading notes.

"Nat," Min-Jae says, interrupting my musings, so I return my focus to the conversation they've been having.

"Yes?"

"Should we really kill him?" he asks carefully.

Even though he's well on the way to becoming a bully himself, killing a real human still seems to disturb him deeply. It's not hard to understand why. That's how normal people should act. It's just some of us who are a bit twisted.

"I don't care," I stretch and yawn.

Even though the guy seems super annoying, it's interesting to watch others struggle to figure out what to do with him. In the past few hours, I also have to wonder if I'm only helping Tess and doing the things she asks of me just because she's the leader of the group and picks up my slack. Or is it because I'm trying to atone?

Every day I learn a bit more about myself, and I wonder if it's the same for others. Am I just so dumb that I'm forced to slowly discover these things, or is this their normal as well?

Well, it doesn't really matter all that much. I already know what I intend to do. It's useless to hesitate any longer, and it just doesn't fit me. I just need to find the right time.

As for the murderer from Easy difficulty, I haven't even bothered to remember his name. He's just a small fry and he'll be dead soon. There is only one interesting thing that came out of this.

If he reaches the highest floor of the tutorial and clears it, will he get teleported to Earth?

Until now, we've been running with the theory that everyone will return at the same time and we'll probably continue to think that. If he could return after clearing, then there's probably going to be people from the first round on Earth by the time anyone from the 5th round makes it out.

Oh, or it could be that by the time we got in no one from the first round had even gotten close to clearing the tutorial. If our theory is right then the 1st round started 4 weeks before ours so they wouldn't have had a chance.

"They're challenging Savant," Lily points out at the same time I notice it. Savant's Avatar appears on the screen, in the same area as the other Avatars. The same forest and a 15-minute countdown starts during which anyone can join.

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It's the 1st out of three challenges, so not many people from lower difficulties bother to join. Savant being the winner of the 1st event and with his selection of rewards, around 100 people from Hard join in.

"Would be funny if they killed him," Min-Jae notes with a smirk, "just imagine."

I'm glad group 4 seems to have the same distaste for the guy as me. Well, it's not so much that I dislike him, he just annoys me and I think it would be fun to see him struggle. Otherwise, I would say my relationship with him is neutral.

But I do not think they will be able to challenge him. He cleared the 3rd Floor alone. He dealt with the Last King and his warriors and then put the Saint to final rest. A bunch of people from Hard difficulty won't be enough.

When the challenge starts, it is as I thought. Savant's Avatar uses his domain, even though it's not as strong as it was in the 1st event it is still capable of quickly killing the weaker challengers with the mana radiation alone.

The domain doesn't use a lot of mana as I don't think he invested that much in that stat. Yet it's still capable of doing so. It's something I'll have to look into. There might be something I can use to improve on my own domain.

Savant even manages to extend his domain across a huge area. After all the weaker challengers die off he starts shrinking it and targeting Hard difficulty, they finally locate him, destroying the tree he's been standing on.

That's when he shows off that weird skill of his. He absorbs fire attacks, mana projectiles, ice cones, water blasts. It doesn't even seem to cause him that much trouble.

Smoothly and with an emotionless expression, the Avatar uses that single skill for defense and offense, turning their own skills against themselves.

He's meticulous when he does too, finding weaknesses and using the right attacks against people who are either incapable of defending or those who find it draining to do so.

As for close-range combat, even third-floor Savant is quicker than any of them. He uses bursts of mana with perfect timing and amazing efficiency to boost his movements only when he needs to.

He deprives them of their weapons, using them in brutal melee attacks and as throwing weapons. He runs away, repositioning, and using his domain before continuing to absorb their attacks and fight.

And none of this even seems difficult to him; the Avatar is clearly not going all out.

When I turn to the side, I notice Min-Jae's clenched fist. The boy must know it the same as I do. Even on the third floor, Savant would have been able to defeat him if Min-Jae got careless.

It's not just stats or levels. Currently, Min-Jae is higher level than Savant was on the 3rd Floor; his main skills are higher leveled too, along with his passives. Yet, it's clear to see in the way Savant fights. The same as it is for Tess or Tacita; Savant is clearly a cut above the normal Hell difficulty enjoyer.

Well, the duels will be interesting, that is for sure.

Losing to Savant's Avatar, the challengers crash out. Then, an hour later, they challenge my Avatar again.

At this point, plenty of them know that I'm watching the event from our roof with some of the other members of group 4, so some of them glance towards me as they wait to enter.

In the end, the group is bigger than the first one. just over 120 people from Hard difficulty, which is more than half of them, and there are plenty from Normal and Easy difficulty as well.

My Avatar waits for them once the countdown finishes and all of them make it inside. Just like before, my Avatar flies up, counting the number of opponents he has to face. And as before, he fights the same. This version of my Avatar also starts setting the forest on fire.

This time they've come prepared, a few groups peel off to fight the fire. Either by trying to put it out, weaken it, or cut off its access to fuel.

It is somewhat effective, severely reducing the number of trees that burst into flame.

If it were me, I would probably destroy the forest just to get rid of everything the Avatar is trying to set fire to. But they don't have the mana to spare.

A group of sneakier people attacks while two groups attempt to distract the clone and two more try to defend against the flames.

Unsurprisingly, my Avatar sees through the various sneaky bullshit skills. My hatred for invisible enemies and anything with 'phantom' in the name shines through brightly and I start liking the Avatar as he mercilessly murders the wannabe sneaks.

Good job, king! Go and get them!

"Fuck, he tore his head off."

"He killed him with his own leg."

Even some of my fellow members of group 4 seem to be appreciating the show.

As they push him further, my Avatar absorbs the heat from all the flames he can reach, creating a fire orb that floats beside him, and he keeps feeding it more thermal energy as his heart beats strongly.

He only uses that energy as he needs it, to strengthen his form. Blades oscillate, as they cut through armor and barriers alike, and [Armament] absorbs a lot of the incoming damage.

When someone tries to use sleeping gas, a poison attack, or blind my Avatar, he simply creates a helmet without a visor, relying solely on [Perception] to bolster his awareness.

Then, the Avatar detonates the flame orb.

The challengers were expecting him to shoot it at them, having been warned by the more mana-sensitive among them, who surely know the amount amount of energy contained within. They are

constantly aware of that and being unable to cancel it they've prepared for the Avatar to shoot it at them.

But nope, the Avatar detonates it right next to his own head after charging into the biggest of the surviving groups.

The flames wash over the forest, setting it ablaze, reducing the forest to ash and baking the ground. There is a hint of gold in these flames and no one is capable of stopping them as they devour most of the group.

Then from the center of the explosion, my Avatar steps out. The helmet around his face is destroyed and half of his face is burned terribly, bone showing through.

All the flames die off, pulled towards him, as he ignores the wounds. Then he attacks again.

The rest of the challengers die in a minute.

Just over five thousand shards flood into my account. Of course, that's only after the system takes its ten percent cut.

Anyway, Avatarthaniel did a good job once again.

"Who do you think would win? 3rd Floor me or Savi guy?" I ask.

"Neither of your Avatars went all out, so it's hard to say," Sophie states while observing the group that, straight out of the lost challenge, starts brainstorming.

"I would win," I say confidently.

"Famous last words," Sophie pokes. "I'm more curious how they will challenge you in the final attempt. Channeler said they plan to go against you with probably over a thousand challengers, even people from

Easy are willing to gamble 5 shards to do so. The thought of you losing almost an arcane item's worth of shards is as painful as it's funny."

"It'll be fine," I say, waving my hand.

The challenges continue to the point where a lot of people from Hell get challenged twice with the last challenge remaining.

I also realize that within 24 hours, they do not have time to challenge every Avatar three times. Since only one Avatar can be challenged at once, and there is a 15-minute waiting period followed by the time spent facing the Avatar. So they are a bit more selective.

Every Avatar gets challenged at least once, but some of them do not get challenged a second time.

Tacita is a menace, killing the group that challenges her with such efficiency they wind up more scared of her than anyone else, Biscuit included.

Isabella gets called a crazy kid.

Even after challenging her a second time, they don't even find Tess as she snipes them from afar.

Gareth endures combined attacks from dozens of members of Hard difficulty. His damage output isn't all that high, but just by having a stronger body than them, he slowly takes them down, in the end, he's not even tired and he hasn't a single wound on his body.

The twins and Min-Jae do well, winning the first two challenges. The twins use [Sensory Deception], causing their challengers to attack each other and moving at high speeds with their [Haste]. They also launch a number of mental attacks that seem to disrupt most of the casting of their opponents.

Min-Jae uses [Gravity Well] and [Telekinesis] mainly. Small stones turning into bullets, easily killing people or forcing them to waste mana on maintaining their defenses. The projectiles are much heavier than they should be, causing a surprising amount of damage.

But even without the overt use of our skills, there is a clear difference between Hell and other difficulties. People from Hell move their mana quicker, skills are activated faster and are more powerful. Their body strengthening and senses are much better. Even people from Hard difficulty can't compare.

It's interesting and I expected the difference to be smaller, but in the end, maybe people from Hard difficulty just aren't that strong. Or are people from Hell just that much stronger?

Only three out of the 31 people from Hell difficulty managed to lose in the first two challenges and none of them came from group 4.

Overambitious restrictions were probably the cause of the losses in question.

Maya's Avatar, using armor and weapons made of mana, cuts through them. Her technique with weapons shows as she restricted herself to the 4th Floor where she paid some people to give her lessons. She really looks like the knight she named herself for in the Community.

Sophie, with the same 4th Floor restriction, is also scary. Even then, she was capable of getting into the head of The First One and holding him down. So what are some challengers from the tutorial in comparison?

Her Avatar is ice cold as it takes over a group of people from Easy who start stabbing each other. Anyone who gets close to her freezes just for a moment which she uses to stab them somewhere vital. Her [Manipulation] interrupts castings, causing attacks to explode in the middle of their groups.

Those with weaker defenses die just from the pressure of her mental attacks. Then she easily manipulates the mana around her, redirecting the attacks being thrown at her or disrupting them outright. She manipulates stone as well, spikes made of the stuff impaling multiple people. The branches of trees twist and bend around people. It's not the kind of combat she prefers, but she wins nonetheless.

When about five hours remain, my Avatar gets challenged for the third time. The first Avatar out of all.

It's not because of Channeler and the disinformation campaign we did. No, the cause is exactly what we expected: simple greed.

It's like a lottery. You know you're probably going to lose, but what if...?

I watch as the number of challengers grows until there are five seconds left until the start.

Challenge 3/3 - 5 seconds remaining until the start

Number of challengers:

Easy - 1021

Normal - 755

Hard - 212

Collected entrance fees: 19,015 shards

My Avatar appears in the arena for the last time. The same empty expression as before and grayish in color. With close to two thousand people arrayed against him.

The common area becomes eerily empty, just a few remaining people remain, mostly from the lower difficulties, and us from Hell. For the first time ever since the start of the tournament, it's grown quiet.

The following slaughter takes barely two minutes.