

Tutorial 361

Chapter 361: Gareth

My Avatar does exactly what I thought he would when faced with a large group of opponents that he couldn't face head-on.

That beautiful bastard just flies straight up.

Yup, it's that simple, yet it still gives him a huge advantage.

It's like introducing a helicopter with machine guns and rockets into a conflict between people fighting with muskets. And it isn't pretty.

Once he's out of range, the people below struggle to detect him and a few of them do manage to reach that far, warning the others of the upcoming attack. But it's all to no avail.

Five seconds pass.

Ten seconds pass.

Nothing.

People from Easy difficulty, nervous and more sensitive to the fluctuations, are already starting to feel his mana concentrating high in the air.

Thirty seconds pass and Samuel shouts, causing people to scatter and spread out over a wider area.

Then my Avatar attacks. Like a crashing meteor, he slams into the ground where the greatest concentration of people from Hard difficulty are, and like an EMP, a disrupting wave explodes from him. It spreads over a huge part of the forest, weakening barriers, canceling skills, and straight up disrupting them.

He then lifts off as quickly, a single orb left in his wake. A thermal orb as big as an orange. It shines an intense golden color, the immense heat being released causing the air around it to waver.

Golden flames explode into the area and with this, dozens of people from Hard difficulty start appearing outside.

And more follow.

One after another, their hastily recreated barriers, their armors, and skills fail to resist the brilliant golden flames. Bodies melt, charred to the point the system pulls them out.

Being charged by so much thermal energy, the orb envelops a huge area, killing hundreds of people.

When it looks like it's the end, from high up in the air, an orb lands in the middle of another group. A tricolored orb that turns bright white, exploding into heat, shockwave, and following with an implosion.

Then another tricolored orb lands somewhere else, and a third one too.

The explosions are changing the landscape, tearing the trees from their roots, sending huge chunks of the ground flying through the air, and flinging human bodies around, burned and crushed before disintegrating into a cloud of shiny particles.

There is no sight of my Avatar, as he hangs safely in the clouds. It's an efficient and smart choice.

Down below is pandemonium. People are burning, the ones not dead have been left with terrible wounds and missing limbs. Some of them scream, most of the leadership is already dead and safe outside in the common area.

As I thought, my Avatar seems to have run low on mana and there are no more big explosions. Instead, a rain of orbs as big as grapes falls to the ground, each of them letting out a whistling noise as it passes through the air.

Some of the survivors try to hide under trees or block the attacks. A few even attempt to shoot something towards where the orbs are coming from. But it's to no avail. The Avatar focuses his attacks on people who have been weakened or occupied with fighting against the forest fire.

Just ten seconds is enough to finish the rest of Easy and Normal difficulty. Tens, hundreds of people decimated by an Avatar with most of its mana depleted.

The surviving members of Hard difficulty shout and hurl insults at my Avatar. Every single one of them finding themselves frustrated with their inability to reach him with their attacks.

Obviously, the Avatar doesn't care at all. Not even a little bit. I love the guy.

On the screen, his face shows for a moment. Calm and expressionless while he forms some larger mana projectiles around himself, compressing them. Using natural gravity and his kinetic energy to launch them at the remaining challengers. Unable to use the flames the challengers just put out, he simply smites them from up on high with mana projectiles.

It's quite shameless.

"Why do you not fight like that? It looks so easy!" Min-Jae comments, watching the screen with big eyes.

"Because it would be boring," I respond.

I figured this fighting style out a while ago. Most of the people around my level or higher can't fly. That's something kinetic energy allows me to do. Having air superiority and being able to launch ranged attacks without worrying about retaliation is truly powerful.

Maybe it is even the most optimal way to fight for me, seeing the Avatar fighting that way.

But it's so boring.

If I fought like that I wouldn't be in danger. I wouldn't gain more experience. I wouldn't see the skills of the people I'm fighting. I wouldn't learn what is possible and how people tend to fight.

I could, but I don't want to fight that way because I don't think I'll get any stronger doing so. It's as simple as that.

Still, knowing that I could fight that way, I wasn't worried about them defeating my Avatar, and Avatharniel didn't disappoint.

Such a cowardly little prick. Good job! You are making Papa Nat very rich!

The last remaining group gives up and leaves the event rather than wait for the Avatar to kill them.

Just like that, in under two minutes, my last challenge is won, my restricted Avatar, the bane of almost two thousand people.

Congratulations, your avatar emerged victorious in the 3rd challenge! You have received 17,113 shards. The final event reward will be given after the end of the 3rd event!

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It physically hurts me how much the system took with its 10% cut, but there's nothing I can do about it. But damn, an arcane passive might not be all that far off. Most likely not during the tournament, but maybe sometime during the 6th or 7th Floor.

"Fucking monster," Brainiac lands on the roof near us.

"I won't give you any shards," I say before he can continue. They're mine. My precious!

My Avat... no, I worked hard to get them.

Brainiac snorts, "Not even I'm that shameless."

"So what are you doing here?" I ask as he sits down next to me and the other members of group 4.

"I had to get away from Gary, the old man can be annoying sometimes."

"You should beat him and take over as leader of WhiteWing," Aaron jokes.

"Only if you take over Group 4," Brainiac sighs, "Even if all of WhiteWing attacks him together we have no chance against Gary."

"He doesn't seem that strong," Maya mentions with interest.

"Gary is crazy strong."

"Sure he is."

"I'm not joking!"

"He just looks like he would fit better as a pastor or the director of an orphanage." Maya snorts.

"I know what you mean," Brainiac nods. "But that's only because we're real people from Earth."

The conversation is getting interesting so I listen. At the same time, Gareth's Avatar appears on the screen and a 15-minute countdown starts.

"What do you mean by that?" Min-Jae asks, moving closer while sipping on his drink.

"I mean exactly what I said. Gary is nice only to people from Earth and no matter how trashy they are, he always gives them a chance. Only once he really believes they are beyond helping will he become ruthless."

I knew it. The paladin of justice is secretly evil. Right now Brainiac might think the Earthlings are being protected by Gareth, but I'm sure his dark secrets will spill. There is no way someone acting so nice to people isn't evil.

Brainiac lowers his voice, "On the third floor he killed a hundred or so natives. Women, and children too, no hesitation at all. We needed water and food and they had it. So he just took it on himself and murdered them all. After that he smiled, saying to us to not worry and that he would protect us and take these sins upon himself."

I watch Gareth's Avatar. Restricted to the 5th floor, it stands there below the trees. The chiseled face of a 40 or 50-year-old man waiting for his challengers.

"Gareth hasn't gotten angry with us, not even once. He never shouts, he never despairs, he never hits us or anything, and often takes hits instead of us. Not once in the past year did I have a worry that he might hurt me," Brainiac says, his usually cheeky expression serious.

"You shouldn't underestimate him just because he acts silly sometimes or seems nice. He's in Hell and in Beyond for a reason," Tess warns the other members of our group.

"He is," Brainiac nods. "You know what's funny? He's at his strongest when he is alone. Fighting with us, he holds back a lot to protect us, but the moment he's alone his fighting changes. Just wait and see." He points at the screen where the Avatar waits for the challengers.

A few minutes later Gareth's Avatar's 3rd challenge starts with over a thousand people inside.

Right away the man starts moving towards the group of challengers and a silver crown floats over his head.

Once again, I have to wonder what his crown is called. Other than me and Tess, he is the only one so far that has one. That offers another question, are crowns rare? Are they considered powerful or important?

Getting closer and seeing the first people from behind the trees, Gareth starts radiating silver light from his skin. Maybe light is the wrong word, it's more like silver smoke seeping through his pores.

In his hands, two maces form, each of them with a few nasty spikes, and both weapons probably as long as my arm. Over his shoulders, two silver orbs float.

Combat opens with Gareth slamming a mace into a melee attacker from Hard difficulty.

Not even for a second is the man capable of facing Gareth's strength, his arms cracking and the mace piercing the skin-tight barrier and turning the man into shiny particles.

A group launches ranged attacks at him and whether they bombard the ground around him or his skin he doesn't bother to create armor around himself. He faces them all easily with just the sheer strength of his stats and enhanced body.

One of the orbs shoots ahead with surprising speed and reaches a group of twenty ranged attackers. Before they can move, the orb expands, in the blink of an eye, almost like a bubble, and each of them finds themselves inside of that bubble. The bubble stops expanding and then changes color to a darker shade of silver.

The group finds themselves unable to get out. Their bodies slam against the inner walls of the bubble and their weapons fail to pierce it. Before they can try more, the silver bubble starts shrinking as quickly as it expanded before.

All twenty people are caught in that. From the size of a small house, the bubble shrinks to the size of a small room and then to the size of a basketball, and finally to the size it started at. Everyone inside it, unable to escape, is squeezed and killed.

Attacks start anew. Gareth is bombarded while moving almost lazily from group to group, no one manages to endure more than one attack from his mace. The two silver bubbles move around, enveloping groups of people and turning them into shiny particles.

Outside of the tournament, the result would be more gruesome. A bunch of people reduced to a compressed bloody paste.

The forest exploding around him from the challengers' attacks doesn't cause him much trouble. He seems capable of going on for days.

Shadowy attacks fail to slow him, fire causes him no trouble. They can't disrupt his mana and they even fail to pierce the orbs. Anyone who winds up inside one of those silver bubbles dies without exception.

When they start moving out of his reach or the range of his bubbles, he changes strategy. The crown over his head disappears and the silver smoke stops leaking from his skin. Instead, armor forms around his body.

His armor isn't bulky or impressive. It seems almost skin-tight and dense. At the same time, the maces in his hands dissolve, and Gareth dashes, the ground exploding under his feet.

In a blink, he reaches another group, gloves forming around his hands as he delivers a shattering blow to someone's head, reducing the man from Hard difficulty into particles. Gareth twists his body and grabs the poor man's sword in his hand as he kicks another assailant, caving in their chest, and dispersing them into a haze of silver particles.

Like Lily, Gareth uses the strength of his body and armor to go wild and tear the remaining people apart.

"Gareth is really bad at doing multiple things at once," Brainiac sighs. "But when he doesn't have to focus on healing, teleporting, and keeping our marks active he can be really scary."

Nice. First, Gareth doxxes the real names of everyone from his group, and now here's Brainiac giving us exposition on his abilities.

What a group.

“So what are the names of his skills?” I ask.

“Not telling!” Brainiac answers.

Well, maybe they aren’t that stupid.

“It’s fine, I might ask Tacita, I’m sure she already knows the names if you guys talked about them sometime during the tournament.” While I say it I glance back to the top of the chimney where a thin girl with messy brown hair sits.

Her eyes meet mine and her expression seems to be surprised and in quick succession a weird field she generates changes a few times. But each time I change my detection as well, allowing my senses to pierce through.

Only her last attempt succeeds at confusing me for even a moment longer and then she stops when I see even through that.

Tacita seems dissatisfied, annoyed even, her eyes turning dangerous as she examines me, studying the way I’ve been detecting her.

I hope you didn’t think you could keep hiding from me forever.

Chapter 362: Challenges

During the next few hours, as we watch the challenges, Tacita and I play a game.

As she sits on the chimney, rooted within her barrier, skill, trait, or whatever it is, keeps changing. She alters it rapidly as she figures out my methods for detecting her.

Sometimes it takes me a few seconds to pierce through, sometimes it takes thirty minutes. She’s really good at it, and it’s intriguing to observe. She’s not like Savant or Tess, with their genius level use of skills,

they're both quick to learn and grasp new concepts. She's not even like me with my abuse of skills to push myself further than others while trying to scam the system.

What Tacita is doing is mostly based on wild instinct. Like a bird thrown out of the nest, forced to learn to fly by instinct rather than rote learning.

And damn, does she seem to be getting annoyed. Her penchant for stealth seems to be an important part of her identity. The way she gets twitchy when people get too close, it's no surprise.

Yet I refuse to take that into consideration. No, I even resort to using my eye trait when I have trouble piercing through her hidey barrier.

The longer this goes on, the more dangerous she feels. The playful mood is gone, and her eyes are glued to the back of my head. I can nearly feel that gaze burning me.

I also keep my body strengthened, while preparing to empty my Vortex Core, and funneling a large amount of mana to my Mana Regulator for Reinforcement.

It's a clear challenge to her, and I might be playing with fire, but I can't bring myself to care. I don't like having her sneaking around and appearing out of nowhere. I've had a deep hatred for such tactics ever since my experiences on the 1st floor. It's not to the point of trauma anymore, but I still find it deeply unsettling.

Meanwhile, the remaining Hell difficulty Avatars go through their third challenges.

After being beaten by me and Gareth, they challenge a few of the weaker-looking ones. Just like before, they continue in groups of anywhere from a few hundred to one thousand. I turned out to be the exception with close to two thousand. They even win some of them.

BenDover gets tired out and hunted down once he runs out of mana. Brainiac fails to reposition quickly enough and gets surrounded, as they use the forest to their advantage, limiting his ranged attacks.

Lootenant is more defense based, so he finds himself lacking in means of attack.

Aaron and Dennis get tired out, neither of them capable of sustaining long combat against that many people who are getting better and better organized. They are also weaker on their own and separated from their twin.

The murderer from Easy difficulty is also joining a lot of these fights, often getting in a few nasty attacks during the challenge only to be pulled away once he reappears in the common area.

At this point, around 150 people from Hard difficulty create a core that goes around challenging Avatars one after another. They are the main forces the others join and follow their lead. That group of 150 people has gotten quite efficient at this point. There's a ranged unit, a melee unit, a unit of scouts, defenders, and a few really weak healers.

They protect each other, their members switching places to keep their mana topped up and stamina fresh. Once again, they're being led by Samuel and the other soldiers from his group. Once they've seen how well they do, the others seem to have an easier time trusting his lead and following orders.

They defeat another Avatar from WhiteWing and another from BenDover's group.

"Would be nice to see them beat your Avatar, Tess, especially given the way you've been putting Samuel down," I note.

Tess doesn't flinch, her bearing confident and carefree. "If anyone from Beyond lost, I would be deeply disappointed," she says.

"I still want to see them beat Savant," I sigh while looking on as they make preparations in the common area. The next Avatar is Tess, restricted to the 4th Floor.

"Maybe if he went for a 2nd Floor [Restriction]," Tess states, watching the proceedings with interest as they split into groups, having received final orders. "I regret not going for 3rd. I was too careful."

"Scared."

“Careful.”

“Sure.”

“Has anyone told you that they would like to punch you?”

“Yup, I heard it constantly on the 5th floor. He was a handsome lad with a very punchable face himself.”

“I see. By the way, can you stop playing with Tacita? You’re starting to scare people.”

“Hell no.”

“Sometimes I forget how stubborn you can be once you’ve made a decision. Anyway, I spoke to Miwa. How did you make her so angry?”

“He wanted to steal her arm,” Maya says, nomming on snacks that she shares with Biscuit sitting next to her.

“It’s still an achievement. Miwa is an extremely polite, patient, and reasonable person. Anyway, she’ll still prepare a pizza, salami with some extra cheese. A few of the ingredients are old, but they should be fine. The price is an epic item and a single mid-sized piece of voidsteel.”

“What? We said epic item only.”

“That was before you decided you wanted to steal her arm and kept pestering her for it.”

“Okay, okay, but the pizza had better be good.”

Tess shakes her head, “You know you could find a better use for an epic item, right?”

Ha! Better than feeding my ESM? No way. I already have plans to take plenty of pictures of the little half demon.

Now that I think about it, demons are indeed dangerous. Just a few weeks and she's got me acting like this. Am I really so weak or are the people around me just scary?

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"I still have a few and I should be able to make them on my own soon. So I wouldn't worry about it," I tell Tess.

"Truly you are the sugar daddy of group 4." Maya says, turning to me, "When you summon your disciple, I fully intend to watch and learn from her. Then I'll be your minion and you'll make epic items for me," she jokes.

"What? I can't hear words of people with a [Focus] below level 40."

"It's starting," Sophie says, interrupting us and nodding at the screen.

Tess's avatar stands alone, with a shine in her eyes as she activates her skill, she quickly spots the challengers. Her crown forms above her head in an instant, white and red lightning cracking in a halo of energy. Then her avatar moves away from the groups attempting to locate her.

While her Avatar runs, stones lift from the ground, floating after her. She imbues the stones with lightning and leaps through the trees, cutting a few branches loose with her bare hand before shaping them into javelins.

In a few minutes, she has a decent number of projectiles floating around her, lightning crackling through the airborne arsenal. The Avatar does all of this while keeping the challengers in her line of sight, and collecting information.

So when she attacks, it's no surprise that she kills Samuel first.

The man dies in the middle of a sentence, a stone the size of my fist tearing through him from over a mile away.

Before the challengers can even react, five more die, each one the leader of their respective units, and none are able to endure the attacks. The Avatar made sure they were strong enough. With her eyes, Tess can see really far away and she can see a little bit of mana too. Not enough to use for detailed analysis like my eyes, but it's more than enough to detect mana signatures and large surges of mana.

The challengers start repositioning and strengthening the barriers. A few seconds later ten more attacks kill ten more people. And this time the attacks are coming from the opposite side, the Avatar moving quicker than they could ever have expected.

There are 196 people from Hard difficulty and each of them dies before the Avatar touches anyone else. Not a single Hard difficulty challenger endures the attack. They are all perfectly timed and unexpected, hitting weak spots with enough force to kill. Each with just the right amount of lightning.

Once she's taken care of them, she changes her strategy. She uproots trees from the earth and flings them into the remaining groups, before following up the attack with a barrage of stones the size of motorcycles.

And the entire time they can't even locate her precisely enough to attack.

"Why are you so cool, Tess," Maya asks, sighing with her eyes glued to the screen.

I mean it might be cool, but all she's doing is flinging junk at them from a distance. It must be boring as hell. Let's ignore the fact my Avatar did the exact same thing.

Anyway, to no one's surprise, Tess's Avatar wipes out the challengers and Tess scrolls through a window to see how many shards she got. It won't be as much as I did, but it's a nice amount for sure. Probably enough for her to buy an epic javelin.

The epic items start at 4 thousand shards, but some of them cost multiple times that. There is definitely a difference between low, mid, and upper, even if the difference isn't as noticeable as it would be for an arcane item.

When the challengers return brainstorming starts and most of the challengers don't really seem all that disappointed. As if they got the result they were expecting and they've chosen to take it as a learning lesson. Though I mostly get that sense from Hard difficulty.

That makes me reconsider a few things. Lately, I've been thinking of them as weak, how could I not? Even restricted members of Hell difficulty can wipe them out with ease, but maybe I've just been lacking perspective.

It's not like Easy has a power level of 1, Normal has a power level of 2, Hard of 3, and Hell of 4. It's more like Hell difficulty is a few stages above.

Yet, Hard difficulty isn't that bad. Logically they shouldn't even be, the tutorial must be... well, hard, for them as well. They've shown me a hunger for improvement that's a cut above the people in Easy and Normal who seem to take things at a more relaxed pace, more like a hobby.

When the tutorial ends, I can certainly imagine a few people from Hard growing strong enough to destroy a small city on their own. Maybe even a bit more when it comes to the stronger ones. But for the moment that's mostly speculation on my part.

It's fun to think of the differences between us.

Oh and now that I think about it, don't the strongest people tend to be loners? Actually, it might be half and half.

Currently, we have 6 people from Beyond here. Tess, Gareth, and Lily are on the more sociable side while Tacita, Savant, and I seem to be more introverted. Though I'm sure our trio of introverts would win. Yup, screw those extroverted weirdos. I bet they're fine talking to people, even the moment after they wake up. Creepy.

I also decide to ignore the fact that we three introverts are certainly weirder and bigger assholes than our counterparts. But it's not like they're normal either. Everyone in Beyond is a bit twisted.

When I finally crack through the change Tacita made in her field, I turn back to the screen. That one was difficult, it took me the longest time yet to pierce. Tacita can be surprisingly stubborn, it seems. Ever since we started, she hasn't moved from her spot or stopped staring at me.

The next avatar they challenge is Min-Jae. They don't even go in with that many people, below 500 even.

I already suspect the result, but Min-Jae gets defeated. He takes out a bit more than half of them and they have trouble catching up to him. The Avatar even uses the eye he got on the 4th floor as it precedes the restriction.

In the end, it's not enough and his attacks gradually weaken as they catch up to him. Current Min-Jae would wipe them out easily, yet the [Restriction] he chose is too severe. The young boy is too proud to go higher than 4th.

The result is a celebration among those excitedly discussing the fight. The one who did the most walks away with the better part of the two thousand shards Min-Jae offered as an additional reward and an epic item he got from the 5th floor. He did set it up after he saw me creating my Avatar and the result is what it is.

If Tess knew, she would've probably stopped him. Even twins would've done that. But Min-Jae did it all on his own.

Even before his Avatar was defeated, he disappeared from the roof.

When Lily's Avatar appears on the screen, I stand up and detect where Min-Jae went. I don't even have to watch this challenge as I'm sure Lily will wipe the floor with them with her surprisingly low [Restriction], the 5th Floor. But that's just her. I'm sure she would be able to do it with the 4th Floor one but she doesn't seem to have the confidence.

I stop in front of Tacita, "I have to go now. But let me tell you one thing. I've humored you sneaking up on me for a good while, but I don't appreciate it."

Even back on Earth I had bullies trying to ambush me in groups. I spent three days fighting for my life, being hunted by Phantom Goblins only to be stabbed every time I faltered.

It's not something I can help, even if there's no malice in it, even if it's just playful teasing. I don't trust Tacita the same way I trust group 4. And even though I can't die here, I can't bring myself to allow it.

Just for once, I'm going to be nice and try to solve things by talking instead of fighting, "Do you know what I mean by that?" I ask.

Her eyes shine below her messy bangs, giving me a long appraising look. Her expression changes a few times until it lands on one of understanding.

A few seconds later, she nods.

The field around her changes but this time it's more akin to a playful attempt to hide and catch someone off guard to laugh at them later. Like a game.

She looks at me with a question and tilts her head. Her own warning to me, to avoid pushing her any further.

"This much is okay." I also change the way I detect her to match her change.

From now on, it's a fun way to keep ourselves sharp rather than anything more sinister.

A bright smile appears on Tacita's face and she waves as I use one of my anchors to follow Min-Jae.

Chapter 363: Kaboom!

I reach Min-Jae just as he catches up to a smaller group of people. Once again I hide my mana and watch from a distance.

Without hearing their words, I can only guess at their conversation, but it's not all that difficult. The people he's confronted seem to be from Hard difficulty, specifically from the group that challenged his Avatar just a few moments ago.

At first, Min-Jae seems non-aggressive even though I can sense his wildly swirling mana and see his clenched fists.

The situation escalates after a short exchange, and the group ends up easily pushed to the ground by a gravity field. Yet even then, the boy seems confused. There is none of the satisfaction he expected, just a dirty feeling, I would think.

It's hard for me to guess because I'm just an asshole who doesn't care about anyone outside of his own family and friends. If someone had asked me one of those trolley questions like, "Would you rather save 1 friend or a million people you don't know?" I would let the strangers die. Without hesitation.

Of course, the situation would be shitty and I like to think that I would feel something, but I have my priorities straight. That's one of the main reasons I want to be so strong. So things like that won't happen to me, leaving me to do whatever I want.

Min-Jae, on the other hand, is young, troubled, and had a difficult childhood, forever caught in the shadow of his siblings. You can even see it in his choice of subclass, Envy, and the ways he's been trying to emulate me.

I don't think it's too big of a problem. Min-Jae will grow and change, and these experiences will serve to guide him in the future. He is still young, and looking for his place in this world.

So for now, I don't bother to intercept him even as he waves his hand, uprooting and crushing a few of the surrounding trees. He stomps angrily, causing more trees to fall under the resulting gravitational waves.

(They're about to challenge Savant,) Sophie says over the web some time later.

(I see. I won't be watching this time,) I answer and then disconnect from the web. Keeping an eye on the man in front of me, I create a chair from mana and take a seat opposite him.

"You didn't watch my Avatar fight. Why?" I ask Savant.

Sitting in a cheap camping chair, he returns my gaze.

"It cost me a few uncommon items," he says in lieu of an answer as he touches it carefully. "It's only been a year, but I have this weird feeling of nostalgia seeing these items from Earth."

"It's just a chair."

"Yes, it's just a chair."

He stands up and throws a few logs into the fire he's built nearby, over which hangs an iron kettle with water coming to a boil inside. Nearby, he has a glass with a tea bag prepared.

"I wanted to observe everyone. To collect some information I could use during the Duels," he says.

"But?"

"I changed my mind. It was mostly thanks to you. I still think my way is better, but watching you during the 2nd event, I came to the question - why am I being so timid and nervous?"

When the water starts boiling, he pours it into the glass and then leans back in his cheap camping chair, his eyes turning back to me.

"I'm stronger than any of you." He declares like he's speaking an absolute truth. "The moment I entered the 2nd Floor, Champion Tristan took an interest in me. Through my talent, I became his disciple and grew quickly. Before he died, he declared me a Champion candidate. I am strong," he repeats.

Silence fills the small camp Savant has set up in the forest. A spoon clinks as he starts mixing the water in his glass.

In a quieter voice, he continues, "I don't need to see more, learn more, prepare more. I will win even without the effort. I want to confirm that."

"So you're second guessing yourself and want to prove that you are the strongest? How human," I reply.

"It's highly possible. I'm human too in the end. So what's your reason, why aren't you watching my Avatar fight?" He asks.

"Same here. I mean, if I thought you were going to lose your additional rewards, I would probably watch, just to laugh, but I don't think that's going to happen. Plus it wouldn't be as satisfying to beat you."

"Pride?"

I nod, "Patience, Diligence, or Pride?"

"Patience."

"I see."

"Yes." Taking a sip, he looks at me, "You haven't been declared Champion candidate yet, right?"

"Nope, but I might try to have someone declare me an Absolute candidate."

He swirls the tea inside of his glass and nods, "I see."

"So, is that the damaged Sword of Aeons?" I ask, gesturing at the broken sword on his hip.

"Yes."

"The best mana battery of Eladore?"

“Yes, though I think it’s weaker than it should be. The system is probably limiting items and the like to arcane at maximum within the tutorial.”

“That’s unfortunate. Still, I will buy it from you. 100 thousand shards.”

“No.”

“You could bet it. I’ll throw in my ax and shards and you bet your broken, and certainly useless-to-you, sword, winner takes all.”

“No.”

“Are you worried?”

“No.”

He seems to be getting a tiny bit annoyed. It's quite fun. Is that how people feel, teasing me when all I want is to be left alone? I think I understand a little now.

Out of nowhere, I feel a ping at the edge of my detection as Tacita enters the area. She is still hiding, but after our standoff, it doesn’t feel as annoying as before. The girl is surprisingly understanding. As long as I try not to trigger her, she tries not to trigger me.

I mean, she will still try to stab me in the neck if I cross that invisible line, but as weird as it sounds, I think that's fine.

A bit later, Savant takes notice as she passes through his domain which he keeps activated at all times. Of course, it's not at its full power, but it seems to be enough to detect Tacita, who hasn’t been making the greatest effort. Still, [Dawn] seems like a really good skill.

“You are not going to watch them challenge you?” I ask Tacita.

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She shakes her head and sits on the ground to my left side and Savant's right.

The fire crackles and the man sitting in the camping chair sighs.

Tacita's hand moves and she uses a stick to draw on the ground.

(๖_5๖)

"I mean, yeah, they're probably going to lose, but won't it be fun to watch? You could also watch them challenge this guy here and use the information to beat him later."

(˘ - ˘)๓

"She says she can take you on easily," I translate for Savant's benefit.

"I think at this point it's obvious that the winner of the 4th event is going to be one of us." He pours more boiling water and then adds another tea bag. Then he opens five packages of sugar and pours them all in.

My teeth hurt watching that.

"There is Gareth, Sset, and Grumpy, but none of them are likely to win," he says, thinking aloud while stirring his tea with his spoon.

His green eyes seem to shine in the light of the campfire, "Sset is strong at the range, but other than a few surprises, she can't take any of us up close. Not without a degree of preparation she won't have. Gareth lacks damage output. He is also too slow to catch anyone here."

Savant takes a sip and then adds two more packages of sugar, "Grumpy will probably win the duels during the second tournament if she grows properly. But right now she is lacking."

(◡ - ◡)

"Tacita disagrees."

"She could still win, of course. But Grumpy will be very dangerous in a few years."

As if I didn't know that.

"What do you think?" I ask Tacita.

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"Yeah, same."

"So what are you doing here?" Savant asks me.

"I was curious," I say honestly. There is nothing more behind it. I just wanted to talk with this man who reached Beyond so early. Well, other than the one who started there.

Even now, he doesn't feel that strong, to be honest. I know most of his favorite skills and I nearly beat him once. Yet I still get the same unnerving feeling every time I go over the fight and imagine it continuing with new information I have.

It's exciting, and out of everyone here, he is the one I want to fight the most. Even more than Tacita, more even than Tess and Lily.

"And you?" Savant asks Tacita.

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“I see.” He nods.

Unlike other people, he doesn’t do sudden movements while Tacita is nearby. Even his voice is calmer and softer. He also doesn’t get closer to her when he throws a piece of wood into the fire.

And his behavior towards me isn’t any different. I can’t bring myself to be annoyed by his actions, and I’m sure it’s calculated on his part. He is clearly reading and observing me the same way I am him.

Having seen enough, I stand up, turning to him, and say “You really need to lay off the sugar,” and with that last sentence, I use [Tether] to telepo...

Huh.

I use [Tether] to teleport away.

...

I use [Tether].

...

($\cong \nabla \cong$)

I find myself unable to teleport within Savant’s domain. Somehow, sneakily, he cut off my connection to my anchor right when I was about to disappear.

(‘ ∇ ’)

Well, there goes my cool exit.

Savant, to make it worse, doesn't even say anything, sipping on his glass of sugar as he watches me.

I sit back down. "Do it again," I say as I examine his domain and the way it sneakily blocked my skill. Right away, I activate my Mana Wavelength Iris and try to examine it deeper.

While Savant starts saying something, I create an extremely small anchor near one of the legs of his chair and start sending vibrating mana through it, stealthily weakening the leg.

After some time, I leave, Savant unwilling to show me how he cut off my access to my anchor. It's not surprising, but he's still an asshole.

At least he didn't notice the damage I did to the leg of his precious chair. Unfortunately, it didn't break while I was watching, but it will probably happen sometime soon in the future. That's what he gets.

With people from Group 4 nearby, a notification finally pops up.

Congratulations, you have placed 1st in the 3rd event - Avatar Confrontation.

You may choose one of the three rewards if you decide to accept.

"I want to use them to enhance my final reward," I say right away and the screen disappears.

At the same time, the four giant screens disappear as well.

As expected, Savant, Tacita, and Lily were not defeated. Sophie survived too, and from one point of view, I think people are scared of her more than anyone else.

I can see it in the way they look at her and the way they avoid her. Even some members of Hell difficulty seem to share in the sentiment. Mind manipulation seems to be just that despised, even among people who have very little experience with it.

Izzy and Maya both lost. Izzy was defeated by the strategy they tried to use for me and Maya lost when they tired her out. It could be different if they chose no restriction, and the challengers seem to realize that even as they defeated the Avatars.

But overall the mood seems good in lower difficulties, the event was fun for them even though they didn't get the most juicy additional rewards.

Honestly, it's surprising considering that most of them died multiple times in the process. The reason might be the difference between how "death" feels during the event and in the common area. Having some experience with that, I would say that death in the common area feels much, much worse, and certainly feels more real.

It's possible that that's the system at work.

The 4th event, Duels, will start in 24 hours. The 5th day of the tournament affords the opportunity to take a break and get to know your fellow tutorial attendees.

You will receive more information as the duels approach closer.

Well, it's time.

"Use minio... disciple summon," I call.

The invitation was sent to your disciple. If accepted, your disciple will join your side for the following 24 hours!

"Where is she?" Tess asks curiously.

“She needs to accept the invitation.”

“That makes sense.”

I nod and then we wait. We're soon joined by Lily, Maya, and the rest of group 4 now that I think about it. It's kind of weird, to be honest, and I hope they don't spook my disciple. At least we're off to the side of the common area, far from the noise of others.

Your disciple has accepted your invitation. Creating an entrance!

A few seconds later, Vega steps out of a door we can't see.

Seeing her face carefully looking around and blossoming into a big smile as she spots me, hits surprisingly hard. The end of the 5th floor was just a short time ago, so why? I bet it's because she is a kid. I can't bring myself to be mean to kids. Probably a result of my past. Well, I don't think that's a bad thing, so I won't try to change it.

But damn, Nathaniel Gwyn, you are getting soft with some people. I need to beat up BenDover to feel manly again. That reminds me that I once again forgot about him. I wonder if he is sitting somewhere, scared, expecting me to come for him.

“Master!” Vega shouts and comes running on her short legs. I notice she glances at group 4, but once she sees me acting normal, she decides to ignore them as she comes to a stop in front of me. She lifts her arms so I can pick her up. Then she nestles her ear against my chest where my heart is.

“Minion,” I say seriously.

“It's Vega, master!”

“Why do you feel stronger? You left close to level 40, so why are you 50-60?”

“Kaboom!”

“Don’t ‘kaboom’ me!”

At that moment, I hear shouts and screams nearby and sense a powerful presence appear in my domain. When I turn around, I find a giant wolf.

The wolf is pitch black and taller than the tips of the trees nearby. The golden eyes shine with surprising intelligence, and he is looking in a single direction.

At Biscuit, who is in Isabella’s arms.

(Human...no, Asshole! Let go of my master right away!) the powerful, and young voice shouts in our heads and probably those of everyone nearby.

Even though people around are panicking and preparing to fight, Biscuit doesn’t seem bothered in the least. He simply allows himself to be held by Isabella. As he does, with his legs hanging down and his tongue lolling, he almost looks as if he’s smiling with a cheeky look in his eyes.

Chapter 364: A demon and a wolf

The panic erupting around us is glorious. Hundreds of people from the lower difficulties turn in flight as they spot the black wolf from a distance.

I admit that I might have underestimated their survival instinct. I halfway expected them to stand around taking photos of the giant wolf snarling at Isabella and calling her an asshole.

But well, some of them faint just from the pressure of the wolf’s telepathic messages, so maybe I shouldn’t get my hopes up for their abilities.

(Let go of my master! How dare you, human! Master, this is such a disgrace! Please, I beg of you, let me avenge you!) he shouts telepathically. Yet the wolf still doesn’t attack.

Knowing where to look, I can sense his telepathic connection to Biscuit as they communicate.

Unsure what to do with the unmoving potty-mouthed wolf, we opt to stand there and wait it out. One thing is for sure: if he so much as moves in an aggressive manner, he'll have a few dozen members of Hell difficulty piling up on him in moments.

Like Vega, he doesn't have any text floating over his head. Vega used to have the title of [Disciple] over hers on the 5th Floor, but it was gone when she returned after her week off. It hasn't returned either. Does that mean we won't have access to this information after we leave the tutorial? Is this a tutorial thing only?

"Master, I want to pet him! Can you hold him down like you did with that Ashenwolf?"

I ignore my disciple and keep my eyes on the giant creature. This situation, especially the reactions of the people around me, has become highly entertaining. Once again, something new has been thrown our way, an unexpected situation caused by a single blimp-like doggo. This burrito-shaped corgi is always doing stuff like this.

"Biscuit, is this your disciple?" I ask, it's the only sensible thing I could think to ask.

"There is no way..." Maya tries to say.

(Friend!) Biscuit interrupts her, speaking into our minds.

Oh boy.

"Sophie, please tell the others from Hell to calm down. Group 4 will take care of Wolfy," I tell her.

Sophie acts immediately, without asking questions, and relays the message. With Vega in my arms, I use kinetic energy to push myself through the air and land in front of the black wolf.

The creature is massive. About the size of a building. His mere presence feels overwhelming, not to mention the sheer weight of him as he shifts his body. His golden eyes shine dangerously as he bears his teeth, each one longer than I'm tall, and he lowers his head.

(Asshole, I have not attacked because my master doesn't wish for me to do so, but I refuse to watch the disgrace he is being subjected to. Tell that young female to let him go! Right away!) His voice sounds like that of a young boy, and the thought that he might be little more than a pup comes to mind.

Just how big must his parents be? How powerful is the wolf? He doesn't feel as strong as Gaiathra nor as strong as Veil Weaver. Maybe he's around the level of a Veil Guardian?

I want to fight him and test him out. He is the first monster I've met with human intelligence and capable of speech. Actually, is he considered a monster or an animal?

(Friend,) Biscuit says, relaying the message through the common area.

It feels like the declaration was mostly meant for me, almost as if the corgi knows what's going through my head.

Damn it, okay. I won't bully the wolfy.

Biscuit floats from Isabella's hands and slowly flies over to me. Then he looks at the wolf who lowers his head in response, like a child expecting a spanking from his father.

(Friend!) Biscuit tells the wolf and floats over to Vega who I hold in my arms and sniffs at her curiously.

"Master, are these people and creatures your minions?" Vega asks, her eyes ticking between Biscuit, the wolf, and the others.

"You could say that," I reply.

"Were they your minions even before I became your disciple?"

"You are my first minion," I respond, knowing what she wants to hear, much to the happiness of the red eyed half demon.

She shifts in my arms, clearly satisfied, her tiny horns poking the bottom of my chin. "Then as First minion and First disciple, I outrank them and they have to show me respect!"

(It's you who will be showing respect to the master, youngling!) Wolfy complains.

"Just wait until the master holds you with his powerful skill, I will pet you for hours!" Vega threatens.

(WHAT!?), the young black wolf seems genuinely shocked. (My lineage is that of an ancient wolf who devoured planets. I will not allow myself to be petted by a weak girl smelling of those maniacal demons!)

"Your heart is weak!" my minion shouts back as if it's the worst insult she could come up with.

Then Maya says what I can only believe everyone's been thinking, "What the fuck." She is almost laughing, in shock and sheer disbelief at the situation we've found ourselves in.

As threatening as the Wolfy Boi looks, he doesn't cause any trouble. Having been reined in by Biscuit, he obediently follows his master's orders, and when we move on to our house, he lays down nearby, crushing part of the forest as he does so.

This story originates from a different website. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

I notice that everyone from Group 4 is weirdly stiff, bodies ready to explode into movement and fight. It's as if they were yanked out of the playful mood engendered by the tournament and into a life threatening struggle. They stay like that even as Biscuit explains everything with Isabella and myself to translate.

The young wolf calls us assholes multiple times and I don't even have to think for a second to know where it comes from.

Goddammit, Biscuit.

The future animal Absolute, Overlord of Earth, Archmage of the tutorial, and deer jerky addict, just floats between us and his disciple. Proud as he tries to introduce both sides.

I bet the corgi saw me summoning my disciple and did the same. Something he probably managed with one of his rewards from the events. So far, no one else seems to have received the same reward.

(Food,) Biscuit declares stopping in front of me.

When I grab his cheeks and squeeze them and then hold him to boop his nose 50 times, the black wolf shifts in his position, golden eyes watching the disgrace I subject his master to.

“Master, you can do that to my nose too!” Vega fights for my attention.

Instead, I let go of Biscuit who floats to the black wolf who's conversing with Gareth and Tess. Then I grab Vega's horn and pull her closer.

“‘Kaboom’, you said.” I shake her head.

“Kaboom!” she answers happily.

“Tell me what you’ve done.”

POV Aaron Dalton

(Fuck, this is creepy. That guy almost seems to be smiling,) Dennis tells me through the link we’ve kept separate from the one integrated into Sophie’s web.

(He isn’t.)

(Just look closer, the corners of his lips are twitching up, and look at the way he’s holding that girl. What the hell, isn’t he just a mana maniac? Why does he look like her older brother now?)

(More like a dad.)

“Kaboom!” the girl smiles as she replies to Nathaniel.

She’s even younger than Isabella but at the same time, I feel nervous just seeing her. Every time Nathaniel looks away, her expression grows cold.

I’ve never seen a child like that before.

For a moment my eyes meet hers as well when Nathaniel turns to the side to say something to Kim sitting next to him. Her red eyes are devoid of expression, just like Nathaniel on the 1st Floor.

It reminds me of the mana rain, of us fighting to survive as the drops pierced our skin and Nathaniel coldly massacred the monsters. She’s just like he was then.

But that expression disappears the moment Nathaniel starts turning her way. She smiles at me and even waves, but it feels fake. Her eyes only seem to light up again when Nathaniel turns his attention back to her, a big smile overtaking her face.

Through our link, Dennis can feel my emotions and I can feel his, and we are of one mind when it comes to the little girl.

(She’s a demon,) Dennis says.

Tiny pointy horns, deep red eyes. She looks like she is ready to start a fight at any moment and will try to bite out your neck if she has to.

(Izzy, what do you think of her?) I ask, adding her to the conversation. At the same time, Aaron adds Sophie.

(She is scary!) Isabella shouts the moment she connects to the web.

(She is just a girl, she's probably been through a lot,) Sophie tries. (Is there a chance it's that? Nat said his disciple had a harsh life.)

(It could be...) Isabella hesitates. (But she is scary! Even the pretty wolf feels less dangerous!)

(Well, fuck,) Dennis sighs.

(Don't curse in front of Isabella!) Sophie warns. (What emotions do you feel from her?)

Isabella is silent for a while and then says, (She is very happy and really likes Nat! But she doesn't like us.)

(Maybe she's jealous, maybe she thinks we're going to take Nat from her,) I offer as we observe the little girl.

"I found a nest of gray lizards, a LOT of them. The gray lizards I told you about, and they really were tasty and their limbs really do grow back. Maybe I can get you one sometime so that you can learn to regrow your limbs faster!" Nathaniel's disciple looks at him and studies him seriously, "How is Bambi's curse? Did it get better?"

What are they even talking about?

(She is not worried about us taking him,) Isabella disagrees. (At least not much! She just doesn't care about us. She got very scared when she appeared here and saw us all, but the moment she noticed Nathaniel she calmed down.)

That is surprising. Other than the few glances Dennis and I've caught she seems normal. Even now she is smiling happily while talking to him and when Nat introduces people to her she greets them. She seems friendly, almost like she's just a kid, scared of meeting a lot of new people out of nowhere.

But I just can't help but feel nervous when her eyes change just a tiny bit every time she looks at anyone other than her master.

(She is really good at detecting mana too,) Sophie mentions. (She's had her mana senses up the entire time, constantly checking for danger.)

I didn't notice anything.

(The hell, really? I can't sense anything either!) even Dennis seems to be as shocked as me.

(Try to focus on it a bit more, like this,) Sophie implores as she shares her method for detecting the interference and I feel it too.

Only then do we notice. The faintest touch of her mana senses.

(Oh and by the way, what she's doing feels extremely similar to what Nat's been doing. It's just that I can't even sense Nat doing it most of the time. But I'm sure he's expanding his senses around himself even now.)

(He's happy,) Isabella says out of nowhere and with Sophie's help she shares what tiny bits of feelings she can detect through Nathaniel's defenses.

It's so weird. Even though his face stays nearly the same as always, he seems more lively, even his movements are quicker, as if his whole being has been affected. He doesn't even seem to mind as she snuggles up to him, her head pressing into his chest. As if it were routine.

But then Nathaniel seems to notice something and mid sentence, his eyes light up with a golden circle around his pupils. He turns to us and I feel him take over a section of the web as if it were nothing. No matter how many countermeasures we've placed to limit this kind of influence.

(Izzy, I told you to stop doing that,) his voice admonishes through the link. (But anyway, my minion sensed you guys probing so at least come and greet her. You're acting like a bunch of creepy stalkers.)

Then his presence disappears.

Looking towards us, one of the red eyes of his disciple changes too, the faintest hint of a golden circle appearing around the pupil.

The girl younger than Isabella smiles at us, but I still feel like a bug in her eyes.

Chapter 365: Sold for Jerky

It doesn't seem like my minion cares much for the people I'm introducing her to. I can feel the tension in her posture and I see it in the way she's constantly monitoring them.

Well, it'll be fine. She's just shy around new people. She even gave Nevan a chance and she liked Duplicaniel because he looked like me. Vega's a good girl! They will not become friends in the 24 hours we have, but she will bear with it for my sake.

But damn, as I listen to her telling me how she found a lair of gray lizards and spent a day collecting kinetic energy to collapse the roof on top of them, I can't help but be moved. She is indeed a good disciple.

"So where are you currently in your world?" I ask her.

"I left the village after beating the snot out of a few people! I know master told me to lay low, but I couldn't help it. Plus, I didn't even tear their limbs off, and their broken bones will heal soon enough," she declares somewhat satisfied. "You said you would do much worse, but I held back!"

I wish Sophie and Maya wouldn't look at me like that.

"It was also really easy to steal from them. The locks were easy to break and no one used any mana-based defenses! After an hour, I left half of the things I stole behind because they were too heavy to carry with me."

Just how much did she take?

Minion continues, "I tried to steal as much as I could, just like you showed me in that bunker! You know, 'take and sell anything that's not glued to the floor'!"

Vega's eyes shine as she happily describes how weak-hearted most of the people from the village were and how easy it was to deal with the monsters and animals further from the village.

It looks like she's been having fun even though she is on her own now. Well, it's only been a few days, so she might get bored after a while. But so far this minion of mine is happier than she ever was in the village. It's certainly not something she would have been able to achieve without getting stronger.

"Wanna check on the wolf?" I ask when she finishes her story.

"Yes!"

With her answer, I stand, and Sophie, Maya, the twins, Izzy and Lily follow us to the rest of Group 4 with Biscuit and the black wolf.

"So your name is Vega?" Lily asks with a soft voice and gentle smile, in a clear attempt to be friendly.

The other members of Group 4 seem to be curious though they view her with a sense of caution. That tracks given that I haven't really told them much regarding Vega.

My minion glances at me then our black haired healer and nods while answering Lily's question, "Yes. Vega is the name master gave me! He said I'm the brightest star of his tutorial. That in the darkness of the tutorial, he found..."

I quickly cover her mouth with my hand, but the expression she makes tells me that she knows very well what she is doing.

Little devil.

As a punishment, I flick her nose.

Tess, seeing us coming, leaves Gareth with the others who've gathered around the wolf, to meet us. She surrounds us with a barrier to keep anyone from listening in, and Sophie supplements her efforts by jamming any foreign mana with the aid of her web.

"Are you going to introduce us?" she inquires.

"Sure. Vega, this is Tess. Tess, this is my disciple Vega."

"Hello!" Vega says simply, and Tess smiles at her understandingly.

Probably by intention, she doesn't pressure my minion, knowing the little half demon will be happier that way, and turns to me instead. "Did you know about this?" she asks, gesturing behind her at the giant black wolf.

"All I knew was that Biscuit liked his disciple," I say watching as Biscuit floats out of our house.

In one of his tentacles, he holds a piece of deer jerky he clearly stole from the sealed cupboard I was hiding it in. He sets the small piece of jerky in front of his disciple.

The giant wolf looks at the ground where the small piece of deer jerky is and then at Biscuit, who floats proudly.

"Anyway, he seems surprisingly reasonable. And not just because of Biscuit, he just seems to be like that," Tess continues. "He knows about the tutorial and tournament, but some kind of custom or rule seems to be preventing him from acting in aggression while he's here. Though I suppose it could just be an aspect of his personality. He is surprisingly naive."

The black wolf lowers his maw and sticks out the slightest hint of his tongue to lap up the jerky along with a few stones and some dirt. Yet he doesn't seem to complain and eats it all while thanking his master.

"I'm lost here," Tess sighs. "All of our disciples were so much weaker than us. The others seem to be the same, and yet Biscuit's is so strong. I bet he could take out most anyone from Hell difficulty with ease."

We are trying to get information out of him, but he refuses to share anything of use, and he doesn't want to tell us his name. He just says that there are some things he doesn't want to say and that the system will censor the others."

"Of course, it would." The system is an asshole.

"He also said that we should just be patient, that most things will be revealed in the course of the tutorial," Tess mentions. "He's placed a lot of trust in the system and the tutorial."

"Master, I want to pet him! Like the Ashenwolf!"

"Soon, minion, soon."

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

"I'm Vega, not a minion!"

"You just said you were my First minion and that other minions had to listen to you."

"I'm Vega!"

Nice strategy, acting dumb while looking cute. Classic minion.

"Maya said you spoke with Miwa?" I ask, turning to Tess.

"Yes, just visit her at her house. I was able to make another deal. You'll see when you speak to her, consider it a small surprise from me."

"What have you done? Tess?"

“You’ll see.”

Haaa. Bullied in front of my minion. My image will never recover from this.

(You, Asshole with too much mana and a weak body!) shouts the telepathic voice of the wolf.

Surely he isn’t speaking to me? My body’s gotten quite a bit stronger, and my passives and traits are helping a lot, so I wouldn’t consider it too much mana. Actually, I’m sure I can raise it even more. It’s been too long since it threatened to break my body.

But the glances being thrown my way as the wolf speaks tell me more than enough. Well, no worries, I will convert them soon enough.

“If you don’t want to share information about the tutorial, the system, and stats, I don’t know what we could be talking about.” I say, coming to a stop at Gareth’s side in front of the giant wolf.

Biscuit is already sitting on top of his head. It’s nice to see minions respect their masters.

(My master has summoned me for only 12 hours, asshole. In that time, I have decided to observe you and the other assholes to see if you are a fitting company for my master!)

The way he speaks it’s almost like Biscuit’s some kind of mystical guru, and the respect he gives him makes me curious. I just wish he wouldn’t talk to us like that.

“So you want a fight?” I ask.

(Great! It’s good you understand! Yes! I will fight you and...) then he stops mid sentence, his golden eyes looking up at Biscuit, (But master! I promise I won’t hurt him... much!) he complains.

Even though Biscuit doesn’t say anything, I can see bits of his mana flickering around his body.

The ensuing messages exchanged between wolf and corgi alone, and after a minute, the black wolf turns to me again. (Asshole with too much mana. Surprisingly, my master is worried that you might hurt me, rather than me hurting you. I do not understand; you feel weak.) The giant head lowers, as the black wolf sniffs me.

His head alone is as big as a bus.

“Ten pieces of jerky if you let me fight him,” I tell Biscuit.

(Food!)

“I don’t have that many. Twenty.”

(Sustenance!)

“You won’t die of hunger, but okay, thirty.”

(Friend.)

“I won’t hurt him, don’t worry. He is your disciple after all.”

(Food!)

“Okay, deal.”

The black wolf seems to be shocked. (M-master, did you just sell me out for a measly...)

I ignore the wolfy and turn to Tess, “Can you take care of Vega for a bit? I will go to Miwa to get the stuff.”

"I wanna meet minion Miwa too!" Vega in my arms says.

"It's a surprise for you. And you should get to know the others at least a bit. I'll be back soon enough."

"It's not a problem. I'll keep her safe, and we'll send you a message if anything happens," Tess smiles at Vega. "You can call me Sset in front of the others." She says gesturing at Gareth.

The definitely-secretly-evil man looks at Vega with a weird expression, especially at her red eyes and horns. I wonder what's going through his head as I remember everything Brainiac told us about Gareth during the Avatar challenge. That also makes me wonder about Gareth's disciple and how Gareth sees him.

Damn, I love this place. So many interesting things to see and think about.

Anyway, "Minion, if anyone attacks you, fight back. Use the kick or kaboom. Otherwise, you can trust Sset and the others, and I will leave an anchor on you."

Then I turn to Biscuit's minion, "See you soon, wolfy. We will fight before you leave."

The giant monster just snorts, putting its massive head on the ground, and looks around while communicating with Biscuit.

I create an anchor and then fly for a short moment, stopping in front of Miwa's workshop. As one might expect, heat pours from within alongside the ringing of iron.

I have to wait ten minutes before the second ranked craftsman calls for me, "Just come inside and don't touch anything." Then the clanging continues.

"Already preparing the pizza?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood as I enter the smithy.

The place isn't that big, but there is a massive anvil in the center, and just a step away from it are a few tables bearing inscriptions, a wall covered in tools, and a floating stone that radiates a lot of heat, while being powered by Miwa's mana.

Miwa doesn't seem to be amused. "I picked out the items you offered. I want that small dagger made of voidsteel and a mid-sized piece of broken voidsteel blade. For that, I will make the pizza you want and add in some extra ingredients."

"Deal."

Miwa, holding a silver hammer in her hand, smashes it into a piece of mystery alloy a few times, working it on the anvil while feeding more mana to the floating stone. The heat spikes, and she redirects it towards the anvil which absorbs it and then emits into the metal being worked.

While it is heating up, she turns to me, "I'll also show you this arm." She lifts her right arm made of a silvery metal with a slight pink luster. Even with all the heat in here, it doesn't seem to have absorbed any. It's just as cold as it would be outside. And that just seems to be a property of the metal, not the inscriptions within the arm.

"So what do you want?" I ask.

Tess is really good at dealing with people. I could get used to such surprises.

"Sset told me you know somebody I want to meet."

Huh, I don't know all that many people. Tess could probably do the same, so why bother me?

Miwa continues before I say anything, "I've been wanting to meet that person ever since I bought one of their items." She gestures at one of the darker corners of the room.

As I look I notice a number of items laying on the table. Items I immediately recognize. None of them are pretty but they apparently perform fairly well. And Miwa has more than half a dozen of them.

"I want to meet Tent C... Fuc... the person who's taken first in the crafter rankings. Sset said you could connect me with them." Miwa seems to be ashamed to say those words, but her expression changes for the first time.

She ignores the metal on the anvil as it starts to melt, and a deep look of interest takes root in her eyes. Nearly a creepy amount of interest.

Is it how she saw me looking at her arm?

But now I also know why Tess seemed to be having so much fun. Damn it.

Chapter 366: A bit weird

If I tell her it's me, will Miwa expose my identity as Tent... the top-ranked craftsman? She wouldn't, right?

But damn, she looks creepy. It's almost like she's about to start drooling at the thought of meeting the 1st ranked craftsman in the tournament. Is she a stalker? Is that why she bought so many of my items? Was she driving the prices up?

Miwa, noticing my gaze fixed on the ugly items, smiles, her face taking on a manic cast.

She takes a step closer to them, "I bought as many as I could! I even got a few of the members of my group to chip in. I owe them, but it was worth it!"

Miwa takes two items: one is a dagger I made, and the other was made by someone else, likely Miwa herself.

She confirms it soon, "I made this dagger. The system rates it at mid-rare."

The dagger she is showing me is beautiful, and even though it's pretty, it doesn't feel weak. The inscriptions are a bit clumsy, but she did a good job shaping the metal, compressing it, and making the result pleasant to look at without sacrificing the performance.

Next to her dagger is one of mine, and as they both lay there, the difference is stark. My dagger is much rougher, a mere chunk of dagger shaped metal. There are imperfections; it's ugly, and even my inscriptions feel less delicate.

Miwa picks up both of them and sends her mana through the blades. Then she swings them against each other.

"This dagger," she lifts up the surviving one with a smile, "is barely rated mid-rare, bordering on low-rare." Her voice has more emotion in it, and she talks quickly.

Like someone finally receiving permission to talk about their hobbies and obsessions.

"So I want to meet him or her. I will let you examine the arm if you promise not to damage it. Sset said you bought items from them and can contact them."

She takes another step closer to me, and I hold out my arm to keep her at bay. "Okay, okay, let's calm down."

Finally coming back to herself, Miwa blushes and quickly takes a step back with an apologetic smile on her face.

She bows quickly, "I apologize for my behavior!"

"It's fine, just let me think about it, ok? And give me some space."

I quickly teleport to an anchor I left in my room and take the dagger she wants and a good chunk of voidsteel. Then, I return to the anchor I left behind.

"For now, take this for your help with the pizza. I'll talk to Fuc... to that person, and get back to you soon."

“Please do so and thank you!” Miwa takes the epic dagger and the metal and carefully puts them away.
“Should I start preparing it?”

“Maybe in an hour or two?” Then I get an idea, “Actually, I will come to you in about a day, and we can make it together. Would that be fine?”

“I don’t mind, but I can’t guarantee the result if anyone else is involved.”

I wave my hand, “That is fine. So tomorrow around this time?”

After she nods, I quickly teleport away. Dealing with the drooling fanboys is a problem for future me to deal with. Screw that weirdo.

Appearing on the roof of our house, I scan the area.

As expected, there are hundreds of presences gathered around our lodgings. It’s no surprise people from other difficulties are intrigued, and the giant black wolf can be seen even from afar. Focusing on one presence in particular, I place a couple of anchors and find Channeler at its source.

“Hey.”

He stumbles back, almost collapsing in shock. I forgot some people aren’t that good at detection or surprises.

“You can’t keep doing that to me,” he complains as I help him back to his feet.

“Shouldn’t you be used to it by now?”

“Give it a few dozen more tries,” he jokes weakly, nodding at the wolf visible even from here. He asks.
“Is that your new pet?”

“Biscuit’s,” I reply.

Seeing that I’m not joking, Channeler only laughs, “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“There is no need to worry; he won’t do anything. And even if he did, we can’t die here, so it’s fine.”

“You could defeat him?”

For a moment, I think of it, remembering the sheer weight of the wolf, the feel of his mana, and his childish yet dangerous eyes. The wolf isn’t weak, no, even though the mood around him has been light, he’s still dangerous.

“Yeah, I could,” I admit.

“How strong is he in comparison to the things you’ve fought on the other floors?” Channeler asks.

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“Honestly? I’m not sure about our current floor, but I’ve met stronger beings before and fought some of them. Make sure to look at him properly. Monsters as big as that wolf probably won’t be anything rare once our round of the tutorial ends.”

“Are you referring to the Pairing,” he asks, looking in the direction of the black wolf.

“Yes.” is my answer.

“And you’re already fighting beings as strong as that wolf.”

“Hell difficulty’s been feel easier lately, as we’ve gotten stronger, but there are always surprises and fuck-ups. So yeah, it’s not all that rare. Why do you think only 38 out of the 250 people who started in Hell difficulty have survived?”

“Honestly, Noname,” Channeler says carefully, “you’ve been so easygoing about it, that it’s never really felt like you were struggling, it’s like nothing’s too dangerous for you.”

“It’s not that bad.”

That blonde and uselessly handsome man just smiles and shakes his head.

What is he, posing for photos?

“Lately I’ve been noticing something.” He says.

While he’s grasping for the right words, I die. Black mana tearing my heart apart as it gets too close. Still, I maintain composure and slightly modify my attempts. Once again I’ve managed to confirm that too much mana, too close to my mana heart is less than a good idea. I clearly need to make some changes.

“You, Savant, Tacita, Sset. Everyone from Hell really. You all seem...”

“A bit strange?” I offer. I’ve noticed that too.

“Something like that. At times, this something shines through that makes it obvious why you ended up in Hell, and I’m not trying to insult you or anything. I just can’t help but think that it would probably take someone like you to endure it all, and none of the Hell difficulty attendees exactly seem like they were exactly happy with their normal lives back on Earth.”

“Can you give me an example?” I ask, gesturing for him to continue, curiosity getting the better of me as I move my mana through my body.

“I have a friend who trained as a professional psychologist, and he said that Tacita seems to demonstrate a lot of the signs associated with someone who’s experienced a lot of deep emotional pain. He can’t be sure but said that she might be a patient from a psychiatric hospital or a domestic abuse survivor, maybe even sexual trafficking. Savant and Gareth both seem like sociopaths and likely you as well —either that or Asperger’s syndrome. It’s hard to say confidently, so these are only guesses. Then I

heard Kim talking about his family, and he seems to be happier here than he ever was back home. Dennis and Aaron also seem to have experienced some form of domestic abuse, apparently, they've been passed around by their family ever since their parents died and they're constantly changing schools."

"You know their real names."

"Yeah, they told me, so did Tess. So my point is that I have spoken with the others. Brainiac, Lootenant, Adam, AnotherOneHere, and that's the one thing you all share - you like this world. Almost like you were missing something back on Earth."

"That sounds right."

"So how is it for you, Nona? Are you the same?"

"Maybe. What else does your psychologist friend think of me?"

"He thinks you might have had a messed-up childhood, probably something to do with your parents. That seems to be the most common issue. He sees something that suggests deep emotional scars."

"Interesting. He seems to know a lot."

"Yeah, he's a bit weird. He's got an eidetic memory and a habit of watching people." Channeler says nodding.

"Anyway, it's not something I want to talk about. Can you get me a few people who are willing to fight? Easy, Normal difficulty, and maybe one or two from Hard." I ask, changing the subject.

"I could try. What do you want them to do?"

"Just a bit of light sparring. No worries, their opponent won't be from Hell difficulty."

“Shouldn’t be a problem. You won’t need to offer any rewards. There are plenty of people who just want to get close to you guys, so I can use that, so long as we remember that person in the future.”

Damn, is this what a high-level extrovert is capable of? It seems so easy when he says it.

Then I remember something and pull a small mana stone from my pocket, “I prepared this for you. It should help you practice moving your mana. I modified it so it should be perfect for you.”

Channeler takes the stone, and as expected, he ignores me for a moment, examining his new toy. I don’t even mind; it’s nice to see someone with similar interests to mine.

“Don’t ask,” I warn him, “try to examine it on your own and come to your own conclusions. It will help you more if you do. I’ll give you some more before the end of the tournament, at least if you do a good job with this one.”

“In that case, I’ll just accept the gift.”

“No problem. I’ll see you later.”

After I teleport, I think for a moment. Should I wait for a response? Are there any customs or rules regarding etiquette when it comes to teleportation, are there places and situations where it might be considered rude to do so?

Lately, I’ve been getting used to my instantaneous mode of transport, but I should probably ask Min-Jae to let me train under his increased gravity field so I don’t get too lazy. It’s been a long time since I pushed my body with proper exercise.

As I arrive I find myself welcomed with an unusual sight. Tacita standing across from my disciple and staring at her. Tess and Lily are standing nearby, and I can almost feel their skills on a short trigger and mana hum under their skin. The girls are about as far away from Vega as Tacita, though they certainly realize how terrifyingly fast the girl with messy brown hair can be.

Tacita must have appeared there out of nowhere, surprising them and cornering Vega.

(It's fine,) I say sending a message to Tess through Sophie's web. If they do something stupid it might trigger Tacita.

"She is my disciple," I tell Tacita, as she looks from me to Vega.

Even as quirky as she is, she can be startlingly intelligent at times, that sentence alone will surely tell her a lot - the meaning of Vega to me and what will happen if Tacita tries to hurt her. Yet, at the same time that sentence, it feels empty. Tacita is faster than me, and she is closer. If she decided to do anything, I probably wouldn't be able to stop her in time.

And the same as me, Tacita realizes that Vega might not be included in the "can't die during the tournament" part of the message. Something I failed to think of in my stupidity.

I act as calmly as I can and take a few steps closer, as I feel my heart pounding in my chest.

A few more steps, and I'm almost within reach. A black mana orb forms deep inside my body, ready for absorption, to strengthen my body to the fullest. The anchor I left on Vega is ready to be activated at any moment.

Then Tacita moves her hand, and I almost attack her. But her movement is restrained, and I hold myself back through clenched teeth. She looks her over without malice, and slowly, gently, she reaches a hand out towards Vega.

She looks at me, her hand stopping mid-air, and when I don't react, she continues and gently touches Vega's pointy horn with the tip of her finger.

Tacita then smiles brightly, her eyes devoid of ill will, and I feel myself calm down.

Then my minion kicks her in the shin.

Chapter 367: Horns

As the kick lands, Tacita turns away from me to look at Vega, a look of sheer surprise on her face.

And Vega kicks her again. The second kick lands as well, which Tacita surely allowed again.

(Don't) I warn as Tess and Lily move to intervene through Sophie's link. Yet I still take a few steps closer, ready for anything.

Displaying an unusual degree of care, Tacita puts her finger on Vega's forehead and pushes her away, causing the young half demon to stumble.

As I catch Vega's gaze, I can't help but think "Oh no".

It's like Vega is confirming I'm nearby to help, as she forms a dagger in her hand to stab Tacita with, as she taunts Vega by standing too close.

"Don't ever touch my horns!" my minion shouts, her voice trembling with anger.

The silent assassin dodges swing after swing with ease, her expression overcome with mischief. Her hand darts out in a blur, knocking the pale blue mana dagger from Vega's hand.

Before my minion can continue, Tacita gestures for her to stop. She takes a step closer and presses her own dagger into Vega's hand, closing her fingers around it. Then, unsatisfied, she pries the minion's hand open, shifting her hold on the dagger, until it settles into a more natural state.

For the following few minutes, my minion tries to stab her as Tacita avoids Vega's attacks and corrects her form. A poorly positioned blade here, a wrong step there, an overzealous swing. Tacita somewhat impatiently corrects it all, with a slightly annoyed expression, as if not understanding why the minion is that bad at trying to kill her.

When Vega does anything too bad, Tacita flicks her tiny horns.

(She appeared here out of nowhere, right in front of Vega. Not even Sophie's web detected her. Sophie couldn't even feel Tacita's mind.) Tess says carefully, speaking directly into my mind.

(And then she touched Vega's horns?) I ask.

(Yes), Tess nods. (Vega didn't seem to like that very much and shouted at her just a moment before you showed up. They seem to be sensitive and when you showed up Tacita touched them again.)

As we talk, I watch as Vega opens her mouth launching a thin, needle-like projectile of mana at Tacita's face.

Even then, her attack is easily dodged, though it still makes Tacita smile brightly.

As is the proper reaction to having someone try to kill you.

Over and over again, Tacita corrects my minion, who just refuses to give up. Watching it all go down, I find myself counting the ways my minion has improved while leveling her skills.

Vega always did prefer fighting at close-range, her style aggressive, not unlike Tacita's, honestly I can't bring myself to think of the experience as anything but helpful, so I let it happen. Still, I don't forget to make my presence known, as a reminder to Tacita to step lightly.

Either because of my warning or, more likely because she's taken a liking to Vega's personality, Tacita makes sure not to push her too far. Though she's fully capable of doing so. And that's just knowing how many times she's killed Samuel alone.

But damn, swindling a free lesson out of one of the most powerful people in Hell difficulty. My Minion is truly a cunning little creature.

As I watch, I check my own notifications. I've managed to level a few of my skills thanks to all my training in the common area, especially my [Perception] thanks to the staring contest I had with Tacita.

[Perception - lvl 43 > Perception - lvl 44]

[Perception - lvl 44 > Perception - lvl 45]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 42 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 43]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 43 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 44]

[Tether - lvl 35 > Tether - lvl 36]

[Infusion - lvl 28 > Infusion - lvl 29]

[Mana Crown - lvl 20 > Mana Crown - lvl 21]

Not bad at all for a few days. Especially given that my higher level skills have been getting harder and harder to level. I could probably get more out of skills with lower levels, but I would be stupid not to seize this opportunity.

I already lost count of all the times the systems decided I was dead, each time I've made huge improvements when it comes to handling black mana and the higher frequencies of kinetic energy. And yet it still feels a bit off.

Sure, I can push myself further and learn more, but there's still something missing. That feeling of danger and death if I slip up is gone. And with it, at least subconsciously, I've lost my drive to give my all. My mind has dulled, and I find myself failing to push my limits.

Actually, it's hard to describe it properly, and despite my efforts to fix it, I find myself at a loss. It's not like it's ruining my plans, but it's still something I need to consider.

"This is what I expect of my minions," I tell Maya, who's been watching from the sidelines.

She did say she wanted to become my minion to get free items, didn't she? I can't help but enjoy watching her expression as she witnesses Vega's assault on Tacita.

At this point in the fight, Vega is tired, She's expended a decent chunk of her mana, and her body's been injured by her own careless manipulation of kinetic energy and mana. My minion is bleeding from her eye too. A faint golden circle etched in her iris.

Yet she continues to push herself, improving at a terrifying speed, not a speck of her aggression has been expended, and her attacks retain their enthusiasm.

I think Maya, and the twins, and a few of the other members of our group are starting to be surprised that I've let things get this far. After all, I summoned Vega to have a nice time and share my favorite food with her, like I promised back on the 5th Floor.

Instead, here she is now. Stumbling, injured under the weight of her own powers, her tiny hand barely holding on to her dagger.

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But my minion is smiling.

Vega seems to be having fun right now, learning things from Tacita that I could never teach her. So in the end, I can't stop her, because it's something she wants to do.

I wait for her to stumble, on the verge of collapse, before I move in to catch her before she hits the ground. And before I can stand, Tacita's vanished, leaving me to look at this silly minion of mine. She's breathing heavily lying in my arms and trembling from the pain of her wounds.

"Did you have fun?" I ask as I take her over to Lily.

"Yes!" Vega says, nodding as her brow furrows, "But that human touched my horns, master! And I couldn't hear her heart at all. Is she sick?"

I respond in an attempt to answer my confused minion, "We humans don't care about hearts quite as much as demons do, minion. As far as we're concerned, they're little more than hearts. And I think she has a skill or trait for the purpose of hiding it."

“Humans are weird, master. But not you! You feel more like a real demon! Thank you for letting me have fun.”

“Yes yes, but you should lower your barrier now, okay? Lily’s going to heal you, so be nice.”

“I will...” Even as dissatisfied as she is, she complies, and Lily touches her for a few seconds, closing her wounds, and leaving my minion refreshed as all the pain disappears.

Confused, Vega blinks a few times and looks at Lily while mumbling, “I will really have to get a healer of my own...”

“Thank you, Lily,” I say, in my ungrateful minion’s place.

“No problem! Vega’s very cool, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a brave young half demon.” Lily says trying to be sneaky, though it’s easy to see through her intentions.

There is no way my minion will fall for that.

When I look down, Vega’s face seems normal. Her expression is neutral and her eyes full of curiosity. Yet I can feel her heartbeat quicken.

“Just a few years and she might be able to beat Tacita with ease,” Lily says.

The half-demon’s tiny heart beats even quicker, and I can see how hard she works not to smile.

Minion...

Once inside our house, Vega looks around full of curiosity. She seems to like the furniture; even the smallest things are new to her. But most of all, she enjoys sweets I saved up from my shopping spree. She seems especially fascinated by the smartphone.

“Master! What kind of item is this, did you make it?” She asks while holding the phone gazing at the picture I took of her.

“It’s a device made on my planet. There was no magic or mana involved in its production.”

Vega shakes the phone, only to be surprised when the picture doesn’t fade. Though she drops it, surprised as the screen darkens, slipping into battery conservation mode.

I grab it before it can crash to the floor, “Don’t worry, you didn’t break anything. It also can’t hurt you.”

“That’s weird, master. Humans are weird.”

“I guess they are. Now smile,” I point the camera at her, ready to take another pic.

“I don’t want to, master. I already did it a lot of times! I even let you take a picture of me with your minions! I don’t...”

“One more of that fruity candy you liked. I hid it before you ate them all.”

Immediately she smiles brightly, and I take a picture. When I look at the screen, it’s indeed the best one yet.

“Good job, minion,” I say, and pull the candy from my pocket and give it to her. Though this time, she takes care not to bite into the wrapping, carefully extricating the sweet before consuming it with joy.

“I’m worried about you, minion; It’s too easy to manipulate you with gifts,” I tell her.

“It’s only that way with master!”

“Sure.”

“It is!”

“You took sweets from Tess, Lily, and Maya. You even let them pinch your cheeks and hug you.”

“Master always said to get as much as possible from dumb people! I gained amazing items in exchange for that short hug. I scammed them!”

“That’s true, minion, but did you even think to ask for more?”

“More?” She asks, tilting her head.

“Yes, more. You accepted the first offer they gave you, but you should always ask for more, go back and forth, and meet somewhere in the middle. Watch.” I say turning to Lily. “You gave Vega one candy for a ten-second hug. Wouldn’t you pay three times that for the same hug?”

“Yes!” Lily answers happily.

Minion seems to be shocked, “N-no way.”

“It’s you who got scammed, minion. You might be cunning, but my group is full of weirdos, so you can’t let your guard down.”

“What should I do now, master?”

“Well, if someone scams you with the intention to hurt you, you can hurt them back; that much is obvious. If you were stronger, I would tell you to beat Lily and others, but as you are now, you would lose.”

“I could stab them when they aren’t looking or prepare an exploding orb for them!”

“That would be going too far. I know you don’t care about them, but they’re members of my group.”

“Nat, your disciple is a bit extreme. I’m not sure if I can get you to accept me as your minion like this,” Maya sighs from the couch, nomming on our snacks as always.

“That’s the problem with you. Why would I accept you as a minion with such poor resolve, right, Vega?”

“Yes! Her heart is also weak!”

“Little demon, why are you so obsessed with hearts? Maya asks, why do demons like them so much?”

I catch a glimpse of the annoyance on Vega’s face before she puts on the fake smile again, “I’m half demon and half human. And a stronger heart means a stronger demon,” she says as if that should explain everything.

“Demons are usually born with a 4th trait, most of the time it is some sort of modification to their heart. The stronger the heart, the stronger the demon and they seem to prefer being around strong people,” I say, explaining to Maya and the others listening in.

“What if there is someone powerful without a strong heart?” Maya asks, teasing my minion.

But Vega doesn’t hesitate, stating that “You can’t become truly powerful without having a strong heart.” as if it were a fact.

I leave them to their fight walking into the kitchen with Sophie, Izzy, and the twins. Izzy tried to make friends with my minion, but after no end of trying, she left, tired.

“So what was the problem, Izzy? You can be honest with me.” I ask, stopping next to her.

The 11-year-old empath sighs before responding, “I had to stop using my skill around her. She is constantly ready for an attack, and I keep feeling spikes of anger from her. She’s probably imagining methods for attacking us.”

“Isn’t that normal? I used to do that all the time.”

“Yes,” Izzy agrees. “But it was much harder to detect from you! I’m at a higher level than her, so I can feel a lot even without trying. I need to level up my skill and improve my control.”

Sophie puts her hand on her sister’s shoulder and continues in her place, “Vega doesn’t trust us at all. Whenever you’re not in the room, she puts on that fake smile. And it’s almost creepy how nice she is when you are there, then she borders on clingy.”

Well, it’s not like I can refute that. She might be even more picky with people than I am. She’s reluctant to trust anyone other than me, and she only seems to respect people on the stronger end of the spectrum. Plus, Vega isn’t human, so can we even judge her with our normal human thinking?

I wave a quick goodbye and head back to my minion, who’s sitting in my armchair and poking at the armrest.

“Minion, let’s check on wolfy.”

Immediately her uninterested expression changes, a smile blooming across her face.

Dealing with other people is so much work. The trouble I’m having with Tess. Lily and her insecurities. Min-Jae and his delinquent phase. My minion, clinging to me, even as she sees the others as bugs. And right when I thought that most of my troubles were over, new ones popped up almost immediately.

Walking outside, I absent-mindedly reach down, ruffle Vega’s hair, and prod her tiny, prickly horns.

Vega smiles at me, and I can’t help but think about how different her response is. Not that long ago, she was willing to stab Tacita just for touching them.

Chapter 368: Looking for a fight

To break the silence, I ask, "Have you been leveling your [Concentration], what about your [Mana Manipulation], and [Kinetic Barrier]?"

"Yes! All of them! [Mana Manipulation] the most. I practice every day with the mana stones you gave me."

"Hardworking as always, minion."

"I need to get stronger." Vega nods seriously.

As we approach the forest, I notice a bunch of kids nearby, standing behind a fence and staring at the giant black wolf. They do seem to be scared though their curiosity has clearly won out. Most of them hail from Easy difficulty. They appear to have been accompanied by a few adults, who honestly don't seem much better.

Even from this distance, I hear one of the kids shout towards the wolf, "Nya nya nya!"

"Oliver, I told you to stop saying that!" The man, probably the boy's father, shouts before slapping the back of his head.

"You got it wrong, Oliver! You should only be adding it to the end of the sentence because..." the second boy doesn't finish because the man slaps the back of his head as well.

We don't hear much more as their conversation fades from the range of our hearing. I turn to Vega, "Minion, have you given any consideration to saying nya at the end of your sentences? Long ago, it was some..."

I see. Humanity is doomed.

Lynthari and human 0, half demons 1.

“So how are things going?” I ask as we approach Tess and Gareth, who are still conversing with the black wolf, patiently sitting nearby with Biscuit on his head.

“He’s been surprisingly nice,” Gareth says.

“We’ve gotten a few “tiny” bits of information,” Tess adds.

“Anything fun?” I ask.

“We were right, there are 14 Rulers. One for each Radiance and Blight. Each one is usually much more powerful than a given Absolute, and most of them used to be Absolutes. The number seems to have been limited by the system itself, and there can’t be more than one for each Radiance or Blight.”

“We expected that much, didn’t we?”

“Yes, but it’s nice to have it confirmed. What is fun is that in some very rare cases, a powerful Absolute can potentially defeat and even kill a Ruler and take his place. Sometimes the title of a Ruler is hereditary, an Absolute can receive the ruler’s powers via a ceremony. In some cases you need to kill them or have a better handle on your Radiance or Blight, it differs from Ruler to Ruler.”

“That’s kind of unexpected but not that surprising if you think about it,” I say.

“Yes, it also seems like being called Absolute isn’t just for the sake of it, and some Absolutes are much more powerful than others. We tried to get more, but the system censored a lot. Floors, Rulers, Absolutes, information on future tournaments, the System, Pairing, factors outside the scope of the tutorial.”

(It’s still too early for you, human. Just trust in the system, and gradually everything will be revealed.)
The black wolf snorts, his breath bending the grass in its path like a strong wind.

“I don’t want to,” I tell him.

(It matters not what you want or do not want, human.)

Well, if this young wolf isn't just as cheeky as his master. Still, I have to wonder why someone as high-leveled as the wolf needed a master. Him becoming a disciple can mean only one thing: he was about to die. Like every other disciple, he was saved from death by being sent to the tutorial, at which point he became a disciple, after being picked by the system due to their similarity to a participant.

"So how did you become Biscuit's disciple?" It's simpler to just ask than stress over it.

(Master possesses the same primordial energy I do, and even though master isn't as high-leveled yet, his mastery over it is much greater than mine.)

Biscuit, you cool little thing.

Sensing my pride, he lets out a gentle woof from atop his disciple's head.

"What kind of energy is it?"

(Human, this is not the kind of information to be shared. The primordial energy my master and I possess is extremely rare, more so than the five that are usually known. You also seem to possess primordial energy, I can smell it.)

"Maybe, maybe not. So, is your primordial energy really that powerful?"

(It's rarer than most. As with the others, its power relies on its bearer. Human, you are indeed stupid and ill-informed. That much should be basic knowledge, you should already know if you reached the first tournament.)

"Sure. You said your predecessor was an ancient wolf and devourer of planets. Was he a Ruler?"

(My predecessor was the first in our line to possess the primordial energy my master and I share. He was one of the most powerful Absolutes to ever live, human. Even Rulers shook in fear of his blinding power!)

The wolf seems simple. He likes to trash-talk, but he is weirdly naive and likes to show off. From a certain point of view, he may as well be similar in age to Vega. That reminds me that I have a promise to fulfill to my minion.

“Biscuit, can my minion pet your disciple?”

(I will not be pet by one of those crazed demons!)

(Food.)

“Of course, I will. I’m sure we will find more deer sooner or later.”

(Food!)

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“Thank you.”

As I pick up Vega to boost ourselves onto the wolf’s head, I hear Gareth ask, “Sset, am I the only one who is taking this seriously?”

Landing on the top of the giant wolf’s head, I stride over to Biscuit and put Vega down. My minion quickly drops to her knees and burrows her hands into the the black wolf’s thick fur. Judging by her smile, I can only guess that she came to like petting dangerous animals after her experience with Ashenwolf. Nice, another person converted.

Meanwhile, Biscuit’s disciple is suspiciously quiet, and for some reason, I find it funny. It’s almost like I’m teasing a little kid.

I sit down next to Vega, and Biscuit floats over to my legs so that I can pet him.

After the end of the 5th Floor it feels nice to have some time to relax and spend at least a week in a safe place. Maybe that's part of the system's intent, letting people unwind and interact with others from Earth so that they can have some fun before being thrown back to the floors. Just a week of that.

From my previous conversations with the others, I've found that most of the people from the other difficulties aren't that hostile or suspicious. Everyone here is going through the same situation, so we share that experience with each other. That seems to build a relationship between us pitting us against the tutorial, bringing us closer together, and smoothing over petty differences.

Of course, there are exceptions, like the murderer from Easy difficulty, BenDover from Hell, and a few more people I don't even know the names of. But I know Tess and others are dealing with them.

That's another reason for me to keep an eye on Vega. It is possible that she can't die here, the aura might just be an area effect. But there is also the possibility that its effect only applies to people from Earth. So it would be stupid to risk it. Tacita has shown me how little it would take. So at all times, Vega will be either near me or with Tess, Lily, and Soph.

Still, there are Savant and Tacita to worry about. The only people capable of doing anything to her even with others protecting her. I don't think they would try anything, but I'm an untrusting person, so I need to prepare for anything.

"Wolfy, what's your name?" I ask him.

(I won't be telling you my name, human.)

"So stubborn," I say tapping on the top of his head, something I'm not sure he even felt. Then I watch as Vega moves closer and stops just an arm's reach away from Biscuit, who eyes her curiously.

Vega carefully reaches her hand and touches his nose with her pointing finger. She does it extremely carefully and gently, something she saw me doing.

Biscuit lets it happen, watching her with his intelligent eyes. He then licks her finger, and she pulls her hand back quickly in response, surprise overtaking her face.

Her eyes jump from Biscuit to me and then back to Biscuit, and she reaches again. This time she lets him lick her hand, and surprised by her own reaction, she giggles.

Biscuit woofs at her, and Vega moves closer and touches his forehead, his cheek, and then carefully and slowly puts her small hand on top of his head. When she starts caressing him, Biscuit closes his eyes, patiently enduring her clumsy attempts at affection.

“What do you think?” I ask, leaning back to watch as she pets him.

“It’s weird, master. I know he is smarter and stronger than me, but I don’t feel like I need to worry about him hurting me. And it’s not just because I have you here with me.” As she speaks, she stops petting Biscuit, until he chuffs at her, leading her to quickly continue.

In response I ask, the black wolf, “ Did you Hear that? Why can’t you be more like your master?”

The black wolf decides to keep his dignity and stays quiet.

“Maybe you would master your primordial energy as well as Biscuit if you behaved like him.” I tease.

Silence.

“I bet that ancient predecessor of yours wasn’t so uptight like you. He probably...”

(Human.) He interrupts me finally, (If you are looking for a fight, let’s fight.) As he growls, I feel its deep rumble in my bones and the ground beneath me. It reverberates in my chest as we square off.

“Let’s do it.”

We face off against each other, having moved to the edge of the common area, relocating to a big clearing surrounded by trees on three sides. Far enough away to avoid causing any damage to the common area at large, not to mention the houses, and camps there. I think. Details... who needs to care about such little things. I just know I'm excited.

This tournament is fun and all, but at the same time, it feels fake, no real danger has been presented to me. It's almost to the point that I can't wait to return to the floors to experience some real danger, and yet even though this is just as fake, it feels more real. It feels strange to say, but that's the only way I can describe the sensation.

Nearby, I see Tess with the rest of group 4 and Vega in between them. They've learned from our previous experience and so they've taken greater precautions, going so far as to set a barrier in advance. It's not like they are close; actually, they are pretty far, but better safe than sorry.

The wolf in front of me stretches and shakes, his teeth bared in imitation of a smile. He doesn't say anything, the kind and boyish atmosphere around him is gone. Instead, every one of his movements feels dangerous, like that of a predator, and his golden eyes take on a vicious glow.

I can already feel my heart pumping madly, so I better calm down so that I don't hurt him too much. We still don't know if our disciples can die here, and I promised not to hurt him. I know there are even more people than Group 4 watching. Some of them are curious, and others are bored and hoping for an exciting fight.

At this point, there is no sense in hiding anything. Of course, I fully intend to hold back, I don't want to hurt him after all, but I don't exactly need to hide my abilities either.

The first to attack is the black wolf. One moment he stands there, a towering giant. In the next, his body shrinks to half of his original size. Though it's still massive.

His maw snaps shut around the space I formerly occupied where I stood and he charges me again, moving so quickly just with the sheer power of his stats.

I dodge again, black mana seeping into my body from the orb I created inside, and I match his speed, dodging at first. Both of us poking at each other.

He slashes with his paw, a trail of mana left behind. He snaps his maw shut, sending a small shockwave through the air. I shoot a mana projectile at him, and he dodges. He senses a concentrated blast of kinetic energy, dodging it as well. Nimbly moving on his legs, he keeps his golden eyes on me, his speed increasing while his body continues to shrink, and I barely avoid him. Both of us waiting for the other one to use any other skill so the fight starts properly.

I see amusement in his eyes as I let [Mana Crown] form over my head so I can flood my body with more black mana from inside.

His amusement quickly disappears when armor surrounds my body and becomes denser and bigger, creating a mana mech-like creation.

[Redistribution] holds him down for a moment, and the massive arm of my mana mech grabs his now smaller body.

There is no childish scream or complaint anymore; instead, he shows me all of his teeth, terrifying fangs showing in their full beauty.

Through my Mana Wavelength Iris, I see his mana swirl, and his body starts returning to its original size.

But with it, my mana mech grows as well. My crown keeps all the mana I'm releasing under my control, as well as thanks to my [Mana Domain] and [Mana Manipulation] helping me control it. The armor surrounding me grows at the same speed the wolf grows, gradually turning into a lighter shade of blue until I use [Redistribution] and [Infusion] to transfer a huge amount of mana to it.

The wolf is now the same size he was before and a bit more, and my armor equals his size, dark blue mana surrounding me.

Finally, he gets away from my hand and jumps back, the ground exploding under his feet as he lowers his body and then charges at me.

From Vortex Core, I take the kinetic energy I was compressing there and use it to help me move the mana armor surrounding me, and we clash against each other.

Instead of a clash of wit and attempts to take each other down smartly, it turns into a brawl of two stubborn individuals.

Chapter 369: Hide it from others

Moving the huge suit of armor takes time, but it's fun, and I had already decided that I would need to practice against an opponent like this. The ones I wouldn't be able to damage with ranged attacks and would need to engage at close quarters.

The wolf bites into my side, and my arms move, grabbing him around his neck. But there's another factor at play. There's some kind of weird field around his body that disrupts and absorbs mana anywhere it comes into contact with him.

It isn't quick nor is it all that strong; rather, its effects manifest as a gradual and unstoppable pull. It continues even as I tighten my hold on my mana by expanding my domain and adding my crown to the mix.

Just like that, it eats my mana. Not unlike Savant's penchant for absorbing attacks to store for later use, but the wolf seems to be... eating and transforming it? It's not even like what Noodle's been doing and I can't really grasp the difference.

My leg moves, and I slam my knee into his head before letting go, causing the giant beast to stumble back and shake his head. I follow through immediately, closing the distance while keeping an eye on my mana reserves.

Once again, the wolf fails to dodge and lets me slam into him, his teeth burying into the mana of my mech and tearing out chunks that I have to reform at an exorbitant mana cost.

As a reward, I punch him in the head, getting a growl from him before punching him again.

He jumps back, mana surrounding his body, preparing to activate some kind of skill. As he does, I turn and tear a few trees from the ground complete with roots, and throw them at the wolf. Each one hits, dirt pouring from the roots.

Boosting my armor with what remains in my Vortex Core, I charge him again, each step shaking the earth.

Like a horror existing only to consume everything.

The giant maw is about to snap around the entirety of my armor in a single bite when I let go of it, ejecting myself from the wolf while taking as much mana and kinetic energy as possible with me.

Reduced to my original size, I crash into the ground and watch as that giant maw gulps down what remains of my armor and the black wolf returns to normal. Almost normal anyway, he's still enveloped in that same eerie mana.

A deep growl reverberates through the clearing, almost like a laugh, as the black wolf licks his chops. His eyes narrowed in a cruel expression, full of ill intentions as he takes a step towards me.

I float into the air to meet him, my body rising to the height of his head.

His maw is open, fangs bared, body lowered into a predatorial crouch, and he keeps his steps soft as if he were stalking unsuspecting prey. The golden eyes are squinted into a dangerous expression.

For a moment, we face each other down, and then with a deep growl, he bites at me.

Black mana seeps into my body, much more intensely than before, and the crown over my head shines brighter. I use [Redistribution], and the black wolf halts his movement, maw open ready to strike, yet the giant body fails to move.

I convert more of my mana into its black variant, making use of [Focus], [Mana Manipulation], and [Redistribution]

There was a time, not so long ago, that the amount of kinetic energy flowing through my body would have been enough to disintegrate me on the spot, and yet now it's doable. I make that kinetic energy my own, change its frequency, and release it all in a single powerful blast that sends the wolf's huge body flying.

The wolf crashes to the ground, rolls a few times, and bulldozes through the forest, bowling over dozens of trees.

Before he can stand up, I'm there, floating over him and grasping him once again, holding him in place despite his struggles.

Finding himself unable to move anything but his mana, tendrils as black as his fur extends from his body, their length extending multiple times beyond that of the wolf's body. They swirl around, destroying the ground and the trees before they thrust towards me.

I create a black orb in front of myself, absorbing the mana constructs rushing towards me with ease. It pulls it at the moment they enter its range, devouring the black tendrils, sucking them in, and growing more powerful in the process.

(That mana!) His voice rumbles in my head, for the first time since the battle started.

Once again, the field around the wolf changes, eating away at the mana I'm using to power my [Redistribution], as he attempts to escape my hold. Before he can do that, I reach out to the black orb that absorbed his attacks and touch it, forcing it to elongate into the form of a javelin twice my height.

Just as the wolf is about to escape, the javelin made of black mana embeds itself deep within his hind leg.

He attempts to turn his head to pull it free, but he freezes mid-movement, and his eyes shift back to me.

There I float in front of his head, a tricolored orb floating over the palm of my hand. Filled with my mana, ready to explode. Just a little push is all it needs.

I watch as he growls, his teeth snapping right in front of me out of anger, all while the black javelin devours his mana faster and faster.

"Do you know anything about that mana?" I ask him, gesturing at the javelin sprouting from his leg.

I can't help but find his expression amusing, so I reach out and boop his nose which, now that I look, is almost bigger than me. After reabsorbing the mana from the tricolored orb I fly over to the javelin and pull it free while boosting my body.

Right away, it starts trying to devour my mana, and though it once again fries my brain, killing me in the process, I manage to pull it under my control. It seems like I've grown careless within the common area, and the tournament as a whole. It also absorbed a lot more of the wolf's mana than I thought.

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

Well, it's not really a problem; I wouldn't have even died if I hadn't lost my concentration.

When I fly over to the black wolf and show him the javelin, he stays quiet.

"Is it some kind of secret?"

He growls, (I don't know how much I should tell, so I'd rather stay quiet.)

"Is it rare?" I wave the javelin, which is growing more annoying by the second as it threatens to subvert my control.

(Extremely rare, human. You shouldn't have it. Hide it from others.)

"I was already told to hide my eyes and my primordial energies. It's annoying. What now? Do you mean to tell me that I can't make use of any of my abilities?"

Following my lead, his mana calms down, and he settles into a less aggressive stance, as his eyes regain their usual shine.

(This is different from traits, primordial energies, or even bearing powerful passive and active skills, human. People might want someone with a powerful trait to try to steal it or breed with you in hopes of securing it for their own lineage.)

W-what?!

He takes a moment to sniff at the black javelin, (Primordial energies are also rare, and their holders can be kidnapped to learn from them or for the purpose of experimentation on bodies capable of containing primordial energies. Sometimes they are enslaved. But none of that really matters human. No matter what you do, there will always be more beings lusting for power. It doesn't matter if it's a skill, a passive, mind control, healing, primordial energies, or a powerful trait.)

The black wolf then pulls away from the black javelin and looks at me instead, (I've never seen it with my own eyes, but even still I've heard about it. There have only been four beings in the last few millennia that have possessed it. Each of them...)

The rest of the words get censored to my surprise, and the wolf notices it as well.

This is unexpected. I could understand information on Pairing and the First Generation being censored as they are about the system, but this? Did the Ruler's intent interfere again? Was it the Ruler of Greed or is this somehow connected to information the system doesn't think I should have access to? Another thing to add to the ever-growing list of mysteries.

"You held back during the fight, why?"

(Human, don't make me call you stupid again. You and your group belong to my master's pack. And unlike my master, I'm not as good at controlling my primordial energy, so I didn't want to hurt you. And you held back for the same reasons. I can see that crazed look in your eyes when you fight, I can smell it pour off of you, and see it in your movements. You and that little demon are the same.)

"I will have to take that as a compliment."

(Do as you wish, asshole human! We will fight the next time we meet. But for now, I need to receive feedback from my master and his teachings. I don't have much time left here.)

His wound has already begun to close, as he walks back through the wreckage of what was once part of the forest.

Now that he's no longer surrounded by that eerie primordial energy, he once again feels like a bratty young boy. A giant bratty young boy with fangs as long as I am tall, yup.

Well, it was a nice warm-up, but it doesn't feel satisfying, so I just have to pin my hopes on the two remaining events. The Duels and the Chronicle of the Past, whatever that means.

Sitting on the terrace of our house, I'm taking a moment to enjoy the soft breeze in my hair and the sweetly scented air, it smells like summer. As I have many times before, I take a deep breath in and take a sip from a bottle of sugary soda from Earth that I bought for two uncommon items. I even used my skill to absorb its thermal energy, thus chilling it to just the right temperature.

Off to the side, Izzy is showing Noodle to Vega, the kind pyromaniac girl still trying to make friends.

Biscuit floats in the air in front of his disciple and dispenses his wisdom to the giant wolf.

Between them and the other members of Group 4, there aren't many people around. They're all engrossed in cooking meat on the fire, talking, sparring, and practicing their skills.

There were some complaints after my light spar with wolfy. A few dozen people from Easy difficulty lost consciousness. Again. At this point, I can't help but be reminded of those fainting goats I once saw on TV.

Some people even complained, but it's not like anyone asked them to watch. At least most of them were smart enough to stay quiet. Channeler said that sooner or later people might start screaming and running away or kneeling in worship at the sight of me. I deeply despise either option.

Wanting to change my thoughts, I look at Tess who has taken the opportunity to steal my other can of soda and is now sipping on it, just opposite me. She, more than anyone, seems to be enjoying this, even though all she's doing is sitting to the side and watching everyone have fun.

I guess a big part of all of this is thanks to her. I don't think Group 4 would be as close as we are otherwise.

Tess Hansen is slightly taller than me. Her blonde hair now ends just below her shoulders, once again she's gotten a new haircut. Her gray eyes are calm, but her face freely displays her emotions. She is only 20 years old, two years younger than me. Yet she did all of this.

And it's not like I can ignore it. Even the duplicate's last wish was a request for me to let them in and accept them as my friends, not to mention the apology I owe my mother. I do not take these words lightly, so even though I'm not fully feeling it, I am willing to accept the fact that the duplicate, knowing he would die, knew best the kinds of regrets I would have.

"I'm sorry."

Tess turns to me, for a moment confused, but she quickly comes to understand. She examines me and I let her by returning her gaze.

"Apology not accepted," she says with a soft smile.

"I see." It's the obvious result. If I was in her place, I can only think that my choice would be the same.

"Was this how you meant to apologize?" Tess asks.

"No. At first, I wanted to give you some items. Maybe make a weapon for you, a few epic javelins. Or I could buy anything you want from the shop with my shards."

"So why did you change your mind?" She asks, propping up her chin with her hands as she stares at me.

"For a while, I thought that giving you something of value would make it easier. Like I'd be paying you back. To show my intentions and willingness to sacrifice my own possessions to make amends."

She nods, "That sounds like you, but you didn't do it in the end."

"No. I did not. I thought you would prefer an honest apology to being bought off."

"You are right," she agrees.

"But you rejected it."

"I rejected it because I don't think you fully mean it yet. I can see a hint of true honesty, but you're not quite there yet." She leans back in the chair and takes a sip, enjoying the taste of the sugary soda in her mouth. "It's close, but there's still a little bit missing."

"Got it."

"So just this once I'm going to be petty, Nat. I'm going to let you apologize to me a few times. I will let you feel the full breadth of these confusing emotions and I will have fun while doing so. Watching you squirm, so close to understanding but not quite there."

"That sounds like fun."

"For me, for sure. For you, it will be a bit worse." Her smile shows her teeth.

Well, it's not like I don't understand. Nothing is ever that simple. But I will stay the course my duplicate has set for me until I understand things properly.

Chapter 370: Cruelty in you

Just a few minutes remain until the black wolf returns home. Biscuit's token only afforded them 12 hours, rather than the 24 granted by mine. However, in that time we did manage to get some information out of him and he got to continue his training with Biscuit. Somehow.

It's still an interesting sight to see a burrito-shaped corgi floating in front of a giant wolf who quietly listens and nods along. I bet if he could, he would be taking notes. He has that much reverence for Biscuit.

The black wolf was about to die, then he was saved by the system and summoned to be Biscuit's disciple. Right away, he understood the majesty of the jerky addict Biscuit and his control over the primordial energy that they share. Even though his level is higher, just knowing that he was willing to learn from Biscuit and even revered him as his master shows quite a bit about his personality.

At the start of his visit, he complained and growled at us a lot, but towards the end, he closed his eyes as Vega and the other members of Group 4, gathered to pet him.

Obviously, he still complained about the wound to his dignity, but it's not like it changed anything.

There are even a few dozen photos in Izzy's smartphone gallery, mixed in with pictures of Vega and our group. The smartphone is being kept charged by solar panels running campsite chargers. That smartphone is now on the table nearby, playing cheerful J-pop. Tess's favorite.

It took a while for Vega to get used to our style of sorcery, but now I notice her humming along with the phone when she thinks no one's watching.

While others wait in the clearing, I'm sitting off to the side, moving mana inside of my body. Compressing and decompressing it, testing the limits of my body when it comes to using black mana to power my skills. It's something I've been doing almost constantly here in the common area.

I'm sure I would make better progress training outside, with real danger, even so, it helps to know my limits.

And there are always more questions. Testing my eyes, my strengthened mana circuit.

[Redistribution - lvl 47 > Redistribution - lvl 48]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 44 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 45]

[Mana Domain - lvl 37 > Mana Domain - lvl 38]

[Mana Crown - lvl 21 > Mana Crown - lvl 22]

The process of leveling my skills has been going pretty well, and from what I've seen, I'm not the only one from Hell difficulty taking the opportunity to train, I'm not even the only person in Group 4.

Then there are those from Hard difficulty who seem like they want to move up to Hell. There aren't many of them, but I wouldn't be surprised if they use it after the tournament. Samuel is not one of these people, preferring to stay with his group and grow stronger as a unit.

Everyone is also using this opportunity to plan, and it might have been part of the intent behind the tournament. even the system told us to take the opportunity to speak with the other attendees, the First Generation of Earth.

The black wolf stands up and looks down at Vega, tapping on his front paw.

(Master is smart indeed, assholes, all of you,) he seemingly can't help but say.

But that's when Biscuit returns from the house, two purple tentacles holding a small bag which he places in front of the young black wolf after wobbling over on his short legs.

(Food.)

The curious black wolf creates two shadowy tendrils of his own and opens the bag. Inside, there are dozens of pieces of deer jerky. The ones I used to bribe Biscuit into letting me challenge the black wolf, and even more from the ones the corgi was saving up.

With his pink tongue lolling from his mouth, Biscuit's expression has all the charm of a cheeky smile.

(Master... I can't,)

(Food!) The corgi's tentacles move and slide the bag close to the wolf. his voice is firm.

In response, the black wolf lowers his head, dozens of times bigger than Biscuit. Biscuit floats into the air, lifts his front right paw, and boops his disciple's nose.

(Thank you, master.)

Only a few seconds remain.

"I will see you soon, Wolfy! Next time, I will be stronger and I'll make you my minion just like your master is a minion to my master!" Vega is smiling as she says so. "So get stronger so that I don't have to be ashamed of you!"

(Crazed half demon,) the wolf snorts.

"Thank you for all the help and for enduring it all. It was nice meeting you." Tess says, giving a small bow which the black wolf returns.

"Take care, wolfy!" Lily shouts.

"I hope you get even bigger! As big as a city!"

"But don't forget us! I'm going to brag about meeting you ." The twins shout, seizing the opportunity to toss in their two cents, as does the rest of the group.

Just before the wolf disappears through a door we can't see, his golden eyes find me sitting on the roof of our house.

(Asshole human, take care of my master. He is too nice for his own good as are some of the human members of your pack. You and I both know that mere strength is insufficient, sometimes you need to make hard decisions and be cruel.)

I nod.

(I saw that cruelty in you and it will help you. But, human, get stronger. Get someone to declare you a Champion candidate and find yourself a good master. You are powerful and prideful, I agree, but don't be too stubborn to receive guidance from those you deem worthy. Like I did.)

"I'll think about it," I whisper.

Afterward, he turns away and takes one last gentle look at Biscuit and nudges him carefully with his giant nose.

Stolen from its original source, this story is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Then the wolf disappears, returning to his world.

Isabella and Vega are watching as I craft an item. It's just a simple dagger with the simplest of inscriptions.

I even let them try it on their own while I offer them advice.

The results are terrible, but Isabella keeps jumping up excitedly when she does something correctly.

Vega gradually changes her bearing and manages a few genuine smiles. At least they feel more honest than before, even given the presence of another.

I watch as Vega attacks Tacita again, the mute girl appearing out of nowhere for another round of teasing my disciple.

Once again, Tacita takes a harsh stance, shaking her head every time Vega takes too long to complete a task.

Vega spends the next two hours being mentored by Tacita, who seems to have taken a liking to the daring girl and for some reason seems to be fascinated by her horns.

Each time Tacita touches her horns Vega attacks her all over again, growing more aggressive with each prod.

After some time, Tacita grows bored with the exercise and leaves after touching Vega's horns one last time.

In the living room, the twins and Min-Jae sit opposite Vega, taking a short break for some food.

When Min-Jae slides some sweets he hid toward her, Vega takes them shamelessly and quickly eats them as if she was worried he was going to take them

The young boy watches with a smile as she stuffs her cheeks while the twins make fun of her.

"You should thank him. Min-Jae was saving these sweets for himself," I tell her.

"Master almost never thanks anyone!"

The twins stop laughing when I look at them, and Min-Jae hides his smile.

As a reward, Vega gets an extremely sour candy from me.

I watch her face scrunch and her eyes squint. I'm sure she knows why it's happening, yet the little half-demon refuses to give up even on very sour food and still eats the candy.

"Can I take him with me?" Vega asks while holding Noodle, her hand moving across his scales, savoring the sensation.

"Noodle is mine!" Isabella shouts, indignant.

"You said you wanted to be friends? Aren't friends supposed to give each other gifts?" Vega asks innocently, but I can see her red eyes shine and the corner of her lips lift.

Even Isabella must feel her emotions.

"You... you!"

"I think you lied then." Vega hugs Noodle and continues to pet him.

The white snake with emerald eyes just looks at me almost as if he blames me for his current situation.

Sorry, bud.

"You feel strong, you just need a better heart," my minion says seriously.

"I already have a plan in place to make that happen. Nat, and I are going to work on some modifications. I experimented with the remains of a Fallen Hero's heart and learned more from a Champion's body, and Nat's heart," Lily declares with cheer.

"Tess, Nat is continuing to ruin poor Lily," Maya shouts in the direction of the living room loud enough to be heard from the kitchen, where we've set up shop.

"Lily's already a lost cause," Tess shouts back.

"You are probably the smartest of master's underlings! The gray smoke you showed me felt really strong. I'm sure it's a skill some powerful demon created long ago. If you get a powerful heart, you will be strong!"

"I'm already pretty strong."

"But your heart is weak," Vega says, confused.

(Nat, can you come here for a moment?) Tess sends through the link.

(Sure.)

Leaving Lily and the minion to argue, I head to the living room and then follow Tess outside, onto the terrace.

I strengthen the field around us that makes it impossible for others to listen, and both of us disconnect from the web.

“The murderer from Easy difficulty is gone,” she says seriously.

I quickly check the anchor I placed on him, and find the connection severed.

Right after, I check our surroundings and Vega, but I sense nothing. I repeat it a few times to the point that not even Tacita would be able to escape my senses, but there is nothing.

“He’s not here,” Tess shakes her head, “he left the tournament.”

“I thought it wasn’t possible to leave the tournament.”

“Yes, we thought the same thing. We even paid someone from Easy to try to leave as the tournament started and he couldn’t. But you should check the Community numbers, Nat.”

Something in her tone makes me do just that.

Easy difficulty:1319/2000

Normal difficulty: 862/1000

Hard difficulty:241/500

Hell difficulty:39/250

Beyond:7/10

Oh. That's interesting. Easy difficulty has one less attendee and Hell difficulty's gained one.

"It's possible that he got a reward from the tournament before he left, he did pretty well during previous events. Maybe it allowed him to enter Hell difficulty even though it was only possible to jump on a level higher or lower before."

"Or he had help from our nosy friend. It sounds like something the Intent would do."

"Yeah. That's an option." She says, nodding solemnly. "We wasted our opportunity to get rid of that man."

"That's not like you to be worried over some weak guy."

"I know, but you could say that I've grown paranoid. If the Intent that's been messing with this tutorial was willing to risk angering the Ruler of Greed and did that, he must have had something in mind. And I don't think it was anything good for us."

"Don't expect it to get any better," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"The Intent is here because of the guy who started in Beyond. The Intent is probably a fragment of a Ruler, and the Rulers have a bit of sway over the tutorial even though it seems like Ruler of Greed has primary control of our if not all tutorials. I wouldn't be surprised if some of the other Rulers come crawling out of the woodwork to watch the guy and mess with us in the process."

Tess sighs, "That's just great."

"There's nothing we can do about it. We will deal with it when we come to it. Just make sure the others are training as hard as possible when they're in the common area. If we can get stronger, we will have more leeway."

"They're already doing so much, Nat. Sophie weakened some of their memories so they can continue to train and die. I know, I know. Don't look at me like that. Not everyone can handle dying here as well as you do. But we will be ready when the 6th Floor comes. But I need to ask you once again to keep your distance so they can face real danger and improve on their own."

"Sounds good. Gather the others so they can say goodbye to Vega and I'll take her to Miwa and Channeler. After that, Vega is going to leave"

I've only got a few more hours with my minion, and after that, it's two more days of the tournament. Then it's back to the Astral Prison.