

My Infinite Mana System

Chapter 51: The Base? (1) - My Infinite Mana System

A sleek, black car glided smoothly along the rain-slicked road, its tinted windows shielding the occupants from the outside world.

Inside, the atmosphere was thick with a tense, almost oppressive silence.

In the front passenger seat, a young woman with dark blue hair sat with her eyes closed, her face a mask of calm detachment.

Her hair, cascading in silky waves, framed a sharp, flawless face.

Beneath her closed lids were piercing blue eyes, eyes that, when open, seemed to miss nothing.

She wore a fitted dark suit, its crisp lines accentuating her poised and commanding presence.

Beside her, gripping the steering wheel with steady hands, was a young man dressed in a matching suit, his face partially hidden behind dark, reflective glasses.

He stole a cautious glance at the woman, the faint hum of the engine the only sound between them.

Then, without warning, the woman opened her eyes, cold, blue, and unreadable.

Her gaze remained fixed on the rain-speckled windshield, yet her voice cut through the silence like a knife.

"The energy and force coming from that portal... it's insane," she said, her tone low and authoritative, carrying a weight that demanded attention. "Just like how I saw it last."

The young man beside her, Oliver, shifted slightly, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel.

For a moment, he considered her words, a faint frown tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"So it was true, Boss?" he ventured, his voice steady but laced with curiosity. "I heard from the organization that you've seen many of these in other... Fruits of Narrative, you never told me. But honestly, I thought they were wrong. This has never happened before, not here."

Larisa's lips curled into a faint, almost imperceptible smile, though it held no warmth.

Slowly, she turned her head, her piercing blue gaze settling on him.

"Hmm... It seems you underestimated me, Oliver," she said, her tone carrying a quiet, almost amused disdain. "How do you think someone like me has not seen something like that?"

She leaned back slightly, her gaze returning to the window, watching the rain trace chaotic patterns across the glass.

"Yes, I have seen them, it is simply called 'The Base'," she continued, her voice calm but serious. "It doesn't happen that often, but when it do... it's never anything trivial. The fact that it's happening here is a serious case."

Oliver remained silent, his focus shifting back to the road.

Yet his mind raced, questions swirling within him.

'Just how many Fruits of Narrative had she pass through?'

'Just how many of these Base Portal has she encounterd?'

'She never told me about all of this amazing stuffs'

But he didn't ask.

Not now.

Not with that slight frown on her face, the one that showed her focus she had.

"In short, i have passed through countless of Fruit of Narrative, I am not new to doing that since it is literally my job, saying the number won't make any difference but if you want I can tell you," Larisa said pausing briefly, while turning her gaze towards his direction. "And about the Base Portal, I have encountered three hundred and twenty five of it, this would make it three hundred and twenty six, since they rearly appears that's why the numbers are not that much, but it is not all I went to, I had other jobs to attend to at those times, so other people handled that."

Oliver was slightly surprised by how she knew the specific number of portals and fruits she went to even tho there were many, but he wasn't to surprised because...

Larisa simply has all knowledge, she knows everything.

Oliver nodded slowly and didn't ask any other question.

It started raining, it relentless dance against the windshield, streaking across the glass like a thousand tiny rivers.

The car hummed quietly as it navigated the slick, winding road, the distant glow of the city reduced to a faint shimmer on the horizon.

Oliver's grip on the steering wheel was steady, as he glanced at Larisa, who sat beside him, her blue eyes calm, almost cold, as she stared out the window.

Silence hung between them, thick, but not uncomfortable.

Not for her, at least.

Unable to suppress his curiosity any longer, he spoke, his tone careful yet direct.

"Uh, can you... tell me some information about the Base? Well i mean, if it's something you can disclose."

For a moment, there was no response.

Then Larisa turned slightly, her gaze shifting to him.

"Ah I remember, you really don't know about this," she said, her voice even, almost indifferent. "Well... sure, It isn't something secret. I have informed the higher-ups and some other people about it, so it is fine telling you."

She paused, gathering her thoughts, and then continued, her tone carrying a calm, almost clinical precision.

"The Base... it is a paradoxical anomaly, an existence beyond all hierarchies, beyond all definitions. It doesn't merely exist within reality or outside it. It is an anti-state, a glitch in the fabric of all creation and non-creation, and even beyond creation itself, even we who are outside of creation, destruction, and fiction."

Oliver's jaw tightened slightly as he listened, his eyes flicking between the road and her calm, composed expression.

"When the Base manifests, it doesn't act like a force or a phenomenon. It's not a presence, it's an overwrite," Larisa continued. "It imposes itself on reality, rewriting everything with its own rules. All things caught within it are reduced to their Base Form, a primordial, incomplete template that predates existence."

She leaned back, her gaze returning to the rain-soaked world beyond the glass.

"This Base Form is the source code of reality, stripped of all complexity, meaning, and function. It is existence in its most bare, raw, and meaningless state."

"That... sounds like a literal menace. Like, literally," Oliver muttered, trying to keep his tone light, though the unease was clear beneath his words. "I doubt anyone can survive that. It looks like it doesn't matter your level of existence, if so, then even meta-omnipotent, abstract, and authors would surely be turned to plain... Base."

Larisa's lips curled slightly, something close to a smile, but it never reached her eyes.

"You're right. Even the strongest of beings, the highest of existences, are not exempt. Once caught in the Base, they are reduced to nothing but their most incomplete form. A high-level threat doesn't even begin to describe it." She said, "In short, the Base is existence's 'default.' It is a reminder that all complexity is temporary, a facade painted over emptiness."

Oliver let out a slow breath, his grip on the wheel tightening slightly.

"Then... is there even a way to counter it?"

"Well, it depends," Larisa said, her voice calm but sharp, "But no one has ever truly tried."

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Silence settled once more, only the rain's steady patter against the glass.

Oliver's fingers tightened on the steering wheel, his gaze fixed on the road ahead.

He hesitated, the words on the tip of his tongue, before finally speaking.

"So... if this is the Base, does that mean—"

"Yes," Larisa's voice cut through his words like a sharp blade, calm but decisive. "When it manifests, it creates a Schrödinger's Portal, a rift that is and isn't a portal at the same time."

Oliver's brow furrowed, but he didn't interrupt.

He knew better.

Larisa's words carried a weight that demanded his full attention.

"It has no fixed appearance," she continued, her tone measured, almost as though she were reciting a fact she had memorized countless times. "But to observers, it appears as a fractured void, a place where geometry contradicts itself. Angles that shouldn't exist, spaces that seem to both stretch and collapse."

An impossible wound in reality itself.

"Crossing it doesn't transport you," Larisa went on. "Instead, it unmakes your current state. You aren't teleported. You are broken down, reduced, and then reconstituted within the Base World."

He nodded slowly, trying to digest the implications.

His voice came out quiet, almost a whisper.

"So... even if you survive the crossing, you aren't the same."

"Precisely," Larisa confirmed, a faint chill in her voice. "And the environment within the portal is a reflection of the location where the rift opened, but reduced to its Base Form. Structures exist as wireframes, half-textured polygons, or flat planes floating in voidspace. Reality itself is stripped bare, no physics, no ability, no logic, no concept. A sword becomes a jagged, gray prism. A star is nothing more than a flat, white circle."

"So... everything is reduced to... a simplified state?" Oliver asked.

"Yes. And entities within it are not exempt. They too begin to degrade, reverting to their base forms," Larisa explained. "A high existence would become a stick figure, a mere sketch of its true self. A thought becomes a static hum, without meaning or coherence. Even abstract concepts degenerate. Cause and effect become fractured, meaning itself unravels."

"It's... a remodeling," he whispered. "A remodeling of everything."

Larisa nodded, though her gaze never left the rain-streaked window.

"A glimpse of existence stripped of all meaning. A reminder that beneath all our grand concepts and structures, we are nothing but empty shapes, placeholders without purpose."

Oliver didn't respond, his eyes fixed on the road.

The rain had eased into a gentle drizzle, a soft mist clinging to the windshield as the car glided along the winding road.

Oliver's eyes remained fixed on the road, his grip on the steering wheel tightened slightly before he finally spoke.

"Are those the only effects that happen when you enter?" he asked, his voice quieter than usual, almost hesitant.

Larisa, who had been staring out the rain-speckled window, turned slightly, her sharp, blue eyes catching his reflection in the glass.

"No," she replied, her tone steady, calm, almost clinical. "It's not just the environment or the entities that degrade. Powers and abilities are also affected. They dissolve into inert 'base' versions of themselves."

Oliver's brow furrowed, and his grip on the wheel tightened.

"What do you mean by 'base versions'?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Larisa explained, leaning back slightly, her gaze returning to the misty world outside. "Fire becomes nothing more than a faint warmth. Teleportation is reduced to a brief, involuntary twitch of your body. Strength beyond normal becomes a slight tensing of your muscles. Speed becomes a slight flicker."

She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in before continuing.

"Your body, your mind, your narrative, your very existence, lose definition. You begin to degrade. At first, you become a crude, low-polygon 3D model, a hollow, simplified version of yourself. Then you flatten into a 2D sketch, a faded outline without depth. Finally, you are reduced to a single point of data, an abstract concept with no meaning."

Oliver nodded, his eyes never left the road, but his thoughts were a storm.

"So... everything becomes nothing," he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes," Larisa confirmed, her voice devoid of emotion, as though she were describing a distant, unchangeable truth. "Everything becomes nothing."

"Can't you just... leave?" he asked, his voice louder now, almost forceful. "I mean, when you enter and notice something's wrong, can't you just turn back? Everyone with any sense would notice something's wrong and—"

"No," Larisa interrupted, her tone sharp, but not angry, just final. "The portal closes behind you. Once you enter, there is no exit. No way back."

Oliver's jaw clenched.

"So you're trapped? Forever?"

Larisa sighed, a faint, almost weary sound escaping her lips.

"There is one escape... but it is not something anyone would call simple. The only way out is through the Quest of Completion."

"Quest of Completion?" Oliver echoed, confusion clear in his voice.

"A task assigned by the Base World itself," Larisa explained. "A goal that must be achieved for you to escape."

The road stretched ahead of them, a winding, mist-shrouded path leading towards the train.

The rain outside had all but vanished, leaving behind a mist that clung to the world like a thin veil.

The car's headlights cut through the fog, their pale glow stretching into the murky distance.

"What quest?" he asked, his voice strained, almost desperate.

Larisa's gaze remained steady, her blue eyes calm, but there was a certain weight to them, an intensity that seemed to cut through the misty darkness beyond the glass.

"First," she began, her tone clear and measured, "you must find the Ball of Colour."

"The... Ball of Colour?" Oliver echoed, his brows knitting together.

"Yes," Larisa confirmed. "It is a glowing orb hidden somewhere in the Base World, a place stripped of all meaning and form. The Ball is the only object with 'potential', an object that can add but cannot remove."

"Add but not remove..." Oliver whispered, trying to wrap his mind around the concept.

"Exactly," Larisa continued, her voice unwavering. "Once you have it, the second part begins, Paint the Base."

"Paint the Base?" Oliver said.

"Yes. You must use the Ball to 'color' the world back into coherence," Larisa explained, her tone methodical. "Every stroke, every touch must align perfectly with the unwritten blueprint of the original location. You must restore the world as it was."

Oliver's heart pounded faster. "But how... how do you even know what the original location looked like? What if you get it wrong?"

"Mistakes trigger a Reset," Larisa answered without hesitation. "Miscolored walls, misaligned geometry, any deviation causes the Ball to vanish, and the world reloads in its Base state."

"Reset..." Oliver's voice was barely a whisper. "So you start over?"

"Yes. Everything is undone, and you are forced to begin again," Larisa explained. "But each Reset wears on you. Your form continues to degrade. Your mind begins to fracture. You lose your sense of self. You become part of the Base World, an incomplete fragment."

Oliver's throat felt dry, his mouth opening and closing without words.

Finally, he managed to speak.

"And if... if you succeed?"

"If you succeed," Larisa said, a faint trace of something like hope touching her voice, "the world is restored to its true form. Reality reasserts itself, and a exit opens."

This was real.

All of it.

"This... this is insane," he whispered, his voice trembling. "Who... who could even complete something like that?"

"Some can," Larisa replied calmly. "Some still survive to tell about it."

The mist outside seemed thicker now, the headlights cutting through it like blades, but revealing nothing beyond a shroud of gray.

The mist outside had thickened, turning the world beyond the car's windows into a swirling sea of pale gray.

The headlights carved a narrow path through the fog, but it felt as though they were driving through an endless void.

Inside the car, silence lingered, tense and heavy.

Oliver's fingers drummed against the steering wheel, a nervous, restless rhythm.

His gaze was fixed on the road, but his thoughts were a tangled mess.

For a brief moment, he hesitated, the words forming in his mind, before he finally spoke.

"Don't you think..." he began, his voice almost hesitant, "that some people could survive and escape it? Like... maybe it depends on their ability or some existence? I mean, if someone is powerful enough they can escape"

"It depends," Larisa interrupted, her voice calm but absolute, cutting through his words like a blade.

Her gaze remained steady, a cold certainty in her blue eyes.

"But not even omnipotent beings can brute-force the Quest. The Base World doesn't care for power, strength, or even knowledge, you can only use your knowledge for completing the quest."

Oliver's hands tightened on the wheel.

"But... Why it depends? How is that even possible? I thought you said the Ball of Colour is the key."

"Exactly, The Ball of Colour is the only key to leave the base, but there are some abilities that can help you leave the base, and some to survive, well it all depends on how high your ability scale and function, and it is very rare, so rare not everyone has those type of ability" Larisa explained, her tone measured.

"As for most powers, it means nothing there," Larisa continued, her voice firm, but not unkind. "The Base World strips you of all that defines you. It all becomes hollow. Completing the Quest requires surrendering to the Base World's rules, not defying them, and you have to do everything in there fast."

"That's... that's terrifying." Oliver said.

"Yeah," Larisa agreed, her voice quieter now, almost a whisper. "It is."

Silence fell once more, heavy and suffocating.

Outside, the mist twisted and swirled, a ghostly ocean that seemed to close in around them.

The Base, a place where even the greatest beings were reduced to nothing.

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The mist still clung to the windows, ghosting across the glass in slow drifts as if time itself had slowed.

The long stretch of road ahead seemed endless, swallowed by fog and silence.

After all the harrowing discussion about the Base, Oliver found himself unusually quiet, his mind swirling with the disturbing details Larisa had laid bare.

No matter how calmly she explained it, the nature of the Base unsettled him.

It wasn't fear that settled in his chest, it was awe, and a quiet, dawning pity.

The Base, for all its predictable patterns, was no less dangerous for being understood.

Its function didn't change.

Its rules were unyielding.

And yet, knowledge was only one piece of the puzzle.

Once inside, survival was a thread barely hanging.

Those who entered without knowing, without the strength or clarity to face it, were doomed to unravel.

Oliver wasn't scared for himself.

He was scared for the people who had no idea what they were walking into.

He sighed heavily, his breath fogging the glass for a moment.

"What we are going to enter is dangerous... the Base," he murmured.

Larisa didn't look at him.

Her eyes remained fixed on the road ahead.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "That's why we have to be careful. But... you don't have to worry too much about it."

There was something in her voice, soft, almost distant.

Before Oliver could respond, Larisa muttered something under her breath.

Too quiet for him to catch.

He tilted his head slightly.

"Because unfortunately, we aren't going to enter the base this time" Larisa muttered.

"What was that?"

She didn't answer.

'Don't worry?' Oliver thought, frowning a little. 'Maybe she said that because she has experience with it. That must be it. Makes sense. That's even the reason I have the courage to face all this in the first place.'

Beside him, Larisa glanced out the window, her expression unreadable.

'And I wanted to use the Base to teach him something,' she thought, slight sadness touching her otherwise stoic face.

The silence stretched until Oliver suddenly broke it again.

"Hey, boss," he said, turning slightly toward her. "I remembered you said even omnipotent and omnipresent beings would fall in the Base... wouldn't omniscient beings fall too?"

Larisa's lips curled into a faint, mysterious smile.

"Yes. They will," she replied simply.

Oliver blinked.

The simplicity of her answer hit him like a truck.

That short, calm reply sent a shiver through his spine.

He stared at her for a moment, trying to process the implications.

"Bu... But aren't you omniscient?" he asked, his voice cracking slightly.

Larisa didn't even blink.

"Hmm... no, I'm not."

There was a long pause.

Oliver's eyes widened, his face going slack.

"Eh?" he said, the sound barely escaping his lips.

He turned his eyes forward again, jaw slightly slack, thoughts scrambling in every direction.

'I'm... cooked,' he thought.

Then his eyes slowly widened even further.

'No. We are cooked.'

The mist was beginning to thin, letting in glimpses of the world beyond the windshield, but the air inside the car remained thick with unease.

Oliver had asked a simple question, one rooted in curiosity, but what followed was like a gun shot to him.

He felt like his blood pressure increased from hearing that.

'She isn't omniscient? But...'

"I am just like omniscient," Larisa said after a pause. "But... let's say I don't really have an explanation that you'd understand. Even if I explain it, it would still fall under the same category as 'all-knowing.' So yes, in short, I am just all-knowing."

She paused then, eyes flicking toward him to make sure the words had time to settle.

Oliver didn't speak, he only stared ahead, slowly blinking, trying to make sense of what she'd just admitted.

"There are some existence," Larisa continued, "That can bypass and overpower omniscience."

That pulled Oliver's attention fully back to her.

She didn't raise her voice.

She never did.

But the words carried weight, a sharp, strange gravity.

"Take the Sixth Orc Lord, for example. He's an entity who can tame anything, everything, and all things. Even that which aren't a 'concept', or that are simply 'beyond concept.'"

She leaned slightly against the car door, her expression unreadable.

"He tamed and destroyed his true name, causing it to be in a state of 'not.' Then he tamed it in that state of 'not,' turning it into 'absolute not.' And then he tamed it again. And again. And again... until he was bored. But even omniscience and existences who claim to be beyond that level of knowing... couldn't know what it was. Not even now."

Oliver opened his mouth, but no words came.

Then finally, almost mechanically, he asked.

"Does that mean you know it?"

Larisa looked at him briefly.

"Yes. I do know it."

Another pause.

"But his true name is useless," she said, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "It doesn't make anything happen. Me knowing it means nothing because there's nothing I can do with it."

Then her tone darkened just slightly, the weight of caution rising in her words.

"And no, I can't tell you his true name. It's for your own good. The moment I tell you, consider yourself tamed... or dead. Or probably even both."

Oliver's eyes widened.

"But well... if you do die, I'll 'probably' do my best to speed up your return. Since no one in the Fruit of Narrative can truly die, due to our Jenka, we just enter eternal slumber. Eventually, we decide whether to return or reincarnate or any other option we like. So yes. But still, I can't tell you. You'd be like me. Hunted. Every single time he gets the chance."

There was silence again.

A long one.

"No... no need," Oliver said quickly, raising both hands as if to physically ward off the concept. "I didn't want to know in the first place. It's not my business anyway."

Larisa didn't smile, but a faint trace of amusement tugged at the corner of her lips.

Oliver sank deeper into his seat, eyes forward, and muttered under his breath.

"Definitely not my business."

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The mist continued to swirl along the edges of the road, framing the world in a hazy cocoon of gray.

Inside the car, the conversation had taken on a heavier tone, dipping into dangerous existence, examples... And unlimited teasing.

Larisa rested her elbow on the edge of the window, her fingers thoughtfully tapping the side of her arm as her voice fell into a more pensive cadence.

"*Sigh*... What am I even saying," she muttered under her breath. "He attacks anyone, that's the truth. But he doesn't do it without reason or gain. The Sixth Orc Lord is dangerous. Cunning. The moment he sets his eyes on you, expect no peace. He thrives on chaos, always calculating, always scheming."

She glanced at Oliver briefly.

"In short, he's absolute trouble. A walking anomaly who tests everyone he meets. Literally almost everyone is after him. But thanks to his cunning skills while also using his tame, and his ability to come back, which is literally unstoppable, he keeps escaping."

Oliver leaned forward slightly.

"So... he's not evil?"

"Neither good nor bad," Larisa answered. "Just neutral. Sometimes he's helpful. Most times... he's a catastrophe in motion."

Oliver tilted his head, eyes narrowing.

"Come back? How? You said he always escapes."

Larisa gave a faint nod, her tone cool and precise.

"The Sixth Orc Lord possesses an ability called *Rewind*. It's not just a temporal skill, it's a self-sustaining power that exists beyond all concepts of existence, nonexistence, and even absolute finality. It ensures he can never truly reach an end, no matter how absolute, irreversible, or greater absolute that end may be."

Oliver blinked slowly.

"Even... absolute ends?"

"Yes. Think of it like a video that reaches its final frame," Larisa said. "Only for an unseen hand to grab it and rewind it to the start, no matter how definitive that ending was supposed to be. That's what *Rewind* is. An endless return."

Oliver let that sink in, then slowly nodded, the enormity of that power pressing down on him.

Larisa straightened up slightly.

Her voice sharpened, drawing focus back to herself.

"Back to what I was saying earlier. In my case, if I fail, it's because I chose to. Not because I couldn't see it coming or didn't have the ability to stop it. If something dangerous happens, and I didn't say anything... it's because I wanted it to happen."

Oliver's head turned sharply toward her.

"Sometimes I allow things to unfold just because I want to see the outcome play out," she added with chilling calm. "But outside of that... I've faced and defeated entities that surpass even omniscience."

She paused again, letting her next words hit with full weight.

"I know what they'll do before they even consider doing it. Before the thought even touches their mind. I know how to counter it. I know every effect, every consequence, every angle. I know their strengths, their weaknesses. I've copied every ability, that's the ones that can be copied, and I've recreated those that cannot."

Her voice didn't waver.

She wasn't boasting.

She was stating fact.

"If I can't win a fight, I know a thousand ways to still win it, or ensure it doesn't benefit anyone. And if it comes down to escaping, even from an inescapable scenario, I know the paths and ways."

Oliver sat silently, unsure if he was supposed to feel reassured... or terrified.

"If someone tries to bypass me," Larisa concluded, "I know how, I know when, I know why. I just... know everything."

The car rolled forward through the fog, and Oliver found himself drawing a quiet breath.

He believed her.

Every word.

The mist had started to thin, but inside the vehicle, the atmosphere only seemed to grow denser with every passing minute.

The headlights sliced through the fog like twin blades, yet even with the road visible ahead, Oliver felt as though they were suspended in a realm far removed from normalcy.

He leaned slightly forward, his eyes squinting in thought, then glanced sideways at Larisa.

"But aren't there some people who can block, negate, or nullify... well, literally anything to it?" he asked, the question hanging with a hint of both curiosity and disbelief.

Larisa's eyes didn't shift.

Her voice was flat and sure.

"Yes, there are. But it won't work."

Oliver blinked.

"Why?"

"Because it's me," she said, as if that alone answered everything. Then she elaborated. "And more importantly, it's not an ability or anything of such, it simply 'is'."

Oliver tilted his head, clearly confused.

Before he could ask, Larisa continued.

"Let's pretend, just hypothetically, that negative could affect my knowledge, which it can't, but we'll humor the idea. And when I say 'negative,' I mean anything negative, like harm, suppression, erasing, deleting, reversal, blocking, all fall under that umbrella. Before anyone even *thinks* of doing something 'negative' to me, or to what I know, I already know it. Which means I also already know what they would do, what they *can* do, and what they *will* do. And I either escape it, or I counter it."

Her voice was steady, not defensive, just an echo of certainty.

Oliver nodded slowly, absorbing her words like someone trying to catch water with bare hands.

"You did say earlier that if you didn't know something, you'd just recreate it."

"Exactly," Larisa affirmed. "That's because I possess the *Ash of Creation*."

She let the words hang for a second, letting their significance settle in.

"It allows me to create anything, existence, beings, concepts, powers, whatever I wish, without any form of restriction. So I can create a counter for anything."

Oliver exhaled a faint breath of wonder.

"Yeah... that makes sense."

Then a thought sparked in his mind, and he chuckled awkwardly.

"So... regarding your knowledge. You also know what I'm going to ask even before I think about saying it, right?"

Larisa glanced at him, her expression unreadable, and gave a subtle nod of confirmation.

Oliver stared out the window again, his voice dropping into a mutter.

"I feel like I'm not safe anymore."

Larisa didn't respond.

But somehow, the silence was answer enough.

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The hum of the car's engine was the only sound filling the silence between them.

Oliver leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, lips parting slowly as a thought came to him.

"But apart from that," he began, his tone casual, "That just reminded me. Did you hear about the Hunter Association's mana scaling machine? The one that had issues and was sent in for maintenance?"

Larisa's head shifted.

She turned slowly to look at him, her sharp blue eyes resting on his face without a word.

Her expression was unreadable, calm, yet strangely focused.

Oliver stared back, confused.

Her silence dragged on, like a puzzle he couldn't figure out.

"...What?" he asked, eyebrows lifting.

Still no reply.

Just the slight tilt of her head, almost curious... or maybe amused.

Then it clicked.

"...Ah, yeah. You already know that," Oliver muttered, a sheepish smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Larisa gave a small nod and turned her gaze back toward the road, the conversation seemingly over.

But then, unexpectedly, her voice broke the silence.

"You don't have to worry about saying things I already know," she said, her tone firm yet not unkind. "You can ask your questions or say what you want. Don't feel uncomfortable or go quiet just because I might already be aware of it. If I can answer, I will. And even if you think it's obvious to me, voicing it might still help you. Might give you new insight. That's not pointless."

Oliver blinked, surprised by the generosity in her words.

"Ah... thanks, boss," he said sincerely.

Encouraged, he leaned forward slightly, voice dropping in volume as if the topic itself warranted caution.

"I heard it wasn't a normal malfunction," he said. "Apparently, it was caused by someone. Or... rather, by an entity."

Larisa's gaze flicked sideways, and for once, she asked something he didn't expect.

"Which entity?" she said calmly.

That caught Oliver off-guard.

He glanced at her suspiciously.

'This feels weird. Really weird. She's asking... even though she already knows?' he thought to himself. 'My boss is such a good person. Acting like she doesn't know just so poor me can feel like I'm contributing something.'

Trying not to show the little grin that almost broke across his face, Oliver sat up straighter.

"I heard it was that guy you mentioned earlier..." he said. "The Sixth Orc Lord."

Larisa didn't respond right away.

The car cruised along the asphalt, the world outside cloaked in a veil of mist and muted light.

"So now he has downgraded to taming little things," Larisa said suddenly, voice quiet but sharp. "A machine?."

Her tone was clipped, almost dismissive, as if the chaos caused by such an act barely registered as significant.

Oliver blinked, caught off guard.

'Small things?' he thought. 'The Hunter Association's mana scaling machine? That's what she considers small?'

He gripped the steering wheel tighter, the absurdity of her words weighing in.

'That machine is crucial. It measures a hunter's mana capacity, it plays a huge part in how they're ranked. Without it, assessments get delayed. And if it's malfunctioning while in use, hunters with real potential might get inaccurately ranked... lower than they deserve.' he thought to himself.

The idea made his stomach twist.

'And that's just 'small' to her? If that's what she calls a small bad doing... how many terrible things has that guy done?'

He frowned, then spoke aloud, voice thoughtful but wary.

"But... why did he tame it? What does he want with something like that?"

As he spoke, he rested one hand on his chin, a reflexive gesture of focus.

The other remained on the wheel, steady and cautious.

Larisa didn't look at him.

Her eyes were distant, but a flicker of something passed across her face, a shadow of amusement, perhaps.

The corners of her mouth curved just barely, the smirk so subtle it could've been imagined.

"Who knows," she said coolly. "Figure it out."

Oliver narrowed his eyes.

Her answer was deliberate.

She *wanted* him to think this through.

"I think I'm starting to get it," he murmured. "I remember you said earlier that he doesn't do anything without a reason. Or a benefit."

Larisa glanced at him then.

Just briefly.

Her expression was unreadable, but her thoughts were steady.

'He's quick. That's one of the major reasons I picked him as my assistant. Even if he's not all-knowing like I am, his mind works fast. His intelligence is refined, sharp. With the right guidance, he'll catch up soon enough. Although he's still lacking in certain areas... but I'll teach him.'

"Yes," she replied simply.

Oliver nodded to himself, confidence growing in his tone.

"That means... him taming the machine wasn't just for fun. It wasn't boredom, or whim either. If it was out of boredom, he wouldn't have done it for a few hours and then stopped. He had a motive. A reason."

He paused, thinking aloud as much for himself as for her.

"It might've been revenge... or maybe a distraction so he could do something else while everyone was focused on the machine. Or maybe it was a warning. Or..."

His brows furrowed.

"Maybe... it was for someone."

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