

Vile 521

Chapter 521 Monster Drops

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"You done checking on those rewards that originally belonged to me?"

Katalina asked with scorn on her face after she saw Tuan walking toward her. The latter chuckled before responding.

"They were not meant to be much use to you anyway. Those weapons are suited to my element."

Tuan said and stood a few meters away from Katalina. The afternoon sun was upon them, which was directly hitting Tuan's eyes. So he used his hand like a canopy and started looking for a shade. The butcher soon found a ruined building that looked like it was some sort of infirmary in its prime. So he started walking towards the ruined infirmary before telling the female close combat expert to follow him.

"You don't follow Titus tournaments, do you? The drops are not fixed. They change as per the ranker's element and style"

Tuan raised his eyebrows before realization dawned on him. He had thought that Alephee announcing the ideal drop meant that the weapons were fixed. Alephee zeroed in on the type as per his needs and let the array used for drops handle the elemental part of the weapon.

"Anyway, what's done is done. You can keep those weapons. But you must also help me get the next drop if and when we find it."

Katalina flared her nose as she spoke. It was obvious from her speech and demeanour that she wouldn't take no for an answer. Tuan consulted with a voice in his head before nodding with a sigh. As if it was going to be such a troublesome job for him.

Katalina's mood improved when he received an affirmative nod from Tuan. Only then did she start taking her co-op with Tuan seriously.

"You don't look like it, but you are a reliable team player, aren't you?"

The female close combat sighed after she threw a rhetorical at Tuan. She continued speaking as she followed him.

"Since the battle is over, there would be no viewing angle. Those heavyweights must have started engaging with the monsters and mana beasts by now. When will we start our raids?"

Tuan didn't reply immediately. He kept on walking and reached the ruined infirmary. The butcher only spoke when he was sitting on the steps that led to the upper floor of the building.

"Katalina... Er... Can I call you Kat? I'll call you Kat."

Tuan said matter-of-factly as he retrieved another bottle of Frostfoam from his storage. He started drinking in the middle of the day. It was his way of celebrating the ownership of such exquisite weapons. Or more like, he was just finding an excuse to drink to curb his cravings for a smoke.

Tuan adjusted himself after drinking Frostfoam and carried on.

"Kat, we have seven days to go. We have barely entered into the finals. Why the rush? I can bet you all the Extols I have right now. This is because the top earners of the first day and the top earners of the fourth day would be different as a whole. And those top earners won't be the same on the seventh day either.

You know why that is, right?"

Tuan asked Kat and threw the glass at her. The latter caught it and looked at it dubiously. Then she stared at him for a brief moment before following his example.

She immediately felt the chill induced by the Frostfoam followed by her mana circuits getting stimulated. With a pleasant sensation coursing through her veins, she opened her mouth to respond.

"Rankers targeting the top rankers of course. I know what you are trying to say here. That earning significant Titus points from the first day is a liability. We would be targeted that much harder.

But we can't avoid earning points forever, Tuan. Have you looked at your drop? The top earners would be the ones who would be slaying more powerful monsters and mana beasts, which in turn would give bigger drops as rewards.

We'd be left behind if we stayed on the fence for too long, and other rankers would strengthen themselves with the drops. We can't slack because of this. We shouldn't."

Katherine said, and threw the Frostform back at Tuan. The latter nodded to show that he agreed with her before continuing.

"You are right. We can't slack around. So we won't. But we don't necessarily have to have more ambitious targets. If the drops are what you are worried about, I'm sure we can find them in the city if we just look hard enough."

Eren said and continued to drink. Katalina cursed him for not offering her another round in her mind before continuing.

"So what is your plan? Run around the city while the rest of the competitors are out, earning points and better drops?"

Kat shook her head in denial. She took a long breath and continued.

"Plus, the drops in the safe area and the drops in the hunting area would be completely different in terms of how rankers can use them. Maybe you got lucky with the drop just now. But the drops in the safe area generally pale in comparison to drops in the hunting area.

The drops here would only contain normal items like weapons, support artefacts and potions. But the drop in the hunting area might offer one-time use items in addition to normal items, effectively shifting power balance."

Tuan cursed his lips when he heard that. Frankly, he hadn't paid attention to the tournament's history. In his previous timeline he barely heard anything like this happening in the Nightshade duchy. So he informed Kat about it.

"Er... I am not aware of how the tournament usually unfolds. I guess the pattern would be the same every year even if the venue changed. So there are more advantages to staying active in the hunting area and collecting monster drops.

Can you tell me how much of an advantage we are talking about when we collect monster drops compared to staying here in the city and taking a safe approach?"

Chapter 522 Effects Of Total Control

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"Can you tell me how much of an advantage we are talking about when we collect monster drops compared to staying here in the city and taking a safe approach?"

Tuan asked with a hint of curiosity in his eyes. Katalina had come to realize that her raid partner had entered the tournament without knowing anything about it. In his defence, he was too busy clearing his hit-list and practising the fire-element spells to his utmost to care about the tournament's history.

Katalina wasn't aware of Tuan's struggles. In addition, she did not care or want to know. Still, for her benefit, she decided to be patient with Tuan and replied to him while remaining calm.

"Collecting monster drops has several advantages. For example, they might contain something like a one-time-use potion that significantly increases your strength, let's say twofold.

Obviously, there would be temporary repercussions for rankers using them. He won't be able to stack it or use it the second time without making those repercussions permanent.

But one-time use items like these are always handy to collect and keep handy in your storage. You never know when you will need them.

These items would act as competitors' trump cards when they are in a pinch. And we are all going to be in a pinch soon or later in these seven days. It's only a matter of when."

Katalina said and sighed.

Eren raised his eyebrows when understanding dawned on him. He realized how naive he was thinking he could use Alephee's help.

His initial goal was to collect multiple resources scattered as loots throughout the city to bolster his offensive and defensive capabilities, with Alephee's soul sense. The strategy made sense to him because he wasn't aware of the tournament's facets.

The competitors were forced to fight with the targets and each other from day one. After all, with an event like this, the organizers didn't want to have dull days that could affect their viewership and affect their daily gains.

Tuan didn't want to take the risks if he could avoid them. But he couldn't just sit around and let other competitors collect all the trump cards either.

"Hmm. I guess you are right. We do need to start earning Titus points and monster drops then. But first, let me get the feel of the hunting area and do some recon on my own.

These first two days, we would prioritize hunting and earning whatever we could find separately. This place looks like it could be our base. Let's meet here for two days and discuss our findings. How does that sound?"

Tuan asked Katalina and handed her Frostfoam finally. There was only a mouthful left in it. But she practically snatched it from him as soon as he raised his hand and responded.

"All right. And Tuan, let me tell you. Don't try to double-cross me or else..."

Katalina asked while trying to sound menacing right after taking the last sip of Frostfoam. But the chill induced by the booze was so strong that her voice was shaky as if she was shivering to her teeth. So her warning sounded funny to Tuan. He chuckled before responding to her threats that weren't threats to him.

"Hehehe. Relax, Katalina. I would only double-cross someone who is set to win the tournament. As I said at the start of this tournament, I'll do anything to win this farce I've put myself into to make it worth my time and effort.

Frankly speaking, you can't win this tournament."

Katalina was frozen in her tracks when she heard how blatant Tuan was in his speech. The latter spoke some more before she could react and argue with him. ? ? ? ? a ? ? ? e ?

"I'm not trying to question your abilities as a ranker but your mindset, Katalina. Take what happened between us for example. I guess you cared more about how your stance was going to look to the audience watching us from outside when I told you to back off.

After seeing how continued engagement with me was likely to harm you more, you came to a logical conclusion and made the right choice. Maybe it was a smart move. Maybe what you did was right for you.

Sort of like cutting your losses early and turning your misfortunes into fortunes right? But have you considered that maybe that's what I wanted you to believe with my aggression?"

The butcher asked and retrieved a potion he had in his storage. It was the same multi-purpose potion that Layla had given him, which he would drink when he was in a pinch. After drinking the concoction, Tuan was revitalized and he didn't need to put up a front anymore.

Tuan didn't show it but he was tired from showing such explosiveness in such a short time in his duel against Katalina. There was one more factor to his fatigue that Katalina had overlooked.

Total Control!

Tuan had been using this support-type time-element spell from the very beginning of his battle. What it did was simple. It would allow the time-element mana to be mixed with all his other elemental spells and delay or expedite their effects and casting times.

This was how he was able to overwhelm Katalina in such a short time. The spells he had performed against her and her contract beast were all strengthened by his time-element spells.

Total Control reduced his other elemental spells' casting times and limited their effects to be delivered within a short span, increasing their explosiveness and effectiveness.

Tuan's attainment in the fire element wasn't as profound as Katalina thought it was. His time-element magic gave her that impression. In that regard, Total Control was the butcher's most effective support type spell in his arsenal yet. It allowed him to gain full control of his spells and tap into all their potential.

But the spell also increased Tuan's mana expenditure. If it wasn't for the support potion he had drunk earlier before using Total Control, he would have shown signs of fatigue much earlier.

"You... you were faking it. You made it look like it was so simple to you. You.. you rascal..."

Katalina raised her finger and pointed at Tuan in an accusing manner. The latter chuckled and threw the empty vial of potion in the air. Before commenting, he blasted the bottle and dispersed it with a small fireball.

"You are missing my point, Kat. I was faking the lack of fatigue that made you think engaging in battle with me was useful.

But my aggression wasn't all fake."

The butcher stood up and summoned his new weapons in his hands. He smiled crookedly at the female close combat expert before commenting.

"Try me if you want to."

Chapter 523 The Switch Of Sanity

"Try me if you want to."

Tuan asked and released his mana sense. This time, there was all his fierceness reflected in it. The Sin of Wrath had also played a huge part in sharpening his aura to feel like a bloodthirsty sword.

Katalina felt Tuan's presence and made a gulping sound. She could see it in his eyes and through his presence that Tuan was even more capable of violence than he had previously shown.

"Al... alright. No need to intimidate me any further if it's already working. Get to the point."

Katalina said while folding her hands under her ample bosom. Tuan admired how quickly she recovered from being on the backfoot and came forward to talk to him in an equal manner.

Tuan did what he was asked to do when he realized that Katalina was worth having as his raid partner. He called off his mana sense and stored his weapons away before continuing.

"My point is, you need to be a bit crazy to achieve success in life. You are not crazy obviously. And I'm not saying being pragmatic is always a bad thing. You may be able to limit your losses after analyzing the situation in your favour. But..."

Butcher said this before walking up to Katalina. For some reason, she reminded the butcher of the old friend he had in his past timeline. She was just like Katalina, fierce and logical at the same time. Hers was

one of a few fond memories he had from his life that was feeling more and more like a dream these days for him.

? ?? ??-??? ??, ?,?,? Unfortunately, she was killed by her naivety in Eren's past timeline.

The butcher stood only an arm's length away from Kat after walking up to her. He looked her in the eyes before speaking further.

Yet, sanity is also one's shackle, Katalina. And don't get me wrong. I'm not liberated from the shackles of my sanity either.

Just now I was considering staying in the ruined city and collecting all the drops while avoiding the hunting area completely. It was a sane decision considering my situation.

And yet, you could see the obvious flaw in it, can't you? It's all a matter of perspective that allows us to peek into the future.

The difference between you and me is simple, Kat. I know how to turn the mental switch of my sanity on and off when I see the need to. Can you?"

Tuan stared intently at Katalina and asked. She was affected by his presence and his words. The close combat expert couldn't help herself from replying to his question by shaking her head in denial.

Tuan nodded at Katalina before commenting.

"Good. Self-realization is the starting point. Your inability to break free from sanity is why you can't win. You need to find that switch and learn how to make it work for you.

I'm not saying this just to make you drop the idea of backstabbing me. That is there. But no matter who they are, I want people who fight with me to be capable. My survival depends on it."

Katalina didn't understand where Tuan was coming from. But she felt that whatever he said was spoken from his heart. The fire-element ranker in front of her might have ulterior motives for saying what we said. Still, the advice made sense to her. So she nodded before replying.

"Hehe. I guess you have a plan in mind that requires me to go overboard. But don't worry. I'm all in. Let's be crazy and see where it takes us. Let me find that switch by being just that."? ??? a ???e?

Katalina said with a newfound glint in her eyes. With her steady voice and keen gaze, she spoke further.

"Tuan, I accept whatever you have said to me. Maybe I'm not cut out in the first place. But that won't stop me from trying. Reach for the stars and you might land on the moon they say. I'm planning to do just that."

Katalina produced a genuine smile on her face when she spoke out about what she truly felt. It was as if she was liberated from the burden of trying to win the Titus championship. She also stopped caring about her viewers and her fan booth. Now all she wanted to do was try to find that switch Tuan spoke of.

Katalina and Tuan talked some more before disappearing from the ruined infirmary that was going to become their base for the next few days. They also exchanged the rune imprints that would allow them to contact each other through ID voice communication.

'What was that?'

Tuan heard a voice in his head all of a sudden when he was traversing through the hunting area. From every side, dense vegetation covered the ruined city, making it difficult for sunlight to penetrate the area near the ground.

It's been a few hours since Eren had left the safe area of the ruined city. He had already killed a bunch of mana beasts and monsters that ranged from Novice rank to the beginning of Ace rank. He had gotten a bunch of normal potions as the monster-drop and 3240 Titus points in return.

'What was what?'

Tuan asked, confused by Alephee's question. The latter clarified it for him.

'I'm talking about you lecturing that lass so extensively back then. It was as if you cared for her. Or more appropriately, what her image represented in your memory.'

Tuan shrugged his shoulders while he was making his way toward a particular spot. He replied after thinking about things from the past for a bit.

'Um... it's not so much as care but more of paying back for all that "she" had done for me. Yes, I know. They are both two different people. Maybe it wouldn't make sense that I started seeing her in Katalina.

But I don't have to make it make sense. It was just something I did on a whim.'

Alephee seemed to chuckle in his head. The butcher was not aware the gem spirit was capable of producing such emotions. She spoke right afterwards.

'Eren Idril, will you define that feeling as love?'

The butcher was stumped for a bit when Alephee asked him that question. But he didn't falter in his answer. He replied with a mirthless smile on his face.

It was something very similar to it. Too bad, I was already broken beyond the limit within which she could help me. I don't blame her, though.

It's my insecurities that prevented me from taking any steps toward her. By the time I decided to fight the demons in my head, it was already too late.'

Chapter 524 Medicine For The Heart

'It's my insecurities that prevented me from taking any steps toward her. By the time I decided to fight the demons in my head, it was already too late.'

Alephee liked Eren being honest with his feelings. This random encounter with Kat had made him take a trip down memory lane. Yet, it couldn't shake him from what he had set out to do in the present. Alephee tried to see if the butcher was nearing his breaking point and asked him another question.

'Are you capable of loving someone now?'

Eren didn't answer Alephee's question immediately. He located a bunch of Goblin Soldiers and one Goblin Lord and killed them all after a short span. He then collected his drops and changed location.

Tuan then found himself sitting leisurely on a giant tree's branch that was located about 12 meters away from the ground. His back was against the tree's giant trunk. He could feel the evening sun's light brushing against his skin from the shadows of leaves above him.

Tuan looked around and stretched his mana sense. Alephee also didn't warn him about anything. So he took out his Stellar Sativa stick after what felt like an eternity to him and lit it up.

'The fallacious affair only lasted a while,

Sucking the life out of my soul, tearing my beliefs asunder.

The endless sins now bind my heart,

It cannot love back, it cannot love any further.'

The butcher said to himself, answering Alephee's question after giving it much thought. The afternoon breeze created a windy noise as it blew and ruffled the tree leaves. Eren stared blankly at the light and shadows playing a game of tag all around him, becoming lost in his thoughts.

Alephee stayed silent and let him enjoy his smoke for a while.

Even after making so many connections in this timeline, Alephee could still feel that Eren felt lonely. Eren's separation from him only made matters more difficult for him on a psychological level.

Eren tried to find some sort of relief from his addictions ever since she was separated. That's why he always seemed to be either smoking or drinking more often than previously. The condition he had after meeting up with Eliza became the medium he could use to make sense of his overindulgence.

Knowingly or unknowingly, Eren's vices became his answer to processing the same feelings he had been battling within the previous timeline. So even now, when Alephee reminded him of fond memories, he chose to process them with his newfound addiction.

Suddenly, when he was lost in his thoughts and emotions, Eren felt like he was connected to the world around him on a deeper level. He could feel that he didn't need his normal senses or his mana sense to observe what was happening around him.

He felt that his body had become formless. His soul had seeped into every matter near him, be it the wooden trunk, tree, the ground beneath it or the wind encompassing the void. The picture of that experience imprinted in his mind was like blank paper.

But he knew that the moment he asked it a question by infusing it with his thoughts, that blank paper was able to answer his question with more profundity than he thought the paper was capable of.

This experience was brief and expired as suddenly as it had arrived. In the next moment, everything became normal. Eren's vision returned to normalcy. There was no white nothingness spreading in all directions in front of him.

This random experience made the butcher confused and lowkey scared. He thought that he had lost control of his body during that time.

This was akin to a near-death experience for him. He could say that with certainty because he remembered the moments before he was dead in his previous timeline after all. ? ? ? ? a ? ? ? e ?

"What the fuck was that?"

Tuan got up from his seat hurriedly and spoke up— his eyes constantly looking for threats nearby him. He suspected that somebody had used an illusion spell on him. But Alephee's next words eased his worries.

'Don't worry. That was not an illusion spell you had fallen victim to.'

The miracle of Alephee's lowkey laughter occurred again before she added on.

'Congratulations, Eren. You had the first sign of your soul sense awakening just now. It is only a matter of time before you can fully awaken it.'

Frankly, I'm shocked that you could awaken your soul sense this early. Even if it was Eliza's era, you would be called a monstrous prodigy for achieving something like this at your current level.'

'Soul sense!'

Eren repeated that term a few more times in his head to make sense of the out-of-body experience he just had. He wasn't sure how experiencing something so freaky would mark him as a monstrous prodigy.

But that experience itself indicated his growth as a ranker. So he considered that as a positive sign and sat back down to enjoy the remaining smoke that he had almost dropped.

? ? ? ? ? - ? ? ? ? ? ? ? , ? , ? , ? Eren once again tried to invoke the same phenomenon by closing his eyes and remembering the experience he had. But it didn't get triggered this time.

But he wasn't disappointed. He chuckled to himself and remembered the chain of thoughts he had before the sign of soul sense awakening hit him. The butcher couldn't help but sigh when his thoughts circled back to Reen and the memories that were invoked by Katalina.

Alephee understood Eren's mood. He was trying to find solace by letting his mind wander off to things he found pleasant from the past.

But trying to stay in the past is not healthy for the present. Therefore, Alephee decided to put all his directionless wandering to rest by saying something she came up with.

'It runs ahead and slips away.'

Yet it remains the same as it has always been.

It kills you a thousand times,

Only to wash away your endless sins.

Time is, after all, a different kind of medicine.'

Alephee said to Eren, bringing a light smile to his face. She was trying to tell him that time would heal him. That it would serve as the medicine for the heart and cure his heartaches and longings one day.

It won't be today. It won't be tomorrow. But he just has to wait long enough till it works its magic on him.

Chapter 525 Signs Of Soul Sense Awakening

'Alephee, did the sign of soul sense awakening appear because I had stopped smoking for a while? Then when I finally did...'

The butcher then snapped out of his past life and focused on his present and future after listening to Alephee's words. She was right. He'd have to die every day in his work to become a better ranker than yesterday. Only then could the passage of time show him the results he desired. Otherwise, it will be a pointless journey that will one day come to an end.

Alephee felt Eren's mood changing. She approved of his fast decision-making and replied promptly.

'There's no sure-fire way to awaken soul sense. Some prodigies achieve it while taking a brisk walk under the moon. Others achieve it while being consumed by the state of epiphany.

Some others awaken their soul sense amid battle. Others achieve it by fulfilling their lifelong dream and living in the most memorable moments of their life.'

Eren was looking at his smoke the whole time Alephee was giving him the explanation. He couldn't help mumbling.

'That means this smoke...'

'Hehe. That's right. That's why they have labelled the instances of someone achieving their soul sense awakening by consuming Stellar Sativa stick as rumours and not solid fact. It only works for some people. You were lucky enough to be among them.

But forget about today's alchemical studies in this field. I can say for sure that the stick has helped you a lot. Your mental condition is the other half of the puzzle.

First, your soul was under duress because of being exposed to Eliza's soul sense. You were plagued by its residual effect for a long time until you were able to get rid of it recently.

And let's not forget that you are an old soul in a new body. The experiences you have are unique. Additionally, you have your own goals to surpass Sage in her game along with your determination to beat her. All your emotions, experiences, and aspirations exposed your soul to a greater burden than it was already facing.'

Eren kept on thinking about all the things Alephee was saying as he smoked. He had flashbacks to all the scenes in his life that had a huge impact on him. The montage of memories had a few blurred pictures because he didn't want to clear them in his mind. Then some were as in-depth in their details as the reality itself, making him feel that the scene happened to him not too long ago.

Eren also kept on looking at the smoke he released as he saw the montage of memories playing in his head. He always told himself that he was smoking to get rid of Eliza's influence on him. As soon as that reason was taken away from him, he subconsciously told himself that he was smoking Stellar Sativa because he wanted to awaken the soul sense.

But he could not have imagined that his excuse would turn out to be genuine one day. He also felt that he needed to find a new reason to limit his addiction, once the soul sense awakens for real. The butcher would love smoking and drinking as long as they didn't hamper his growth.

"So my misery is also the reason I have awakened my soul sense so early. Hehe! At least something good came out of it."

Eren chuckled and commented to himself. Alphee's voice echoed in his head the next moment.

'That's also spot-on. When something is put under constant pressure, it either breaks apart or expands into something much more substantial. The matters of the soul follow the same principle, more or less.

? ?? ??-??? ??, ?,?,? So don't worry about having to limit your smoking from now on. Don't smoke more than usual either. Let your emotions guide your soul.

Those who experience the first signs of soul sense awakening would keep on experiencing that sign at random moments until the soul sense awakens completely.'

Eren nodded after hearing Alphee's response and got up from his position. He disappeared from his spot soon after, leaving a bunch of flames behind where his feet were that were extinguished right afterwards.

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"How was your first day, Kat?"

Tuan asked Katalina after they met up in the evening at the ruined infirmary. The entire city was a safe area where the contestants couldn't attack one another. Both close combat experts didn't have to worry about sneak attacks.

It was a few minutes past 7 PM. Meaning the live feed had been cut off for viewers and only the organizers of the Titus tournament were keeping an eye on the contestants.

Tuan was in the same clothes he had in the morning. But Katalina was in different clothes.

'She must have changed before coming here. I wonder if the organizers would dare to air female rankers changing their clothes to their exclusive viewers.'

The butcher thought to himself and chuckled. He knew the idea was very lucrative. But nobody would dare to implement it and mess with the Amazons that were known to champion female rankers' rights.

The duo was having dinner, which they had received as consumable drops. A mix of rankers-only food along with mortal cuisines.

The Titus competition wasn't known for serving the most delicious food after all. Competitors ate the food as a way to sustain themselves throughout the competition. They could have hunted the mana

beasts to satiate their hunger. But since the beasts were array generated with no real bodies, the competitors placed rations as consumable drops for each random hunt.

Katalina took a bite out of her ham sandwich. She chewed it a bit and gulped it down. She then drank Frostfoam given to her by the butcher before replying.

"Hehehe! Pretty neat actually. I scored... cough... I mean I scored a decent amount of Titus points. I chose a bunch of easy targets, mostly kobolds. They would give low Titus points. But since they usually stay by their monster nests, you can cast an AoE. And boom! You would take care of a huge number of them at once, giving you a lot of points.

I also killed a pair of Black Wind Panthers and got four vials of spell enhancing potions related to the wind element.

Not a shabby harvest I say. What about you, Tuan?"

Katalina told Tuan everything except for her Titus points. She didn't trust the guy completely yet after all. The latter couldn't blame her. In addition, he did not want to know her points either since he was sure she wouldn't be in the big leagues. So he ignored her fumble at the mention of Titus points and continued.

"My gains were also decent. Got a bunch of potions and one-time use alchemy items. Did you come across any other competitors?"

Katalina's smile changed and turned into a frown when she heard Tuan's question. She nodded affirmatively before replying in a serious voice.

"I did. Three of them actually. They were prioritizing their hunts too it seems like you said they would. So the encounter took place without causing any scene.

But I could feel that they seemed to have decided that they would target me after a few days. Heh! If they think I'm easy to bully, I'll have a surprise waiting for them."

Tuan expected Katalina to meet the competitors. After all, she didn't have a handy Alephee compass tool with her she could use to traverse through the hunting area without encountering anyone she didn't want.

A smile spread across Tuan's face as he looked at Kat before asking her another question.

"I found a clue about another safe drop. There is no rule prohibiting us from checking out the drops at night. Want to check it out with me?"

Chapter 526 Lily's Team

"Hm? Two rankers are heading somewhere, this late at night. Isn't that odd?"

Ketsu let his two raid partners know about what was happening around them. He controlled his voice in a way that only his mates could hear him.

He was wearing spectacles that didn't have any glasses in the frames. Instead of glasses, a thin layer of semi-transparent mana served as the lenses of the artefact. It offered the artefact's wearer enhanced night vision.

Ketsu was a ranger. He had used various means at his disposal to make it to the finals. He was used to studying his competition so that he could take countermeasures against them.

Even now, he was sitting on the rooftop of a worn-down building, trying to check up on random details.

The entire city looked like a ghost city under the moonlight with no sound of anyone or anything whatsoever. Still, Ketsu was not willing to retire to bed this early without doing his routine recons.

"Well, we can't attack anyone as long as we're all in the safe area, can we? Leave them be. We should all sleep, Ketsu. The days of fighting against each other are still ahead of us. Haha!"

Wilder commented after getting up to the rooftop in one swift jump. He was a tall, tanned, and muscular guy with a bald head. Even his eyebrows were nowhere to be found.

The guy looked like a mortal wrestler who was used to putting up a show of having the strength of rankers while staying unranked. Such stunts were really popular among mortals. Instead, his barbarian-class aura would tell anyone that his strength was not a show but the real deal.

Wayne Wilder's landing with his bulky build upset the already worn down rooftop and a portion of the uppermost ceiling serving as the terrace's platform fell. The fallen debris was about to create noise when Ketsu used his sound magic to isolate it, keeping the night's silence intact.

Ketsu shook his head in disappointment. He said in a voice that could only be heard by Ketsu and his other partner.

"Damn it, Wayne, keep it low. Others competitors would be doing reconnaissance on us, you know. If you keep causing trouble, I and Angela will team up together and rob you of your resources even before the day we have decided to part ways. Because your actions are about to become a liability at this rate."

Ketsu said and adjusted his spectacles over his eyes once again. He could only see two rankers moving in the same direction. They were slowly getting away from the trio. If Ketsu wanted to follow them, he would have to make quick decisions.

Wilder was about to speak up and register his complaints regarding how Ketsu treated him. But he was silenced by the ranger's next words.

"I can't think of any other reason behind finding a safe drop location for those two to be travelling at night. Those guys must have found a clue or something for the drop. We... hehe... we should follow them."

A hint of excitement flashed in Ketsu's eyes. He liked the idea of taking things from other rankers. But Wilder was there to put reins on his thoughts.

"We don't need mediocre drops from the safe zone, Ketsu. Don't you know it's better to get the monster drops? And we are already doing that.

Who's becoming a liability now by taking unnecessary detours?"

Wayne Wilder said while folding his hands. The dark blue tank he was wearing was stretched to the limit from the chest area when he did that, a testament to his powerful physique. He was wearing dark cargo pants that couldn't completely hide the muscles of his legs.

Suddenly, a third person appeared on the rooftop. Unlike Wilder, this person landed on the rooftop with light feet, sans any noise or overwhelming presence. It felt like this person couldn't have been detected by normal senses if they hadn't spoken just now. Therefore, Ketsu didn't have to create a sound barrier.

"Wilder, you muscle maniac, we all know that monster drops are usually better than drops hidden in the safe area. But there are always exceptions.

Ketsu is right. We should follow them and see what happens. If neither side can attack, that is all the more reason for us to keep an eye on our opponents.

You guys stay behind me and maintain a distance. I'll track those lucky bastards."

Lily commented in her usual cold voice. Her assassin class made her ideal for espionage operations like these. She wore a bluish-black outfit that hugged her body tightly and highlighted her petite feminine curves.

Yet, if one were to blink, they might lose sight of her because of the way her outfit was used to blend in with the surroundings. One could tell that the assassin's suit she was wearing was meant for rankers of a specific element.

Ketsu smiled and nodded his head to tell Lily that he accepted her lead. Wilder had a blank face when he was told to shut up by both his raid partners. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed, accepting the decision made by the majority.

Usually, it was him that jumped the gun and got into trouble. This was the first time he was telling others not to cause trouble. And they moved ahead and ignored him. Wilder had the taste of his own medicine at this time. Only now did he understand how much an ass he had been to his team members outside the competition.

The trio quickly came to an arrangement. Lily led the operation while Ketsu and Wilder followed behind. Ketsu also used his sound-element spell on Wilder to make him not produce any noise from his barbarian-specific movement spell.

Two rankers were seen using the rooftops of ruined constructions to make their way to a particular destination. The fire-element ranker's movement spell was most eye-catching in the night because he left a trail of blaze behind him.

There was a wind-element ranker following him. All she generated with her movement spell was an invisible gale. She just had to touch her toes lightly on the terrace. Her single step was enough to propel her tens of meters forward.

'Someone's following you.'

Alephee reported Tuan when he was making his way towards the safe drop with Katalina. He heard her remark and responded with a smirk on his face.

'Heh! I'm fishing anyway. Let the baby salmon take the bait.'

Chapter 527 Making an Ass out of the Assassin

"Open it. It's for you."

Tuan said to Kat after they reached the drop site. It was another ruined location with traces of ruined constructions and destroyed homes. The latter looked at him suspiciously because there was nothing in the vicinity she could feel with her mana sense that could imply that there was a drop.

Tuan pursed his lips when he found out Kat was looking at him with doubt and suspicion in her eyes. He had forgotten that he knew the location of the drop because of Alephee. There was no way for him to sense it with his mana sense either.

'Fuck it. I'll just activate the array and let her open it. That shouldn't make the drop change its element according to me, right?'

Alephee replied promptly to his question.

'It shouldn't. As long as you guys are quick enough.'

Eren decided to follow Alephee's advice and stepped ahead. This time, the array wasn't imprinted on the ground. It was woven into the very spatial fabric of the empty void.

'What should I do now?'

Eren asked Alephee while maintaining a stoic face. That's because he didn't want the organizers to know that he got to the safe drops by other means.

There were clues scattered across the subspace. Only those clues were supposed to reveal where natural drops were located. In addition, organizers could not keep track of all participants 24 x 7 as they roamed around the ruined city site and the much larger landscape of the hunting grounds. There were obviously some dead zones that couldn't be recorded due to conflict generating between various arrays.

Alephee had helped Tuan locate those inactive live-stream zones. He had passed through them specifically to make the organizers lose sight of him. This way, he would have a valid excuse for locating the clues while nobody was looking.

Now all he needed to do was act his part and pretend that he had read through the clues. Alephee told him that he just needed to feel the void space in front of him with his fingers imbued with his non-elemental mana. That way, the array would take some time to determine the ranker's element while it was activated. This time should be enough for Tuan and Kat to make a switch.

Things proceeded according to plan, and Kat successfully managed to open the array drop. The spatial fabric ruptured briefly and ejected a pair of shoes. Each shoe had a pair of small, bird-like wings attached to either side around its heel. This was a wind-element artefact meant to be used by a ranker like Katalina.

Katalina opened her eyes wide in surprise as she looked at the levitating pair of artefacts. She stretched her mana sense around it to see if they were indeed real and not an illusion or trap.

"This... this... I don't know how to thank you Tu..."

Katalina was about to touch the artefact with her hands as she thanked her raid partner and benefactor. She had said that she needed him to find a drop site for her on a whim. She couldn't believe Tuan would be able to pull it off something like that just a day into the tournament.

But before she could take possession of the artefact she felt with her mana sense that Tuan was coming at her with a cruel grin on his face. She turned around while cursing her luck and her naivety to think that there were free lunches in this world.

"Tuan... you son of a bitch...."

Kat quickly drew her rapier and tried to attack the incoming Tuan with her wind-element spells. But Tuan was way faster. He disappeared from her sight only to appear behind her back.

Clank!

The sound of metal hitting metal rang in the surroundings. Kat was a bit confused before checking her body. She thought the bastard had backstabbed her in a metaphorical and literal way.

'I... I am fine. Then...'

Katalina found herself to be unharmed. She then stretched her senses some more and turned back to see Tuan's Anduril blades clashing with something invisible in the air. The pair of artefacts were just a few meters away from that weird clash.

Slowly, the invisible blades that had engaged with Tuan's Anduril started taking shape. They were a pair of Schmitter's that were as black as the starless night sky. Soon the wielder of those blades emerged from the blur.

Lily had tried to snatch the artefacts from Katalina because she too had an affinity for the wind element. Plus, these artefacts looked like they could be a perfect match for an assassin class like hers.

"How... How were you able to detect me?"

Lily asked with vigilance in her eyes. Tuan seemed unshaken when he saw her materialize out of her spell as if he was already aware of her existence there. This realization alone was enough to make her raise her vigilance against a ranker like him.

"Um... let's say I was expecting guests when I was starting a barbecue."

Eren said as he took his weapons back to his storage room. He kept his hands behind his back and looked at the assassin in front of him with keen eyes.

'Hmm. Pretty face but small boobs.'

Tuan said to himself before shaking his head in denial.

'Heh! I shouldn't be so judgemental. Big or small, they can all be pressed with equal affection.'

Tuan thought as he stared intently at Lily. The latter couldn't be sure where he was looking due to his shifty eyes but her feminine instincts told her that he was checking her out.

"That... that doesn't even make sense. You must have known about me and my spell from the beginning. Tell me how."

Lily asked with a frown on her face. She gripped her hands around her weapons tightly before staring back at the guy with the same intensity in her gaze. It's just that the motive she had in her eyes for him was different.

"Miss Lily, have you forgotten that we are all contestants in the Titus tournament? All of our names, spells, and battle styles are public knowledge. Of course, I'd know about you. Are you that stupid?"

Tuan asked the question with an expression that said, "Can you believe this idiot?". Then he made fun of her with his last set of words. Lily opened her mouth to say something to the fire-element ranker in front of her. But she found out that there were no words that could help her make a comeback. Her subconscious mind decided to act out with violence.

"Listen here..."

'Don't be like this muscle-brain Wilder, Lily. Put the weapons down. Otherwise, you'd be disqualified.'

Chapter 528 Zephyrus and Untamed Winds

"Listen here..."

'Don't be like this muscle-brain Wilder, Lily. Put the weapons down. Otherwise, you'd be disqualified.'

Lily was about to walk toward a weaponless Tuan with weapons drawn in her hands. But she heard a distressed voice just as she was a few steps away from the guy.

She looked behind to see Ketsu standing behind her with Wilder standing behind his back. The ranger's medium stature and frail-looking physique created a contrast against the muscular-built Wilder serving as the background.

Lily was confused for a bit before realizing her mistake. She looked at Tuan to see that he was weaponless.

"The safe area... I..."

Lily had drawn her weapons instinctively when she saw Eren attacking her in her invisible form with his weapons. And she got too preoccupied with her range of thoughts afterwards to recognize the clever trap Eren had set for her.

"Forget about Lily getting disqualified. Why hasn't that guy been disqualified yet for drawing his weapons?"

Wilder asked while flaring his nose and looking at Eren with the intention of battle. Ketsu sighed and explained.

"That's because the guy drawing his weapons could be seen as defending the artefact their team just found. Lily drawing her weapons in response at that time would be considered part of self-defence.

But any more aggression from either side would become the reason for either of them, both of them, or all of us getting disqualified."

Ketsu completed his sentence and looked at Tuan with the same curiosity. He had studied every competitor of the finale by watching the recorded copies of their battles with other rankers. He hadn't thought of Tuan as someone this crafty at that time.

Lily quickly stowed her weapons in her storage. She then retreated to where her raid partners were.

Eren clicked his tongue after seeing that his trap was not sprung. He then reappeared from his place and reappeared in front of the safe drop reward. The levitation magic wore off as soon as he grabbed hold of the pair of shoes with both hands.

"Here. Bind them and wear them from this moment on."

Tuan commented after appearing beside still-shocked Katalina. He then gave her the artefacts while still looking ahead— his gaze fixed on the trio that had just crashed the party.

Katalina had too many questions to ask. She also wanted to convey her apology for doubting him. But Tuan's commanding tone made her prioritize what he had asked from her.

She recovered from her stupor and wore the shoes quickly before readjusting her grip on the rapier. Then she remembered that this was a safe area and nobody had drawn

'Haah! Tool late.'

Lily sighed internally as she saw Katalina wearing the shoes she had wanted. She had been attracted to them as soon as she saw them for the first time. As a result, she immediately thought of bending the rules instead of breaking them.

After all, conflict with other rankers was not allowed in the safe area. But there were no specific instructions about what to do.

Too bad, Tuan saw through her plans and prevented her from getting her hands on the artefacts she had wanted. She cursed the guy in her head before speaking up.

"Tuan, Katalina, although we're competitors in the tournament, we shouldn't have to be enemies. I propose that we cooperate in a raid in exchange for..."

Lily was trying to pitch a deal with the duo. The exchange of artefacts for co-op in a raid. But Tuan started laughing like he had heard the biggest joke before coming up with his verbal response.

"Miss Lily, you think too highly of yourself and your two goons. I suggest you get your heads out of your asses and read the situation. We are not interested in any kind of deal from thieves like you. Now do us a favour and kindly fuck off."

A gentle smile radiated from Tuan's face as he spoke. His words, on the other hand, painted a different picture.

Lily narrowed her eyes on Tuan when she heard the vicious words coming from him. But she also couldn't come up with a better reply because she knew she was at fault. So she spoke the only thing she could speak.

"Watch your back in the hunting area in the coming days, Miss Katalina, Ace Tuan. There would be predators roaming to hunt for their prey."

Lily said and responded to Tuan's gentle smile with a gracious grin of her own. She then gestured for Ketsu and Wilder to walk in the same direction they had come from. The trio disappeared from the scene soon after.

Katalina breathed a sigh of relief when Lily and her raid partners left. She knew that no competitor would try to attack another in the safe area only to get eliminated. Still, subconsciously she felt stressed because of the assassin's weird spells.

Out of all the competitors, Kat found Lily to be difficult to deal with because of the assassin's way of doing things. If the involved rankers' ranks were the same, two vs three was never a positive sign for the two.

"Tuan, these shoes are just awesome."

Katalina spoke after the duo returned to the ruined infirmary. She spoke while using her new artefacts. She now understood why Lily was so desperate to obtain them at the cost of being called out as a thief by Tuan.

Katalina was fascinated by the shoes' capabilities. She named them Zephyrus.

This pair of artefacts allowed its wearer to experience a brief flight. Additionally, it enhanced the wearer's wind elemental movement spell. Plus, the pair of artefacts had an inscribed spell.

Untamed Winds!

Swoosh.

Katalina disappeared and appeared some meters away from her previous position in a blink. Even with the casual execution of the artefact's spell, she was a bit faster than Tuan. Or to be precise, Tuan was using the combination of his fire-element movement spell along with his time-element spells while keeping his lightning element movement spell out of the picture.

As a wind-element user, Katalina's speed was already better than normal rankers. But with the shoes on, she broke all her previous records easily.

Chapter 529 Apology

Tuan was standing next to a window frame that had no windows anymore as Katalina tried on her new pair of shoes. Rankers or mortals, he guessed women would always be fond of fancy footwear.

His thoughts drifted from one topic to another as his hands rested on the window's ledge. With his relaxed posture, he looked outside and stared at the glittering night sky.

Ever since he had experienced his first sign of soul sense awakening, he felt different about the world around him. It was like there were a lot of worlds within the world he was seeing and interacting with.

He could almost tell that the world was trying to speak to him in a language that only they both understood but couldn't speak or write in. At first, that experience scared him. But then he figured he felt scared because of how novel and enlightening that experience was. He got scared subconsciously after realizing how addicting the feeling of losing one's self within the world can be.

'My thoughts and emotions are like some form of energy that keeps my soul active. And Stellar Sativa is like those pair of flying shoes this lass is wearing, enabling my soul to take flight from the ground.'

The butcher couldn't help connecting whatever was happening around him with whatever had happened to him in the afternoon. He let his mind wander some more.

'In that moment of flight, I'm connected to the sky that has no limits. As my altitude increases, I have an endless possibility to expand my vision.

From there, all I need to do is look down. Heh! Looking at the whole world from a height that makes it appear like a minuscule thing. I bet that will be something interesting to see.'

Tuan wanted to smoke badly right now. But he controlled himself. He needed to find another dead zone in which he couldn't be recorded before he could indulge in his sought-after vice.

Unable to smoke, Tuan could only retrieve one of the last bottles of Frostfoam left with him. He uncorked it and smelled the booze by bringing it to his nose. He remembered his past life when he used to do the same thing with the cheap alcohol he was used to having.

Katalina smelled the booze too and looked in Tuan's direction. By now, she too had gotten addicted to Frostfoam after he had offered it to her a few times.

She cancelled her flight and appeared next to Tuan. She also remembered what she needed to do.

"Tuan... I... I am sorry for doubting you."

Katalina pursed her lips and looked at Tuan with a hint of guilt on her face. She clenched her hands when she said that. Her innocent expressions could melt even the toughest of hearts.

Tuan didn't look at Katalina immediately. He was too busy smelling his booze and observing the night sky at the moment. He just jumped out of the window frame and sat on the ledge, keeping his legs outside the window. With his hand, he tapped on the portion of the ledge that was beside him, indicating Katalina to follow his example.

Kat thought for a moment before doing the same. The two were now sitting on the window's ledge on the second floor of the ruined infirmary. Both had their legs slightly swinging in the air as they enjoyed the night sky.

"You better be sorry for what you did out there. I gave you the drop's location, allowed you to have its reward, and even defended your reward at the cost of painting a bull's eye behind my back.

I have now come to believe that no man should ever help a so-called damsel in distress. Because first, help is taken for granted. Second, they won't come to help you when the roles are reversed."

Eren said with a serious look on his face. Once again, he mixed what he really felt with what he was faking, creating a spectacular mix of bullshittery. Therefore, Katalina was unable to distinguish his lies from the truth.

But she wanted to convey her sorry. So that's what she decided to do next.

"Tuan, you can't blame me for not trusting you completely. We are in a competition together. We would soon turn out to be each other's enemies as the last day of the competition approaches us."

Tuan looked at her with a "are you kidding me right now?" look. Kat understood what he was trying to say to her with that look. So she sighed and spoke up.

"Yet, you helped me despite us competing. So that kind of becomes a moot point."

Kat looked at the stars after following Tuan's gaze. She continued speaking up as the latter started drinking from his bottle of booze.

"Me not putting my trust in somebody is not a competition thing though. It just makes my job easier because I have a valid excuse not to trust you.

I don't know which damsel you were talking about who didn't appreciate the kind gesture you had offered to her. I'm sorry to bring up her subject, but were you talking about your wife?"

Kat questioned Tuan before realizing that she shouldn't have. After all, Tuan had a breakdown at the opening event just before being sent here. She decided to shift gears with her next words.

"Err... anyway... I hope it's not me. It can't be me. That's because I have not and will not take your help for granted."

Katalina clenched the window's ledge with her hand as she spoke. A few creaking sounds were made by the ledge's worn out wood as she did so. Listening to that sound, the close combat expert released her grip and continued to verbally march on.

"First of all, I'm no damsel. I can take care of myself, no matter how difficult the road gets in front of me. No matter how much loss I incur as a result. Heh! I was a mortal girl not too long ago, you know. There was nobody to help me. Still, I survived.

That being said, I don't want to ignore the genuine help that's offered to me. I have seen the harsh side of the world. So it gets a bit difficult for me to count on other people, that's all."

Katalina started talking about her childhood. She told Eren about the only friend she had and needed to take care of. Someone that she wanted to send to the Duchy of Lehan, where she could get treated for her illness.

'Hm? I guess my bullshittery had an unwanted effect and sent this lass on a different tangent altogether. I need to restart our conversation.'

The butcher thought to himself and sighed as he had the thought.

Chapter 530 Replacing Bad Memories

'Hm? I guess my bullshittery had an unwanted effect and sent this lass on a different tangent altogether. I need to reboot our conversation.'

The butcher clicked his tongue as he had the thought. He handed Kat the booze in his hand. He then coughed a bit before speaking up.

"Kat, what you're saying is not an apology. A proper apology has layers to it, you know.

The "I'm sorry part" has already been covered by you. But you are still yet to handle "How can I make it up to you?" part."

Katalina was interrupted from her talk when she heard Tuan's response. She looked at him intently and nodded her head before speaking up.

"Forgive me, Tuan. I have a habit of oversharing. Yes, you are right. Tell me, how can I make it up to you?"

Kat said with seriousness on her face and in her voice. This was the first time in a long time she wanted to share her experience to somebody apart from her ill friend. She felt glad and sad at the same time.

Glad after realizing that she could form another bond without faking it. And sad for the fact that her current condition wanted her to focus more on winning the tournament than making friends inside it.

Tuan smiled when he heard Kat's reply. He replied to her with a mirthless smile on his face.

"Hehehe. Now that sounds like an apology to me, Kat.

Hmm. I'm not sure I should tell you this. But I indeed have a request in my head."

Tuan said with a tinge of sadness in his eyes. Katalina too was affected by his mood along with the booze's subtle high. She nodded her head a bit frantically in response to Tuan's question.

Tuan continued soon after.

"You already know about what happened to my wife, Kat. I had really loved her. It's sad that she couldn't love me the way I did. What's even sadder is the fact that she couldn't be honest with me."

'Eren, are you the best man to talk about honesty?'

Alephée asked in the butcher's head. But he ignored it and continued.

"There were a couple of things we used to do as husband and wife, Kat. The memories of doing those things are forever burnt in my memory. I can't drown them. Nor can I delete them completely.

All I can do is replace those memories with better ones. By doing the same things with someone different.

One of those things was a couple's slow dance that I and Tista had done during one such night as picturesque as tonight's."

Tuan said with a little vibrations in his sound that indicated that he was being emotional. His eyes also looked in the void and tried to see something that wasn't there. He spoke up after taking his time.

"Would you mind if we danced together for a brief period maybe? It would certainly help me put your face in my head for those memories."

Kat was a bit taken aback by Tuan's odd request. But after witnessing his breakdown at the event, she could believe it. The guy's performance was also impeccable.

Plus, it would also help her repay the gratitude she owed to Tuan. She decided to proceed further and nodded her head.

Tuan smiled when he heard Kat's reply. While he was having those aimless thoughts, the butcher had also come up with a strategy to win the tournament. He needed Kat's help to win the tournament.

He could only count on his Sins series ability in his plan. His time was short. So he decided to put things into motion from day one.

A soft, joyous, and orchestral symphony started playing in the ruined infirmary. It was very pleasant and soothing to listen to. But with the setting of a ruined city, it would sound haunting to any mortal passing outside the building.

The source of this pleasant symphony was an array disk that was producing live-like audio effects. It was as if the entire band was playing inside the ruined construction with all its instruments put to good use.

A couple was seen slow-dancing on the tunes of the lyric-less track. The array disk also provided the necessary mellow illuminance to suit the mood. Katalina found it oddly amusing that she was dancing with someone she barely knew in a place where they were supposed to fight.

"Tuan... I'm also sorry for... calling you... son of a ... you know..."

Katalina said hesitantly as he followed Tuan's lead and swung in his arms lightly. The butcher was proving himself to be a capable classic dancer. Despite his desires to act otherwise, he behaved gentlemanly with the lady in his arms.

But it was only a matter of time.

"Hm? Oh... that. Yeah... that's no biggie."

Tuan discarded Katalina's apology for calling him a "son of a bitch." He had long decided that he wouldn't get offended when someone called him anything remotely like that.

Katalina sighed and decided to give up understanding Tuan for tonight. The guy acted like he was a man on a mission when he battled his way through the finals. And now, he was showing so many ranges of emotions that she could hardly believe it was the same person.

Thanks to the butcher's earlier showmanship, his image as the real Tuan Aag was maintained. Otherwise his minor and major flaws as acting like Tuan would have been highlighted a long time ago by experts and fans alike.

As the tune started getting slower and intimate, it brought the pair dancing to its tune closer than ever. Tuan put his hands just above her posterior as he kept on leading her with finesse and completely in sync with the tune.

"You... you are full of surprises Tuan Aag. I could have never pegged you for a good dancer."

Katalina said as she spun around herself when given a cue by her partner. The latter smiled before commenting.

"It's the small tricks I picked up from my last life before I started living for myself."

Tuan said and pulled Katalina closer to him all of a sudden— embracing her in the warmth of his hug. Before the wind-element user could react in time, her lips were locked with the butcher's.

"This was one of the memories of Tista that I wanted to replace."

Tuan said in Katalina's ears as if they were the whispers of the charming devil.