

Brand New 1731

Chapter 1731: The Demon King Of Flood

"You were meant to awaken at a much later date, but I decided to grant you the privilege of awakening and joining me. Rejoice, Demon King of Flood."

From the depths of the great ancient sea temple, an entity awakened, as Arcadia's oceans shook like never before.

Tsunamis appeared across the planet, drowning dozens of port cities and killing thousands.

Its azure eyes opened, as Thanatos's ghostly eyes observed their true form.

"Not one, but two?"

With intrigued eyes, he illuminated the vast room, revealing two chained mermaids.

They looked similar, twins, with cascading pink hair and pale blue skin, scales covering their arms, necks, and legs, and long fish-like tails.

Glowing azure crowns adorned their heads.

They looked unlike any "Demon King" could have ever looked.

Yet Thanatos could feel it.

As they opened their azure eyes and gazed at him, he felt it.

RUMBLE!

An immense oceanic power surged, as if the sea might swallow him completely.

"Heh, welcome. Let's destroy the world together and reform it anew, my fellow Demon King."

With a swipe of his claws, he tore through their chains. Both mermaids fell to the floor, gasping for air.

One was shy, the other bolder.

"Who are you?!" the bolder one asked, protecting her sister.

"My apologies. Did I not introduce myself? I am Thanatos, Demon King of Death. I have attained supreme god-like power, and I have decided I will no longer obey the System's wishes," he said. "You were meant to awaken when I died, but I have... well, accelerated their plans."

"...! Sister, are we finally free?"

"I... guess so...! You... you're a Demon King like us..."

"Indeed!" Thanatos said gallantly. "Now, my sisters, let us govern this world together."

The mermaids exchanged glances, doubt in their eyes.

Could they really say no to the monster before them?

"Of course...!" the bolder one said. "Let's go, sister... we're finally free. At the very least, we must show this King our gratitude."

"A-Ah! Yes..." the other sister nodded, staying by her side.

"Hmm!" Thanatos nodded with a dry laugh as he stepped out of the temple with both twins, each seeming to be one half of the Demon King of Flood. "Now, my sisters, shall we free our other brothers? Our Era is about to begin. No longer will we be abused, suppressed, sealed, or used. This time, we will command the world from the highest seats!"

Though initially afraid of his appearance and aura, both sisters were inspired by his words and nodded excitedly.

They too harbored great malice and resentment toward the world for what it had done to them.

Despite their initial fear, they slowly smiled, fascinated by the chaotic seas before them, all caused by their will.

"See? This is the almighty power we possess! Do you truly believe beings of our caliber should be sealed, used, or abused? We are the true rulers of this world. We are the Demon Kings!"

"Y-You're right...!"

"Yes, sister! Finally! We can exert revenge on all of them!"

"Would you be kind enough to share your names, my sisters?" Thanatos asked in a gentlemanly tone.

The sisters glanced at each other and nodded.

"I-I am Nyssiria. I represent the pain and sorrow of the Demon King of Flood, The Whisper Beneath," the shyer one said.

"And I am Thalazra! I represent the rage of the Demon King of Flood, The Howl Above!" the bolder one said.

"I see! So the two of you are both halves of the Demon King of Flood?" Thanatos asked. "How fascinating!"

"In a way, yes," Nyssiria said.

"We were born with a Curse, the Curse of Flood," Thalazra said. "Without knowing, we caused great catastrophes..."

"Even when we tried to run away... to avoid harming anyone else... heroes kept pursuing us, aiming to kill us," Nyssiria cried. "I just... wanted to live normally..."

"Our last memory is being brutally killed by a band of Heroes," Thalazra sighed. "But somehow, we are alive now. I don't understand why."

"That is something you will learn soon," Thanatos nodded. "For now, rejoice. Your lives will no longer be about persecution or suffering! You will live proper lives and enjoy them together forever!"

"Finally, sister! We're free!"

"Yes! We can be together without being pursued..."

As they celebrated, Thanatos reviewed his mental notes.

The First Fragment, the Demon King of Plagues.

The Second Fragment, the Demon King of Famine.

The Third Fragment, the Demon King of Miasma.

The Fourth Fragment, the Demon King of Death.

The Fifth Fragment, the Demon King of Flood.

The Sixth Fragment, the Demon King of Swarms.

And the Seventh Fragment, the Demon King of The End.

"Plagues and Famine are both dead, slain before Miasma. However, I can bring them back. I have located their Souls in the Netherworld. Miasma is a traitor, turned into a forest spirit by Yggdrasil. Flood is with me, however strange she is, her powers are real. The End is in Hell, actively working with me. Now, only Swarms remains."

He gazed at Arcadia's silver moon. His skeletal face showed little expression, but his ghostly flames flickered with slight annoyance.

"To think they sealed her in the moon. What did she do to receive such punishment?" he sighed, angered by her suffering. "Worry not, my sister. We will rescue you. This pile of bones is merely a secondary, weak body. It might not withstand the atmosphere and could explode. I need to expand the Domain of Death or create a strong enough avatar to inhabit."

Like him, the Demon King of Flood was restricted to the "Domain of Floods," encompassing all the world's oceans.

That meant the mermaid twins would be greatly weakened on land.

However, that didn't matter.

"The Demon King of Swarms is in the Moon," he told the twins. "I rescued you two because you were the easiest. To reach the Moon, I need your assistance. Will you grant this body your power?"

"You mean...?" asked the bolder sister.

"Yes, infuse yourselves into me," Thanatos said. "Then we can travel to the Moon momentarily, shatter Swarm's Seal, and free our last sibling!"

"...!"

"Okay!"

Both nodded and agreed. Easily swayed by Thanatos, they transformed into a giant mass of seawater, overflowing with powerful Miasmic Flood Water.

"Hooo! With this power...! It should be possible."

Thanatos laughed, becoming a giant of bones and ocean. Using Arcadia's entire sea, he surged into the skies, higher and higher.

And then, toward the Moon itself!

Chapter 1732: The Demon King Of Swarms

RUMBLE!

Landing on the moon, Thanatos' body began to freeze rapidly, the water flowing around him struggling to withstand the coldness of space.

However, ice was also part of water, and the Demon King of Flood manipulated it effortlessly.

"Now, it must be over there."

Using his power, Thanatos swung his fists, unleashing an explosion of void energy and splitting the ground before him. Countless pieces of moonstone flew everywhere.

In the distance, he noticed a large city with many inhabitants, forests, and deserts. The moon had its own biomes and living beings.

He paid no attention to these lowly creatures, focusing on the hole he had created.

"Awaken, my sister!"

He rushed down and struck the ground beneath, shattering it further until he landed in the hollow core of the Moon.

BOOOM!

As a massive explosion sent rubble flying everywhere, Thanatos surveyed his surroundings. The two halves of the Demon King of Flood gazed around.

"Lord Thanatos, what is this place?" Nyssiria asked shyly.

"This is the Hollow Core of the Moon, and that in the distance..." Thanatos said, pointing at a gigantic black temple. "Is where Swarm is sealed."

"Swarm... what is her power?" Thalazra asked.

"Heh... It's a wonderful power that threatened the entire world... And now, not just Arcadia, but Earth and its many Realms will suffer her wrath!" Thanatos laughed.

With a single step, he pierced through space and reached the temple, shattering the system messages before him as an explosion of void and divine power erupted.

BOOOOMMM!

The seal shattered instantly, as the gods who once fueled it were all dead. Thanatos had learned this truth, now acting bolder than ever.

He waved his hands, ignoring the countless system messages trying to stop him, and stepped into the dark temple.

Immediately, something within roared at him.

"GRYAAAAAAHHHHH!"

"Ngh?!"

"Ah!"

"Agh!"

All three groaned in pain, stepping back as they saw a dark monstrosity hidden in the shadows, with long legs and eight sharp crimson eyes.

"Calm down, Demon King of Swarms! I've come to free you! I am the Demon King of Death, Thanatos! Introduce yourselves," he told the twins.

"We are the Demon King of Flood, Nyssiria and Thalazra...!" both sisters said in unison.

"..."

The Demon King of Swarms fell silent the moment she sensed their enormous power.

"You've come to free me? Then hurry and do so... I have a grudge to repay. That world that neglected me and didn't let my family thrive... that cursed world that left me alone. I will drown it in eternal pain and agony, forevermore."

"Hahah! We speak the same language!"

The Demon King of Death laughed, destroying the chains and freeing the monstrosity, revealing her form at last.

She appeared as a gigantic bug-like alien monster, resembling a caterpillar with countless centipede-like heads sprouting everywhere and ten long spider-like legs.

Atop the monstrosity was the small torso of a human with pale white skin, eight red eyes, and long dark purple hair.

"As you've introduced yourselves, I shall too!" she said, her enormous aura spawning thousands of insects, filling the other Demon Kings' vision instantly.

"I was once Serelune Vireth, a gifted Entomancer from a noble house known for insect magic and healing.

My family was executed after being falsely accused of poisoning the king. We were victims of political scapegoating.

When I died, I refused to accept defeat. Festering in my grave, I merged with my swarm to survive, consumed by my own wrath and sorrow... this is what I am, no, what WE are.

This is how I awakened as the Demon King of Swarms and was crowned with my true name, Zzerynth Malatrix. With my power, I flooded the world with my swarms and showed everyone what suffering truly was."

Thanatos realized her voice was not singular but the whispers of hundreds of monstrous insects composing her body.

The Demon King of Flood twins trembled, utterly terrified...

Yet Thanatos had nothing to fear.

"We share the same goals. I too wish to flood the world with death!" Thanatos said. "Zzerynth, let's join hands and dominate as the true kings we are."

"Hmm~" Zzerynth, less trusting than the twins, eyed Thanatos with suspicion. "Fine... let's cooperate for now, Thanatos. We share the same goal."

As she emerged from the Moon's depths, she sent a swarm of thousands of giant bugs toward the City of Moon Elves, devouring its people.

Only a few arks escaped to Arcadia below as she laughed and sang amid the suffering of countless innocents.

Thanatos benefited greatly from the massacre, absorbing the death energy and souls, while the Demon King of Flood twins watched in awe.

"Now, sister, shall we return to Arcadia?" Thanatos asked.

"Sister? I'm fairly sure I'm much older than you," Zzerynth said. "From now on, Thanatos, refer to me as your senior."

"...?!" Thanatos stepped back, visibly annoyed.

"Hm? What? You don't like it?" Zzerynth glared at him with her sharp crimson eyes.

"...Very well, Senior," Thanatos sighed. "However, I am the Lord of Death, and my territory is far larger than yours... It would be odd to call you my superior before my subordinates. And in terms of power... is it necessary to discuss this?"

"I'm rapidly regaining my power," Zzerynth said. "But you're right... I'll let it slide for now. Show more respect next time."

"I will, Senior Sister," Thanatos nodded, as Zzerynth smiled, glaring at the two mermaids within his bones. "You two... You barely look like Demon Kings, unlike that skeleton and me. Thanatos, are you sure they're Demon Kings?"

"I am. Their bodies are simply... suppressing their truest forms," Thanatos said. "But fear not, I'm sure with time, they'll awaken great power, right?"

"Y-Yes...!"

"Of course..."

Both twins nodded nervously under the gazes of two monstrous beings, quickly realizing they'd have preferred to remain sealed rather than be among such creatures.

Yet it was too late, and deep down, they yearned to exact revenge on those who had tortured and tormented them.

"Let's return, not as mere Demon Kings, but as Gods."

The three Demon Kings returned to Arcadia, their powerful Domains shaking the planet to its core.

The Domain of Death.

The Domain of Flood.

The Domain of Swarms.

These three Domains spread through Arcadia and its connected Realms.

Now, the great war to conquer everything had begun.

Chapter 1733: Cursed Runes

Elayne and Mark gazed at the many desiccated, mummified hands imprinted with powerful Curse Runes. Both wondered for a moment what to choose after hearing the explanations from the shadow-like creature the Undead General called "Cursed Needle Master."

Although the Curse Caster understood they were low-ranking Undead who couldn't think quickly, he had a busy day and promptly urged them to decide, or he would choose for them.

"Hurry! Decide in the next ten seconds or I'll decide for you! I have a busy day! Hurry already!" He slapped Mark and Elayne's heads, as if that would make them think faster. "Tsk, these damn low-rank Undead! You barely have one or two thoughts in those heads, don't you?"

As he complained, Elayne studied the Cursed Runes and their names, trying to determine what would benefit her most.

Despite her difficulty thinking in her current state, she focused on finding the best combination to grow quickly.

She recalled what the "Cursed Needle Master" had said about the Runes.

"The Rune of Decay amplifies your decaying power, strengthening your presence.

The Rune of Ghosts enhances your soul's ghostly essence, allowing you to project it beyond your Corpse Body.

The Rune of Agony grows stronger as you suffer, granting resistance to Dark Magic.

The Rune of Pain is similar but builds permanent strength over time through prolonged suffering.

The Rune of Resentment increases magical power based on your resentment, boosting your potential for Curse Magic.

The Rune of Madness drives you berserk, granting momentary bursts of power.

The Rune of Bones strengthens your bones, if you have any.

The Rune of Rot improves your ability to regenerate rotten flesh.

The Rune of Flesh makes your flesh tougher, if you have any.

Lastly, the Rune of Nether enhances your ability to gather and manipulate Nether. Now choose."

Among these options, what could awaken the power hidden in her soul?

She realized she needed "Essence" of any kind most.

Undead grew by accumulating, refining, and cultivating Nether.

Thus, the Rune of Nether, which aided in gathering it effectively, was an easy choice.

She also needed to strengthen not her decaying body but her soul to draw upon its hidden power, so the Rune of Ghosts would work.

To capitalize on their suffering, she chose the Rune of Pain. The more she endured, the stronger she could become.

"I... choose... Nether, Ghosts... Pain."

"Oho?" The Cursed Needle Master seemed intrigued by Elayne's choice. "An interesting combination... Are you aiming to evolve into some kind of Ghost Maiden?"

"Hm..."

Elayne didn't respond. The Cursed Needle Master didn't care about her answer, viewing her as a mere "lowly Undead."

The shadowy being called her over. Mark watched in awe as it used a needle to pierce her soul and body masterfully.

"Uugh...! Guuhh..."

Though the Runes on her body didn't hurt, those in her soul were agonizing. She had all three inscribed there.

If she lost her physical body, it was better to keep them in her soul.

The Rune inscription was painful and agonizing. Elayne screamed in horror. The sharp needle piercing her soul's depths was the worst pain she had ever felt.

Each inscription felt like her wounds were filled with burning acid, intensifying the pain.

When the ritual ended, Elayne could barely think, groaning in pain.

"Augh... Ugh..."

"Tch, what a crybaby! I'm the most dexterous Cursed Needle Master in this Region. Imagine if you were assigned to the others. Your soul would have been extinguished from pain, hah!"

The shadowy entity glared at Mark with glowing red eyes.

"You're a skeleton, so you've only got bones... but they're tough," he said. "What will you choose?"

"..."

Mark chose the same combination as Elayne, knowing her choices would suit them both.

Elayne, still in pain, could barely think. After hearing Mark's ghostly wails, she slowly opened her eyes.

"M-Mark..."

"It's done! Now get out of here, you dogs!"

The Cursed Needle Master kicked them out of the building. Elayne and Mark collapsed on the ground like ragdolls, nearly powerless.

"Ugh..."

"..."

Elayne looked at her hands, feeling dizzy.

A dark power surged from her soul's depths, a deep, black energy unlike anything she had experienced.

It was the opposite of everything she had cultivated before. Nether and Cursed Energy were opposites of Life Force and Spirit Energy.

It created a disgusting, dreadful feeling within Elayne, making her want to vomit, though her stomach was empty.

"Urk..."

Mark wasn't as affected, but he grabbed his skull, shaking it constantly, tormented by the curse differently.

"Mark..."

She helped him stand. They walked elsewhere, hiding behind the building near empty barrels while hearing countless Undead practicing with weapons, occasionally sparring.

"It's... okay... It's... okay..."

She hugged Mark, caressing his head and kissing his forehead, slowly helping him recover. Eventually, Mark seemed to doze off, though Elayne couldn't tell, as he had no eyes.

Elayne let him rest in her embrace, holding him tightly. With her soul exhausted, she fell asleep in the dark.

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"Wake up, you two! What are you doing here?! You didn't even come for your rewards! Hey!"

"Ah!"

Elayne woke, crying black tears after a nightmare.

In it, a giant skeletal hand pierced her chest, tearing apart her spiritual heart, magic circle, and soul.

The terrifying nightmare felt more like a memory than her imagination or fears.

Perhaps her missing memories of becoming Undead were like that.

The Demon King of Death must have tortured her, but she could no longer recall.

He certainly seized her powers and stole everything.

But shattering her soul was strange.

If her soul was destroyed, how was she here now?

"Am I... just a small soul fragment?"

She couldn't understand what she was or her own identity the more she tried to think.

"Hey!"

"Agh!"

Elayne cried as a steel boot kicked her. She glared at the source, a tall, imposing skeleton with a blazing head, wearing heavy, spike-covered armor.

"You dare ignore a great skeleton of my status, you lowly worm?!"

Chapter 1734: Ghostly Yin Pills

"You dare ignore a great skeleton of my status, you lowly worm?!"

"Uhh..."

"Tsk, perhaps more torture will make you more obedient..."

The General swung his claw toward Elayne, aiming to leave a permanent scar on her face.

However, a large skeletal hand wreathed in black flames intercepted his arm. Mark had awakened, his empty eye sockets blazing with blue flames.

"You...?!"

The General snarled, retracting his arm before delivering a barrage of kicks and punches that cracked Mark's bones.

"Mark!"

Elayne cried out, embracing Mark to shield him from the onslaught.

Yet Mark gently pushed her aside, absorbing the full brunt of the attack.

"Damn thing, your bones are tough...! Hahaha! You withstood all that damage?!" the General laughed.
"Well! I am thoroughly impressed! And you didn't choose the Rune of Bones?! Why! What the...?! What runes did you choose?! Pain? Ghost?! The Ghosts Rune is no good for skeletons like you, foolish idiot! Were you trying to mimic this woman? She chose poorly too. She should have picked Flesh or Decay instead. Zombies benefit most from enhancing their decaying flesh and regenerative abilities... tsk, you're both foolish idiots! But you're talented..."

The General scrutinized them while they clung to each other, nodding with a sinister smile on his blazing face.

His aim was to transform these two seemingly worthless undead into formidable soldiers for the Eternal Death Kingdom, earning himself merit in the process.

To him, Elayne and Mark were mere tools for advancing his rank.

"Come with me. You haven't received your other reward, brainless fools."

He strode away, followed by Mark and Elayne, who glanced around, noticing the stares of other undead still training.

Somehow, Elayne could hear fragments of their inner thoughts.

"They get special treatment again..."

"Why? Why?"

"Why can't I learn a skill..."

"It's so hard..."

"I want to die... let me die...!"

"I hate them... I want to eat their souls... Kuku..."

"I want to gnaw at that zombie's face..."

"Look at that skeleton... his bones are covered in cracks... hehe, he got a fine beating from the General."

This was an unusual ability, not commonly found among other undead. Elayne began to realize this as her soul expanded slightly, thanks to the Cursed Rune of Ghosts.

"Here."

The General led them to another site; a grim place filled with burning cauldrons. Massive flesh golems seized struggling undead and hurled them into the cauldrons, where they were burned and pulverized with hammers.

As the undead were crushed and incinerated, their screams were horrific. Elayne, overwhelmed by their thoughts flooding her mind, screamed and recoiled in horror.

Not only were their decayed bodies being processed, but their souls were also being boiled within the cauldrons.

Eventually, the General pulled a lever on a towering cauldron over five meters tall.

A surge of white steam poured from a small opening, followed by clear blue pills that fell into a leather bag, which he promptly seized.

"Here, Ghostly Yin Pills, crafted by crushing the bodies and souls of the weaker, less fortunate ones who lack your talent! Consume them gratefully and honor their sacrifice."

"..."

"..."

Elayne and Mark stood aghast at what they were given. Mark's skeletal hands trembled as he reluctantly accepted the leather bag.

Neither knew what to do. They stared at the pills with fear and pity, hearing the anguished wails of trapped souls within.

"Now go, consume them, and return to me tomorrow! You'll begin training with me. I'll shape you into proper soldiers for the King."

"Elay... ne... what... what? Do... what do...?"

"What... do we... do?"

"Hm..."

Mark gazed at the pills, his heart heavy with sorrow for the souls.

Elayne felt the same.

As compassionate beings, consuming pills made from the suffering of innocent souls was unthinkable.

They had defeated undead before, but never consumed their souls, always allowing them to pass peacefully.

This... was something a vile cult like the Black Hand would do.

They couldn't bear it.

"Let's go... outside..."

Mark followed Elayne as they attempted to sneak away but were thwarted.

A ghostly barrier blocked their path, and as they tried to breach it, a massive bone golem approached ominously.

"Ugh..."

Elayne abandoned the escape plan, retreating behind a building until the bone golem ceased its pursuit.

"We... can't... escape..."

"Hm..."

Feeling hopeless, they rested behind the building, staring blankly at the distant Netherworld, yearning to roam freely, find their lost friends, and return home.

"We... we have... to get stronger..."

Elayne's face contorted with pain and disgust as she picked up a pill, hesitating to place it in her mouth.

The moment it touched her lips she heard the screams.

"GYAAAAAAH!"

"SPARE ME!"

"IT HURTS!"

"MAMA...! WHERE ARE YOU?!"

"Ugh?!"

The thought of consuming them vanished instantly. Elayne dropped the pill, coughing up black miasma.

"I... I... can't..." she muttered weakly, tears streaming. "I'm... sorry... uuuh..."

"It's... fine..." Mark gently caressed her face with his skeletal hands. "We... we... should... we should... let them... rest..."

"Yeah..." Elayne managed a faint smile. "Let's... let... these... souls rest..."

They moved to an abandoned, secluded part of the city, dug into the dry, dead ground, and placed the pills there, crushing them with their hands.

As they crushed the pills, small soul fragments emerged, scattering into the air.

Afterward, they covered the remains with dirt and walked away.

As they departed, they noticed a skeleton watching them from behind a building.

It was unsettling.

"...?"

Elayne looked back in confusion, but the skeleton fled before she could hear its inner voice.

She sighed, recognizing that all undead were peculiar and quirky, and chose not to pursue it.

After all, what more could she do to the poor creature? She had no intention of causing further suffering to any undead.

"Let's... sleep...?" Elayne asked.

"Hm..." Mark nodded.

They hid in the shadows, embracing each other and falling asleep.

Despite the nightmares, sleep was the only "pleasure" Elayne and Mark could find.

Even after being stripped of life, humanity, and strength, sleep remained a universal constant.

Although undead were technically tireless, the more they used their souls and Nether, the more restless and unhinged they became.

Sleep helped Elayne and Mark preserve their sanity and gradually restore their minds.

The next day arrived.

"Wake up."

The ominous voice of the General echoed before them, laced with fury.

Dread gripped Mark and Elayne's souls. For a moment, they longed to remain asleep, escaping reality.

Yet they had to face it.

Chapter 1735: Separated

"Wake up."

The ominous voice of the "General" echoed before them.

Slowly, both Elayne and Mark stirred, facing him.

Today, he was going to teach them how to fight—or something like that. Elayne wasn't exactly looking forward to it, but if it could help her grow stronger, she was willing to put in the effort.

However...

His voice was more serious than usual. Stern.

"Is this yours?"

"Eh?"

The blazing skeleton threw crushed pills onto the ground. They were covered in dirt—Elayne and Mark had tried to bury them.

The pills were shattered, their souls long gone.

"Surprised? A little bird told me you two bastards didn't want to eat the pills. That you crushed them, let the souls escape, and buried them."

"I... I can explain..." Elayne muttered.

SLAP!

The General struck her, sending her flying into the ground. Her face burned as she crashed, groaning in pain.

"Elayn...!"

Mark rushed toward her, but the General grabbed his shoulders, stopping him.

"I offered you kindness! And this is how you repay me? You're still clinging to your attachments from life, aren't you? Heh... You foolish idiots! You have to let go!"

"Raaaahhh!"

Mark lashed out, trying to attack.

But the skeleton crushed his legs with a single kick, dropping him to the ground.

Then, he placed his boot over Mark's skull.

"No...! No!"

Elayne crawled toward him.

"Please... forgive him... It was my fault... I forced him..."

"Elayn... no... no...!"

The General stared at them for a moment.

"Ghostly Yin Pills are a precious resource. Throwing them away is a grave insult to the souls used to make them," he said coldly. "It's clear you're a terrible influence on him... He reminds me of myself when I was a young recruit. Still attached to my past life. Naïve. I hadn't yet faced the harsh truths of the Netherworld. But my master showed me the truth... and I'll show him the truth."

"Huh?" Elayne blinked, confused.

"But you? You don't get that privilege. From the moment I saw you, I knew you were trouble," he growled. "Still, you're too talented to be crushed into pills. I'll punish you instead. Take him away!"

"Elayn...! ELAYNE...!"

Mark screamed as a pair of Corpse Golems dragged him away.

"Mark! What... What are you doing with him?!"

Using all her strength, Elayne managed to speak clearly, surprising the General.

"Hoh, so you can talk properly? Interesting... Don't worry, I have great plans for him. But you? You'll rot in the pit for ten years. Think about your mistakes—and about the glory of the King. When I bring you out, you'll see the incredible being your lover has become."

"No...! NOOO!"

Elayne screamed as a bone golem hurled her into a dark pit.

THUD!

She hit her head so hard her skull cracked open, and she lost consciousness.

...

"Leave me...! Go...! Elayne...! Elayne...! Where... Where... Where...?!"

Mark thrashed inside the large cage where he'd been confined. His body blazed with fire, his power growing rapidly.

He formed twin swords of flame and began cutting through the metallic bars. The magic runes encasing the cage started to crumble.

"Hah, you've got great potential! But forget about that zombie. I'll shape you into the perfect soldier for the King!"

"Let me go!!!"

Mark roared, transforming into a blazing figure as he destroyed the cage. The General laughed, stepped forward, and punched him in the face—shattering most of his skull.

BOOM!

"Gaaah?!"

Mark groaned, his soul cracking as half his skeletal body was obliterated by the blow.

"Now, now. You've got potential, but aren't you getting a little too cocky?"

The General smirked. Two bone golems grabbed Mark and dragged him into a massive magical device resembling a cauldron, flanked by two bone pillars.

"Ahh... What is this?!"

Mark groaned, struggling to speak. Liquid Nether poured into the cauldron, beginning to boil.

"Don't worry. I'm not turning you into a pill. But I'll use the same method to refine you into a perfect soldier. I'll make you suffer so much you'll forget you ever loved her."

The bone golems sealed the cauldron with a heavy lid, trapping Mark inside as his body and soul boiled in Nether.

"GAAAAHHHH!"

His agonized screams echoed throughout the fortress, loud enough for every soldier to hear. They shuddered at the thought of angering the General.

After a day, the boiling stopped. Mark emerged, groaning furiously.

"BASTARD! I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

"Hoh, still not enough? I can do this as long as it takes."

The device activated again. Mark was boiled in even more intense Nether, his body and soul constantly seared.

His thoughts unraveled. Memories became foggy and fragmented...

And as days, months, and years passed...

Even his identity began to fade.

...

How long had it been?

Elayne stopped counting after forty days.

In those first forty days, she tried to move—but could barely manage it.

Letting her Ghostly Soul circulate through her body was slow and tedious.

Day by day, she sat up, checking her head. A massive crack had opened, and her brains were leaking.

Over the next fourteen days, she tried to make sense of her surroundings.

Everything was pitch black.

She slept for another ten days in a daze before waking again.

A faint light shone from above. The pit was likely dozens of meters deep.

"...Mark."

Elayne stared upward, sighing.

It was all her fault.

Her compassion had ruined their only chance.

"I'm sorry..."

She cried black tears, then slept for weeks and months.

Without souls or Nether, her soul grew weak and small.

She was starving.

"Ah... Mark..."

A year passed.

Elayne woke again, dizzy.

How many times had she dreamed the same nightmare?

It repeated endlessly: a giant hand crushing her chest, tearing out her spiritual heart.

"...Elena."

She remembered her daughter.

Her friends.

Her family on the farm.

Her animals...

"I miss you all..."

Half a year passed in the blink of an eye.

Elayne opened her eyes again.

Strangely, she didn't feel as tired.

"What's happening to me?"

Her soul had been starving for so long.

And yet...

She wasn't scattering.

Then, in the darkness, she saw something.

A small, glowing mushroom.

"...?"

She crawled toward it, intrigued.

How could a mushroom survive in the Netherworld?

It made no sense.

And yet...

As she touched it, the mushroom glowed.

Dark blue with gray dots, it radiated Ghostly Energy and Nether.

Could this even be called a lifeform?

It absorbed Nether and converted it into Ghostly Energy to feed itself.

"...You're alive."

Elayne realized that despite its strangeness...

It was a living being.

An organism that had adapted to survive.

She smiled faintly.

"Hi... I'm glad... I have someone to talk to..."

She gently touched the mushroom, then pulled her hand away, afraid to harm it.

"Please... keep glowing... by my side..."

She fell asleep next to it, slumbering for another three months.

THUD!

She woke to the sound of someone else being thrown into the pit.

She rushed to see who it was.

A small skeleton lay there.

It resembled a child.

Its legs were crushed, half its skull missing.

"Aeh... Aeheh..."

It cried in pain.

"Are you okay?"

Elayne slowly approached, nursing the child.

"Uuh... mama?"

"My god... How old are you? Why is a baby like you here? Do they not even spare the souls of children?"

"Mama..."

"I'm not..."

"Mama..."

"..."

Chapter 1736: The Dark Pit

Elayne quickly realized the skeleton had likely been discarded for being either useless or rebellious.

It hadn't been crushed into pills immediately, which meant it possessed some kind of talent.

Still, it was so traumatized that it clung to her, calling her "Mama" and refusing to let go.

"What's your name? I'm Elayne."

"Ma..."

"Ma? Is that your name?"

"Waaahhh..."

The child skeleton suddenly burst into tears.

Elayne sighed, hugging it gently and helping it fall asleep.

After laying it down softly, she approached the mushroom.

It had grown larger, now surrounded by several smaller caps.

"Did you have children? I'm so happy for you... They look adorable."

Once again, Elayne gently petted the mushrooms.

But this time, something changed.

She felt a faint sensation.

A flicker of light.

"...?"

A small spark of dark blue and greenish energy danced on her fingertip.

It began to condense into something.

"Wait... is this...?"

Elayne sat down cross-legged, gathering her thoughts.

She expanded her ghostly soul bit by bit.

Using the power accumulated from the Curse of Pain, she had stored a modest amount of Nether.

She couldn't miss this opportunity.

Quickly, she merged the spark of light with her ghostly soul.

Then, slowly, she wove a spiritual thread connecting to the mushroom colony.

FLASH!

"...Nature."

Elayne's eyes glowed bright blue for the first time as she felt Nature Energy flow into her body.

Then she understood.

"It doesn't matter where I am... Nature will always try to survive."

Instead of consuming souls or absorbing Nether...

Elayne sat beside the mushrooms and began to meditate.

She unraveled the thread of spiritual energy and reached the mushroom's soul.

It had one—a tiny, ghostly soul.

Nature was with her.

Even in something so small and seemingly insignificant...

It remained.

"There's a path..."

In that moment, Elayne realized there was indeed a path forward.

One no Undead had ever taken.

She was still a Farmer.

And a Druid.

Even in death, the Demon King couldn't strip away what made her special.

"My soul must have endured because this mushroom was sharing its energy with me without my knowing..."

A year passed.

THUD!

Another undead person was thrown into the pit.

This time, it was a young zombie missing both arms.

He cried out, calling for someone.

"Emilia... Emilia... Emilia..."

Around his neck hung a necklace with a portrait of someone he loved.

"Hi..." Elayne tried to speak.

He ignored her, muttering to himself and trembling in fear.

"I know you're afraid... and you miss her."

"..."

The man looked down, acknowledging her presence.

"I miss someone too... and I'm scared. But maybe we could talk. Keep each other company."

"..."

He glanced at Elayne, noticing the little skeleton hiding behind her.

"It doesn't matter."

"...?"

"Nothing matters. We're dead."

"Yes, we are," Elayne replied with a bitter smile.

They fell silent.

After a minute...

"But still..."

"...?"

"Even if we're dead... I believe there's a way out."

"We were thrown into a pit. It's over."

"No, it's not."

"..."

"They said they'd eventually get us out, right?"

"Probably to turn us into pills."

"Yes, but that's still a chance."

"A chance for what? We can't escape."

"But we can try. Together."

"It's impossible."

"Maybe. But it's worth trying."

"It's not even worth that."

"You never know until you try."

"..."

Annoyed, the young zombie turned away and hugged the portrait of his lover, closing his eyes.

"If you ever want to talk... I'll be here."

"..."

He quickly fell asleep, ignoring her.

Elayne turned to the mushrooms in the corner of the pit.

They were slowly spreading along the walls.

And something new had appeared.

Moss.

Dark blue moss was growing near the mushrooms, forming a kind of symbiosis.

Using her glitched system, Elayne identified the mushrooms as Ghostly Wail Mushrooms—highly toxic to both the living and undead, capable of harming the soul directly.

The moss was called Dark Blue Yin Moss. It contained Yin Energy and thrived in this realm, absorbing Nether and Ghostly Energy and converting them into Yin Energy.

Elayne gently touched the moss, then the mushrooms. Threads of green and dark blue light emerged from her ghostly soul.

Her soul was growing, and her control over her body was becoming sharper.

"Mama... moss? Mushroom?"

The little skeleton walked toward Elayne.

She had no name—or couldn't remember it.

So Elayne named her "Hope."

This little skeleton kept her company and brought her a small measure of happiness each day.

She was her hope.

"They're friends... dear friends of ours."

"Ooh..."

"Touch them, Hope."

"..."

Hope extended her tiny skeletal fingers and touched the mushrooms and moss.

"Soft... hehe..."

"Yes, they're soft, right?"

Elayne gently infused a bit of her energy, helping Hope form a connection with the mushroom and moss.

Another year passed.

The young zombie had grown curious about Elayne and Hope's strange underground farm.

He watched them blankly, passing the time.

"You know this is all pointless, right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"What will you get from it? Mushrooms and moss? There's no magic in them."

"There's a little."

"Not enough to matter. Why bother?"

"Because it's worth trying. It's all I have now."

"..."

In a year, the glowing mushrooms and moss had spread even further, all connected to Elayne.

Year by year, slowly...

She was farming.

And through farming, something within her soul was stirring.

Very slowly.

"There's nothing else we can do but persevere. Keep trying. Keep moving."

"Even when we're dead?"

"Yes. Even then."

"..."

The man sighed, glancing at the portrait of his beloved. He shed a few tears and closed his eyes.

THUD!

Over the years...

THUD!

More were thrown into the pit.

THUD!

Seven years after Elayne had arrived, three more joined them.

A wailing ghost with no clear shape who loved to sing—Dorothy.

A bear-like skeleton, large and strong but always sad and unable to fight—Norman.

And a small shadowy figure with red eyes and long arms who stared silently at everyone—Shade.

They had all forgotten their names, so Elayne gave them new ones.

Now, they gathered around her, admiring the glowing mushrooms and the soft moss beneath their feet.

It was the only trace of the living world they had left.

And it gave them a faint glimmer of hope.

Chapter 1737: Friends

"Do you feel the nature within you?" Elayne asked. "These little plants that go unnoticed... they're amazing, right?"

"Yes..." Norman replied. "I love... I love plants... I love forests... I want to go back to my forest..."

"I always love singing about the beauty of nature. Tralalala~!" Dorothy hummed.

"...Light, glow, pretty," Shade murmured.

"But no eat! Mushroom and moss bad for you," Hope warned. "Just befriend, okay?"

"Hm..." Shade released the mushroom he had been about to eat.

"I don't know how you do it... to think they're all your friends... you're weird," the young zombie muttered.

"Come to think of it, I've never known your name," Elayne said.

"My name is Sailor..." he answered. "I died when the ocean went mad and swallowed us all. My beloved was with me, and I've been trying to find her ever since."

Sailor had opened up more over the years. Thanks to Elayne's persistence, he had begun to speak more. Perhaps the soft glow of the mushrooms lifted his spirits, even if only slightly.

"Emilia?" Elayne asked.

"Yeah..." Sailor nodded. "I miss her... my Emilia..."

"I miss Mark... I'm so worried..." Elayne whispered, a black tear rolling down her cheek. "But I can't do anything except stay here and do whatever I can within this space. So let's become friends while we still have time. We have to live every moment, or we'll regret it, Sailor."

He said nothing, but he didn't turn away.

"Then shall we continue talking with the plants?" Elayne walked back toward the other undead, who were all conversing with the flora.

"Why do we have to talk with the plants?" Sailor asked.

"Because they feel lonely too," Elayne replied, smiling softly with melancholic eyes. "Oh my dear... how are you today? Yes? Good? I'm so happy..."

Sailor sighed.

Even though Elayne appeared sane on the surface, it was clear she had lost her mind. Plants don't talk. They don't understand words. He sighed again, pitying her.

Over time, Elayne learned many things about the people thrown into the pit, even fragments of their past lives.

She discovered that Dorothy had been a musician from Arcadia, a songstress from a port city Elayne had never heard of. Dorothy died when undead attacked the caravan she was traveling in, which had been returning to her hometown.

They hadn't killed her outright because her voice could enhance the vitality of ghostly souls—or inflict pain—depending on her intent. Singing was her obsession, the last lingering attachment she couldn't let go of. It interfered with her training, so they cast her aside.

"Oh, Elayne! There's nothing I love more than singing! It's my passion, my life. It's kept me fed and sheltered ever since I was a little child."

Dorothy loved talking about her past and how music had shaped her life, despite the hardships. Elayne understood her well and was a patient listener, always enjoying her songs. Dorothy brought life to the dark, lifeless pit, and everyone grew to love her—even the pessimistic Sailor.

Unfortunately, Dorothy knew little about the Netherworld and was just as clueless as Elayne and Hope about its vastness.

Norman, however, seemed to know more. Elayne learned he had once been a Bearman lumberjack who lived in the West Woods of the Verdant Continent. He had a large family, but hunters killed his parents and siblings.

Norman fled to the mountains and avoided villages, living off the land. Though lonely, he found happiness among the forest animals... until the forest turned dark and poisonous. A giant, purple insect chimera killed him while he was fishing. After that, he appeared in the Netherworld and was enslaved by the Demon King of Death's army.

Unlike Elayne, who had arrived only days before being thrown into the pit, Norman had been here for twenty years. He had learned a few things.

"That man you call 'General' is no general," Norman explained. "He's just a low-ranking commander, barely above the regular soldiers. He oversees about three hundred undead. When they fail the tests, they're turned into those horrible pills. That's why he and others like him regularly visit the Netherworld's Gate to find new recruits to enslave."

"The Netherworld Gate?!" Elayne exclaimed. "Can we escape to the outside world?"

"There are many gates in the Netherworld. They open and close all the time. The only permanent one I've heard of belongs to the Demon King of Death... but it's inside his palace. You'd have your soul torn apart before you even got close."

"Oh... So what's this commander's name?"

"He's called Blazer—or maybe that's a title he earned. He's a commander for a reason. As you might guess, he's one of those undead who managed to crystallize a Nether Core, or Nether Heart, whatever they call it."

"Is creating one of those really that significant?"

"Of course it is, Lady Elayne. It completely transforms an undead. It grants magical abilities, stronger bodies, powerful regeneration, and more."

"Blazer... the bastard who took my Mark away... No matter what, I'll make him pay."

Shade remained the most enigmatic. Unlike the others, he had been in the Netherworld far longer, and his mind seemed fractured. Decades of undeath had made him strange and erratic.

Yet by speaking to him regularly and letting him interact with the plants, Shade began to show occasional signs of lucidity. He grew fond of Elayne and attached to her kindness.

"Once. Lived. Far. Away. Mother. Sick. Father. Dead. I... Shade... what did... Death? Death..."

Sometimes he tried to speak but quickly forgot what he was saying, muttering "death" over and over until Elayne's soothing voice calmed him.

Shade was likely a Shadow because his soul had been eroded by the Netherworld for too long. Still, being a Shadow came with unique abilities, including an innate talent for curses. He taught Elayne what he could.

What Elayne most wanted to learn was how to dispel curses. Shade shared what he knew, but his explanations were fragmented, leaving Elayne to fill in the gaps herself.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. Elayne spent her time speaking with those around her, forging deeper connections, learning more about their circumstances, and diligently farming mushrooms and moss.

And so, ten years have passed since Elayne was thrown into the pit.

Chapter 1738: Ten Years Later

Ten years had passed since Elayne was thrown into the pit.

"Tsk. What's with all this fungus around the pit? Has someone actually cleansed this place?"

"Who cares? It's the damn pit."

"Commander Blazer said we're pulling them all out today. He's hosting some kind of event."

"What for?"

"I don't know... testing some kind of super soldier he made."

"Oh, that guy?"

"Yeah... we'd better just follow orders. I don't want my soul destroyed after finally learning to talk again."

"Me neither..."

Elayne opened her eyes.

She had been in deep meditation for the past three months, communing with the plants and her companions, who were also in a similar state. Sailor was the only one who hadn't fully embraced her "doctrine," and he had sensed earlier that their time had come.

"Elayne, it's time," he said, his expression solemn as he looked up at the sky.

"I know," Elayne replied with a nod.

She glanced at a glitchy system notification. Using her Ghostly Soul, she deciphered the corrupted text and uncovered the true name of her new Skill:

[Congratulations, you have learned the Skill: [Netherworld Farming Arts: Lv1]!]

"Finally..."

After ten long years, she had drawn out every ounce of power buried deep within her soul. In this desolate place, with no resources and no path to strength beyond the cultivation of plants, Elayne's mind had slowly healed. Her memories had reassembled, and she had regained full control of her body. Her mind was nearly as sharp as it had been in life.

The wound in her head had closed, and the one in her chest had mended as well, thanks to the Nether energy she channeled into her flesh. It activated the regenerative power of the Zombie's Flesh. Shade had also helped her craft a Cursed Rune of Flesh and another of Decay. Though slightly flawed and not as refined as those made by the Cursed Needle Master, they were sufficient.

"Hurry and climb up!"

A skeleton called from above, tossing down a rope. One by one, they were expected to climb out on their own.

"If you take too long, we're burning this whole pit down!"

"..."

Elayne looked at her friends.

Dorothy.

Norman.

Hope.

Shade.

Sailor.

She smiled and nodded at them. "Let's go."

She was the last to climb, letting little Hope go first, with Norman just below to support her. Hope hadn't been able to "grow up" and remained a small skeleton, but after a long time, her legs had finally regrown. She could now walk on her own.

"Huh, there were five in here? More than I expected."

Elayne was the last to reach the surface. Ten years had passed, though to her, it felt like only a few weeks. Being Undead had severely distorted her perception of time.

"Excuse me, has it really been ten years?" she asked politely, addressing the two skeleton soldiers clad in black armor.

"Yeah, it has, trash! You're heading to the arena right now, so grab a weapon and get ready!"

"Arena?"

"Lord Blazer picked you and these four other useless piles of bones to serve as entertainment. We've got some distinguished guests today!"

"Guests?"

"Two nobles from great families are visiting... You really don't know anything, do you?"

"I'm sorry... I hope this helps."

Elayne handed one of the soldiers a Ghostly Yin Pill.

"Hmph. Well, no harm in telling you. It'll be the last thing you learn before dying to our strongest soldier anyway," the one who took the pill chuckled, while the other glared at him with envy. "The youngest son of the Great Lord of the Black Spectral Dragon Palace is arriving today, along with the daughter of the King of the Nether Ghost Castle—the White Ghost Princess. They're both esteemed members of two major powers in the Netherworld's Abyssal Cavern Labyrinth Territory. That's where we are now."

"A-Abyssal Cavern Labyrinth... So that's why there are caverns everywhere," Elayne murmured. "And nobles?"

She was stunned. The Netherworld was far more expansive than she had imagined. She had thought it was just a realm where the undead wandered aimlessly, perhaps with a few scattered villages. But contrary to her assumptions, the Netherworld was a vast world of its own—possibly even larger and older than Arcadia.

"They're here to witness the special soldier Lord Blazer has been raising," the soldier continued. "Our great King wants to build ties with the ancient forces, palaces, and kingdoms of the Netherworld. That's why he's hosting these events and offering up his own soldiers, hoping the ancient families will see him as someone worth supporting."

"...?"

Then it clicked. The Demon King of Death was likely a newer power in the Netherworld compared to these ancient factions. Though his strength was undeniable and he was probably feared by many, the oldest powers could still oppose him—and if united, perhaps even defeat him.

This was all speculation, but it was based on the fragments of knowledge she had gathered.

"He's not just creating soldiers for himself," Elayne thought. "He's selling them to other factions to earn their favor and gain access to their strength. All to advance his plans to invade the Living World."

"So... His Maje...sty..." Elayne struggled to say the title respectfully. "He's hosting this event? Will he be present?"

"Of course not! He's got far more important things to do than watch a bunch of trash fight in a second-rate arena," the soldier scoffed. "But sometimes, a genius talent emerges from the rubble. That's who you'll be fighting. You weren't turned into pills because you might actually pose a challenge."

"Good challenges..."

Elayne sighed as she walked through the city, taking in the surroundings. Gloomy houses made of black stone and white bones stretched in every direction. Some rose like towers, others sprawled low and wide. There was little sense of architectural order.

From Norman, she had learned this place was called "White Bone City." The name made sense, given how much of it was built from bones, with only a few structures made of black stone.

"Elayne, what now? I thought we were going to escape."

Sailor's voice echoed in her mind through "Spirit Talk," a unique ability Elayne possessed. It allowed her to communicate with Spirits without speaking aloud. Anything that qualified as a Spirit—even the ghostly souls of the Undead—could speak directly into her soul, sometimes involuntarily.

"Please, just let me find him first."

"..."

Sailor rolled his eyes and looked away. The others—Hope, Dorothy, and the rest—showed no doubt. They trusted Elayne completely.

Chapter 1739: We Meet Again

After climbing countless stairs and crossing a floor paved with white bone tiles, they finally arrived at a vast arena built within the remains of a colossal Bone Beast. The arena and its seating were entirely crafted from the creature's white bones, shaped and assembled by masterful Bone Crafters.

A large audience had already gathered. Hundreds of Undead of various shapes and sizes filled the stands—some unlike anything Elayne had ever seen. There were black trees with legs and dangling fruits that resembled red eyes, blue-skinned goblins with white horns, and demon-like beings with six arms, their skin either crimson or cobalt, their golden eyes sharp and piercing.

These beings bore no resemblance to typical undead. They weren't skeletal, decaying, or ghostly. This was another truth Norman had once shared with her: these were members of the "Nine Noble Races of the Netherworld."

While common Undead like Ghosts, Zombies, and Skeletons were the most widespread, the Nine Noble Races were the true powers of the Netherworld. They had established kingdoms, empires, and nations,

each ruled by their own bloodlines. These beings existed between life and death—technically alive, yet capable of surviving in the Netherworld by adapting their biology to absorb Ghostly Energy and Nether.

They reminded Elayne of the Mushrooms and Moss she had once befriended.

Norman had only known of four noble races, but Sailor had told her about the others. The Nine Noble Races of the Netherworld were:

The Blue Ghostly Goblin RaceThe White Ghost RaceThe Withering Tree RaceThe Rakshasa RaceThe Asura RaceThe Jiangshi RaceThe Vampire RaceThe Ghoul RaceAnd the noblest of them all, the Nether Dragon Race

Some of these races treated all members equally, while others were divided by castes or bloodlines. The Nether Dragon Race, for instance, had splintered into over five distinct families, each descending from their Great Ancestor.

There were likely other intelligent races as well, but these nine controlled most of the Netherworld's territory and were constantly vying for resources and dominance.

The Demon King of Death must have arrived in this chaotic realm and, through sheer power, established himself as a new force to be reckoned with. His presence had stirred the other races, who now viewed him as a threat.

To Elayne's surprise, Thanatos had managed the Netherworld with unexpected grace. He was now regarded as a powerful and just ruler—at least by some—who sought unity among the Undead and dreamed of conquering the Living World, a dream shared by many races trapped in the Netherworld.

"Here we are..." the soldier said.

Elayne and her group were led into a small chamber beneath the public seating. A large metallic gate stood before them, currently closed. It was made of iron bars, allowing them to see into the arena beyond.

Inside, a group of Undead Soldiers were locked in brutal combat with monstrous Nether Beasts—and being utterly annihilated. The opening battle was clearly for entertainment; none of the soldiers were expected to survive. In the end, only one creature remained: a massive, bat-like quadruped that devoured the souls of the fallen.

Suddenly, four ghosts composed of black and dark blue lightning descended. They unleashed a strange technique, binding the beast in Yin Lightning Chains and dragging it away as it shrieked in fury.

Elayne could hear its voice.

"It hurts...! I did everything you asked! Why won't you let me go?! How much more must I suffer... Kill me...! Kill me!"

Despite its monstrous appearance, its voice was articulate and filled with anguish. Yet no one else seemed to hear it.

"I see you've grown a stronger soul."

A familiar voice cut through the air.

Elayne turned sharply. Behind her stood a tall skeleton wreathed in red and blue flames, clad in heavy, spiked dark-blue armor. In his right hand, he held black chains connected to the collar of a three-headed, dog-like Nether Beast that snarled at them.

It was him.

The bastard who had tormented her and Mark since their arrival.

Commander Blazer.

"I don't know how you managed it without soul pills, but it doesn't matter," he sneered. "You're all going to die today, your souls devoured by my magnum opus. So get ready."

He gestured to the beast. "This? She's my new pet. A gift from the Black General of White Bone City, for raising such a powerful soldier that even the Nobles took notice."

"...Blazer," Elayne said coldly.

"Oh? You know my name? How adorable," he chuckled, his eyes gleaming with contempt. "I can't wait to watch you burn. You remind me of everything weak about being alive. The sooner you're gone, the better. Come, my beast. Let's leave these fools behind and enjoy some crystallized souls. I'm starving."

The three-headed dog appeared obedient, but Elayne could hear its true thoughts.

"I'm hungry...!"

"You eat all the soul crystals and leave us scraps!"

"I want to eat you, bastard! One day, I will!"

All three heads loathed Blazer. They were starving—and furious.

Elayne couldn't help herself. She giggled.

No, she burst out laughing.

"Pfff... Hahaha!"

Blazer turned, puzzled. "Oh? Have you finally lost your mind?"

"No, not at all," Elayne replied, her grin wicked. "It's just... you look absolutely ridiculous riding that three-headed mutt. Hahaha!"

"...Hah?"

Blazer drew a blazing sword and pointed it at her, but stopped himself. He couldn't kill her yet. He had promised the crowd a grand spectacle.

"You'll see what's waiting for you soon enough. Let's see who's laughing then."

He turned and walked away, unaware that Elayne had accomplished something while distracting him.

Behind the dog and its armored handler, a small patch of moss and mushrooms had taken root.

Sailor noticed it immediately. Elayne had done something—something she hadn't told anyone about. And something about her had changed. Her demeanor was different. Sharper. More calculating.

Ten years of meditation had altered her mind.

She had become cunning.

"What's wrong, Sailor?" Elayne asked, her eyes still shadowed with sorrow. "Let's enjoy the games while we wait for our turn."

She turned her gaze to the arena, where warriors and beasts clashed in brutal combat. Sometimes the warriors triumphed. Other times, they were torn apart.

Sailor glanced at the floor.

Moss.

Then, near the arena seats—mushrooms. Small, sprouting, and unmistakably alive.

"What? Is this her doing?"

He couldn't be sure. How could anyone make plants grow instantly, especially in the Netherworld?

If it wasn't her... then who?

As he pondered, the gates creaked open, and two guards approached.

Chapter 1740: Confrontation

The gates creaked open, and two guards approached.

"One of you, step forward. Our Champion is coming. Prepare yourselves—grab a weapon!"

They offered a selection of rusty arms.

Elayne reached for a sword, her calm, sorrowful eyes meeting theirs.

"I haven't wielded a sword in ten years."

Gripping the hilt, she stepped forward.

"I'll go first."

"Fine, go ahead. Lord Blazer instructed us to send you in first anyway."

As the gate shut behind her, Elayne walked into the center of the arena. Her bare feet sank into the white sand, her heightened senses absorbing its texture.

"Who is that zombie?"

"For a filthy zombie, she's got a pretty face."

"I agree—she's certainly unique."

"What a strange aura. She gives off a disgusting vibe."

"Have the seats not been cleansed? Why are there mushrooms everywhere?"

Amid the crowd, Elayne glanced toward the elevated seats encircling the arena, where the truly powerful sat. The moment her gaze met one of them, a jolt surged through her body—a paralyzing pressure.

She had locked eyes with a woman of pale skin, long white hair, and gray eyes. Dressed in a mourning gown and veiled in white, her beauty was haunting. Powerful guards flanked her, and her icy stare froze Elayne in place.

"That must be the White Ghost Princess, daughter of the King of the Nether Ghost Castle. Her aura is ominous... yet she's surrounded by guards. Is she still too weak to defend herself?"

Another gaze struck her. Elayne turned to see a young man with purple hair, black horns, and blue skin. His golden eyes glowed as he smiled at her.

"That creep must be the youngest son of the Great Lord of the Black Spectral Dragon Palace. So he's a dragon? He doesn't look like one—probably using some method to take human form."

Elayne's nerves tightened. Their attention was fixed on her.

The dragon's leering smile was the worst. Surrounded by female zombies dressed like belly dancers, he ogled her with lust.

"It's a shame that beautiful one is being sacrificed. Is there no way I can buy her?"

"Sorry, my lord. She was designed specifically to be killed by the Champion."

"Hoo..."

She overheard him speaking to a tall, red-skinned, four-armed Asura servant dressed in a butler's uniform.

"Ugh... I'll ignore him."

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the main event! Once lovers in life, now forced to fight to the death! One became our great Champion, trained personally by me. The other was cast into the pit for ten years! Husband and wife!"

"...?"

Elayne's eyes widened. She knew who the Champion was.

RUMBLE!

Heavy footsteps echoed across the arena. A massive figure approached.

The metallic door flew open, revealing a towering shadow emerging from the underground passage—a three-meter-tall skeleton with black bones, a flaming red skull, and blazing wings. Red armor clung to his frame.

"Mark!"

She had feared this moment. Now that it was real, dread consumed her—yet so did joy. Even under these horrific circumstances, she was finally seeing him again.

"Mark! It's me! Mark!"

Elayne ran toward him. His eyes, ablaze and empty, stared back.

"Master... must serve... master... kill... kill you..."

"M-Mark?"

He raised his flaming sword.

CRASH!

The blade struck the ground, unleashing a fiery slash that exploded against the wall behind Elayne.

BOOM!

A nether energy barrier shielded the audience.

Elayne stared at Mark. His inner voice was gone.

He was hollow.

A puppet. A tool. No longer himself.

"Mark... MARK! It's me! Elayne! I love you! Please wake up!"

She cried out, but Mark stepped forward. Flames spread across the sand, burning her foot.

"Ugh!"

She leapt back just in time as he charged, his body blazing like a meteor. Blazer's laughter rang out.

"Gyahahaha! You fool! Ten years! Did you really think he'd remember you? I boiled his soul until every memory of you vanished—scattered like dust!"

"...?!"

Elayne's face twisted in horror and despair.

"Hehehe! HAHAAHA! YES! That's the face I wanted to see!"

"Memories cannot be erased."

"...Hm?"

Elayne's expression shifted. Calm returned.

"They're a fundamental part of who we are. Mark's soul remains intact. No matter how much you torture him, deep down, my Mark is still there."

"KILL... KILL!"

Mark roared, opening his skeletal jaws and unleashing a beam of flames.

Elayne stood her ground and swung her sword.

Her Aura erupted.

FLAAASH!

"Ngh?! What... What is this?!"

Blazer screamed as Elayne radiated an immense energy—Nature, Life force, and Spiritual Essence interwoven with Ghostly, Yin, and Nether energies. Predominantly green and gold, it stunned the crowd.

Infusing her sword with this power, Elayne unleashed her technique.

A flame of glitching pixels and digital particles split Mark's attack.

RUMBLE!

Mark staggered, a deep slash carved across his skull and armor.

He roared and charged again.

"Don't worry, honey... I'll save you, no matter what."

Black tears streamed down Elayne's face as she smiled and met his blade. Their swords clashed, shaking the arena.

Sailor and the others watched in awe.

"H-How?! Where is she getting this much power?!" Sailor gasped. "Wait..."

Someone was missing.

"Little Hope...! Where is she?! Wasn't she just with us?!"

"She went to complete the plan~!" Dorothy sang. "And now it's our time to act~!"

As she spoke, Elayne dodged another strike, touching the ground and spreading dark blue moss and black mushrooms.

"{Farming Terrain Expansion: Netherworld Garden}"

Moss and fungi erupted across the arena, climbing over nobles and undead alike, draining their energy.

Screams and chaos followed.

"W-What's the meaning of this?! What are YOU doing?!"

Blazer raged, glaring at Elayne—the source of the disaster.

"Oh dear, we're just getting started. Little Hope should be ready by now."

"Hm?!"

FLAAASH!

From the dark pit, an explosion of blue, green, and golden light burst forth.

The millions of mushroom colonies and moss Elayne cultivated over ten years began to converge, forming a crystallized core.

At the same time, Elayne opened her chest, revealing a glowing green crystal. Moss and mushrooms grew inside her body.

"S-She turned herself into a damn flowerpot?!"

Drawing power from her modified body, her surroundings, and Little Hope's efforts, Elayne stood tall.

"Gardenia, it's time to wake up."

Her counterattack had begun.