

H. Academy 151

Chapter 151 Chapter 34.2 - First Step

"Why did you call us here?"

Inside the dimly lit building with the clear signs of being empty, three students gathered, their faces filled with different emotions.

The one leaning on the wall was a tall boy playing with the dagger in his hand. The other two were the newcomer girls who had just entered the room. One of them had a clear, annoyed expression, and the other had a smirk.

"You know, we need to lay low for a while, right?"

The girl, with an annoyed expression, said, looking at the boy.

"Of course I do. Do you think I would call you here without any reason, Pieck?" The boy answered as he stood up. "The target is not dead."

Pieck's annoyance turned into surprise, her eyes widening as she processed the boy's words. "What do you mean he's not dead? We executed the plan perfectly! There's no way he could have survived."

The boy, still playing with the dagger, nodded his head. "I know we have done everything right."

That was a correct statement. Before executing the act, they had searched the target's background and his possible skills. Then, they prepared the tools they needed to use according to it. Everything was perfect, as their target was within the range of their capabilities.

However, one factor was different.

"Apparently, we underestimated him. He managed to live somehow. You remember the light that shone on the skies in the dungeon, right? I think something happened at that time."

As those words sank in, the trio fell silent. The girls were trying to absorb this information and the possible results of it.

The second girl, Annie, who had been smirking, chimed in, "Seems like our dear Astron is more resilient than we thought. Perhaps there's more to him than meets the eye." She was clearly in a good mood as the expression she made wasn't that normal for any other average student.

"SHUT UP!" However, the Pieck wasn't in the same mood. "This is not the time to joke around, Annie!" Pieck's panic started to show, and her voice quivered as she spoke, "If he's alive, he'll expose everything! We can't let that happen!"

The boy walked closer to Pieck, his expression serious. "That's why I called you here. We need to regroup and come up with a new plan. We can't afford any mistakes this time."

His gaze alternated between Pieck and Annie. "You know what will happen to us if we fail, right?"

As the weight of the situation sank in, everyone fell silent.

This wasn't something they were ready for. After all, what could have possibly happened when they were trying to kill the weakest of the academy? Surely, nothing, right?

But now, that lack of preparedness came to bite them all.

Amidst the tense silence, Annie's smirk faded, and Pieck's panic lingered. Even the craziest ones did know the fate that was awaiting them the moment their connection to demon followers was leaked.

The boy took charge of the conversation, pacing as he spoke, "We need to reassess the situation. Astron's survival changes everything. We can't underestimate him again."

Annie leaned against a wall, crossing her arms. "So, what's the plan now? We can't just go after him without knowing what he's capable of."

Pieck, regaining some composure, added, "And we need to be more discreet this time. We can't afford any attention. The last thing we want is the academy getting involved."

The boy nodded in agreement, but at the same time, he released a bitter sigh.... "I also agree that we shouldn't involve the academy, but it is too late for that now. At this point, they should be aware of the fact that some of the students entering that dungeon were demon contractors."

As Reiner said that, he showed his smartwatch. There, the trio could see a message coming from the academy investigation team, calling Reiner.

"We may even need to abandon the mission and run away. With all these eyes, it will be a lot harder for us to complete the mission in any case."

Pieck's eyes widened with worry, and she blurted out, "But where do we go, Reiner? The organization won't just let us live. We're in this too deep. The only way out is to complete the mission as fast as possible and then leave the academy during the break period. It's our only chance."

Annie, who had been silent for a moment, finally spoke up, her tone serious, "Pieck's right. We can't outrun the organization, but if we finish this mission, we might have some leverage. We need to focus on Astron. Find out what he knows and exploit it. We can't afford to fail again."

Reiner nodded in reluctant agreement. "Fine, we stick to the original plan, but we need to be cautious. We can't afford any more mistakes. We also need to find out more about what happened in that dungeon. Whatever caused that light might be the key to understanding that bastard's resilience."

Pieck, frustration, and worry etched on her face, couldn't hold back her resentment. "That Astron, he's just an orphan bastard who got lucky. He won't be able to stand against us ne-"

SPURT!

However, at that moment, something unexpected occurred. The sound of wind and the sound of liquid splashing around echoed in the closed building.

Pieck couldn't even complete her sentence, as something had pierced her forehead, blood splashing through from there.

-SPLASH!

But that wasn't all; a series of other projectiles punctured her body one by one.

THUD!

And, in a matter of a second, Pieck fell to the ground without being able to utter any other words.

"Huh?"

The first one to give a reaction was Reiner, as he finally noticed the pool of blood that was forming underneath the Pieck.

"We are under attack!"

He shouted, assessing the angle from which the projectiles were coming. From the shadows, the unseen assailant continued to rain the projectiles.

WOOSH! WOOSH!

Reiner immediately activated his demonic powers, a dark aura enveloping him as he sought cover, his eyes scanning for the source of the attack.

"Bullets?"

Looking at the small things that fell short at the end of his shield, he mumbled. Bullets were something that wasn't widely used, as guns didn't hold much strength against strong people.

"Hehehehehe.....Who is this, I wonder?"

Annie, while laughing, took swift action, finding cover while drawing her menacing scythe.

The metallic gleam in her eyes conveyed her readiness for battle as her normal crazed smile returned.

"WHO ARE YOU!"

Reiner shouted, trying to get a reaction from the assailant. He had already taken a cover, and Annie was the same.

SILENCE!

However, no answer came as a reaction, as only an eerie silence was left in the building.

'How did he trespass our radar?'

They had already put a safety measure at the entrance, a device that was one of the biggest reasons why the government wasn't able to capture the demon followers.

'No, it is not the time to think about it.'

Reiner thought, looking at the pool of blood formed underneath Pieck's body.

'We shouldn't drag this.'

The bullets were also stopped, as only the darkness remained inside the room.

'No lights?'

The lights were gone.

'They are shot.'

The lightbulbs were all shattered as Reiner looked at the ceiling. There were no lights, but his superior senses as the demonic human was spread all around the place.

He could hear everything sense everything clearly. However, there was still no information about the assailant.

'Fuck!'

Understanding that time was not on their side, Reiner immediately stood up, moving to Pieck's body.

SHINE!

And at that second, he saw something shining on top of the ceiling. There on the wall, Reiner immediately sensed the mana channeling.

'No!'

He sensed, but it was too late.

SWOOSH!

As the channeling of mana was finished, another projectile flew, this time containing a lot more energy.

It was an arrow with a blue-lighted mana covering. The energy it contained was so much that even Reiner felt threatened.

BOOM!

Following that, the arrow exploded near Reiner, and the force of the blast sent him reeling.

THUD!

He lost his balance for a second, his demonic armor absorbing some of the impact but leaving him momentarily disoriented. As he hit the wall, he was momentarily shaken up.

"Kekekeke! There you are."

However, he wasn't alone.

Annie, seizing the opportunity, immediately dashed toward the direction from which the arrow had come. Her scythe gleamed menacingly as she prepared to strike down the unseen assailant.

SWOOSH!

Her scythe sliced through the air, aiming at an invisible target. Yet, as the weapon swung through the space, it met no resistance.

"What the hell?" Annie exclaimed, her eyes scanning the darkness. There was no one there, no trace of the attacker who had just launched the explosive arrow.

SWOOSH!

And, as if the attacker had predicted what Annie would do, at that exact second when she was in the air, another arrow flew through.

STAB!

And stabbed her in her shoulder. This time, it didn't contain as much energy as the previous one; thus, it was even harder for her to sense the arrow.

"Grr...."

Annie gritted her teeth, but that clear smirk was still on her mouth.

THUD!

With a smooth landing, she reached the ground.

Reiner, still recovering from the blast, managed to regain his footing. He activated his demonic powers, forming a protective barrier around himself.

"Annie, what happened?" he called out, his eyes darting around the room.

"I...I don't know," Annie replied, a hint of frustration in her voice. She was puzzled by the sudden disappearance of their unseen foe.

SWOOSH! SPURT!

However, in the silence that followed, they heard another sound of something splashing.

"Huh...."

As they turned their attention to the sound, they saw Pieck's body on the ground, with another arrow stabbed...

On the right beside her heart.....

"No..."

And the arrow was shining.

BOOM!

Coupled with another explosion occurring....

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BOOM!

The explosion that followed was more intense than the previous one, sending shockwaves through the room.

'NO!'

Reiner wanted to shout, but he couldn't even open his mouth.

TING!

His body was shaking as if something different had entered his body, disturbing his strength.

He shielded himself with his demonic barrier, absorbing some of the impact, but the force of the blast still rocked him.

THUD!

Annie was also caught in the radius of the explosion and struggled to maintain her balance.

The feeling of nausea rose from deep inside their stomachs as if something was breaking the order in their bodies.

"Burghk!"

The remnants of a shiny mana left an ethereal glow in the air, creating an eerie atmosphere.

'Holy Attribute?'

It was a holy attribute, the biggest enemy of the demonic humans.

"Haaaaaah...."

Reiner took a deep breath to calm himself down, risking showing his position.

"Grrr....."

Annie was also grinding her teeth, as she didn't have the defenses that Reiner had to protect herself.

"You bastard..."

The smirk on her face was far long gone, replaced with an angry expression.

However, on Reiner's mind, something far more concerning was there.

'Pieck.'

One of their members caught up with the explosion. The demonic humans had the power to regenerate themselves most of the time, but the holy attribute countered that.

As the dust settled, a voice echoed through the room, mocking and distant. "How does it feel?"

It was a voice filled with sneer. The sheer tone of coldness and hatred was enough to send shivers down Reiner's spine.

「Demonic Materialization. Blades of Hell. 」

Without wasting any second, he immediately used his skill to attack the location where the sound came from.

SWOOSH!

The blades of demonic energy flew; it was such a huge amount of raw energy that it almost even destroyed the walls of the research room, which was supposed to be able to resist any factor that could possibly occur in an experiment.

SLASH! SLASH!

However, even then, nothing was revealed there. Only pieces of a mana-engineering device.

'What?'

TOK!

At that moment, Reiner's senses picked up something hitting the floor. Just beneath them, something hit there.

'Capsule?'

It was an arrow with a capsule attached to it.

PISS!

Following that, a gas started spreading from the capsule, filling their vision.

"Haaaah....."

As the gas enveloped the room, Reiner and Annie found themselves struggling to breathe. The demonic mana in their bodies started getting harder to control with each second.

The thing that once intensified their bodies was now biting them back.

"What is this.....Haaah..."

"I-I.....can't breathe....."

The darkness, now compounded by the disorienting effects of the gas, intensified their sense of vulnerability.

Reiner's demonic materialization dispersed the gas immediately around him, but the assailant's tactics became clear. The gas had been a diversion, a tool to sow fear and confusion. Reiner, with his heightened senses, understood the implications.

"Annie, stay close!" Reiner barked, trying to maintain a semblance of control.

However, even in the darkness, they couldn't see each other. The gas, coupled with the pitch-black environment, made their perception unreliable.

As if shadows were playing tricks on them, they were seeing figures moving in the gas.

"How does it feel? The thing that once supplied you with power is now holding you back."

Those words echoed in their heads.

"YOU BAS-"

He wanted to refute; he wanted to swear.

SWOOSH!

However, he couldn't. Suddenly, an arrow with a faint mana glow streaked through the air. It was aimed at him, who instinctively activated his demonic barrier.

CLANK!

The arrow collided with the barrier, creating sparks. Despite the successful defense, the attack added to the psychological pressure.

"Reiner! Where did it come from?" Annie's voice echoed in the dark.

"I don't know. Keep your guard up!" Reiner responded, his own uncertainty masked by the authoritative tone.

The fact that Pieck had just exploded just before their eyes was enough to show that the assailant had enough firepower to overpower them if they were caught off-guard.

SWOOSH!

However, they didn't have any time at all. With those words, arrows filled with mana started raining upon them one by one.

The sheer strength contained in those arrows wasn't something much, as their demonic skin was enough to defend them from the strength they were ready to defend.

STAB! STAB! CLANK!

With their amplified body abilities close to high-ranking students of the academy, they were able to defend themselves even with their senses getting disturbed.

But, that wasn't the case for the arrows that were filled with the shiny color of blue.

BOOM! BOOM!

Mixed between the other arrows, those charged with the blue-colored mana exploded whenever they hit them.

And whenever those arrows hit, they always left wounds on their body.

To add salt to the wound, the assailant didn't seem to have any sort of difficulties while hitting them.

The arrows always found their mark, as if he knew their location from the start.

'Fuck! Where is he?'

SWOOSH! BOOM!

With another arrow exploding just on his shoulder, Reiner felt the pain of displacement. His bones broke as the heat spread through his body.

"FUCK!"

The explosive arrow had taken its toll, leaving Reiner seething in pain. The relentless assault, coupled with the gas-induced confusion and the lingering fear from Pieck's demise, pushed him beyond his limits.

"WHERE ARE YOU, YOU COWARD?" Reiner's roar echoed through the room. His frustration transformed into a berserk determination. He couldn't take it anymore. The unseen assailant, mocking them from the shadows, needed to be silenced.

「Demonic Materialization. Blades of Hell. 」

Reiner unleashed his demonic energy without restraint. Blades of raw, chaotic energy erupted from him in every direction. The once dimly lit room now became a chaotic storm of demonic energy.

SWOOSH! CLANK! SWOOSH!

The blades collided with the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. Reiner, blinded by rage, attacked without precision, creating a tempest of destruction in a desperate attempt to unveil the hidden adversary.

The assailant, having enjoyed the psychological advantage, now must have found themselves on the defensive.

That was what Reiner assumed since the arrows ceased momentarily as they evaded Reiner's wild onslaught.

As he continued to fire his demonic blades, supplying all his energy, "What's happening?" Annie shouted, her voice almost drowned out by the chaos.

"I'm done playing games!" Reiner bellowed, the blades of demonic energy continuing to ravage the room.

Annie, caught in the maelstrom, activated her own defensive skills. The scythe in her hands glowed with sinister energy as she tried to keep herself protected amidst the chaotic onslaught.

"Hey! Slow down!"

However, for Annie, she didn't have many defensive skills, as she focused on offense. With her body already worn down from the constant attacks of arrows, now the blades of Reiner attacked her, and she couldn't defend herself completely.

SPURT!

Blood spilled from the wounds created by Reiner's blades.

"YOU FUCKER! YOU ARE GOING TO KILL ME!"

Annie's desperate protest barely reached Reiner's ears. His sanity had slipped away amid the chaos he himself had unleashed. The blades of demonic energy continued to lash out indiscriminately, leaving Annie in a perilous situation.

"Hey! Reiner! Enough!" Annie cried out; her voice strained as she tried to shield herself from the onslaught.

But Reiner had long lost control. His hysterical laughter joined the cacophony of destruction, a manifestation of his crumbling composure.

"HAHAHA! I SHOULD LIVE! I SHOULD BE THE ONE! YOU JUST BEAR WITH IT!" Reiner's laughter echoed, a disturbing sound in the midst of chaos.

Hearing this, Annie's eyes widened in disbelief and fear as she witnessed the expression on Reiner's face.

The guy who was always calm now had a smile on his face, but the shaking of his body was giving away the fear he had.

Annie's disbelief turned into a surge of anger that burned hotter than the demonic glow surrounding them.

"You bastard!" she spat, her frustration and rage channeled into her words.

Even though the trio hadn't been allies for a long time, they had completed a bunch of requests from the organizations, and they always looked after their backs while ignoring the annoying things each of them had.

But now, this guy was cutting her off like that.

'I will kill you fucker.'

The already different brain of hers was filled with an annoyance that wasn't even natural from the start.

As if something had been affecting her mind, she forgot the assailant for a second and attacked the boy.

SWOOSH!

With a fierce determination, Annie, fueled by anger, dashed towards Reiner. Her scythe gleamed with an intensified sinister energy as she prepared to strike him down.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST GO CRAZY AND I'LL SIT BACK?" Annie roared, her voice cutting through the chaos. She swung her scythe, aiming for Reiner's now manic form. The air whistled with the force of her strike.

CLANG!

Reiner, lost in his own madness, barely managed to raise a defensive barrier. Annie's strike collided with the demonic shield, creating sparks that illuminated the dark room.

"Hahahaah....What are you doing?" Reiner said with his arms shaking for a second, but then again, anger soared in his heart. "Do you want to die as well?"

'As well? Who else is here?'

Reiner couldn't help but think. But Annie didn't give him any more time.

As the clash echoed in the room, both Annie and Reiner seemed to be consumed by the same madness that had gripped their actions.

The demonic blades and the sinister scythe clashed relentlessly, each strike resonating with the echoes of anger and madness.

SWOOSH! CLASH! SWOOSH!

The sound of their blades meeting filled the room, drowning out any rational thoughts. Annie, now caught in the whirlwind of her own anger, attacked with a frenzied determination. Her strikes were relentless, driven by the betrayal she felt from the person she had considered an ally.

"YOU THINK THIS IS FUN?" Annie shouted, her voice a mixture of rage and desperation. The crimson glow of her scythe intensified, casting eerie shadows on the chaotic scene.

「Seal of Death」

She used her skill, and the same eye appeared behind Reiner's head, followed by his insides spilling out.

「Demonic Materialization. Blades of Hell. 」

"You fucker."

Reiner, still laughing sporadically, responded with demonic counterattacks.

His blades moved with a chaotic rhythm, no longer following a strategic plan but responding to the sheer turmoil within him.

SPURT! THUD!

Despite their demonic resilience, the wounds began to accumulate on both of them. The berserk state they found themselves in made them more susceptible to each other's attacks.

THUD!

And finally, both of them fell to their knees as they couldn't stand anymore, thanks to their accumulated wounds.

"Kurgh...."

Blood spilled from their mouths as clarity returned to their head slowly.

"Huh?"

Reiner looked at his hands, feeling something was amiss.

'What was I doing?'

He asked himself, but before he could say anything more, he sensed someone's presence.

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

Followed by the sounds of clapping.

"It really worked...."

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Reiner looked at his hands, feeling something was amiss.

'What was I doing?'

Something was different.

It was as if, something had possessed him. The anger he just felt, the fear, all those emotions. They were so extreme that, it wasn't normal.

But before he could even think of anything, a sound echoed inside the room of the research.

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

It was the sound of clapping.

'What?'

Then he realized. There was one other being with them inside this place.

The sole reason why he was in this state.

'I forgot?'

He realized; he had forgotten the existence of the assailant in the room.

At that moment, it felt unnatural.

"It really worked...."

As the clapping continued, a figure emerged from the shadows.

The attacker revealed himself, wearing a dark, creepy mask that concealed his face.

His hood draped over his head and obscured any glimpse of his hair. The attire, pitch black like the abyss, merged seamlessly with the shadows surrounding him.

The aura exuding from the mysterious figure was suffused with darkness, but underneath that layer, a faint silver-colored mana emanated. It was a strange and ominous combination, creating an unsettling presence.

But the moment Reiner saw the attire, he realized it was the attacker immediately. The moving shadows and the arrows coated with mana matched the figure perfectly.

TAP! TAP!

As if to instill more fear into its enemies, the once-silent figure slowly moved while making sounds.

As the clapping ceased, a low, eerie whisper emanated from behind the mask, cutting through the dim silence.

"Congratulations. You've made it easier for me," the figure mocked, his voice carrying a tone of sinister satisfaction. "Fighting amongst yourselves like rabid beasts. Truly, you've proven yourselves worthy of following a bunch of dogs."

Reiner's eyes narrowed in a mixture of anger and desperation as he glared at the masked figure.

'It was this fucker.'

The sinister presence of their assailant fueled the fiery rage within him.

'I will kill him.'

"Grr...."

Gritting his teeth, Reiner harnessed the last remnants of his demonic energy, unleashing a primal roar as he charged at the hooded menace like a wounded beast.

"RAAA!"

The anger he felt coupled with the fear of death now turned him into nothing but a lump of disgusting flesh not resembling a human.

SWOOSH! His movements were fueled by a reckless determination, driven by the fury of a cornered predator.

But, the moment his blade met with the supposed attacker, the only thing he cut was the empty air.

'Huh?'

"You don't learn, don't you?"

The hooded figure's voice echoed, the sentence hanging in the air like a venomous promise.

SWOOSH! SLASH!

Before Reiner could comprehend the meaning behind those words, the attacker swiftly moved. His already tired and worn-out body was reaching its limits, but it came nowhere close to the mental strain on his mind that accumulated in just ten minutes.

The silver-coated daggers in hooded hands blurred in the air, leaving behind streaks of deadly brilliance.

"Gah!" Reiner grunted as pain flared through his body. The daggers imbued with a strange silver mana, cut through his demonic skin with an efficiency that defied the chaotic nature of the ongoing battle.

At that moment, Reiner felt the true fear once more.

'No....I can't die....I can't die....'

The door of the death was opened, and someone was seemly peeking through that door.

"YOU BASTARD!"

Reiner shouted, trying to fend his fear off.

RAAAAAR! Reiner's desperate roar echoed through the dimly lit room as he summoned the last reserves of his demonic energy. The crimson aura around him flared, creating an eerie spectacle that clashed with the silver brilliance of the attacker's daggers.

"You really are no different, a beast," the hooded figure remarked, his voice a chilling whisper that hung in the air.

And then, with an uncanny swiftness, the shadowy figure vanished. It was as if he had melded seamlessly with the darkness, leaving no trace behind.

Reiner, caught in the grip of fear, struggled to comprehend the sudden disappearance of his adversary.

"Where are you, you bastard?" Reiner shouted, his voice a mix of rage and desperation. He frantically scanned the surroundings, his heightened senses strained to their limits.

The room seemed to close in on him, the shadows becoming suffocating. Reiner could hear the rustling of the air, the subtle sounds of movement, but he couldn't pinpoint the location of the assailant.

With each second passed, it felt like thirty seconds. His mind was already worn out from all the things that happened, and the pain from the wounds added salt to it.

"Show yourself!" Reiner demanded, his breaths heavy and labored.

RUSTLE!

'Here.'

And as he suddenly heard a sound on his back, he attacked like a madman.

"RAAA!"

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

He swung his demonic blades in a wild frenzy, attacking the empty air. His movements were driven not by strategy but by a desperate attempt to strike anything that might be lurking in the shadows.

But his attack met with nothing, as the attacker remained elusive; his presence was felt but never seen. Reiner, now covered in a cold sweat, turned in all directions, his senses on edge.

"What's the matter, Reiner?" The hooded figure's voice taunted him from the unseen. "Can't handle the unknown?"

As the disembodied voice continued its mockery, Reiner felt a paralyzing fear take hold.

The figure's taunting continued, each word dripping with malevolence. "You, who fancy yourself a predator, are nothing more than prey in the dark. How does it feel, Reiner? The fear, the helplessness?"

Reiner's movements became erratic, his once-confident demeanor replaced by a sense of dread.

The room seemed to warp and twist around him, shadows dancing with malice. He swung his blades aimlessly, attempting to ward off the unseen threat.

"You thought you became something after getting the power you sought this much, but here you are, lost and afraid," the hooded figure's voice whispered, encircling Reiner like a vengeful specter.

FLINCH! Hearing this, Reiner flinched as the memories of the past came.

The memories of when his father was beating his mother.

The memories of when he was powerless.... The memories of when he was getting targeted by the kids who were awakened.

'How does he know?'

The sounds of rustling and unseen movements intensified, playing on Reiner's frayed nerves.

"Haah.....Haaah.....How do you know?"

His breaths came in ragged gasps as the oppressive darkness closed in. He staggered, his once-mighty frame now reduced to a trembling shell.

"People like you, seeking power to escape the past, are always the same," the hooded figure's voice echoed, a haunting reminder of Reiner's deepest fears. The room seemed to tighten around him as if the shadows themselves were constricting his very essence.

"How do you know?" Reiner choked out, his voice a desperate plea. His vision was blurry, as the wounds that were accumulated were now taking their toll.

SWOOSH! STAB!

And, at that exact second, before him, the figure materialized from the shadows, his silver-maned daggers gleaming with an otherworldly light. Without a word, the figure swiftly closed the distance, and in an instant, the cold steel pierced Reiner's heart.

"ARGH!" Reiner cried out, the pain searing through him. "BURGHK! Then, blood started flowing from his mouth as he felt his demonic heart not functioning.

As he felt his consciousness sweeping away, he heard the last words of the attacker.

"We are probably the same....You had just chosen the wrong master to follow."

With those last words, he felt his consciousness fading, as the last thing he had seen was the cold, shiny blades.

In the real world, without any dreams whatsoever, there are consequences of actions. Everything has a price.

If you seek strength, you need to pay a price.

That will be either in the form of time to spend on training or in the time of money to spend or resources.....

But, then, where do the demon followers stand?

Do they train for the powers they get from demons?

Do they spend mana on treasures to increase their strength?

No, they do not. Any person without money or talent can become a demon follower. That is the reason why those who were abandoned by the world chose the path of the demons.

The world is not a fair place.

Some don't have the money to spend on all those resources...Some don't have time....And some don't have the talent.

Therefore, rather than accepting reality as it is, by the nature of humans, they look for other options.

Options that make them stronger.

Demons just exploit that fact and make use of the sought-after strength.

They give the demon followers the strength they desire.

But, just as I said, everything does have a price.

What do demons get from giving such humans demonic energy?

Or, what negative effects does it have on humans?

Just like in any social structure that belongs to sentient beings, there is also a hierarchy in the structure of demonic followers.

And for those that are rather on the lower rank of the scale, the resources they were given are also on the lower side. Their demonic energy is rather raw and unrefined, which makes it very hard to control.

Essentially, since humans were born to use mana, the existence of demonic energy inside them is unnatural. And because of that, the body repulses the external being. But the more you are subjected to such energy, essentially, to adapt that common fact, the more your body changes.

Those adaptations make you closer to a demon, and that is also one of the biggest reasons why once one uses the demonic energy for a long time, they would no longer be able to return to their human body.

The changes happening in them are too big for their own good.

In any case, the demonic energy is raw. The lower-rank demonic energy makes the people subjected to it more prone to emotional fluctuations, making their rationality more berserk.

That was where a thought ticked in me.

While I was fighting with these two in the dungeon, I realized their demonic energy and its quality was a lot lower than when I fought with Fred.

Considering Fred was not that of a high-ranking demonic human, that meant these two were on the bottom rank.

Therefore, I decided to test something.

'Berserking Vial.'

There was a potion in the game that made monsters berserk. It was a common-grade potion, and it was very commonly used by the players since, essentially, by making monsters berserk, you could make them fight with each other and then last hit at the end to get exp.

Then I thought, if they are lower-rank demonic humans, can't I do the same thing for them?

Then, I referred to the ingredients of the Berserking Vial but only altered some of its contents to make it more efficient against demon followers.

Then, I put the substance into the arrows, covering the tips with the poison.

It was just an experiment. Even if it didn't work, it wouldn't matter that much, but if it worked, that would give me direction in the future in this aspect.

And here we were.

Standing in front of those who once tried to kill me but then lowered themselves enough to not discern the enemy and ally.

Just like the lowly demons they followed, the dogs shared the same disgusting aspect.

'Like the owner, like the dogs.'

The anger in my heart as I looked at the disgusting demon followers didn't cease. The feeling of hatred was still there.

'It is not enough.'

I thought to myself.

This was nowhere near enough.

'This is the start.'

But, even then, it wasn't meaningless. I had confirmed my abilities.

'I should just clean up and leave.'

Looking at the dead bodies lying on the ground, that was what I thought. Though before leaving, I didn't forget to take their watches.

After all, I still needed to take care of the instigator.

Just like that, the real first step for my revenge was complete.

Chapter 154 35.1 - Short Break

Dr. Emily Carter, a dedicated researcher at the forefront of her field, found herself immersed in a late-night working session at the laboratory.

WROOM!

The hum of machinery, the soft glow of computer screens, and the scent of chemicals filled the air as she delved into her research. Time seemed to slip away as her passion for discovery fueled her commitment.

"Yaaawnnn....I am so tired...."

Hours passed, and as the clock neared midnight, Dr. Carter reluctantly decided to call it a night.

"I guess I should leave."

The deserted corridors of the research facility echoed with each step as she made her way toward the exit. The usual silence of the building took on an eerie quality at this late hour.

This was what she felt most of the time. Being a researcher from a young age, where she needed to abandon her career as a hunter, she was trying much harder than her peers.

After all, her bosses and the big shots in the field didn't have any trust in her at all.

HOWL!

"It is really cold."

Upon stepping outside, the cool night air greeted her, and she took a moment to stretch and yawn.

"Hmm?"

However, her brief moment of relaxation was shattered when she noticed an unusual sight – a thin trail of smoke rising into the night sky.

Her curiosity piqued, and Dr. Carter narrowed her eyes, trying to discern the source of the smoke.

"Wasn't that place abandoned?"

The smoke seemed to originate from the direction of an abandoned building nearby. A building that, to her knowledge, had been vacant for years and seldom used.

"I should check it out."

Even though one wouldn't normally advise her to go to such a place at night, since she was in the facility of one of the supposed 'safest' locations in the world, she wasn't worried at all.

Also, if something alarming, possibly a machinery misconduct, occurred, that meant her research might also be affected somehow.

Concern crept into her thoughts as she considered the possibility of a fire or some unforeseen incident.

Without hesitation, Dr. Carter quickened her pace toward the abandoned structure.

"What is this sensation?"

As she approached, the smell of burning material grew stronger, but at the same time, something suffocating entered inside her, confirming her fears. ,

It was as if her body was repulsing whatever was there, and she knew what it was.

'Demonic Energy.'

Being a former Hunter and a researcher focusing on demonic energy detection abilities, she was familiar with this energy. But the amount she was feeling right now was something she had encountered for the first time in her life.

'A demonic human....No, at least two.'

Panic and adrenaline surged through her veins as she reached for her phone to dial the emergency services of the academy.

It wasn't something she could handle after all.

"There really were demon contractors here."

One of the men said with his hands in the pockets of his coat as he approached the smoke-rising building.

"To think they were right in front of our noses."

'Guardians,' a special division tasked with investigating supernatural occurrences within the academy.

As they approached the now-burning building, the atmosphere was thick with otherworldly energy, and the acrid scent of burning demonic energy lingered in the air.

Detective Michael Harris, a seasoned detective with years of experience and now a Guardian, surveyed the gruesome sight before him. The abandoned building bore the scars of a fierce battle, with remnants of demonic energy lingering in the aftermath.

Lying amidst the wreckage were the motionless bodies of three young people seemingly. It was very hard to recognize the lying bodies.

One of them seemingly had their upper half missing, possibly from an explosion. The other ones didn't seem to share a different fate, as their skin was slowly deteriorating.

Detective Harris, with a stern expression, signaled to his partner, Detective Emma Rodriguez, to begin their investigation.

"Tch...Disgusting...."

The two moved cautiously through the debris, their keen eyes scanning the surroundings for any clues.

"Looks like they weren't able to unleash their demonic forms," Detective Rodriguez observed, examining the demonic residue on the walls. "They weren't high-ranking demon contractors, it seems."

Looking at the form of the bodies, he mumbled. Normally, whenever a demon contractor revealed their true form, their body would change inside, and it would take a lot of time and resources to return it to normal. That is also the reason why most demon contractors refrained from doing so until it was the last chance they had.

"This wasn't just a simple confrontation."

However, the traces of the demonic energy in the air were signaling something different. From the mana left as the aftermath, the detective could easily say two demonic energies clashed in this place.

Detective Harris nodded in agreement. "It seems like a conflict between demon contractors. But what brought them here?"

"I assume they had been using this place for a while. There are traces of repeated demonic energy usage as well as a bunch of artifacts to use for surveillance. This wasn't a one-time occurrence. They chose this location deliberately."

"Then, that means...."

"Yes....There is still an insider here."

As they continued talking, one other detective was different. He was looking around without engaging in conversations with his coworkers.

"These marks?"

He was one of the newly hired detectives in the office. Since he was a new recruit, his presence didn't hold much value in the office.

"Bullets?"

He wanted to touch the marks, but he knew he couldn't, as that would possibly damage the crime scene.

However, the marks really looked like a bullet.

At that moment, Detective Harris and Detective Rodriguez approached.

"Yo, newbie. Found something?"

They had sneers on their faces. After all, this kid was always overly excited and wanted to participate in the investigations, and this was a threat to their positions.

Jim nodded his head, affirming his suspicion about the marks resembling bullets. "Yeah, these look like bullet marks to me."

Detective Harris and Detective Rodriguez exchanged amused glances, their sneers turning into outright laughter. "Bullet marks? Come on, Jim, this isn't some action movie," Harris jeered.

Rodriguez chimed in, "You watch too many detective dramas, kid. Look around. Do you see any bullet shells? Anyone dumb enough to use bullets in a demon clash would leave evidence behind. Also, do you think a bullet can damage the skins of a demon contractor?"

Jim felt a flush of embarrassment, their mockery hitting a nerve. He also knew what he said was out of the norm, but his intuition as a detective was telling him that he was on the right track.

"I know it sounds strange, but these marks, they're too precise for a demon fight. Just keep an open mind."

The veteran detectives continued to chuckle dismissively.

"Yeah, yeah... Open mind..." Detective Rodriguez repeated mockingly, his tone condescending. "Listen, kid, this isn't some rookie case. We've been on this job longer than you've been out of school. You'll learn a lot if you keep your eyes and ears open and your theories in check."

Detective Harris added, "We've seen all sorts of weird stuff in our time, and it's always been demons or their artifacts. No bullets, no guns. It's just classic demon business. You'll understand when you've got more experience under your belt."

Jim sighed inwardly, realizing that convincing these old colleagues wouldn't be easy.

'You boomers, what do you even know?'

However, a determined spark gleamed in his eyes as he looked at the marks.

He wasn't ready to discard his instincts just yet, even in the face of their skepticism. The investigation had just begun, and he was resolved to explore every possibility, no matter how unconventional it seemed.

He ventured around the location, ignoring the two old dogs talking as he looked for traces that supported his theory.

"Hmm?"

Continuing his walk, he noticed some different traces on the ground, which many missed.

"These are arrow marks. Explosive arrows?"

While the other two seemed to think this was a confrontation between the demons, Jim seemed different.

'There are no bows here?'

None of the demon contractors seemed to have used arrows.

'And what is with this mana?'

It was as if the mana itself was plasmatic. Even the raw energy that was left as an aftermath seemed unstable enough to destroy a metal.

'This is definitely not a demonic energy?'

The demonic energy was also unstable and hard to control, but rather than having plasmatic effects, it had the effect of corroding the mind and the user.

'There was someone else in this place, something else. A possible third party.'

His deduction led him to a compelling theory: a possible third party.

Someone or something had been present during the altercation, utilizing unconventional weapons and a distinct type of energy.

'The air around is also not usual demonic energy....'

Sniffing the air, he felt a different substance existed.

'I will need to wait for the autopsy and the analysis from the forensic chemistry department.'

Jim noted down his observations, marking the potential involvement of this mysterious third entity.

'Let's check.'

As he delved further into the investigation, Jim began considering the abilities of this unknown assailant.

'First, they definitely have a stealth ability.'

Stealth seemed evident, given the lack of detection by the demon contractors.

'And, they also have a high proficiency at ranged combat.'

He wrote on his notepad, putting ticks on every keyword.

'Bullets(?)'

The use of explosive arrows and possibly bullets hinted at proficiency in ranged combat. Top of Form But even then, one thing remained unknown.

'What was their goal?'

It was the goal of the possible third party.

In the end, he was left with more and more questions as the chilly night ventured.

Chapter 155 Chapter 35.2 - Short Break

-CHATTER!

The hall echoed with the lively chatter of students, the air filled with the excited hum of conversation.

"Finally, the exams are over."

"Yeah....I thought they were never going to end."

As the clock ticked towards the time of the meeting, the door swung open, and Instructor Eleanor White walked in, her bright yellow hair contrasting with the serious expression on her face.

"Settle down, everyone," she called out, her voice cutting through the noise. The room gradually hushed as all eyes turned towards the instructor.

Eleanor paused, her gaze sweeping across the room before she spoke, "As the first half of the semester comes to an end, I want to commend all of you for your hard work and dedication. You've shown remarkable progress."

A ripple of pride surged through the students, some exchanging smiles and nods.

"However," Eleanor continued, her tone becoming more serious, "we're not done yet. The second half will bring new challenges while being far more difficult than the first one, and I expect nothing less than your best efforts."

The anticipation in the room heightened as she spoke.

"Before we dive into the next phase of your training, there will be a one-week break. Use this time wisely to rest, recharge, and, if needed, reflect on your experiences so far."

A murmur of excitement spread among the students at the prospect of a break.

"You're free to leave the academy during this time. Enjoy your break, but remember, our journey is far from over. Be prepared to return with the same enthusiasm and commitment. Also, your mid-term exam results will be revealed after you return from your short vacation; make sure to follow the announcements."

With those words, Eleanor White concluded her announcement. The students erupted into chatter once again, discussing their plans for the upcoming break and the adventures that awaited them in the second half of the semester.

"Finally, a break! I'm heading home for some good home-cooked meals," one student exclaimed.
Top of Form

"Fuck...I am envious...My mother can't even cook; I wish I could eat a homemade meal as well."

Laughter erupted in response to the student's declaration about heading home. However, there were those who disliked the 'words'. "Hah? Do you see your mother only as a cooking machine?" From there, a girl with an arrogant face came up to the boy and asked.

"Huh?" The boy was so dumbfounded that he couldn't even respond. He wasn't even very associated with the girl, and it was the first time she had talked to him.

The girl crossed her arms, shooting a disapproving glance at the boy. "I don't know what century you're living in, but women can be as powerful and capable as men. It's not about cooking or being a 'mommy.' We have ambitions and talents beyond your stereotypical view."

The group was left dumbfounded the more the girl spoke.

"You are a mis-"

"Sigh..."

Just as the girl was about to continue her 'words' or, in another aspect, her 'doctrine,' a hearty sigh came from behind her.

The girl was clearly displeased at the interruption. She turned her head back, shooting an irritated look at the source of the sigh.

An ordinary figure with a nonchalant expression stood there, his head lying on the desk as if he were sleeping.

It was a young man, his messy dark hair partially covering his eyes as if he didn't even care about his appearance at all. He looked unfazed by the ongoing conversation, but at the same time, a slight annoyance could be seen on his face, as if his sleep was interrupted.

"Noisy....."

The partially opened, tired purple eyes locked onto the girl. Yuki, the girl who had been fervently expressing her views, scowled at the newcomer.

"You guys are just like beasts, making sounds like that," she scoffed, glaring at the boy sleeping on the desk. "This is an intellectual discussion, and you're here snoring like a wild animal. It's no wonder some people never learn anything."

"Yeah....And you are like a rooster.....Only opening your mouth to annoy people."

"Haa!"

Yuki's irritation reached its peak as she clenched her fists. The boy, Astron, seemed unfazed, but the students around them sensed the rising tension, and they also knew this girl's temper.

"What did you say?"

SMASH! THUD!

With an impulsive burst of anger, she slammed her hand on Astron's desk, creating a loud noise that echoed through the room.

SILENCE!

The sudden disruption silenced the surrounding chatter, and all eyes turned toward the source of the noise.

There, they could see a fist smashed on the desk and the boy who now stood up.

"Surely we are no different than beasts, but you who can't even stand a bunch of words not. It is a good logic you do have; keep it up."

His expression didn't even change for a second as he simply uttered those words and slowly started leaving.

"Yo-"

The girl wanted to say something, but before she could even say anything, her eyes met with the piercing eyes of the instructor, who hadn't left just yet.

Seeing Professor Eleanor's eyes looking at her with an annoyed tone, she decided to retreat back.

But her eyes glared daggers at the boy leaving. "Aliya....just where are you, now?" she mumbled, seeking her friend's assistance right at this time, though that sought assistance was nowhere to be seen.

"Finally, the first part of the semester ended."

I mumbled to myself, walking to my room. After the first mid-terms, the academy would come to a small abrupt, and the player would return to the Hartley family.

This part was very important for the player since this would be the first time that many named characters would make their appearance.

The Hartley family and the parents of Ethan would show themselves as interactable characters for the first time, and some groundwork for the future would also be laid.

But, aside from that, this period didn't contain many story points for others. There weren't any events. Of course, the player could make some side quests, and even though they weren't necessary, most players used this time to explore the world.

Thus, this period was often remarked as the 'Grind Period.'

Though, that didn't mean much to me. After all, when it came to me, I didn't have much to show as a family.

'Tch....'

Thinking about it now makes me feel angry once again. I can feel the changes in myself after yesterday. The sense of guilt is slowly leaving its place to something else, fueled by the anger inside me.

'It is weird.'

But at the same time, it was something expected.

'I am a human too.'

We were bound to change on the path we were walking through. This is how we are.

'I guess they must have found the corpses now.'

Normally, I was going to make a full cleanup of the building. Since those three used a bunch of artifacts to cover the building, there were no sounds escaping from there.

Therefore, no one would be aware of what happened there. But I wanted to make sure someone found the traces of the fight, and since I made it seem like they fought amongst themselves, nobody would be suspicious of me.

"Pardon."

As I was walking, I heard the voice of someone before me. Raising my head, I saw a guy leaving the building with a bunch of bags.

"Here." Nodding my head, I gave him the way. It seemed I was lost in my thoughts as I was walking.

"Thanks."

After he left, I reached my room.

TAK! CREAK!

Opening the door, I threw a look at the room, which would be changed probably after I came from the break.

Even though, according to my performance in the mid-terms, my rank won't be that high, it won't be that low either.

'Probably between 1700-2000.'

And that was enough to increase the quality of my room. In any case, even though I got used to this room, it was small, and the conditions to study weren't perfect. Thus, I mostly studied in the library.

Aside from using it as a sleeping place, I didn't do anything else inside here.

Sitting at my desk, I glanced over the plans I had crafted for the upcoming break.

'Weapon.'

That one word was the most important goal of the upcoming break. What I was lacking was a suitable weapon.

The bow supplied by the academy wasn't bad, and the daggers were fine, too. But, the last confrontation I had with the demon contractors had proven that any normal weapon wouldn't do it.

The goal I had in my mind was something that wouldn't be achieved by such puny materials.

Even though the girl, Annie, had a corrosion attribute, and it was even rare for a demon contractor to have, she was still at the bottom of the ranks.

If I wanted to kill demons and their stronger pawns, I needed a stronger weapon.

But then, there was a catch.

'What kind of weapon should I get?'

From the start, I had never used one singular weapon and focused on it. Rather, my style was more versatile. Something that changed constantly, from ranged combat to close combat.

Even though it was flexible, it also limited me since none of the artifacts I knew from the game were compatible with such flexibility.

'In the end, I have one choice, don't I?'

Remembering a certain named character, I shook my head. Aside from him, I knew nobody would be able to make a weapon sufficient for me.

'However, reaching him will not be easy at all. I guess I should start gathering information first.

Opening my watch, I started typing to my trusted informant group.

[Find me the map of the mana wave distribution of the Area underneath the Hikama Mountains.]

At the end of the day, in this world, nothing was easy at all.

Chapter 156 Chapter 35.3 - Short Break

Blacksmith.

A term that defines one of the most important jobs in the world. For those who had followed the path of strength and assimilated themselves in the concept of mana, that occupation meant the magic itself.

After all, even though the engineering of magic based on reason and logic existed in a world filled with miracles and unreasonableness, there was also a part of people who made their products with their passion and belief.

Rather than relying on the monotonous technology and techniques that stemmed from observation, they put their emotions and passion into their art.

Those people were called blacksmiths.

At least, that was how they were defined in the game.

The weapons they made couldn't be mass-produced, and neither could they be understood by any normal logic.

Even if you had copied the exact way, exact range of motion, and exact force applied by any blacksmith while they were shaping the metal, you still wouldn't get the same result they had.

That was how things went. After all, blacksmithing itself also contained mana as well as divination itself at some point. The blacksmith doesn't only move its body, but it also moves the mana inside it to shape the materials.

There were countless researches made by the mage tower to understand the concept behind the blacksmithing and to apply them to any weapons, but at the end of the day, none of those researches were able to reach an ending.

'This was how they decided to create the background for a fantasy world, huh?'

I thought as I looked at the article written on the page. The players wouldn't want a monotonous game where they would buy a bunch of mass-produced swords. They would want a weapon special to themselves, as they self-inserted into the main character.

Therefore, the developers needed to have special blacksmiths to do the job. Of course, as the weapon you wanted to make increased in quality, a higher skill was required from a blacksmith to make such a weapon possible.

That was how things worked.

Then, considering the developers' tendency, it was very easy to assume that they had a special type of blacksmith in the game as well.

And this is where I am heading right now.

-WROOM!

The metallic rumble of the train echoed through the bustling station as I approached the ticket counter.

The air was thick with a mix of excitement and anticipation as well as the busyness of the modern world, an atmosphere befitting the capital of the Human Federation.

I handed the attendant the required amount, receiving the ticket with a nod of appreciation.

"One ticket to Hikama Mountains, go ahead," the attendant said, her voice cutting through the ambient noise. It was weird to use tickets as well as modern devices at the same time, but some of the railways didn't have the necessary equipment and funds. Therefore, they didn't have rapid railways.

I walked toward the platform, the clatter of footsteps and distant conversations filling the air. Even then, the train, an impressive blend of technology and design, stood imposingly on the tracks.

Its sleek exterior gleamed in the station lights, a symbol of the advanced civilization that coexisted with magic in this fantastical world.

The doors slid open with a hiss as I boarded, finding an empty seat by the window.

'Seat 52, here.'

The hum of conversations, the occasional laughter, and the excited chatter of fellow passengers surrounded me as I settled in.

'It is quite nostalgic.'

I wasn't sure if this was their intention or not, but the atmosphere on the train was quite cozy, as it was already winter. Some people were drinking coffee while talking amongst themselves, and others were simply busy with their smartwatches.

'This will take a while.'

The train wasn't the one with high speed, so it would take a while.

Leaning back in my seat, I allowed my thoughts to wander.

The article I had read earlier about blacksmiths replayed in my mind while also referring to Earth.

'Certainly, there are things that I can't put a name on in this world.'

Not everything could be understood, and that was what we called as magic. But, at the same time, one part of me wanted to understand everything. It was the innate desire to know things as a human being.

DING!

At that moment, a message notification came from my watch.

'But, it is not the time to think.'

Deciding that thinking about the meaning of life wasn't the right thing to do at the moment, I opened the message section.

[Horde: Sir, the mana-wavelength distribution map you have requested is here.]

It was a message coming from my trusted informant.

[Did you get it from the Association's database?]

[Hode: Yes. As you have advised, we specified our research on the western server and were able to find the map.]

[Good work.]

[Horde: It is our pleasure.]

After I finished the chat, I looked at the attachments. The Horde had a special way of delivering the messages and files, as they used a unique program they coded on their own to decrypt the file.

-FUSH!

The train's engines roared to life, a signal that our departure was imminent.

"Dear passengers, this train goes to Hikama Mountain Range....."

-TOK! TOK! TOK!

The rhythmic clanking of the wheels against the tracks started, and the scenery outside began to shift as we left the station behind. The cityscape transformed into a bunch of walls protecting the railway, as the city traffic would be affected by the train.

As the train started moving, I also opened the file. The seat beside me was empty, so I was able to get more comfortable on the road.

Opening the mana-wavelength distribution map, I started putting the college knowledge of mine to work.

The vector calculus came in handy right at this time; as I combined the knowledge we gained from the [Introduction to Mana for Hunters], I was able to read the map with a little more detail.

Though, I still needed to study a little bit on the way.

Just like that, the train went as I tried to analyze the map in my hands.

CRUNCH! HOWL!

The crunch of snow beneath my boots accompanied every step as I walked deeper into the Hikama Mountains.

The air was crisp, and the cold bit through my clothing, a stark contrast to the warmth of the train.

The snowfall painted the surroundings in a tranquil hue, muffling the sounds of my footsteps.

"Haaah.....Haaaaah...."

I had been walking for almost a day now, and the cold, coupled with my low stamina, was finally hitting me.

As an awakened, walking 9 hours should be nothing, but this was different if one wanted to climb.

KIEK!

The mountains echoed with an eerie silence, broken only by the occasional creaking of branches and the distant howls of magical creatures.

Raven, come out.

At those times, the recent bond I had acquired came in handy.

FLAP! FLAP!

With its wings flapping, I sent the Raven to the skies to scout around the place. I was moving while utilizing the shadows as much as possible to erase my presence, but even then, there were some monsters that had exceptional detection skills that I wouldn't be able to bypass.

'7 Rune bears, huh? I guess they are the ones occupying this territory.'

It was always advised to run away as fast as possible if one encountered a rune bear. Even Hunters wouldn't want to deal with them since they are rather intelligent monsters.

'I guess I should walk a little more.'

After marking the location of the bears in my head, I recalled the Raven and started walking once again while looking at the map.

'If my assumptions are correct, it should be around here.'

I had been working on the map for a while now to infer the unnatural mana wavelengths. Of course, there were several different locations I had marked at first, but as I studied the topic more and analyzed the magic formulas, I finally narrowed the location to three points.

I had already checked the first and second ones, and this was the last one.

CRUNCH! HOWL!

The strong wind and heavy snow didn't help as I continued my climb.

ROAR!

The cacophony of the mountain winds and the crunching snow beneath my boots was interrupted by a sudden roar. The ground beneath me quivered, and the mountains themselves seemed to respond to the powerful presence emanating from a distance.

Instinctively, I tensed as if something reverent was around me. The appearance of the new presence was so unusual that I momentarily stopped moving.

'If it is this area, then it must be-'

TISS! BOOM!

Before I could even continue my analysis, I heard the sound of hissing as well as something hard-hitting to another.

'Somir.'

There was one monster that would hiss like that in this mountain range, and it was the peak rank-8 monster, Somir.

It was a strong Lizard-type monster that had a cold immunity and preferred cold places, but at the same time, it wasn't a monster that usually showed itself.

'But, considering the time I came to this place in the game, it was one year later than now.'

And that meant one possible thing....

'There was another high ranking monster living here, and Somir killed it, winning the territory battle.'

As I reached the conclusion, I couldn't help but curse my luck.

'And out of all times, they are fighting now.'

BOOOM!

At that exact moment, an explosive shockwave echoed through the mountains, rattling the snow-covered peaks.

THUD!

Before I could even react, an intense force slammed into me, sending me sprawling across the snowy terrain.

"Kurghk!"

The air crackled with the aftermath of the explosion, and pain radiated from where I had been struck.

BOOM!

Then, another deafening explosion erupted from above, and I instinctively shielded myself this time.

The force of the blast knocked me back, and as I tried to regain my bearings, I realized the peril had multiplied. The mountainside, disturbed by the dual forces of the monsters and the explosions, began to shift.

RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

While trying to regain my bearings, I felt the tremors under the ground.

"Spit-!"

Spitting the blood in my mouth, I immediately grabbed a healing potion from my spatial bracelet, gulping it down.

"Tch-!"

As if to add insult to injury, the tremors on the ground weren't synced with the sounds of clashing.

Meaning a possible avalanche.

'I can't even return back.'

Dash.

Activating my skill, I felt strength coursing through me as I took the position to run.

SWOOSH!

And then, started racing against the time. After all, there was one possible location I could reach....

Chapter 157 Chapter 35.4 - Short Break

No matter how much you research or how long you live, it is impossible to know everything about the world.

And considering most of my actions were based on the little knowledge I had from the game, it itself alone makes it unstable.

This is how it goes. Even the smallest things that you have missed may have a significant effect on the world.

And this was exactly what was happening right now.

SWOOSH!

The echo of the explosion still reverberated through the mountains as I sprinted, the force of the blast still resonating in my ears.

RING!

I was having a hard time keeping my balance, and the pain from the earlier impact throbbed with each step, but the urgency of the situation propelled me forward. My wounds were healing rapidly anyway, and only pain was in the way.

'I can't afford to lose even a second now.'

BOOM!

Another explosion shook the mountainside, and I instinctively shielded myself from the falling debris.

SWOOSH!

The mountainside loomed above, and I focused on the one possible location I could reach before the avalanche descended.

'Fuck.'

Dread seeped into every fiber of my being, the urgency of survival heightening my senses.

As I ran, the mountain presented a series of life-threatening challenges. Cracks in the snow-covered ground, hidden rocks, and the ever-present threat of loose snow beneath my feet made each step precarious.

However, thanks to my trait [Perceptive Insight] and all the explorations I had done in dungeons, it made it a lot easier for me to notice those little details that would possibly cost my life.

"Haaah.....Haaah...."

The air became thin, and the cold seeped through my clothing, intensifying the struggle for breath.

Once again, the low constitution was dragging me down, but at this point, I couldn't care less.

RUMBLE!

The ground was still shaking from both the clash of monsters and the approaching avalanche.

As I raced against the time, I also needed to check the map from the time to see if I was on the correct path.

Let alone waste any second being slow; if I even went in the wrong direction for a second, things would go awry.

'I am close.'

At the very least, the map revealed a glimmer of hope. Though I wasn't sure the destination was correct, I couldn't afford to doubt at that second.

RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

The smoke of the approaching mass of the snow and rocks had already reached me, covering my vision.

'Eyes of Hourglass.'

'I have at most five seconds.'

Estimating the distance, I pushed myself to the limits.

'Four.'

SWOOSH!

My feet dug into the snow, the boots strengthening my foothold.

'Three.'

The debris and the smoke became a lot more dense, and breathing became impossible.

'Two.'

Holding my breath, I clenched my legs and pushed myself against the pressure from the avalanche, pulling me downwards.

'One.'

My eyes hourglass slowing the time, I could see the huge mass of snow almost reaching me, but at the same time, right before me was a small crack.

A crack where the snow wasn't entering as if something was blocking it from entering.

'It is here.'

The lack of oxygen from holding my breath and the tiredness of my body were already taking its toll, putting my consciousness on the verge of the brink.

'Don't stop.'

With one last push, as the avalanche overwhelmed me, I was able to reach the crack with my hand.

CLENCH!

I clenched my hand, then pulled myself into the crack, and following that was the familiar feeling of myself getting sucked into the portal.

THUD!

I hit the ground, feeling like the world around me was still shaking, even though there were no physical tremors anymore.

The abrupt transition from the chaos of the avalanche to the unfamiliar ground left me disoriented.

"Haaaaah....haaaaaaah...."

As I struggled to regain my bearings with heavy breaths, the shaking world slowly started returning to its original state.

As my vision slowly cleared, I found myself in a different landscape altogether.

The air felt different, charged with a sense of foreboding. With each breath, I could sense a shift in the atmosphere.

'This is the right place.

The crack, the lifeline that saved me from the avalanche, was actually my destination from the start.

'As expected, math never disappoints.'

The adrenaline's effects slowly calmed down as I stood up.

The world around me had already taken its shape, revealing a place unlike any I had encountered before.

The sky above was dark, not because it was night but rather because it was filled with thick smoke. The oppressive atmosphere contrasted sharply with the icy mountains I had just narrowly escaped.

'It is hot.'

The heat in the air was palpable, a stark departure from the cold of the mountains. The ground beneath me felt different—smooth and worn. It was hot, but the dark landscape felt smooth at the same time.

FUSH! FUSH!

From points around me, the ground pulsed and rumbled, and suddenly, heavy, pressured water erupted like geysers.

The water cascaded in rhythmic bursts, creating an eerie dance against the backdrop of the smoky sky.

Around me, the ground seemed to writhe, and a river of lava flowed as if it were a liquid, weaving its way through the rugged terrain.

The heat emanating from the molten rock added to the oppressive atmosphere, making each step precarious.

In the end, it was a landscape that was a lot different than the entrance, casting a stark contrast.

'I should rest at first.'

Taking out my coat, I felt the strain from the long climb and that last heavy run finally taking its toll on my body.

GULP!

Gulping a stamina potion and a mana potion to replenish my reserves, I sat on the ground, masking my presence.

'Raven, come out.'

The first step was to scout, as I was in a vulnerable state right now.

FLAP! FLAP!

With the Raven flapping its wings, I started exploring the dungeon inside, looking for any presence of monsters.

'Vision Sharing.'

After my bond for a while, I was able to use the vision sharing without any discomfort. As my perspective changed to birds, I could see the landscape and could grasp the details a lot more.

'Hmm....Same as in the game, Magma Serpents.'

The first type of monster came into view: Magma Serpents. They naturally navigated the rivers of lava, their scales shimmering in the molten glow.

'Peak Rank-5 monsters.'

Even though they seemed weak, in reality, they weren't. The monsters had a strength rivaling the Magma Wyrms we had seen in the mock dungeon before, and their numbers weren't alone.

Right now, to subdue all those monsters, at the very least, a veteran high-ranking Hunter, possibly a B-rank, was needed.

As I observed, one serpent slithered through the lava, basking in the intense heat, while another lay coiled near a ledge, its eyes fixated on potential prey.

'And then, Geyser Stalkers.'

The second type of creature emerged, revealing the elusive Geyser Stalkers. These ground-dwelling predators blended seamlessly with the surroundings, utilizing the erupting geysers as both camouflage and cover.

'Potentially marked mid-rank-4 monsters, but their strength is mostly reliant on camouflage and surprise attacks.'

They stalked the landscape with patient precision, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. In a sense, they were the ones I could take one-on-one, but considering the landscape, that would mean I would become the prey of Magma Serpents.

However, in the end, my goal here was never to fight with monsters.

After all, this place wasn't a location that I meant to conquer right now since the Hikama Mountains alone was a place that was meant to be explored when the player reached higher levels.

Which I was certainly not. Thus, I had only one option and goal.

'Avoiding confrontation and reaching the final destination.'

And that was only possible because of the [Unknown's Armor] I had gotten from the Blackthorn's vault. After all, a high-ranking monster had an intuition and instinct that couldn't be compared to the previous ones I had encountered.

"Huuuuf.....This is enough."

Taking a deep breath, I readied myself, looking at the road ahead. Things were going to get hard, but it was manageable.

As I activated my trait, I slowly blended into the shadows.

In a room that smelled like luxury ornaments, a girl with blazing red hair sat on the ground.

The room was wide, almost as if it were a house itself. Countless different rare materials covered the room; even one of them was enough to feed a simple household for 20 years.

"Hissss....."

The girl released her breath, filled with fire, as she sat in a meditating position.

"I am bored."

Opening her amber eyes, she mumbled. Staying in this state for a while just to improve her control over her magic was alone a boring and monotonous act.

TOK! TOK! TOK!

At that exact second, the door of her room started being knocked.

"Enter."

CREAK

The door creaked open, and a maid in a pristine uniform stepped into the room. "Young Miss Irina, the Madam is summoning you," she announced with a gentle bow.

Irina sighed, her fiery hair flickering with the movement. "Can't she see I'm busy? What does she want now?"

Her relationship with her mother was a little.....Complex.

Knowing this, the maid hesitated for a moment, then responded, "It's about a matter concerning the upcoming gala. She insists on your presence to discuss the arrangements."

Irina groaned, clearly uninterested in the affairs of the upcoming event. Even knowing this, her mother still had never let her have the fun, saying one day she was going to inherit the family's business.

At the same time, she also knew this was just an excuse her mother gave to maids to call her, and knowing her personality, Irina already knew why she had called her for.

"Fine, fine. Let's get this over with." She rose from her meditative position, her crimson gown flowing around her like a cascade of flames.

"She is waiting for you in her office." The maid bowed her head as she waited for Irina to walk over the place.

Irina simply followed the maid through the lavish corridors of the mansion, each step echoing with the opulence that surrounded her.

'Annoying.'

The grandeur of her surroundings didn't match her disinterested demeanor.

As they reached her mother's office, the maid was about to knock gently before opening the door.

"You may enter." However, a refined voice came over the door even before she could knock.

CREAK!

The door opened, making a creaking sound.

Inside, a woman with striking red hair and amber eyes sat behind an intricately carved desk. It was as if the room was decorated in the same manner as the Irina's; it contained countless luxury ornaments and rare magical artifacts all around.

The woman's expression was stern, a reflection of the responsibility she carried as the head of the household, but at the same time, the pressure emanating from her made it very hard to look her in the eye.

"You are here."

Chapter 158 Chapter 35.5 - Short Break

Irina Emberheart.

A girl who belonged to one of the most famous and influential mage families in the small city country.

It is a self-governing state under the rule of the Valerian Federation.

Arcadia Dominion -- the location where the magic is revered, and it is the most prominent.

It was where the magic towers were located for each big branch of magic, and all those towers were ruled by a family.

The Emberheart Family was one of them, ruling the Red Tower of Magic and specializing in fire.

A family whose origins belonged to the period before the Nexus Convergence, where the world didn't even have magic in it.

It was said that their ancestors came from another world, just like the other races. Most people would base the strength of the four magic families on this speculation.

Belonging to such a family, her whole life passed in the pursuit of magic and perfection. From a young age, she didn't have many friends, and neither did she have the time to play with them.

She always studied magic, studied the etiquette of higher-ranking people, how to govern, and how to be on the top.

At first, she liked being different. She liked the praises that continuously came. She liked the acceptance of her strict parents, especially her mother.

Until that time -- when he had shown her the truth about those smiles. After that time, all those lessons that were given to her, all those education....Rather than making her feel above, it felt suffocating.

She felt as if she was a bird in the cage.

Thus, she changed from an obedient to a fiery girl.

Now standing before the same stern woman, those memories came back to her head for a second.

"You are here." her mother said, not bothering to look up from the documents she was studying.

SWOOSH!

As she swung her hand, a wave of warm wind passed through the maid as she disappeared from the room, leaving only the mother and daughter alone.

"Irina, the preparations for the gala are in full swing. I trust you've been overseeing the arrangements as I instructed?" Her voice was measured, carrying a blend of authority and expectation.

The same voice, the same attitude, the same pride.

Everything was the same, no different from the past.

Irina leaned back in her chair, an indifferent expression on her face. "Yes, Mother. Everything is going according to plan. The decorators are working tirelessly, and the invitations have been sent to the esteemed guests. You'll have your grand gala, as always."

Her mother's eyes finally lifted from the documents, and a scrutinizing gaze locked onto Irina. "Your nonchalant attitude is not befitting of someone who will inherit this legacy. The gala is not just a social event; it's a representation of our family's standing. You need to understand the weight of these responsibilities."

"...."

Under her mother's heavy gaze, Irina couldn't refute any further, as she already knew doing so wouldn't even matter at all. The memories of the past and how her mother discarded him as if he hadn't even existed were still there.

"I understand."

In the end, she didn't have any choice but to bow her head. However, the mother had different plans.

"Speaking of legacies, let's discuss your progress at the academy," her mother continued, seamlessly transitioning the conversation.

"Why are your grades still behind?" her mother asked, the tone carrying a sudden intensity that sent a shiver down Irina's spine. At that moment, the atmosphere in the room seemed to change, the air growing warmer as if responding to the woman's rising agitation.

Irina hesitated for a brief moment, feeling the weight of her mother's expectations press down on her. "Mother, as I said, I've been focusing on a well-rounded education. I believe—"

Before she could finish her sentence, her mother's eyes flashed with a fiery intensity, and the air in the room seemed to crackle with energy. "Enough excuses, Irina," her mother interrupted, her voice now carrying an undertone of authority that was almost beastly.

"I don't care what you are focusing on. Connections or whatever, it doesn't matter."

The pressure in the room intensified, making it harder for Irina to breathe. It was as if the very essence of her mother's displeasure manifested in an invisible force that surrounded them. Irina felt a bead of sweat forming on her forehead as she struggled to maintain her composure.

"You are the heiress of the Emberheart family, and your performance should reflect that. Look at Seraphina, the heir of those cold bitches. She surpassed you in the last rankings, and I felt the weight of shame in that gathering. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is for me, as the head of our family, to have our heiress ranked below that girl?" her mother continued each word carrying a heavy implication of disappointment.

'Again with that girl.'

Irina clenched her hands, feeling the anger rising in her heart.

The comparison to Seraphina, the heir of a rival family, felt like a blow to Irina's pride. The warmth in the room seemed to transform into an oppressive heat, mirroring the burning sensation of her mother's scrutiny.

"I won't accept any excuses next time, Irina. I've given you all the resources and opportunities. It's time you make the most of them. I won't tolerate our family's reputation being tarnished by your incompetence," her mother stated, the air in the room practically simmering with tension.

Irina bit her lip, struggling to contain the mix of frustration and anger within her.

Her mother's expectations were like a heavy chain around her, dragging her down. The room, adorned with opulence, felt like a cage, and the pressure was suffocating.

'You really can never understand.'

But in the end, she couldn't say anything. Her mother was the sole person with whom she could never speak her mind.

'Don't talk to me.'

At that moment, for some reason, she remembered that annoying guy. The same annoying guy whom she could never win against with words.

"Understood, Mother," Irina replied tersely, her voice a strained whisper.

"Good. You need to make sure to win, whatever it takes. Do you understand?" her mother demanded, the intensity in her eyes unwavering.

"Yes," Irina responded, her jaw clenched. "Good," and as her mother returned to her documents, Irina slowly retreated back as she slowly got out of her mother's room.

CREAK!

As the door opened, she left the room. She signaled the maid waiting, and she immediately approached. "Young Miss, do you need something?"

She needed something to cool her head off as well as to get rid of all those emotions lingering in her heart right now. She needed to get rid of the resentment.

"Prepare the Flame Chamber." Thus, she ordered the maid – to prepare one of the most dangerous locations.

"Right now?" The maid's response was just as expected since the Flame Chamber was a highly dangerous location even for her, who had immense control over fire psions.

"Right now. Is there a problem?" But, once she decided something, it was over.

"No, there is not. I will get it ready immediately."

Top of FormAs

As the maid slowly left, she also started walking towards her room, her head filled with thoughts.

'Seraphina.'

Her rival.

The Arcadia Dominion was a small place focused on magic, containing some established families.

But, even though each family specialized in one of the big disciplines of elemental magic and were of the same country, in reality, they were rivals.

There was a strong rivalry between them for decades, and this was especially severe for the two families containing contrasting disciplines.

The Pillar of Fire, Emberheart.

The Pillar of Ice, Frostborne.

The two were in a rivalry almost from the day of Nexus Convergence and even before that.

And the girl her mother just mentioned was the heir of the Frostborne family.

'Tch.'

She clicked her tongue as she remembered the unpleasant memories of the past, where she fought with the girl in the magic tournament and where she lost to her.

It was the same this time, too.

"It is so annoying."

Being just one step behind the girl and, because of that, being ranked third on the entrance exam made her mad.

Now that her thoughts had slowly come to the academy, she naturally remembered her exam and term grades.

'That guy.'

And naturally, that annoying guy. The guy who reminded her of him, making her uncomfortable.

'Because of him.....No, not because of him.'

She wasn't immature enough to blame him for the mistakes she had made in those dungeon explorations.

She might be a little immature and fiery at that time, but it was because she was annoyed at his attitude. Now that he wasn't in her presence, she could clearly see how immature she had acted on her own.

"Sigh....."

She knew she was probably escaping from her responsibilities, but she also couldn't digest losing. Trapped in the dilemma of being the girl her mother wanted and doing whatever she wanted, she released a hearty sigh.

DING!

Just as she was pondering about the past, suddenly, her smartwatch rang.

"Hmm?"

She wasn't going to check the message, thinking it probably came from the group, but she decided to check it anyway.

[Dog1: Young Miss, the results of the investigation you requested are out.]

'Which investigation?'

She pondered for a second.

[Dog1: We have found the propagator behind the rumors surrounding Astron Natusalune.]

"Ah...."

Remembering she had requested something like this after the practical exam, she nodded her head.

"Indeed, I requested something like this."

[Why did it take this long?]

It was just a simple investigation, and it shouldn't have taken this long. However, the reply she got answered that.

[Dog1: My sincerest apologies for the delay, Young Miss. The nature of the investigation proved to be more complicated than anticipated. We initially underestimated it as a simple rumor, but it led us to discover a tangled web of deception.]

[Hmm, go on.]

[Dog1: Someone with considerable influence has been actively spreading false information about Astron Natusalune. Not only that, but they've managed to manipulate certain staff within the academy to turn a blind eye to their actions.]

Irina's eyes narrowed at the revelation. The situation was more serious than she had expected. Top of Form

It normally wasn't her business to care about all those things, but she owed that guy her life, arguably, and she wasn't someone who liked owing debts.

[Who is behind this? Do we have a name?]

[Dog1: Yes. It is Trevor Philips, the heir of the Philips Family.]

Chapter 159 Chapter 36.1 - The Forge

BOOM! CLANK! CLANK!

Amidst the cacophony of explosions and the oppressive heat that permeated the air, the sharp and rhythmic sounds of metal clashing echoed through the volcanic cavern.

The dungeon, filled with the fiery glow of molten lava and the acrid scent of smoke, provided a surreal backdrop to the intense 'battle' that unfolded.

In the midst of the 'chaos,' a colossal being stood tall, almost reaching three meters in height.

Its massive form, bathed in the crimson glow of the lava, exuded an aura of raw power. Long, twisted horns adorned its head, and a flowing beard of the same fiery tone cascaded down its chest.

Its mustache was curly as if to compliment the beard, the tips being burned from the scorching heat.

The being's eyes glowed with an otherworldly intensity, reflecting the heat and violence that surrounded it.

CLANK!

With the arm holding the hammer raised and hitting the metal once more, sparks flew into the environment, creating a display of art.

"Hmm?"

Just as the tensed arm with huge muscles was raised once more, suddenly, the figure came to abrupt with a deep hum.

"I sense a presence."

A deep voice filled with experience and pride echoed in the workshop, voicing the thoughts of the huge figure.

"A thin, but a presence nonetheless."

BOOM! CLANK!

The rhythmic clashing of metal ceased as the colossal being slowly lowered its hammer, allowing the vibrations in the air to settle. The cavern seemed to hold its breath, awaiting the next words from the enigmatic blacksmith.

The figure turned back, its glowing eyes piercing through the smoky atmosphere. The workshop, bathed in the eerie glow of molten lava, revealed the intricate details of the being's crimson beard and twisted horns.

"It has been a while since someone has ventured to this secluded place, away from anyone's watchful eyes. Here I thought, I had hidden my traces well."

The words resonated in the cavern, spoken in a slightly cryptic tone. The blacksmith's gaze shifted towards the entrance as if peering into the shadows where the presence had been detected.

"Coming into the place away from the eyes of many....the land hidden in the heart of the volcano, only stepped by a few....What brings you here, oh the lost soul?"

The shadows at the entrance remained still, and for a moment, the cavern seemed to hold its breath.

"Haaaah..."

Then, with a voice filled with ancient wisdom, the blacksmith continued after sighing tiredly.

"To think this old man here would see such a young'un in this place....The fate is indeed different. Though, young'un, the fire in your heart is like an open book to my eyes. I see the weight of your

footsteps, the whispers of your intentions. You carry a story, one etched in the fabric of your very soul."

The figure's words resonated as if the blacksmith could perceive something nobody else could as if its glowing red eyes contained a pearl of different wisdom.

"....It is indeed hard to escape from the eyes of a being like you..."

In the heart of the volcanic cavern, where the molten glow painted the surroundings in shades of red and orange, a sudden movement stirred in the shadows. From the concealed darkness, a presence made itself known—a young man, his purple eyes shining with an intensity that mirrored the glow of the lava.

His silhouette emerged, revealing a demeanor that carried both determination and uncertainty.

The young man stepped forward, acknowledging the ancient blacksmith with a nod. His expressionless face showed as if he expected to be revealed.

"To think a young'un like you were able to come all the way from the entrance, I guess my senses had become dull."

The figure's eyes fetched into the very being of the unknown visitor, his senses squinting the strength of the young man.

"Something...I can sense something from you."

The young man stood there without saying anything as the huge figure looked at him. Even in the presence of such an intimidating figure, he seemed rather relaxed, as if he was sure he was safe.

"I see...."

He grabbed his beard, caressing it as if he finally understood.

"To think I can sense the presence of the eldest one inside.....Now, everything makes sense."

From the eyes of the figure, the small shadows were fluctuating over the young man, and it was a familiar presence.

However, at that second, as if his interest was diminished, the blacksmith turned back to his forge, dismissing the young man as if his presence was inconsequential.

"It doesn't matter who you are or who you carry within. I don't wish to be bothered," the figure declared in a deep, resonant voice.

CLANK! CLANK!

The rhythmic clanging of metal resumed, signaling the blacksmith's return to his craft. The young man, now acknowledged and dismissed, was left standing in the flickering glow of the volcanic cavern, pondering the mysteries that surrounded both the ancient blacksmith and the presence within him.

However, the young man remained undeterred, as if he knew this would happen as well. He stepped forward, his voice cutting through the rhythmic clanging of metal.

"How long are you going to run away?" he asked, his face unchanged.

The blacksmith continued working, ignoring the question as if the words were carried away by the billowing smoke of the forge.

CLANK! CLANK!

"Is it how you are trying to redeem yourself? Closing yourself from the outside world?"

Undeterred, the young man continued to approach the workshop. The sparks flying from the workshop continued to rain down, and with each step he had taken, the temperature rose, reaching dangerous levels.

But the blacksmith remained engrossed in his work, the fiery glow of the molten metal reflecting in his impassive eyes.

"Escaping from the responsibilities of the past...Consequences of your actions.....Is it the way of the Great Vorgvir?"

THUD!

However, at that second, with the last words of the young man, the hammer came to an abrupt halt once again.

"....You know me...."

The blacksmith spoke with a tone different than before.

"I do." The young man answered. "The ancient demon of fire, the Legendary Blacksmith of Netheria."

The cavern seemed to hold its breath as Vorgvir turned back, his eyes gleaming with a different intensity. The crimson glow of the lava bathed the legendary blacksmith in an ethereal light, emphasizing the lines etched into his weathered face.

"You do know a lot....But don't you think it is not wise to reveal such things in the presence of an ancient demon you speak of?"

The young man met the blacksmith's gaze with unwavering determination. "I know the risks, but I also know that you won't kill me."

A hint of amusement flickered in Vorgvir's eyes. "And what makes you so sure?"

The young man took a step forward. "You, the one who saw the destruction his weapons brought upon the world....The one who wished for the cruelty to end....You are not someone to kill the weak...."

Vorgvir's expression remained inscrutable, but the flames in his eyes seemed to soften. "You speak as if you know my heart."

"Actions speak louder than words....And one's past shows one's own nature. This is what I do believe." The young man said as he took one last step. Standing in front of the forge. The heat got so hot that the young man could no longer resist as if it was nothing and was sweating from the hotness.

Vorgvir observed the young man in silence, his massive frame towering over the forge. After a moment, he spoke with a gruff yet contemplative tone, "If you know the reason why I am here, why seek my presence for another weapon? A tool for destruction. What makes you think I will make a weapon for thee which will bring the same destiny to the world?"

At his words, the young man stopped for a second, his purple eyes meeting with the blacksmith's. His eyes were now filled with an intense flame....

The aura oozing from the young man slowly made itself known. It wasn't strong, wasn't huge...But it was intense.

As if to display his own feelings, as if to show how intense those feelings were.

"Because, in the behind of the fa?ade of redemption, I know it is nothing but anger and sorrow.

Behind the feelings you have portrayed in the legends, underneath how it was displayed in the murals....

There lies the guilt that is overwhelming you."

The young man's words hung in the air, carrying a weight that seemed to cut through the fiery atmosphere of the cavern. Vorgvir's eyes, still locked onto the young man's, flickered with a mixture of surprise and deep sadness.

The young man continued, "It is the guilt of wielding a power that took away someone you held dear—the weight of the one lost in the wake of your creations.

And it is the anger towards this cruel world and yourself. The unforgiving feeling of sadness, the memories flooding back every second....

It is not the noble cause of ending the cruelty in this world."

The young man stopped at that one little world.

"It is the feeling of hatred towards the one who took your loved ones, but not being able to achieve the vengeance you seek...."

As the young man spoke, Vorgvir's mind became a canvas painted with memories long buried beneath the layers of time. His stoic exterior cracked, revealing the pain etched into the lines of his weathered face.

In that exact second, the forge's fiery glow seemed to dim as Vorgvir was transported to the times of the past—the memories he had tried so hard to bury.

He saw the smile of a young boy, his eyes filled with admiration, holding a tiny hammer, trying to mimic the great blacksmith.

Another image flashed—the same boy, now a bit older, sweating profusely as he forged his first piece, determined to earn acknowledgment.

And then, the vivid image of the same kid, face pale and covered in blood, behind him was the being he hated the most. The memories assaulted Vorgvir's consciousness, each frame a dagger thrust into the recesses of his soul.

The blacksmith's massive frame trembled slightly as the memories of the past awakened once again.

The emotions he had sealed started flowing down....

But at that exact moment, his experienced eyes met with the young boy before him.

And there he saw something...Something similar....

The fire burning in those eyes, the hatred, the anger....

It was the same...

This young man before him was here because of the same thing.

Before Vorgvir could voice the storm of emotions within him, the young man spoke his voice cold and filled with hatred, "I am not the hero who deserves the holy weapon you aspire to create. I am here not to save the world but to bring destruction to those who took something precious from me."

"...."

"Thus I seek your abilities one last time.....The abilities of the legendary blacksmith...."

Vorgvir's gaze remained locked with the young man's as he absorbed the weight of those words. The cavern seemed to hold its breath, awaiting the blacksmith's response.

"Very well...."

Chapter 160 Chapter 36.2 - The forge

"Very well," Vorgvir said, finally accepting the young man's words. "I will do what you wish." As he said, he slowly turned to his own workshop, looking at the metal he was working on.

However....." He stopped for a second, turning back. "You came here seeking the forge of a legend," Vorgvir spoke, his voice carrying the weight of centuries. "But forging a weapon is not a mere craft. It requires understanding, sacrifice, and a journey into the depths of one's soul. Are you ready to tread such a path, young one?"

The young man nodded resolutely. "No matter how painful, how agonizing the path, I won't sway. I have not once forgotten the past. I carry the weight of my purpose with every step, and I am ready to face whatever challenges lie ahead."

The Vorgvir nodded his head as he averted his gaze. He couldn't keep looking at the young man's burning eyes.

Never in his long life had he seen such intense hatred oozing from a person before. Even he himself, who had possibly experienced the same situation in his life, didn't feel this much.

'Or, maybe I had suppressed it.'

It might have been him having no choice at that time....It might have been the feeling of exhaustion coming after the long run.

But in the end, he did what a coward would do....Escaping from the pain itself.

'But this child....'

Vorgvir was sure....This young man before him didn't even have one-tenth of his life experiences... Neither did he have the strength....

He could see with his eyes that the child before him couldn't even be called a warrior compared to those he had seen in the past.

But even then, he was standing right before him. Coming to such a place, enduring all the agony instead of giving up....

'What a resilience.'

He was looking right into his eyes without backing off. Even under the scorching heat, even though he was tired, he didn't even care.

'He reminds me of that kid.'

The boy before him probably didn't know, but now that Vorgvir had checked him, he was sure.

'Would he smile like him if such a thing hadn't happened? What a pitiful kid...'

Vorgvir was not stupid. From the words spoken by the young man alone, he could easily understand who his enemy was.

After all, otherwise, the young man wouldn't come to this place suggesting revenge. Even then, he came into the place of his possible enemy.

'Each second must be incredibly itchy for him.'

Vorgvir knew how it felt to be in the presence of the ones you hated the most. Even those resembling them would become something to hate.

"Young man," Vorgvir said as he reached the shelves in his workshop. His large hand carefully selected a vial containing a mysterious liquid. The flames flickered, casting an arcane glow on the ancient blacksmith's face.

"Do you know what makes the weapon powerful?"

The young man met Vorgvir's intense gaze and replied, "The strength of the owner. The weapon is a reflection of the one who wields it. Its power is not solely in its craftsmanship but in the connection between the owner's essence and the essence of the weapon."

Vorgvir nodded in approval. "Precisely. The journey into forging a legendary weapon is not only about the materials and techniques but also about understanding the purpose behind it. The weapon needs to be the reflection of the one who wields it, and even the materials need to be in this harmony." At that point, he stopped.

"And you want to see my essence."

"Indeed. That is what this vial is for." Vorgvir nodded his head, looking at the kid. "Are you ready?"

"I am."

Vorgvir handed the young man the vial, its contents shimmering with an otherworldly glow.

"Haaah...."

The young man took a deep breath, his determination shining in his eyes. Without hesitation, he lifted the vial to his lips and drank its mysterious essence.

GULP!

The moment the liquid touched his tongue, a surge of energy coursed through his veins. The mana around the environment started curling all around, and it slowly gathered into the young man.

THUD!

As the mana coursed through the young man, the intensity of the energy caused him to fall to his knees. His eyes closed, and the surroundings were enveloped in an ethereal glow. The forge's flames responded to the shift in energy, curling and dancing in an intricate display.

Suddenly, a mysterious smoke began to rise from the young man, shrouding him in a veil of the ancient energy contained in the vial itself.

The smoke expanded, filling the cavern with an otherworldly ambiance.

The air seemed charged with magic as the essence of the vial intertwined with the young man's being, revealing what was intended to be seen.

As the smoke finally settled itself, slowly, the mana started taking its shape. The surroundings started to change.

"Moon?"

The scenery slowly turned into something surreal. The moon cast an ethereal glow on the sky, covering everything.

"Huh?"

Underneath lay a barren land, filled with nothing but grass bathed underneath the light of the moon.

And in the midst of it stood a figure as if the moon was his sanctuary.

The moon cast a green-colored light upon the surroundings, creating an otherworldly ambiance.

As the figure came into focus, it held a long and distinct-looking weapon in its hand. The weapon seemed to resonate with the moon's glow, emitting a faint luminosity of its own.

The figure's features were obscured, yet an air of power and purpose emanated from its presence.

In a mesmerizing display, the figure condensed the green-colored light from the moon into a radiant projectile. The energy formed at the tip of the weapon, and with a swift motion, it shot forth, traversing the barren landscape with incredible speed. The projectile left a trail of shimmering light in its wake, illuminating the moonlit night.

The young man hadn't witnessed what it was, but Vorgvir did.

'Don't tell me?'

That was the purpose of the vial itself, called the Pathfinder. The vial would show what would be the most suitable weapon, the blacksmith itself, and one of the most sought-after materials in the world.

'He is one of them.'

The moon....It was something he hadn't seen for a while.

'Old friend...to think I would see one of your descendants here.'

Memories came crashing, but his focus remained on the kid.

At that exact second, Vorgvir had already realized what kind of weapon would be needed and what he needed to do. He was the legendary blacksmith for a reason.

"Huh?"

However, something different happened. Initially, he had assumed the display would be over, but it didn't.

Suddenly, the light covering the sky changed from green to blue.

The moon, which was glowing green, turned blue/gold as if it were on fire. It shone brightly, burning the grass field underneath.

And amidst the burning field, the same figure stood. This time, holding a different type of long weapon in his hand.

The weapon now looked like a wide bow. A wide bow filled with energy.

As the figure knocked the weapon and stretched the string, suddenly, an arrow materialized in the midst of the bow out of thin air, shining brightly.

BOOM!

As the arrow flew, it crashed on the ground, creating a loud explosion from the place it knocked.

"How?"

Vorgvir could only watch in silence and awe.

"How can he use both?"

Remembering the words of his old friend, he couldn't help but be surprised. Of course, the path to creating such a weapon also immediately formed in his prodigal head, but even then, the essential surprise was there.

However, it wasn't the end.

After the display of the explosion, the sky changed once more, turning into something eerie.

The moon cast a crimson-colored light on the ground....Underneath, the grass seemed to deteriorate.

As if the blood needed to be spilled as if the madness itself occurred in the place.

There stood the figure once again, this time holding two daggers in his hands. The daggers shone bright red as, once again the moonlight condensed upon them.

SLASH!

As the figure moved, he slashed the open air. Following the blades, the condensed crimson energy shot right from the blades, cutting down the grass.

On their path, each piece of grass they touched slowly deteriorated, losing their source of life.

'.....'

At this point, Vorgvir didn't even say anything and only looked at the scene with an immense amount of focus, his brain capturing every detail that was needed.

After the red one came the silver-colored sky. This time, the figure held a weapon he hadn't seen in a while.

The chakrams glowed in the faint silver color. The figure shot forward at a rapid speed as he fired the blades constantly.

SWOOSH!

The blades first shot forward, and as they hit the target they returned like a thread of silver energy was connecting them to the silhouette.

And after that, as the last one, the sky turned into the color of purple/black.

A different pressure seemed to descend upon the world as the moon cast a dark, gloomy light.

The grass was crushed underneath the light as the silhouette simply stood still. In his hands, only a small bunch of rings could be seen on each of his fingers.

The rings directed the purple right into the middle of the figure's hand, forming a sphere of dark purple.

And the figure moved his hands as he wished, with each of his hand movements the crushing force on the grass increasing.

FUSH!

As the showdown met its end and the smoke rising from the ground disappeared, Vorgvir looked at the young boy before him kneeling.

"Oh my.....This will take a while...."

At the end of the day, he couldn't help but shake his head.