Demonic Sword 31

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The battlefield became silent.

Susan was the strongest of the group from Balvan mansion and right now she was convulsing on the ground engulfed by flames.

'Fuck!'

Noah was the first to react.

He hastily slashed the throat of one of the men in front of him while he was still stupefied by the unexpected event and then got ready to run away.

He didn't know much about magic spells but he was sure of one thing.

'If that man can do that attack again we are doomed! I must retreat! I will never be the last one to escape again!'

He swore this to himself since the events near Lilun village, if you have to escape be the first to do that!

This was the main reason why he was the first of the group to react, he was constantly wary of any unexpected thing that could happen, like a rank 3 magical beast rising from a shore made of bones, or a misleading report not mentioning a mage in the group of deserters.

Before he even managed to turn back though, a shockwave ran from the flames, extinguishing them.

Susan's figure struggled to get up, showing to the onlookers the pitiful state she was in.

She was completely naked without any hair left on her body.

Her skin was almost completely burned and crackling sounds came out of it.

She was missing her right arm, that probably took most of the destructive power of the spell, while her left hand had only 2 fingers left.

A guttural voice came out of her mouth while she spoke slowly.

"Can... hold back him. Complete ... mission."

Then she jumped back on the man now visible high in the mountain path.

He was staring at her with a slight smile, apparently satisfied by the damage dealt by his spell, yet his complexion looked pale like he was tired.

Noah was stupefied.

He was ready to run away but then he saw what should have been a burned corpse getting up and speak.

'She should have been killed already just by the injuries created by the flames, not even considering the impact of the attack hitting her. Is this a real cultivator?'

He looked at the remaining man standing in front of him, about how he blocked his attack, and could not help but feel like he was an ant fighting another ant.

'I really am incredibly weak.'

He wasn't thinking only about his physical power but also about his mental state.

Seeing Susan's determination inspired him.

As if sensing the change in his mental state, his acupoints started absorbing "Breath" at a speed like never before, slowly refilling the "Breath" he used till now.

The man seeing the kid slowly moving toward him felt a chill down his spine and got ready to block any incoming attack. "It's useless."

Said Noah walking past him.

"You are already dead."

The sword in his hands, held in a horizontal position in front of his chest, divided itself into two halves, then a red line appeared from his head till his waist.

Blood sprouted from the red line as the man was cut vertically in two.

A weak cultivator could do nothing against the full power of a rank 3 martial art!

Even though Noah could have defeated him conserving most of his "Breath" that would have taken some time, and he was eager to give support to the other people in his group.

'Even if I can't defeat the mage, they probably can if they work together. I have to use my last full power attack wisely.'

The "Breath" in his body was halved by his last strike but now he could assist the others in their fight.

Meanwhile, Sandy and the others had resumed their fights after seeing Susan's attempt to buy time for them.

Ethan was fighting with the man that tried to block Susan previously while the brothers were still dealing with the 3 injured cultivators.

Ethan seemed at a disadvantage against the maneuverability of the man's short sword and he kept getting wounded superficially by its fast attacks.

On the other side, Sandy and Mark seemed close to delivering a fatal attack to one of the men surrounding them but they would always be obstructed at the last moment by the other two, the advantage in numbers was slowing the arrival of victory in their fight.

Noah chose to help the brothers since their fight was the easiest to end with his help and since he wasn't too sure that he could block the short sword of the man if he focused him.

Uncaring of their bleeding wrists, the 3 deserters were still delivering powerful blows containing great force, they used their martial arts empowered with their higher tier of "Breath" to continuously unleash peak rank 2 attacks.

Noah could do that only twice and that was because his martial art was rank 3!

Even though theirs was an art of a lower level, their attacks contained the same power and the deserters had fewer restrictions in their usage.

Yet, the brothers would always dodge them while delivering swift counterattacks that would either be blocked by one of the deserters or wound them lightly.

Wounds kept accumulating on the trio but they held still, waiting for their boss to finish his fight with the almost dead woman.

Another counterattack was launched by Sandy but was blocked by one of the men confidently, he was preparing himself to deliver another powerful blow when he felt a sudden pain to his back.

He turned around to see a kid with black hair in a ponytail getting away from him at high speed.

He had icy-blue eyes and donned a tight black kimono, in his hands there were two black sabers, one of them had dripping blood on it.

He had no time to say anything because Mark didn't let this occasion slip by and planted his knife in the man chest, the man died still wondering where the kid came from.

After one of the 3 deserters died, the fight became completely one-sided and Mark and Sandy took out the already injured opponents in a few rounds of attack.

They didn't waste any time as they sped toward Ethan's battle, Mark only slightly nodded at Noah's figure following them at some distance.

Ethan was having a rough time, his opponent was slowly overwhelming him, locking him into a passive position.

There were a lot of light wounds on Ethan's arms and a deep one on his left leg that was hindering his movements.

The brothers arrived at full speed stopping the man from inflicting another heavy wound on Ethan and then, together with him, unleashed a series of attacks on the encircled deserter.

Seeing that the situation wasn't looking good, the man chose to escape, getting purposedly injured to escape the encirclement and then running at full speed toward the forest.

But then, a black saber appeared in front of him.

Chapter 32 - 32. Victory

In order to block the saber, the man had to stop his escape, allowing the guards from Balvan mansion to encircle him again.

Enraged, he tried to find the owner of the saber only to see a small figure getting away at high speed.

In this moment of distraction, Ethan stabbed him on his waist followed by Sandy and Mark's knives.

In a battle between cultivators, one instant of distraction could cause your own death.

That's why Noah's job was to ensure that the cultivators would fight themselves without interferences, and interfering was exactly what he was doing.

He would lie in wait in order to find an opportunity to cause a misstep in the enemy that would be exploited by his companions.

BOOM!

An explosion resounded from high in the mountain path.

A serpent made of flames was coiling around the deserters' boss right arm.

On the ground near him, Susan's charred corpse was lying unmoving, no more life was in it.

"Bos... s."

The man stabbed by the trio made a last plead of help before dying.

The flames slowly dissipated and the serpent with them, showing how proved the mage was by using the spell two times.

Noah, Ethan, Sandy, and Mark regrouped and stared at the pale man that killed their captain.

"Your name?"

Ethan asked, breathing heavily from the fatigue of his two consecutive fights.

"Tsk, what, the Shosti family forgot to mention it when they gave the reports?"

The group and the man stalled in order to regain some energy.

"We are simple people, reading the names of those that we have to kill is just useless work."

Sandy said shrugging his shoulders.

"My name is Orson why do you want to know it?"

"Well, you killed our captain, we need to report your name after we kill you to complain about their shitty report."

Mark's time to speak had arrived but Noah didn't care this time as he was completely focused on Orson.

'Can he do it again? Anyone of us that gets hit by that spell will probably die, but Susan managed to make him use it two times. Can he do it a third time?'

"Oh, no wonder she was so strong, it was your captain! Her body should have reached the limits of rank 3. What a pity, if she was a noble she would have had the technique needed to break through rank 4 but alas..."

Orson seemed really sad for Susan as he kept on speaking.

"You know, that's why I rebelled. I have been a rank 1 mage for ten years now and managed to obtain a spell only by stealing it. Don't you think that it's unfair? Don't you think that someone as talented as her, as talented as ME has the right to obtain what he deserves?"

His speech was about the common problem in the human's cultivation world.

Noble families would accumulate wealth and techniques to have a monopoly over them. Anyone not belonging to their inner circle could just serve for life hoping to be rewarded accordingly, or resort to illicit ways.

Ethan breath returned to a normal pace, he looked at his companion and nodded.

"Shall we start?"

Orson shook his head but got in position to fight, he took a big iron mace from the ground with his left hand and yelled: "Come then!"

The group waited no more and jumped right at him.

Ethan was the first to clash with the mace causing the ground beneath him to crackle, Sandy and Mark slowed their pace on purpose to deal with Orson's sides.

Before the brother's knives could hit Orson though, the serpent of flames appeared again, this time protecting him.

Sandy and Mark had to halt their charge while Ethan was pushed three steps back with his hands lightly burned.

The serpent disappeared and the exchange of attacks and defense repeated itself.

It seemed that if Orson used the magic spell only to protect himself, its consumption of mental energy would be lower.

After three rounds of attacks, Ethan's left arm was hanging on his side while he wielded his greatsword with his right hand. The wound on his left leg was constantly spilling blood and he was deadly pale, he probably could hold only for another round.

Sandy and Mark were relatively better, the fire only touched them superficially and managed to cause only some spots of burned flesh.

Orson, on the other side, was panting heavily, he looked completely drained, like after a full session of training in the Kesier rune.

It was obvious that the next round would be the last.

Ethan's eyes became resolute as he charged recklessly toward Orson.

Like the times before that, his greatsword met the mace and he pushed hard with all the strength he had left to lock Orson in that position. The attacks of the brothers arrived as punctual as always, aiming for the blind spots of the mage.

At one step from death, Orson resolutely chose to raise once again his right arm to unleash his strongest attack.

The arm lit up and a serpent of flames was being formed when a blade of wind, with the form of a crescent moon, hit the arm and severed it!

Noah was a few meters away from the mage, kneeling on the ground and managing to keep his upper body erected by pointing with his sabers on the ground.

He had watched the whole battle from a small distance away and understood one thing: the flames originated from his right arm.

So he waited till Orson exposed his arm again to deliver the only ranged attack that his art had.

The execution was perfect and the magic got interrupted, Sandy and Mark used this chance to directly cut off Orson's head with two strikes from opposite directions.

The mage was dead!

Noah and Ethan immediately fell on the ground, one had his "Breath" completely drained while the other was heavily injured.

The brothers, on the contrary, were still standing looking around the battlefield and on Orson body.

After their search, they came back to where Ethan and Noah were resting.

"No traces of the scroll containing the magic spell, he must have destroyed it."

"Except for some starving women that survived and us, everyone is dead."

They divided their lines as usual but there was a trace of sadness this time and not the usual irony.

Noah looked at the charred corpse at some distance from them and spoke.

"If she didn't make Orson use the spell twice, at least another one of us would be dead."

Everyone nodded and bowed to the corpse of their former captain.

Chapter 33 - 33. Rarity

Inside the carriage, the group from Balvan family was returning to the mansion. Having completed the mission, there was no reason for them to remain in Cliffshear mountain.

They had signaled the place where the encampment was and left the hostages there waiting for someone from the noble families to pick them up, in a matter between cultivators those women were treated only as casualties and were for normal soldiers to handle.

The atmosphere during the trip back was pensive, everyone was silent with their mind wandering.

Sometimes their gaze would lie on a charred corpse lying on the wooden seats of the carriage, sometimes on Orson's head on the floor.

After he stared at the mage's head, Noah broke the silence wanting clarity on a pressing question in his mind.

"Is it really that hard to get a magic spell if you don't belong to the nobles' inner circle?"

The group was a little surprised form the question but then realized that this companion that fought with them was, in fact, a kid.

Mark did a complex smile and spoke.

"I'm sure that your Master already said something to you but I'll try to be more precise. You were probably misled to think that if you put enough efforts inevitably you will receive rewards. That is true only until a certain level."

He pointed at the corpse on the ground and continued.

"Susan was the third strongest in the outer ring, below your Master and his captain. She served in the guards of the outer ring for more than twenty years. Do you know the reason why she could not receive a technique that surpassed rank 3?"

Noah's answer was immediate.

"Because she didn't join the inner ring."

Sandy broke the silence too and corrected him.

"No, because she had talent and will."

Mark nodded to the answer of his brother and continued.

"You saw the power of a magic spell now, what would happen if the nobles gave that kind of power to someone that might become stronger than them?"

'One single cultivator having a magical spell could kill and injure 5 of them, with some of them stronger than him in other aspects.'

The answer this time was obvious.

"Rebellion."

Mark nodded, his smile becoming more complex.

"Exactly, that talented person might not welcome the control of the noble's families anymore after he obtains the power to fight them. You probably thought that you could find some ways around it since you got rewarded with a rank 3 art but let me tell you: that was the most valuable reward they could give you. Remember that you gave a "Breath" blessing, which is one of the

most precious treasures for low-level cultivators, for it and you had your Master help in the delivery. I'm afraid that if you lacked one of those you would have received only some amount of gold as a reward."

Noah remembered how just by standing next to that blue mineral his injuries were healed and his second cycle was completed.

'That was indeed a good stone, no wonder they gave me such a high tier martial art for it.'

"With magic spells, the process is more complex."

Mark kept explaining.

"The first issue is that you need to be at least a rank 1 mage to learn it otherwise your sea of consciousness won't be able to bear the pressure of its diagram, many cultivators would rather train in other aspects that give an earlier increase of power than spend hours looking at a rune for many years. This greatly reduces the number of people that can strive for a magic scroll."

"After that, there is a problem with the aptitude of a person. If your aptitude doesn't match the element of the spell its power will be immensely reduced. Mages would rather serve a noble family that has accumulated a sufficient variety of spells rather than going around stealing scrolls only to end up with something that they would rather not use. I believe that Orson chose to rebel when he finally found the spell matching his aptitude."

'So his aptitude was fire. I won't know mine until my dantian is formed which means that it's useless to search for a way to get spells until then.'

"The last thing is the rarity of your element. The most common spells are of the fire and water element, followed by wind and earth. Thunder has a spot over them surpassed only by light and darkness. Of course, the rarer the element the stronger would be the spell compared to those on the same level." This was the first time Noah heard something like this. He could not help but interrupt Mark explanation to ask:

"Why is there such a division?"

Mark had to think for a bit before continuing his speech.

"Well, truth is that the creation of spells is a process that went on for thousands of years and only top cultivators with a specific talent in magical diagrams can attempt to draw them. According to the common knowledge, the rarer one element the harder is to create diagrams of it, that's why there are fewer spells of them and that's where they took the name 'rare'."

Mark then pointed at himself and his brother.

"Our element is thunder. Even if it's a rare element, with the accumulation the Balvan family has they should have some scrolls of it. Yet, do you think that they will give them to us even if we enter the inner circle?"

Sandy didn't give time for Noah to answer and spoke directly.

"The answer is: probably no! With the character that we have, the inner circle will never allow us to have that kind of power, they simply don't trust us. Why do you think we are still wandering in the outer circle doing these kinds of missions while we both have reached the level of rank 1 mage?"

'So they were indeed mages and not simply talented scouts.'

"My brother is right, our power would increase too much with a spell of a rare element in our set of abilities. Because of that, the inner circle would not let us in and will just leave us to age in the outer circle."

Noah was confused.

"Then why do you still serve the Balvan family?"

Mark's smile showed only helplessness at this point.

"Because it is the only place where we can receive something for our cultivation, and in the bigger families there is only more competition for rewards at our level. The only option would be the academy in the Royal city but alas..."

He winked at Noah.

"They only enroll people below 18 years old."

Chapter 34 - 34. Problem

Since Noah found a way inside the cultivation world he completely disregarded any other type of knowledge, not that he had time to study anyway with his rigid schedule.

He only had a basic understanding of the political power system of this country and of the environment near his family's mansion.

The subdivision of power was similar to the feudal system from his previous world: small-size noble families would pay taxes to the medium-size ones in order to keep their territory; like this till the large-size noble families that answered only to the Royal family.

Any large-size noble family would be in control of a city, like the Shosti family with Mossgrove city, and would run it according to the orders of the Royal dynasty.

Yet, Noah's mind was mostly oblivious to any names concerning these topics, he focused so much in cultivation that he only barely remembered that this nation was called Utra.

'So there is an alternative! I would have known more if the cultivation topic wasn't so hidden to the public. I need to have one or two backup plans for when I leave the family.'

If there was one thing Noah was sure of, it would have been his departure from the Balvan family in the future. He knew that his possibilities were limited in that environment due to his status as a bastard so he had no plan to stay, he would rather be a fugitive like Orson than spend his whole life serving nobles, hoping one day to be rewarded.

'Unfortunately, I'm still weak, I should wait for my dantian to form and for my aptitude to be determined before thinking of running away. I would also need a general plan on how to become stronger without the nobles' support and there is the situation about my mother too...'

There were no immediate solutions to his problems, so he just chose that he would think about them when he had a clearer understanding of things.

Life kept going as usual in the outer circle.

With the exception of the ceremony for Susan's funeral, Noah did nothing but training and clearing magical beasts' packs.

It was a few days after he became 12 that a big event happened: his acupoints had completely stopped absorbing "Breath", his third cycle was completed!

In the next cycle, he will obtain a rank 2 body!

Right now, Noah was in the torture room below the guards building, he was screaming in pain tied to a metal table.

Willam was next to him, yelling the number of the acupoints he was going to destroy.

"All of the seven acupoints are destroyed, the whirl is forming, focus!"

Noah was, by then, used to the treatment or at least to its procedure.

The pain he would feel from having his acupoints broken was still as terrible as the other times, no matter how much he increased his mental energy he had to put all his concentration on managing to stay conscious.

The usual feeling of death approached Noah's mind but that could not make him flicker, he was completely focused on the "Breath" accumulating over his back.

After reaching a decent amount of density, he manipulated the "Breath" to enter and fill the space where his acupoints previously were.

Yet, at that point, something unexpected happened: the "Breath", instead of accumulating in the empty places, was absorbed by his body.

The most worrying thing was that Noah didn't feel any increase of strength, the "Breath" had completely disappeared inside his body while the feeling of death was still getting closer at high speed.

He tried again to flow "Breath" in the acupoints' previous spots but the same thing happened.

He was at loss of what he had to do!

Any strand of "Breath" he tried to accumulate would be absorbed by his body and he didn't even know why!

At that point, a drop of a familiar black liquid got expelled by his right arm, seeing it Noah finally understood: he was going through the advancement of rank of his body!

'Is the "Breath" being absorbed pushing my body over the rank? Does this means that I can't form acupoints until my body advances?'

He could not think of any different explanations and he had no time to ask William because of the darkness getting closer in his mind so he just went all out with the absorption process.

He continuously absorbed "Breath" without even stopping to check if his acupoints were forming.

The black liquid began to be ejected from his body at high speed.

William was holding him down watching this process with worry.

He understood that his disciple encountered some kind of problem but there was nothing that he could do to help, so he just let his hands getting stained by the black substance while keeping him still on the table.

Meanwhile, Noah was being entirely covered by the liquid as he hurried in the absorption process to avoid being engulfed by the darkness.

Then, finally, "Breath" began to accumulate forming his acupoints.

He hastily isolated the newly formed acupoints waiting for them to solidify and link themselves to his body.

He completely disregarded the pain caused by the connection process and focused only on the barriers incubating the mixture of "Breath" and shards of bone.

The mixture, in the end, became solid and he felt an immense wave of strength running through him.

Like the previous times, he waited some more time before releasing the barriers around the newly formed acupoints in order to be completely sure that the treatment went well.

His body felt extremely strong.

His mind was tired and his mental energy was almost completely expended, but there was no pain coming from his back.

He gave a powerful pull with his arms and the metal chains tying his hands broke.

Then he did the same with his legs and the chains holding them shattered.

He stood up on the metal table trying to sense his body but his mind was too tired from the pain he had endured to size his new strength precisely.

William, in the meantime, was smiling warmly looking at him, he was proud of this disciple continuously surpassing any difficulty with determination and bravery.

Noah got down from the table and bowed to his Master, it was the first time he could do that right after finishing the treatment.

"Thanks a lot, Master. Oh right, it seems that since my body broke through I won't need to be bedridden this time so we can spar tomorrow, I'm eager to feel the strength of my new body!"

The smile on William's face disappeared, replaced by an irritated expression.

"You damned workaholic, tomorrow you will clean this room to get rid of the filth that your body expelled! And you will do extra missions to repay my handcuffs!"

Chapter 35 - 35. Doubt

When Noah woke up the next morning he clearly felt the increase of strength of his body.

He had taken a bath before going to sleep to wash away the filth his body secreted during the advancement of rank and now he was standing in his room sensing attentively any change he could feel. The most immediate thing was that his muscles increased in size and were more defined, not an inch of fat was present on them, giving to Noah's figure a slender and sturdy appearance even though he was still quite short.

Yet, the biggest changes happened inside his body.

The seven acupoints on his back were absorbing "Breath" at a speed at least two times higher than they did in the previous cycle.

The quantity that his body was holding had already increased threefold and its quality seemed higher!

'With this amount, I can launch full strength attacks at least six times before running out of "Breath"! I'm not even factoring the new speed at which I'm recovering it, I might as well have the energy for another attack when the other six are used, and this while the fourth cycle is not even complete!'

The newly found power was making Noah eager to spar with his Master so he hurriedly donned a white kimono and got ready to exit the room before a thought stopped his tracks.

'Right, first I have to clean the torture room.'

CLANG!

The sound of swords clashing resounded in a room of the guards building.

Noah was fighting against William with decision and resolution while getting used to his body.

It was some time since William had to drop the wooden stick an use a real sword to block Noah's attacks.

Nevertheless, Noah was never able to surpass his Master's defense, William would just block any attack coming at him while commenting on its execution.

Yet, the happiness for his body's improvement wasn't present on Noah's expression, which exuded only coldness and concentration.

He had met with his mother before going to the sparring session and was crestfallen to see a big bruise on her face right under the left eye.

Some sort of pressure had formed in his mind, hurrying him to improve faster before something irreversible happened.

William noted his disciple state of mind and raised the stakes of the training as a form of respect for his determination.

It was only when Noah was breathing heavily and sweating profusely that his Master decided to stop the sparring and sit on the floor to discuss things with him.

Noah sat on his knees on the spot in front of him and sorted the questions he wanted to ask.

"So, how is a rank 2 body?"

William started the conversation.

"It's really amazing! My strength and speed rose to an absurd level, I believe that now I completely crossed the boundaries of a rank 3 magical beast."

William nodded. He knew that every advancement in rank comported a sudden increase in strength and that the higher the level of the rank, the bigger would be the difference with the previous level.

Noah chose his first question.

"Master, are cultivators all idiots?"

William was surprised by the question and could not help but to ask for the meaning of it.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, in the mission against Orson I realized that cultivators have... well... peculiar traits in their personality."

William was at first confused but then realized something looking at his disciple complex expression and became irritated.

"You, the kid that at the age of 8 scammed guards for techniques, the kid that in 4 years did nothing but train and fight, the kid that can't think of anything than cultivation all day, are saying that cultivators are peculiar?"

Noah seemed to be taken aback by these words but just put a slight smile on his face as an answer.

William shook his head and continued.

"It's not the cultivation process that causes these peculiarities, rather a person needs those to keep pursuing power. Only a strong personality can continue on this long road unmoved by the many difficulties that it will encounter."

Noah was enlighted.

The body-nourishing methods required constant meditation and great patience to be trained, and those were the easiest techniques to practice in.

Most of the people would just grow bored or tired of such methods, no wonder they could not pursue higher powers.

Who would be willing to practice every day in a martial art till his body was exhausted? Who could spend hours looking at rune that would cause him pain and exhaustion?

Only strong-willed people! And they generally had some particularity in them that were unwilling to abandon, like Noah's stubbornness in his search for power or Sandy's uncaring attitude.

"I think I understand now. There is another thing though."

Noah was about to ask about the academy in the Royal city but then a doubt crossed his mind. He held back from speaking the last part of the sentence and changed its subject at the last moment.

"Can-can I take a look at the information about cultivators in this country? You know, the knowledge about this topic is quite hidden and I wouldn't even know where to look for it."

William was astonished but then nodded for a few times with a radiant smile on his face.

"You finally want to know more about this country's history! Don't worry, I'll bring a book from the inner circle on our next appointment. To think that I would live till you asked me something not concerning training!"

Noah had a guilty smile on his face, it was only after he left the room that he could finally relax.

'I almost made a mistake. I know that Master cares about me but what would happen if he understood that I want to leave the family? Will he help me or will he punish me? Just to be sure it's better not to disclose anything with him until the Forging of Seven Hells is completed. Plus, I don't really know how to get to the Royal city anyway.'

Noah went back to his room while deep in thought.

He didn't really like hiding things from William since he helped him so much, yet his future came first.

He could not accept to be a simple guard in his life, he wanted to be free to soar the sky without anyone having the power to obstruct him and to do that he needed a power that he could not find staying in the mansion.

'It seems that it's really my nature to disappoint those that love me. I'm sorry Master, but there is no chance that I'll simply accept my status as my fate. I hope that you can understand.'

Out of habit, he picked his sabers and practiced.

The "Breath" in his body was replenished by a quarter since the sparring had ended.

Chapter 36 - 36. Bandits

The was only one imminent problem with Noah's lifestyle.

He kept on training and fighting but one aspect was pressing him.

'How the fuck am I supposed to tell Master that the rune in my sea of consciousness is almost complete!?'

It has been only two years and a half since he started the training for his mental energy but with the advantage his rebirth gave him he had almost become a rank 1 mage.

'Well, I'll think about it after this mission. At least there were no problems with the fifth treatment.'

About one month ago he successfully completed his fourth cycle and entered the fifth one.

Apparently, the cycle right after the body's advancement was the easiest to complete, followed by the middle one that required a long time of nourishment, to the last one that forced the practitioner to break through ranks during the treatment.

'I should be able to obtain a rank 3 body some months after I turn 13, I hope that the last treatment will be similar to the fourth.'

Since the unexpected event during the treatment, Noah reflected more on the various cycles of the Seven Hells method in order to be ready when another unexpected situation appeared.

After all, one misstep during the process will cause his death or a permanent injury.

During these months, he also expanded his knowledge of this country thanks to the many books his Master kept on giving him, and, in the end, he found the information that he wanted.

'The Royal city takes the name from the dynasty that runs it and since two thousand years ago it has been called Elbas.'

Any noble family that manages to take control of the Royal city will become a dynasty.

Two thousand years ago, the Elbas family waged a war against the previous Royal family and won, since then they never lost to any rebellion against them.

One of the reasons why they resisted for so much time was the creation of the academy.

"The academy is the best training ground for the descendants of the noble families and for young talents. It was made by the Elbas family as a mean to get any talented individual of the younger generation closer to the Royal family since you can get a prestigious position in the Royal city once you graduate from the academy. It's a smart move that increases their power while lowering that of the noble families at the same time, that's why they invested so much in it giving access to many techniques and spells to its students. The problem is that I can only enter there through a competition." The academy enrolled twice per year and only through two methods: money and strength.

You could either pay an exorbitant sum of gold and precious materials or you had to win a competition set up by it against other contenders.

Needless to say, Noah's only option was the second method.

'I even prepared a couple of escape routes for when the time comes, I can only hope that it will be near the time of one of the enrollment competition.'

After obtaining the information about the academy, Noah had just to inspect the maps about the continent of Utra to plan some escape routes toward the places where the selections would be.

While he was brainstorming about his recent discoveries, Noah was speeding through Evergreen forest.

His mission consisted in finding a group of bandits that assaulted a merchant caravan that transported body parts of magical beasts.

He had to execute the bandits and retrieve the goods.

His Master assured him that they weren't extremely powerful cultivators and that he could choose the reward for the mission between the stolen merch.

'The reports said that this group calls themselves "Gray Shadows" and they have seven members. In the last year, they operated in the zone near Evergreen forest so their base should be here but even after some investigations, they have never been found. I guess that Sandy and Mark are busy somewhere else for Master to choose me for this mission.'

With his strong mental energy, Noah was one of the best candidates for this mission since he could sense clearly the environment around him.

It was his second day inside the forest but he still had to find traces of the bandits.

Even though the surface of Evergreen forest was bigger than the one the Balvan family ruled on and was full of dangerous magical beasts, the area near its perimeter was relatively safe since the Shosti family would periodically send soldiers to clear it from dangers in order to make the merchant routes safer.

'Master said that if I find nothing after one month of search, I can just give up and go back to the mansion.'

So, its solitary mission had begun. Noah would travel during the day looking for traces of the Gray Shadows and train at night in the Kesier rune.

He liked this type of mission because it allowed him to learn how to survive in the wilderness, he took it as a preparation for his big escape in the future.

After one week of exploration, he still ended up with nothing.

Noah didn't really want to fail the mission, or to say it better he didn't want to give up the free reward from the bandits' deposit.

He stood on a tree deep in thought until he had an idea.

'What if I follow a caravan?'

The idea seemed worth a shot so he moved toward the perimeter of the forest in the direction of Mossgrove city.

He waited there for three days, letting pass the caravans that were too small or looked like they weren't carrying anything important until he finally found the perfect target.

It was a big caravan made of two different carriages. It had a big red emblem inscribed on its side representing a tiger with wings on his back, Noah supposed that it belonged to one of the middle-size noble families in the Shosti's domain. One of the carriages was ridden by a group of soldiers that alternated the coachman role between themselves, while on the other one a bald fat man without any beard and a young girl were in the rider's position.

'That one looks like the ideal target of the Gray Shadows, the soldiers don't look that strong but for a noble family to send them to protect a merchant it means that the goods they carry should have some value.'

Mental energy could be used to scan the surroundings but also to evaluate someone's strength, yet before becoming a mage its precision would still be somewhat lacking.

To evaluate these soldiers though, Noah's level was more than enough.

'So it's decided, I'll follow them!'

Chapter 37 - 37. Theft

The caravan took a path inside Evergreen forest.

Noah was jumping from tree to tree following it at quite some distance, he was waiting for the moment the Gray Shadows appeared.

He was quite bored, all he could do was wait for something to happen or to enter his range of perception, a big contrast with his usual days spent on training until he had to sleep to recover.

Meanwhile, on the caravan.

Quinn was a merchant that took on his family's job at the age of 16.

He was talented in the art of trade and managed to raise his position till being the preferred merchant of the Merger family, a middle-size noble family under the domain of the Shosti family.

Right now, he was doing a trip back to Merger mansion, situated on the other side of the forest not far from its perimeter.

He had successfully sold the goods given to him by the noble family in the market of Mossgrove city and made quite a sum.

Since the business trip went well, his mood was joyous as he took the shorter road back to mansion uncaring of the dangers of the forest, after all, he had in his defense the soldiers of a noble family!

'Haha, if my ancestors were to see me now! I singlehandedly raised my family status so much that a noble family actually protects me during my travels!'

These were his thoughts.

Of course, he knew that the soldiers' mission was to protect the goods and not him but his mood was unaffected since his trip this time was really profitable.

'After I complete the trade and give back the accounted goods, I will have enough to retire and build a small mansion. Who knows, in a few generations my family might become a noble one!'

His gaze involuntarily shifted to the young girl next to him.

She was his only remaining family since his wife passed away, yet, this daughter of his inherited his talent as a dealer.

Quinn taught her all his knowledge and experience but never thought that one day he would be near setting his own mansion.

'I wanted her to marry someone from a small-size family but if I wait a bit she could actually strive to be the first wife in a middle-size one! After all, her relationship with the young master of the Merger family is not too bad.'

Quinn was lost in his thoughts while the caravan kept going. He would just plan things and sort the inventory during the uneventful travel.

However, one week after his entrance in Evergreen forest, something unexpected happened.

An arrow, shot from behind the trees, hit the horse carrying the carriage in the front.

The horse fell dead on the ground immediately as three figures came out from their hidings.

The soldiers got enraged and jumped off the carriage yelling at them.

"How do you dare to assault the carriage of the Merger family! You must be tired of living!"

The three figures had gray hooded cloaks that completely covered their faces and large sleeves that hid their hands.

One of them started laughing when the soldier threatened them.

"Haha, did you hear him second shadow, third shadow? He actually thinks that we are scared of them!"

Another one answered,

"First shadow, don't you worry, they will soon understand."

Like it was some sort of signal, the three hooded men directly attacked the soldiers, throwing knives and unsheathing short swords from their sleeves.

The soldiers blocked their attacks and started to encircle them.

There were, after all, five soldiers against the three of them, the advantage in numbers was showing itself.

At that moment though, another arrow shot from behind the trees and hit one of the soldiers' legs and two more hooded men came out from their hidings.

With the injured soldier the thieves were having the advantage, yet they didn't seem too focused on killing their enemies.

Quinn was hiding with his daughter inside the carriage since the assault started, he knew that the goods were the soldier's core mission so he smartly chose to hide between them.

He was quite relaxed in the whole process since he had complete confidence in the power of a middle-size family.

"Don't you worry, simple thieves won't dare to kill anyone wearing the emblem of a noble family, even if they resorted to a life of crimes they still fear the power behind nobles."

He was consoling his daughter when a voice interrupted him.

"He's right cutie, we are too scared of the powerful cultivators protecting them. However, that doesn't mean that we will simply run away when we see their emblem."

Quinn was startled, a hooded figure was at the end of the carriage looking at the goods.

He did a hand gesture and all the inventory was sucked inside his sleeve.

"Many thanks!"

The thief lightly bowed and then hurried outside the carriage, in a few instants he had disappeared between the trees.

Quinn lost all his strength at this sight and released a weak statement.

"I'm ruined."

Turning back time a bit, Noah was still following the caravan.

It had been seven days but there was still no sign of the Gray Shadows.

'This is so boring! Don't tell me that it was the wrong decision to follow this caravan and that they went after the poorer ones.'

Noah was hiding at the top of a tree but doubts were starting to accumulate in his mind.

He got ready to kill some time by looking at the rune when he sensed something getting near the position of the caravan.

He completely switched his state of mind to total concentration and stared at the unfolding of the events on the ground.

He saw a hooded man shooting an arrow to kill the horse in the front carriage and then three men engaging a fight with the soldiers.

He saw the soldiers slowly going into a passive position when the other two men appeared, but he waited.

He had to know how they were going to steal the goods and where they would put them.

As for the fate of the caravan, he couldn't care less.

At that point, a fast figure went inside the rear carriage and came out after a few instants. Some seconds later, the merchant came out of the carriage crawling on the ground and pointing in the direction of where the figure went.

The merchant's skin was pale and he seemed devoid of any life.

Quinn's condition made Noah understand the situation.

'The goods have been stolen!'

Once the realization lightened up his mind, he wasted no more time and jumped directly in pursuit of the figure in the forest.

If someone looked from above the forest, he would see a black dot running at high speed on the top of the trees.

Chapter 38 - 38. Ring

Noah was jumping from tree to tree at high speed toward the faint presence that he felt with his mind.

When the figure entered his field of view, he slowed his pace to make sure that he would not be noticed.

The member of the Gray Shadows kept running for about an hour deep in the forest unaware of a black figure hiding in the trees behind him.

Then he stopped in a seemingly random location and hid in a bush, probably waiting for any pursuer to show up.

After a quarter of an hour, he got out of the bush convinced that no one was following him.

He happily folded his sleeve and raised his now exposed right arm into the air, then he closed his eyes in concentration while furrowing his brows.

A twinkle shot out from his hand and various items appeared on the ground. There were magical beasts' parts, weapons, bottles with shining liquids and so on, all of those had appeared out of nowhere.

The hooded man was about to sort the items on the ground when a black blade appeared on his throat, followed by a cold threatening voice.

"Tell me how you did that and I'll let you live."

The man realized that he had been followed and cursed internally.

'I'm the fastest in the Gray Shadows but my brothers should be near here by now, maybe if I stall for a bit...'

The plan of the hooded man was simple but effective, so he went for it.

"Oh, you know, it's a special technique passed down by the ancestors of my fa-!"

He could not finish his sentence that a sharp pain coming from his right shoulder assaulted him forcing him to crouch on the ground holding his shoulder.

However, when his hand reached for the spot where the pain came from he only felt a warm liquid flowing from it.

He opened his eyes to look at it and discovered that his right arm had disappeared from its spot and was on the ground staining it of a red color.

Before he could say anything though, the black blade reappeared on his throat and the cold voice sounded again.

"Next is your left arm if you don't speak."

The Gray Shadow was terrified by now and hastily explained with a trembling voice.

"I-It's the space-ring on my right hand, sir. If you use your mental energy you can bind it and use it to store non-living things. It's all yours, just give me one second to remove my binding."

"No need."

The cold voice sounded one last time and the head of the thief fell on the ground severed by its body.

Noah gave a look the severed arm on the ground an found a plain-looking silver ring.

He took it in his hands and focused his mental energy to inspect it.

A type of connection was created and the half-transparent image of the ring appeared in Noah's sea of consciousness.

When Noah focused on the ring, he could see a separated space of 30 cubic meters inside it full of precious material and similar.

He was amazed!

He shifted his gaze toward the items on the ground and just by willing it, they got sucked inside the space of the ring.

He tried to do the same with the corpse of the thief and the same thing happened.

Then he concentrated again on one of the items inside the ring and it suddenly appeared in front of him.

He put the item back in the separated space and inspected the ring carefully, from every perspective it looked perfectly like a normal ring, only by inspecting it with mental energy you could vaguely sense that something was off with it.

'This thing is amazing! There is no way that I give it back. If I just hide it under my clothes no one would be able to find it!'

While he thought of this, he sensed six presences coming from the forest in his direction.

'Right, let's solve this issue first.'

The remaining six members of the Gray Shadows arrived in the spot where Noah once was and got perplexed seeing the stains of blood on the ground.

One of them touched them and spoke in a worried voice.

"The blood is still warm, I think that seventh shadow was followed and injured, as we all know his battle capabilities are pretty inconsistent."

Another one of them answered him.

"What do we do now? All the stolen goods are in his space-ring and, without it, we are just some lousy robbers."

'So everything they have is inside the ring, no need to waste time then.'

Noah was back in his hiding position at the top of a tree listening attentively to the conversation of the thieves to make sure that there were no more secrets to uncover.

Once he was sure that the ring was the main reason they managed to operate in secret for so much time without getting caught, he slashed the air in their direction and jumped toward them at high speed.

The slash created a blade of wind that crashed on the remaining members of the Gray Shadows catching them by surprise.

Two members of the group got injured instantly and were about to unsheath their weapons when a black figure passed next to them, their heads detached from their bodies as if they were only leaning on it.

Noah touched the ground and released four more wind slashes in the direction of the remaining four hooded men, then he followed the slashes without even waiting for them to hit.

Every time he moved, someone's head would be severed, he was using his rank 3 martial art at full strength!

Since he entered the fifth cycle, the limit on the usage of his full strength got raised to 10 attacks, so he wasn't going to hold himself back against six enemies.

In less than a minute, the Gray Shadows were all dead and put inside Noah's space-ring.

'I have less than two weeks left for this mission. I might have a plan on how to get the highest benefits from it, but I must first clean this place and go deeper into the forest to make it work.'

Noah hurriedly dug out the terrain that got stained by blood and put it in the space-ring, then he refilled the holes and checked again to be sure that he left no traces of his battle.

'This should be enough, now I need to find a suitable place in the forest to create a fake deposit.'

As he thought that, he ran in a straight line toward a deeper part of the forest.

Chapter 39 - 39. Goods

Deep into Evergreen forest, in an area not cleared by the Shosti family.

Noah was standing in front of the entrance of a small cave.

He found this place after a full day of running into the forest.

He entered the cave and carefully inspected it.

It was large 50 meters squares and was quite dark, it seemed perfect for his intentions.

Noah unloaded the contents of the space-ring in the deepest place of the cave to create false proofs that this spot was, in fact, the deposit the Gray Shadows used.

Then, he placed the bodies of the band of thieves on the ground with their respective heads near the bodies.

To better create the facade of a battle, he slashed randomly on their corpses until he was satisfied with the scene being displayed.

He was about to nod in satisfaction when a thought crossed his mind that made him reveal a complex smile.

'To think that it was less than two years ago that I first killed a human while now I'm falsifying a murder scene to steal some items.' Since the events with Balor, he never hesitated again to kill any of his enemies.

He never thought too much of it since he had no time to think about it but now the situation was different.

He was actively covering his tracks to gain benefits from it, but the thing that made him depressed was something else.

'I don't feel anything.'

He kept on looking at the torn corpses but could not find an ounce of disgust or guilt inside him.

'It was my mission to kill them so I simply did it, now I want their items without consequences so I simply raged on their corpses.'

He stared for a few more moments before he found the answer he was looking for.

'Life has no meaning, the one of both humans and magical beasts. Yet, in a world where one being can stand at the top of all things, life's meaning might be found in power. If you are an ant, you can be swept away by a dragon that was simply passing by. If you are a dragon, you might be denied a meal by one hand gesture of a cultivator. Power stands above any definition of good and evil. And to obtain power...'

Noah's eyes in this moment of realization became extremely dark and cold.

'I must be willing to create mountains of corpses.'

A light chuckle came out of his mouth.

'I guess I'm a bad man after all.'

In the end, he smiled, this process of completely accepting himself left his mind clear of doubts and he felt freer than ever.

'Now, let's inspect the goods.'

Noah neared the pile of stolen items on the ground and started sorting it.

He looked through all the magical beasts' body parts first.

There were tails of thunder wolves, legs and pincers of ironclad spiders and many others of which Noah didn't recognize the species, but they were all separated in a different group away from the pile.

'I can't keep those, even if I hide them in the space-ring their usage is limited since I don't know anything about how to forge a weapon or vendors willing to buy them.'

He was sure of one thing: the less he stole, the fewer were the possibilities of being discovered.

Next, it was the turn of the weapons.

They were in great number and seemed all newly forged but their quality matched at most the one of his own black sabers.

'Mh, I think I can take some of these, I won't necessarily use them but they can be traded more easily. They can be my reserve funds, 10-12 of them should be a fair number.'

Noah took various weapons of different types and put them inside the spacering and then moved the remaining 40 or so in the group with the beasts' body parts.

In the original pile of items, only boxes containing pills or bottles with strange liquids remained.

'Are these drugs? Their effect should be good if they were stored with the other items'

He took some pills in his hands and sniffed them one by one, sometimes he would feel a nauseous smell that almost made him faint, sometimes a faint odor that made the "Breath" in his body restless.

'These things are powerful! I can't take them carelessly, let's put them away for now and focus on those with a description.'

There were only three drugs that had a description attached to them, the first he picked was a box with dark bottles in it.

'Beast's essence, concentrated blood of magical beasts refined to be used by humans. Smear it on the crucial spots of the body-nourishing technique to increase the ratio of absorption of "Breath". Its effects mimic the innate absorption ability of magical beasts to increase the speed of cultivation of the body. The effects will diminish if used too many times.'

There were 12 bottles in the box, yet they instantly disappeared inside the space-ring when Noah finished reading their effects.

He didn't hesitate for even an instant in his decision of stealing them.

Then he picked a small box that contained 3 red pills.

'Inner-fire pill, ingesting it will create a burning sensation that reinforces the sphere in the sea of consciousness. Helps to stabilize the mind in the training for rank 1 mage.'

Noah looked at the 3 pills for a bit before deciding to put them into the pile of items on the ground.

'My mental energy is already nearing the level of rank 1 and the constant pressure I undergo during the treatment has the same effects. Even if I can have a small increase in mental stability, they are not worth the risk.'

The constant worry in Noah's mind was that if he stole too many items he could become one of the suspects.

Since these goods have been in the hands of the Gray Shadows for about one year, it was normal to think that they have used some of them, yet Noah still wanted to play it safe and not take unnecessary risks.

'Last one.'

He picked a tiny case that looked more refined than the others, only one big brown pill was inside.

'Earth pill, increases the density of "Breath" in the dantian. It helps in breaking stages inside one rank of the cultivator. It has a 100% success rate of breaking through the liquid-stage and an 80% success rate for the solid-stage. If used on a rank 2 dantian, the success rate diminishes by 60%.'

This was Noah's first time hearing about stages in the ranks of the dantian, actually, it was the first time he had any information about the cultivation of the dantian at all!

Chapter 40 - 40. Meeting

In a cave, deep into Evergreen forest, a young man was sitting on the ground with his upper body naked.

He was smearing a black liquid on his back while looking at a sheet with a complex rune written on it.

'This beast's essence is good, I'm sparing weeks of nourishment using it and I still have 8 bottles left!'

The young man was of course Noah.

He was using his remaining time for the mission to make use of the goods he chose to keep.

'I bet that the Earth pill will be amazing too.'

In the end, he was too tempted to not keep the brown pill for the dantian.

After a few hours, he stopped his training in the Kesier rune even though he was far from his limit.

He never forgot that he was still in the wilderness, he had to be ready if a sudden attack of a magical beast arrived.

'I bet this smell is keeping them away.'

He looked in the direction of the corpses that were now starting to decompose.

The smell they emitted was awful but Noah didn't care, they had to stay in their spots to create the perfect scenery of a battle.

Noah had already made a plan to appear as innocent as possible and to carry it out he needed 3 days, so he decided to use the days left before them to increase his strength as much as possible.

'I can use two bottles of beast's essence per day, in four days I'll be out of them and I can start preparing for my return to the mansion. I wonder how much of the fifth cycle I can complete.'

A few days after the medicinal bottles were emptied, Noah was carrying a huge pile of items tied together with the clothes of the dead members of the Gray Shadows.

He wasn't going to lift it since its form was too uncomfortable to raise up so he simply dragged the goods with an improvised rope.

'This will leave a good amount of evidence that my version of the story is the real deal.'

Some days later.

Quinn was feeling desperate.

He was camping on the perimeter of Evergreen forest near Mossgrove city waiting for the orders of the Merger family.

Only three soldiers were left standing guard on him, while the other two went to their family mansion to inform the inner circle of the events during the trip.

Yet almost two weeks had passed, and of the envoy from the family there was still no trace.

'I'm totally ruined! Even if they manage to take back the goods I will receive no share from it. I might even lose my privileged position as their merchant. My dreams, my plans, everything is ruined!'

He was completely powerless in this situation and the remaining guards started to treat him with coldness even though the job of protecting the shipment was theirs.

In this world, it was always the weaker one to get the blame for any faulty situation.

"Tsk, if that idiot of a merchant didn't take the path in the forest, everything could have been avoided."

"You are right, now our position in the guards will be severely affected because of such a greedy man. And we also have to stand here with him!"

The guards were speaking in such a loud voice that Quinn could clearly hear them.

His daughter understood the situation and remained silent for the whole time, scared that one misspoken word could trigger the anger of the soldiers.

It was at that moment that a kid donned in black and sweating profusely exited the perimeter of the forest carrying a big pile of items tied together by clothes stained with blood.

The group from the Merger family stared with wide eyes at the small figure dragging a burden that was four times his frame.

Quinn looked at the items and recognized some of them as the ones that were stolen from him.

He hurriedly got close to the young man yelling loudly.

"Wait, wait! You, kid, where did you get those items?"

The excitement from finding his assets made him speak without any form of respect.

Noah looked at the fat merchant and answered nonchalantly while continuing o his tracks.

"Found them on the forest."

Quinn felt finally hope after two weeks of desperation.

"There are some items that were stolen from me between those that you are carrying. Please, return them to me."

Noah still didn't stop and only asked a short question.

"Do you have any proof?"

Quinn was at a loss for words and only now realized that the young man in front of him could have not been a simple one, he was, after all, coming back from the forest with a great burden on his back.

When he looked at the signs of dragging on the ground he realized with fear that he could not see where the signs started from.

'For exactly how long has he carried such a weigh?'

The guards though had slower minds than the merchant and when they overheard the conversation they arrogantly neared the items.

"Kid, if the merchant said that these are our items then so it is. If you have any complaints you can come to the Merger mansion to apply for a refund."

The soldiers only saw wealth in the pile in front of them and were already imagining the reward the family would give them when they brought them back.

Just when one of them was about to undo the packaging made of clothes to inspect the items, a kick came in his direction.

The attack was too fast and too sudden, it hit the soldier chest sending him flying away for five meters before he fell on the ground unconscious.

In the spot where he was previously, Noah was now standing with his right leg still raised.

"So you want to rob my Balvan family of the earned reward from a mission assigned by the Shosti family?"

Noah shamelessly used the names of the noble families to stop their claims on the items.

The group was stupefied seeing a kid knocking out a soldier with just one attack, their attitude became immediately more respectful.

Noah simply snorted and went back to his dragging toward Balvan mansion, yet, before he could move again, Quinn placed himself in front of him with a wide smile on his face.

"Ehm, young sir, I want to apologize for my earlier rudeness. That thing that you are carrying seems heavy, would you like a ride back to your mansion?"

'Oh, it seems that this man is not that stupid. Well, they can be my witnesses if I go with him.'

"I agree, but I have a condition."

Quinn lightly bowed while speaking.

"Please speak, young master."

Noah pointed at the pile of items behind him.

"I can take one of those things as a reward so you have to explain to me the effects of the pills in there."