
Chapter 10: Road Ahead

The trip through the dimensional rift invoked a very peculiar sensation. It felt as if I was trapped in the middle of a fast forwarded movie scene. My surroundings were whizzing by in an indistinct blur of colors as I sat on my ass, staring blankly off in the distance with no more tears left to cry.

The ground I landed on cushioned my fall with a pile of leaves and vines. It didn't matter, though. Even if I landed on jagged rocks, I probably wouldn't have noticed.

I remained in same, seated position I was in during the trip, not even bothering to take in my surroundings.

She was gone.

I would never have the chance to see her again.

Those two thoughts triggered another wave of emotions as I heaved out dry sobs.

I began recalling the near four months we had spent together; how caring she was, treating me like her own blood. I didn't care that she had prolonged sending me home so that I would stay with her. Through the short time I had been with Sylvia, she taught me so much and given me insight that I had been lacking since coming to this world.

Succumbing to the faculty of my mind that desired sleep in order to cope with the pain, I curled up into a ball where I landed when a searing pain props me back up.

The burning sensation spread from my mana core throughout my body until a voice echoed in my head.

"Ahem! Testing, testing... Ah good! Hello Art, this is Sylvia."

My heart fluttered as I instantly responded to the voice. "Sylvia! I'm here! Can you hear..."

"If you're listening to this right now, it means I have shown you what I actually am..."

Ah, it was some kind of recording that she had infused into me when she gouged that small hole into my mana core.

"... You're nowhere near ready right now to know the whole truth. Knowing you, if I were to have told you who that figure in the sky had been, you would have brashly tried and fight. Little Art, you are barely passed the age of four. Upon looking at your mana core, I have realized that you have a rare talent seeing that your mana core is already dark red in color. I will leave you with this: I have infused with you my unique will. This is something incomparable to a normal beast will. Your future progress as a mage depends on how well you will be able to use my will that is embedded into your mana core..."

Was that why the purple in her eyes and golden patterns disappeared?

"The moment your mana core reaches a level past the white stage is when you will hear from me again. At that time, I will explain everything and what you do from there is your choice."

There was a stage past white?

"Lastly, Art... I know you may be in grief, but remember that you have your family to look out for and the stone I entrusted you with. My only wish is for you to embrace the joys and innocence of childhood, train hard, and make your parents and I proud. Do not go chasing after shadows in a fit of rage. Killing the ones that are responsible for my death will neither bring me back to life nor make you feel better. There is a reason for everything and I do not regret what has happened. With this, I bid you farewell for now. Remember, protect your family and the stone, study what I have left you, and enjoy this life, King Grey."

"..."

That name and title was from my previous world.

She had known the entire time...

Did she discover something in my mana core? Was she able to look into my memories? So many questions but the only one who could answer them was gone.

I refused to move for a long time, staying in my cozy fetal position, deep in thought.

Sylvia was right. She had said all of this knowing what my life back in my old world was like. I can't make the same mistake of living for the sake of solely pursuing strength. I wanted to be strong, but I also want to live my life without regret. I want to live a life that Sylvia would be proud of. I don't think she'd be happy even if I reached whatever stage was after white while living a life of only training. No, I needed to hurry and reach my family.

But before that... where the hell was I?

Looking around, trees that towered high over my head surrounded me. There was a dense fog that loomed thickly a couple centimeters off the ground, filling the air with nearly palpable moisture.

Trees and an unnaturally thick fog...

I sank back on my butt, crestfallen at what this could only mean.

I was in the Forest of Elshire

A disheartened sigh escaped from my mouth as I picked myself up.

It seems like I won't be meeting my family anytime soon. It had been over four months since I had fallen off of the cliff. My family had most likely either gone back to Ashber or had maybe even decided to stay in Xyrus.

I didn't have any sort of provisions except for the clothes on my back and the strange stone that was wrapped in Sylvia's feather. This cursed fog limited my vision to about a few meters around me. While reinforcing my eyes with mana helped quite a bit, that didn't solve the even bigger problem of how to get out of this place.

I reinforced my body, enabling mana rotation that had become second nature to me by now. Right now, I could only absorb about roughly twenty percent of what I could do while just meditating, but I couldn't complain.

The only downside to mana rotation was that it wasn't a replacement for strengthening your mana core. In order for me to purify my mana core and get it to the next stages, I need to solely focus on gathering mana, from both my body and the surrounding atmosphere, and use that to get rid of the impurities little by little. One notable thing I felt was that after getting my mana core to dark red, the amount of mana I could store inside

increased significantly. While the size doesn't increase, I'm guessing the purity allows more mana to be stored.

I climbed a few branches up the nearest tree and situated myself once I got high enough. I focused mana into only my eyes, enhancing my vision even further.

What I was looking for wasn't a way out but more so for any signs of humans. Sylvia had said that I would be teleported close to humans so I was hoping that there may be adventurers traveling through here that would direct me out, or even escort me.

After about ten minutes of searching, jumping from tree to tree, I found what I was looking for.

I hopped a few more trees, feeling quite proud of my primate nimbleness, stopping at a branch just a few meters away. Hiding myself behind the thick trunk, I observed the group of humans.

Something was off.

I hid myself completely behind the trunk and closed my eyes, imbuing mana into my ears.

"NOOO! HELP! SOMEONE PLEASE HELP! MOMMY! DADDY! NOOO I'M SCARED!!!"

"Someone shut her up! She's going to attract attention!"

THUD

"Quick. Put her in the back of the carriage. We're only a few days away from the mountain range. We'll be safer then. Don't relax and keep moving."

"Hey, Boss? How much do ya reckon she'll sell for? Elf girls go for a lot, don't they? Hehe, she's a child too so a virgin at that! I bet she'll fetch us a lot of money, huh!"

Slave traders!

I carefully took a peek to spot the small-sized carriage, enough to tightly cram in about five or six adults. I turned back around just in time to see a middle-aged man hauling a little girl into the back of the carriage. She looked to be around six or seven, with a silvery hue in her hair and the trademark pointed ears that elves were known for.

What should I do? How were they even able to kidnap one in the first place? The Elshire Forest's magical fog was supposed to disorient the senses of even the most capable mage.

After a few more seconds of observing, I found my answer.

Attached to leashes were mana beasts that looked like a mix between a deer and a dog, with antlers that branched out, looking like a complicated satellite. They were mentioned briefly in the encyclopedia I had always carried with me. The forest hounds were native to the Forest of Elshire and could navigate even better than the elves could.

How those brutes acquired forest hounds, I had no idea but I needed to think of a plan.

Option one: Steal one of the forest hounds and have it lead me out of the forest.

Option two: Kidnap the kidnapped elf girl to have her lead me out of the forest.

Option three: Kill all of the slave traders and set the elf girl free, then take the forest hounds and have them lead me out of the forest.

Pondering for a couple of minutes, I'm faced with a dilemma. Option one would be easiest, but it didn't sit right with me to just leave the elf girl.

But then again, who knows... maybe she'll get bought by a kind old man who will free and take her back to her home.

...Fat chance...

Option two had the obvious flaw that, once I saved the elf, she wouldn't lead me out of the forest and just insist on going back home and the slave traders probably wouldn't take it too kindly. Option three had the best outcome, but was by far the most pain in the butt, considering that there were four of them and only one of me. Because of the fog, I couldn't sense if any of them were mages but it was safe to assume that at least one of them would be. Being able to capture an elf in the forest meant that they were either very lucky, or were professionals.

After letting out another deep breath, I couldn't help but notice how often I sighed these days. Option three it was.

After hours of observation, I had learned enough about them to make a move. I waited until nightfall to take my plan into action. Despite their rustic appearances, the slave traders were surprisingly vigilant; they never built a fire and always kept two people on guard at all times.

After stirring up the forest hounds with a carefully thrown rock, I made my move as soon as one of the two on guard went around to the other side of the carriage to quiet them.

The one that stayed behind was sitting on a fallen log, fiddling with something in his hands while the other two were sleeping inside the tent.

Carefully, jumping to a branch directly above the carriage, I prepared for my attack.

My first target would be the one that had gone to quiet the forest hounds first.

I dropped down with a quiet thud behind one of the slave traders. This man had a very lanky build. While lean muscles were visible, he didn't seem too strong and was only armed with a long knife.

Startled by the soft thud, lanky turned around probably expecting a curious weasel or rat. His face twisted into a mixture of surprise and amusement when he saw me, a four-year-old child in ragged clothes.

But before he had the chance to even speak, I lunged upward towards his neck. I infused mana into the blade of my hand, turning it into a sharp edge. This was called the swordless art in my old world but here it would be more accurate to call it a wind attribute technique.

He flinched back reflexively, his hands trying to reach where his face was to guard against the boy shooting towards him.

It was too late.

I take a quick swipe at the jugular, taking his vocal chord out along with his carotid artery. A stream of blood sprayed out of his neck immediately as I land behind him, supporting his lifeless body and gently placing him down to avoid making noise. Just as expected, the forest hounds that had just been calmed down by the Lanky jolted back awake at the stench of blood causing them to howl and bark.

"Ey Pinky! Can't even calm the hounds...What the?!"

I had already picked up... Pinky's knife and was waiting for him at the back corner of the carriage.

While the other slave trader's attention was directed at the corpse of Pinky, currently being eaten by the forest hounds, I jumped out from behind and stabbed the side of his neck with the knife.

The hounds quieted down while devouring the two corpses. As I headed towards the tent to dispose of the remaining two in their sleep, a shrill cry ruined my plans.

"HELLLLP! MOMMY! SOMEONE! ANYONE! PLEASEE!!"

Son of a... why now of all times?

On cue, I heard the rustle of the tent as the two slave traders that were left had come out. "Pinky! Deuce! The kid is awake! What the hell are you guys..." He barked, still half asleep.

I swallowed down the inappropriate urge to laugh at the ridiculous names of the slave traders, and hid myself behind a tree next to the carriage and infuse mana into Pinky's knife.

Sensing something was amiss, the two remaining slave traders carefully stepped around to the other side of the carriage where their eyes bulged upon upon witnessing their two former companions being eaten by the forest hounds.

Using this chance, I attacked the nearest one when his gaze whips back at me and instantly swings his short sword at my face.

Dodging the slash, I dropped low and dashed toward him, trying to get in the range of my knife. I swung, reinforcing more mana into the knife, landing a clean wound through his right leg's Achilles' heel.

"Gah!!" he let out a pained howl as he dives desperately out of my range before I could do any further damage.

"Danton, be careful! I think this brat is a mage," the fighter, whose tendon I just severed, cried.

I turned my attention to Danton as he pulled out his sword from its sheath and lower into a defensive stance.

"You see all sorts of crazy things these days! Looks like a huge sack of gold just showed itself in front of us, George! I bet he'll get us almost as much as the elf," he let out a crazed chuckle.

These bastards didn't even care that I just killed their party members.

Danton's body glowed faintly as he reinforced his body with mana. As he advanced towards me, his lips curled into a confident grin on his square face.

George was out of the fight with that crippled leg, but this augmenter was going to be trouble.

The augmenter named Danton suddenly jumped above me, his right arm poised to throw a punch. I could only guess that his only reason for not using his sword was to not damage his "goods". While I'd normally be offended, in this case, overconfidence made it much easier for me so I didn't complain.

I jumped back in time to avoid the blow strong enough to leave a small dent in the ground as I threw my knife at him. I used the same trick as I did with the conjurer I dragged down with me off the cliff but this mage was a more careful. He disrupted the mana string with his sword and grabbed my knife with his free hand.

Shit.

I was in a bad position right now. Danton wasn't tall but his reach was still a good amount longer than mine. He also had a sword, which he now deemed it necessary to use, that further increased his range.

Wasting no time, Danton dashed toward me and threw back the knife that I had just launched at him. I easily dodged, but not in time to react for his next move as he swiped my ankle with his sheathe. As I stumbled to regain balance, he used that chance to grab ahold of my ankle and flipped me upside down.

His confident face crumpled as I punched the hand that was holding onto me as I concentrated mana. I used a fire attribute technique, releasing all of the mana focused on my fist and aimed for the weak joint of his wrist.

A loud crack, followed by a howl of profanities indicated the attack was enough.

His broken wrist released my ankle and I landed awkwardly on my back. Quickly jumping up to my feet, I picked up Pinky's knife and used the chance to charge towards the wounded Danton. While he was still preoccupied by the pain from his wrist, he angrily cursed, "You're DEAD now you piece of shit! I don't care if I can't sell you anymore!"

His left wrist was wounded, leaving a gap in his defense. I willed more mana into my feet and arrived in range, about to land a solid hit to his side, when I see him furiously swinging his sword down.

He fell for it!

I quickly pivot with my left foot in place, spinning to my right. Dodging the swing by a hair's breadth, I enter into my knife's range to his right side, open because of his last desperate swing.

He immediately tried to jump back but I placed my right foot behind his leg making him lose his balance. In one quick thrust, I jabbed my knife below his armpit, through the gap between his ribs and into his lungs.

He was easy to finish off after his breath was collapsing from the wound.

I was now left with the immobile George.

I couldn't use Danton's sword since it was too large and heavy for my body so I made use of Pinky's knife one last time and swiped George's jugular. The poor fighter couldn't really contest or run away with his useless leg and died with a look of disbelief. Much like his two comrades, fed to the hounds.

It seemed that the elf girl knew that there was fighting going on by eerie quiet.

I climbed up onto the back of the carriage where she was locked and I spotted her shivering in the corner with dirty rags minimally covering her privates. She studied me in surprise and doubt, her eyes almost saying, "He can't have been the one who save me, right?"

I untied her as she remained silent, her swollen turquoise eyes never leaving my face.

Tired and feeling gross, I helped her up and simply stated, "You should go back home now."

"Hic...hic..."

She probably didn't know whether I was an enemy or friend until now, but once the word 'home' was said, a look of relief washed over her tense face and she broke down.

"Hic! I was so scared! They were going to sell me! Hic! I thought I was never going to see my family again! Hic! WAAAAAA"