
Chapter 9: Ones Held Dear

"W-What are you?" I managed to stammer out.

Despite having lived two lives, what my eyes saw, my brain refused to believe. A monster, for a lack of a better word, which easily towered over ten meters high, was seated cross-legged, on a crudely carved throne of jagged stone with an arm lazily supporting its head. With petrifying red eyes that gazed down at me, while menacing, carried an oddly tranquil quality. Two massive horns protruded out the of sides of its head, arched down and around it's skull, curving up to a point near the front, reminding me of something almost akin to a crown. It had a mouth with two fangs peeking out of its lips and while its body was adorned in a sleek black armor that had neither decorations nor embellishments, it still glowed with the quality of a priceless treasure.

Reiterating the fact that I was once a king, still, this being that stood before me now made me embarrassed of even having the nerve to call myself one. No, the one sitting on that giant throne was a being that would make even the most unfaithful heretics bow down in submission.

Yet here it was, in all of its glory... with its head resting on its arm, while its other hand nonchalantly scratched its nose.

What I had failed to notice until now, though, because of the dim lighting in the cave and its body being completely black, was that this being had a gaping hole in the side of it's chest, blood continuously oozing out.

"We finally meet," it repeated with a lazy half smile that revealed a row of pointed teeth.

I tried getting up, but failed halfway and end up back on my butt, my face still slack from the shock of what my eyes were seeing. "Bugs will fly into your mouth if you keep it open that wide."

Great. At least it has a sense of humor.

"As for what I am, I won't say anything more than what you can see from looking," the horned humanoid monster said with its eyes seeming to gaze straight through me.

"..."

"It is going to take to a while for me to open a dimensional rift that will transport you to your house, so until then, just be patient and wait here. There are special roots that grow here. You will be able to live off those until I finish," it sighed.

That's right. That's what I was here to do. I managed to regain a bit of my composure and I stood up, walking a little closer to the being.

Giving a courteous bow, I replied, "Thank you for everything you've done for me and what you will do. If there is any way I can repay you, I will do for you whatever is in my power."

"Such good manners for a child. Do not worry; I am expecting neither a favor nor your gratitude. I am simply doing this for my own amusement. Come! Sit here closer to me and keep me company. I haven't talked to anyone in a while," the being laughed, patting an area of its throne for me to sit on.

I climbed up the platform rather awkwardly, forgetting to use mana to just jump up, and I propped myself on the throne next to the being.

"Uhh... excuse me for being rude, but you don't exactly look like a lady. How should I exactly address you as?" I said, making eye contact with the being.

"You're right. I don't exactly look like a lady, now do I? I wonder why I said that. My name is Sylvia," she replied, letting out a soft chuckle.

This giant demon lord-like monster looked like anything but a Sylvia to me, but I chose to keep that to myself.

"Elder Sylvia, do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Go ahead young one, although I may not be able to answer everything."

I immediately rattled off all of the questions that had been on my mind ever since waking up and after meeting Sylvia. "Where is this place? Why were you here all alone? Where did you come from? Why do you have that huge wound? ... Why did you save me?"

She patiently waited for me to finish before replying.

"You must have had a lot on your mind. The first question is easy to answer. This place is a narrow zone that is between the Beast Glades and the Forest of Elshire. No one knows of this place because I've been warding off anyone who came close, although the cases are rare in the first place. You, young child, are the first to enter into this domain," she easily explained.

"Please call me Art! My name is Arthur Leywin but everyone calls me Art! You can too!" I blurted out before shutting my mouth with my hands, confused as to why I was acting like an excited child.

"Kukuku... Very well child, I will call you Art!" Her red eyes glazed, looking afar while answering my next questions.

"Continuing on to your second question. I am here alone simply because I have no one left to be with. While I do not think telling you everything would be wise, I will tell you that I have many enemies that desperately wish for something that I have; my last battle with my enemies left this wound. As for where I come from... very far away, haha."

There was a moment of pause before Sylvia continued on, this time her eyes looking straight at me, almost studying me.

"As for why I saved you... even I do not fully know the answer to that question. Perhaps I have been alone for far too long and I simply wished to have someone to talk to. I first noticed you when your party was engaged in battle with the bandits. When you fell off the cliff to save your mother, I felt compelled to save you, thinking it was a waste for such a good child to die. You are very brave. It is rare for even an adult to be able to do that."

I shook my head. "I was scared too and I didn't have much of an option. I just wanted to save my mother and my baby sibling inside her." I didn't know if it was from the gentle way she talked or because of how big and powerful she seems but in front of her, I seemed to turn into a child. No, I was a child in front of her.

"I see... Your mother was pregnant. You must miss them dearly. Rest assured, your family and party are safe. As for where they have gone, my sight cannot reach far enough to tell anymore."

"..."

A wave of relief washed over me as I had to do my utmost to keep tears from falling.

I see, they're safe. This new life brought about emotions I had thought never experienced in my previous life.

"Thank God. Th-they're alive...they're okay..." I let out snuffle.

Sylvia's giant hand reached down as she softly patted my head with a finger.

The day passed by with me conversing with Sylvia, picking up some roots in between to eat that looked and tasted very similar to potatoes but were black in color.

We talked about all sorts of things to pass the time as she prepared to open a portal. At one point, she asked me how I was able to use mana so well at my age.

"I was under the impression that amongst humans, the earliest mage to have awakened so far was the age of ten, and even then, because the child couldn't grasp how to use it, there was very little he could do with it. Yet, not only have you already formed your mana core, but, by the way you use your mana, you seem to be more efficient than a lot of full-fledged mages."

I just shrugged, feeling oddly proud by her compliment. "My parents said I was a genius or something. I can read really well and I get what the pictures and words in the books are saying."

A few more days trickled by as Sylvia continued preparing the portal.

In a regretful tone, she explained one day, "The spell will take some time in order for it to be completely safe. I do not wish for you to land in a destination you are not familiar with. Even one inconsistency can lead to you being transported a couple hundred meters off the ground. Please be patient; you will be able to see your loved ones soon."

I nodded and said that as long as I knew they're alive, I was fine with waiting. It beat trying to climb back up the edge of the mountain.

These past couple of days, while I trained my mana core and chatted with Sylvia, I noticed a few things.

Sylvia really made me think of the cliché, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Contrary her intimidating appearance, she was kind, gentle, patient, and warm. She reminded me of my mother, in the way that they both scolded me while being tender when I did something wrong. I mentioned how the mage that I fought, as well as the other bandits, deserved worse deaths than they had when she suddenly flicked my forehead..

Even though she was gentle, a flick of a finger from someone over 10 meters high was nothing to make light of. I was sent tumbling on the ground before angrily spouting, "What was that for?"

Picking me up and setting me on her armored knee, she said in a soft but pained tone, "Art. Perhaps you are not wrong in that those bandits did deserve death; even I chose not to save that mage you fell with for the same reasons. However, do not let your heart be clouded with continuous thoughts of hatred and the sort. Continue on proudly with your life and gain the strength to protect your loved ones from harm. Along the way, you will come to face situations like before, maybe even worse, but don't let the grief and rage corrode your heart but move on and learn to better yourself from those experiences so it won't happen again."

I blinked, a bit stunned by the fact that I was being lectured on morals by someone that looked like the epitome of evil herself. Strangely, it stuck to me as I just responded with a blank nod.

Another thing I noticed was that her wound seemed to be getting bigger. At first, I found it somewhat odd that she could still be alive with a gaping hole on the side of her chest, but I grew numbed to it. That is... until a couple days ago, I noticed the wound seemed to be bleeding a more profusely. Sylvia tried to hide it at first with her hand, but it was growing more and more obvious.

Noticing my concerned gaze towards the wound, Sylvia gave me a weak smile and said, "Do not worry little one, this wound festers from time to time."

One day, as I was meditating and using strict movement techniques to better control my mana, Sylvia suddenly interrupted, "Art. Try absorbing mana while you are making movements. Ideally you should be able to absorb at least a fraction of the mana you would during meditation while you are fighting. Although you would be spending mana faster than you can absorb mana, you will be able to prolong the usage of your mana."

That brought about memories of me thinking about this exact idea. I had forgotten about testing my hypothesis since I wasn't able to move as freely as I could now. I was used to having absorption of mana and the manipulation of mana as two separate things that I hadn't stopped to think about the possibilities in this new world.

"Let me try," I nodded.

"Humans have a very linear mindset in regards to mana and find it hard to deviate from anything that already works. Practice hard now though, because you can only acquire this skill while both your body and mana core are immature. Even mana beasts learn to do this naturally, but humans awaken much too late and in most cases, their bodies are not adept for this ability when they first awaken. Considering you are so young, there shouldn't be a problem if you practice," continued Sylvia with a proud puff of her nose.

I had to admit that, like testing most theories, it was extremely difficult at first. It reminded me of the exercises my caretaker at the orphanage had showed us when I was younger, the ones where you tried to make each of your arms do something different... except much harder.

Practicing this essentially meant being able to fight proficiently while still maintaining a constant inward flow of mana. Sylvia's only advice was that, according to her, an exceptional mage must be able to split his thinking mind into multiple segments in order to process information at efficient speed. While I've never had a teacher tell me to split my mind, I tried doing as she said. Needless to say, I had never tripped over my own body so many times in this and my previous life combined.

This, at least, seemed to get a few hearty chuckles of amusement out of Sylvia.

Two months had passed since then as I kept Sylvia company with stories of my family and the town I was born in, while continuing to improve in the technique thanks to Sylvia's patience and my diligence.

Sylvia refused to tell me the name of this skill, so I named it myself: Mana Rotation.

Over this period of time, it would be an understatement to say I've merely gotten close to Sylvia. She had treated me like her own blood grandson and, in response, I've grown attached to this demon lord grandmother. It was because of our growing relationship that I wasn't able to simply ignore what was happening.

It was frustratingly clear that her wound was growing worse as the portal responsible for taking me home was becoming more distinct.

"Sylvia, please tell me what's happening to your wound? Why is it getting worse? It wasn't like this before! You saying it was only a fester every now

and then was clearly a lie! This isn't going to go away on it's own, it's actually getting worse!" I frustratingly voiced my concern one especially bad night after she had vomited a pool of blood.

I paused for a second, struck with realization...

Why didn't I notice this before?

She had been getting worse while creating the portal.

In order to send me home...

She was sacrificing her life so I can meet my family.

Sylvia let out a deep breath, knowing that I had realized what was going on. Managing a sheepish smile, Sylvia whispered, "Art. Yes I am dying. But I will get angry if you blame yourself, thinking that you are causing this. I have been dying for quite a while now. You are doing me a favor by allowing me to leave this forsaken cave a bit faster."

As soon as she finished speaking, a bright golden glow radiated out of her body. Shielding my eyes from going blind, I tried to focus on the shape forming from where Sylvia once sat. In place of the ten-meter titan-like figure was a dragon even larger. From her snout to the end of her tail, she was clad in a pearl white coat of shimmering scales. Beneath her iridescent lavender eyes were glowing golden runes that marked her neck and ran down to spread around her body and tail like a sacred engravings. These markings reminded me of a very elegant, almost celestial, tribal pattern, branching out harmoniously and with purpose like carefully placed vines. The dragon's wings were pure white adorned with white bladed feathers so fine and sharp that they could put swords forged by master smiths to shame.

The golden light enveloping the dragon dimmed until it fully replaced the once titan-shaped being.

"There now... Do I look a bit more like a Sylvia?" Sylvia let out a toothy smirk.

"S-Sylvia?? Y..you're a dragon?" I said.

"Now That I am in this form, we do not have much time. Yes, I am something you humans refer to us as 'a dragon'. The reason I am dying is because I had been inflicted with this wound after narrowly escaping from my captors. I had sensed one of them approaching dangerously close a few days ago, so I feel that my time of hiding is drawing to an end. This form will

alert them of my location, which is why I only have time to explain what is necessary. I am giving you this to take care of from now on."

One of her bladed wings unfolded and revealed a translucent, rainbowcolored stone the size of two fists. With a myriad of colors and shades, this stone resonated an aura that made me hesitate in holding it, as if I wasn't worthy.

Without waiting for me to respond, she continued, "Everything will reveal itself when the time comes so just hold onto this and do not let anyone know that you have this. Most will not know what it is but everyone will be attracted by the aura it emits."

Sylvia then proceeded to pluck a feather from her wings with her claw and hand it to me. "Wrap the stone in this to conceal it."

After doing as told, the once divine radiant stone merely appeared to be a smooth white rock, pretty, but ordinary.

While I was studying the feather-encased stone, I was suddenly pushed back as Sylvia's snout gently brushed against my chest where my mana core was.

Taken aback, I looked up to see Sylvia's purple eyes and the gold markings blaze brighter than they had when she first transformed. As the markings grew dimmer and then disappeared, Sylvia pierced her tongue into my core and wisped out a golden smoke that crackled in sparks of purple.

A sharp yelp escaped my mouth as I blinked, confused and surprised. I continued to just stare at her as she moved her head back, leaving a trail of blood from a hole in my worn down shirt. My sternum had bled, but when I ran my hand through the area, there was no wound.

Sylvia's expression had grown visibly pained and weak; it was apparent even for a mighty dragon that was even bigger than her previous illusion. What caught my attention, though, was that her once shimmering purple irises were now just a dim yellow with the beautiful runes that flowed across her face and body now gone.

Before I had the chance to ask what she had done, a giant explosion interrupted me.

I whipped my head up to see that the ceiling of the cave had been blown off and what came into vision was a figure that reminded me of Sylvia's previous form.

Clad in sleek black armor and a blood red cape that matched its eyes. The figure's pale grey skin matched the clouded sky in the background. The horns were different, though, as this entity had two horns that curled down and under its ears, lining its chin.

Sylvia immediately covered me with one of her wings in time to protect me from the falling debris and probably keep me hidden from our visitor.

"Lady Sylvia! I advise you to stop your stubbornness and hand it over. You've already caused us quite the trouble after hiding yourself! If you submit, the Lord may even heal your wound," the entity reasoned impatiently.

Immediately after he had finished speaking, the world around me seemed to pause. Everything but Sylvia and myself, the colors of the world were as though it was being seen through an inverted lense. What surprised me the most was that everything was still. The entity, the clouds behind him, and even the falling debris of the ceiling.

Ignoring the enemy, Sylvie casually peeked underneath her wing. "I'll open the portal now. I didn't have the time to make it go directly to your home but it should take you to a place with humans nearby. Do not let him see you and do not look back," she whispered, her eyes solemn.

I ignored Sylvia's instructions after I heard what the entity had promised. "Sylvia! Is what he said true? If you turn yourself over, will you be able to live?"

"Do not trust his honey-coated words. It will be worse off for you if you are found right now. As for me, I would rather die than go back to where he is," Sylvia said, impatience and anger mixed in her voice.

"No! I won't let you die here. If you refuse to go with him, then please, just come with me!" I begged.

"Unfortunately I cannot go with you. You will forever be in danger if any one of them finds out you have had contact with me. I need to stay here."

Sylvia gently wiped my cheeks with a claw, her draconic eyes lined with what I saw as tears.

"You asked me once, why I chose to save you. The truth was to satisfy my own greed. I wanted to keep you as my own child even for just a little bit. I intentionally prolonged the transportation spell because I wished to spend

more time with you, but it seems I didn't even have the chance to finish it. I'm sorry, little Art, for my selfishness but I have one last request to make... can you be my grandson and call me grandmother just this once?"

"NOO! I don't care about all of that! I'll say it as much as you want if you come with me! Grandma! Grandma! You can't! Not like this!"

"I-I-I... Please, I'm begging you, just come with me. I-I don't know what you did but everything is frozen right now; we can escape! Please, Grandmother, don't go. Not like this!" I held on to Sylvia's claw, desperately trying to pull her away with me.

In my last moment with her, Sylvia's face blossomed into such a beautiful smile that I swear I thought I saw a human.

I could barely make out the words she said, before she pushed me into the portal.

"Thank you my child."