

Ali-

Ali knew she was the first to complete her trial.

Not only had the demon king told her. But when she emerged all of her party members still sat legs crossed, and eyes closed in a trance.

Completing the trial before the others felt like an impressive feat, and the gnome girl was secretly kinda proud of the accomplishment.

Especially since she had never once asked for help from that demon, and had been sure to tune out any 'assistance' he did offer. She had even denied the seemingly benign request to be given a form other than the cat he had appeared to her as, she had no idea what giving a demon form in her soul could do, so she hadn't done it.

The only reason she had answered the 'what do you want' question was because she could tell he wasn't going to get off her back about it, and she had been as vague as possible. So Ali felt like solving all three puzzles and getting out before those who were falling for whatever tricks the demon king was playing at had to be impressive.

Speaking of the Demon King he was waving to her from behind a barbeque-style grill that had definitely not been there when she had left. He was wearing a chef's hat and an apron that said "license to grill" on the front.

"Good job on your trial" He said with a friendly smile that Ali wanted to punch "Do you prefer hot dogs or hamburgers?"

"Neither. I wouldn't eat anything you cook."

"Oh, come on. Why would I poison you? If I wanted you dead-"

"You could evaporate my atoms or whatever I get it, I'm still not eating it"

"I'll just put you down for a hamburger then. People like you are usually hamburger types" The demon said cheerily, when the caster didn't respond he sighed "I get you don't trust me. That's fair and more than reasonable, but I do intend to teach you and-"

"Please, shut up." Ali growled "You're a world ending monster. Add to that the fact that I just met you today! What kind of sane person would let you teach them anything? I'm not falling for whatever this is."

"I mean... I did get you to a first trial mage." The demon king argued

Ali shaped a Sigil for fireball in her hand and threw a ball of flames at his head, she couldn't help but notice that it felt different, more complete somehow.

The demon dodged with a step to the side. A single step that carried him ten feet.

“Watch it! You’ll burn the food! If you have to try to kill me please use your other mana types, lightning, and ice, correct?” he shook his head like she should know better, and without moving another demon king appeared at the grill to prepare the meal.

Ali felt incompetent, wanting to rage at the uselessness of her attacks and feeling so utterly helpless. If he wanted the demon could pop her head like a grape, and she could do nothing to stop him.

The demon King walked over to her his, apron and hat having disappeared, Ali tried one more half-hearted attempt at a fireball, but it was easily redirected without even breaking the demon’s stride.

“I do want to talk about your trial. You were in there for less than fifteen minutes real-time, most people take at least an hour, how did you do it?”

Fifteen minutes? It had felt like days to Ali, time must flow differently in the soul or something.

After a minute passed without an answer from the caster the demon continued “I was there, and I have no clue what you did. You spent nearly a week, subjective time, completely ignoring the only other person around. I mean talk about the silent treatment.” he chuckled, and after a few seconds of silence said “You’re doing it again ant you?”

Ali glared at the Demon who just kept talking.

“The closest of the others to finishing is Hailey, but she only has one gate to find. You passed her by miles with three and without taking my help.”

It had helped that she knew exactly what she had been looking for. Once she found a pattern she just had to follow it.

“The next closest is Kenn, but I think he’s just opening every door in succession until he gets the right one, right now.”

Ali had to suppress a giggle. That did sound like Kenn.

“Uhp, I saw that smile. So you *can* hear me. I get that you don’t want to the trial, but lets talk about the effects. Those aren’t secret, right? I mean they’re pretty much the same for everybody.

Ali groaned “You’re not going to leave me alone, until I talk to you are you?”

“Probably not, I’m bored. You’re now in the soul step of the mortal stage. How do you feel?”

Ali paused, she hadn’t really considered if she felt any different. Now that she thought about it, she could feel... something inside, flowing throughout her body along with her veins. As she tried to analyze the feeling her vision unexpectedly turned inward, much like it had when she

unlocked each core but rather than seeing a vision of the meaning of her elements, she was presented with an image of her own body, Three balls of light sat near her navel, with a complex system of channels roping off of them, connecting to every part of her body, energy seemed to pulse through the links, starting out red but turning pale blue then bright purple as she felt at her cores with her new sense.

The channels seemed to concentrate in certain areas, forming almost webs in her head, heart, feet, hands and throat.

The former three seemed dormant, asleep somehow, the energy being brought to them feeling minimal compared to the torrent that flowed into the latter two which glowed like beacons in her mental image.

Ali instantly knew what this was.

"I can see my mana network." She said unable to keep the awe out of her voice

"That's your brain interpreting your new internal mana sense, you'll be able to feel what's going on in there without having to focus on it soon enough. Get used to it. A mage has to be sure what's going on with their mana system at all times. Damage the right spot and your magic career is over if not your life."

Ali spent a few more minutes marveling at the sight and feel of her mana, forming a spell and watching as the sigil that she had had to keep perfectly memorized before, appeared like in ink on the web of power within her hand, she held it there letting the image of it fade from her minds eye, and it stayed. Only disappearing when she let go of the power or cast the spell. Even that felt different as she had noted earlier. Before it had felt like she was forcing the spell out. *Making* it happen. Now it felt like she was letting the spell out. Like she was doing something. Similar to lifting her arm or taking a step she was just making a part of her work.

Ali felt each spell drain mana from her core, It was like her core was a ball of yarn and the mana she used to form the fireballs was a bit of string tied a certain way. When she released the spell, it pulled more string along with it until an invisible pair of scissors cut it off, leaving her feeling just a little more drained and her fire core a little dimmer.

The sensation was so clear that Ali wouldn't have been surprised to see a blue mana bar in the corner of her vision like a video game. That didn't happen obviously but honestly she didn't need it.

"It's cool right!?" The Demon King said jolting Ali out of her reverie, "a lot more than just that has changed, but I'll save lengthy explanations for when everybody's up. Personally though I think the coolest part is now that you can see what you're doing, you could, in theory, begin working on your own spell sigils, so you don't have to keep using the basic bitch magic you've been using so far."

That did sound interesting, but Ali wouldn't admit that to the demon. Instead, she groaned, channelling the edginess that was inherent in all teenagers "Whatever. If I ever come up with any new spells they'll be used on you." she threatened.

"I wouldn't have it any other way. When the others are done I was actual thinking that after lunch we coul- oh, speak of the me" He suddenly turned to face where all the others were still unmoving "Hailey's about to wake up." he explained before disappearing with a pop of displaced air to appear standing in front of the unconscious elf. Ali followed, ready to hear of her friend's experience in the trial.