

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 101 Team [2] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 101 Team [2]

Chapter 101 Team [2]

It was a thought that came to me the moment that I ended my performance.

I could still vividly remember how I had almost lost myself in my performance. How I had almost lost myself to Alexander's emotions.

.....It was there that the thought came.

'Can I copy their experiences and fighting styles?'

What if I were to immerse myself deeper into their characters? Not just their emotions, but their memories and fighting styles?

Would that work?

Staring at Luxon who stood on the opposite end, I closed my eyes and sank deeply into my thoughts.

I immersed my mind deeper and started to reconstruct a few parts of what I had seen after using the skill.

It was a backyard.

The world was gray, and there was no sound around.

Swoosh—!

A boy stood in the middle, waving his daggers. With careful steps and movements, he practiced against a dummy.

Contrary to what one would expect, his movements and fighting style weren't chaotic.

Rather...

It was refined and minimalistic.

There wasn't much that I could work with. I only had a few memories. However, given how boring his life was, most of them were just about his training.

Just like Azarias...

His world was a colorless one.

Staring at his figure, I immersed myself in his image. I tried to picture myself in him.

Slashing the daggers, swords, and fists, taking the little steps, and avoiding the dummy. I mimicked everything in my mind.

Before I knew it, I was no longer watching, but I was the one doing the movements.

'Slash—!' I ducked down and slashed up. 'Slash—!' I sidestepped and avoided the counterattack.

'Slash—!'

The more this continued, the more I felt myself synchronize with the Alexander from my vision. From the way he moved his body, to the way he breathed. I copied it all.

To the point where,

I....

Was slowly becoming Alexander.

"....."

Opening my eyes, I felt a lot of my emotions numb down.

Scratch. Scratch.

My neck started to itch.

The deeper I immersed myself in his emotions, the more I found myself picking up his traits.

Alexander was a dagger user. Such was the weapon of his choice. That being said, he could also use other weapons.

In my case...

Clank. Clank.

I still chose to stick to the chains and body.

.....While the memories were clear in my mind, they weren't enough for me to completely become him. It was good that way. Were I to completely lose myself in this deep sense of initiation that I was currently relieving, I wasn't sure whether I'd be able to return to who I was.

In fact, what I was doing was dangerous in itself.

I couldn't immerse too deeply into this. There was a very real risk of losing myself in the character.

What would happen if I lost myself in character?

What would become of me?

"Are you ready?"

Overhearing Luxon's voice, my chest trembled.

The world around me started to gradually lose all color. It was starting to become boring. No, it had already become boring.

Scratch. Scratch.

It was such a monotonous world that made me crave for something.

For some color.

Staring at him, I nodded my head.

"I'm ready."

Woom—!

He appeared before me. In less than a few seconds, he had covered the distance that was between us.

On any normal occasion, I would've panicked a little.

But, now...

'Boring.'

I took a single step to the side, deftly avoiding the incoming slash.

"Uh?"

Briefly, Luxon appeared stunned. I took in his expression. Seared it in my mind as my lips trembled slightly.

Twisting my torso, I coiled the chain on my left hand and punched toward where I expected Luxon to be.

Swoosh—!

As my fist drew near to his face, I felt my heart beat faster. Yes... Yes... Finally, something to break the monotonous shell that was my world.

Just as I thought my attack was going to hit, he disappeared and reappeared right behind me.

"....!"

The chains in my hand snaked around my arm, deftly moving towards my shoulder where a wooded sword appeared.

Bang!

I felt an intense pain as the wooden sword smacked against my shoulder.

"....."

"....."

Scratch. Scratch.

I felt a wave of annoyance as our eyes met. Just in the nick of time, I had been able to protect my shoulder. But even so, I could tell that it was dislocated.

Boring... So boring...

Using my other hand, I stepped slightly and punched forward.

Swoosh.

That attack met nothing as Luxon appeared on the opening on the side of my body.

How weird...

As if I could tell what he was going to do next, I tilted my body slightly.

Swoosh—!

The sword slashed in an upward direction, narrowly avoiding my nose. It was close. Extremely close. About a few millimeters.

Had I not been careful, I might've lost my nose.

But I couldn't care at all about myself.

Rather, I found something peculiar.

Swoosh—!

I ducked down.

Swoosh—!

Stepped to the left.

Swoosh—!

Stepped to the right.

I could trace Luxon's movements.

Despite that, each time, I'd get hit. I felt pain engulf my mind, but I was used to pain. I didn't let it affect me.

Swoosh—!

Marks started to appear on my clothes as I avoided them, but I was slowly starting to get a hang of it, getting better and better at dodging.

Almost as if I was in a trance.

No, rather than trance, it was more like I was starting to be able to predict them. In this monotonous world... Everything felt bland. And as I delved deeply into Alexander's mind, I could see that Luxon's movements were similar to his.

Alexander's life was boring. In his life, one of the few means of entertainment for him was combat.

There was nothing he enjoyed more than seeing his opponent defeated and basking in the audience's praise.

It was for that reason that he spent a major part of his life just training.

So...

Swoosh—!

Taking a slight step forward, I yet again avoided his attack.

Ba... Thump!

"Haa..."

The more time passed, the more I started to grow accustomed to this new style.

It was still raw, but it was working...

I was gradually starting to mimic Alexander's movements perfectly. To the point where I slowly started to lose sight of myself.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

...And slowly, I indeed started to lose sight of myself.

"More..."

Luxon's opinion of Julien was rather mixed. While he did believe that he was weak and that he didn't deserve his rank, he also didn't dismiss his Emotive abilities.

They were in a league of their own.

But that said...

'So long as he doesn't touch me, I'm good.'

As far as he knew, Julien was only capable of voice transmission for [Sadness]. If one was ready, then defending against it wasn't impossible.

In that case, the only thing that he truly needed to worry about was the distance between the two.

He couldn't allow Julien to touch him.

And that...

'Shouldn't be a problem.'

Luxon was confident in his abilities. Just like Josephine, he had been trained in a knight's family. He was extremely proficient in the sword. Besides those 'monsters,' he was confident in handling everyone.

He was that confident in his skills.

Therefore...

Swoosh—!

"Uh...?"

Luxon was stunned when he noticed that his attacks were starting to miss.

'How is this...?'

Swoosh—!

Even as he slashed again, he was stunned to see that his attack graced the air.

Planting his foot forward, Luxon went for an upward diagonal slash. He was mid-way through his motion when he suddenly felt a small resistance coming from the bottom part of his sword.

"Ukh...!"

Exerting more force, he managed to push through the resistance, but the few seconds lost due to the resistance were enough for Julien's foot to land on his stomach.

".....!"

The blow hurt, but it wasn't anything that he couldn't handle as he took several steps back. As Luxon was about to reposition himself, the resistance returned.

This time, it was latched onto his foot.

".....!"

Yet again, his movements had been impeded.

Another foot came at him. It wasn't very fast, and Luxon was able to dodge it. Dodging wasn't the problem. He could dodge all the attacks. They weren't anything that put him in a difficult spot.

The problem was the fact that he couldn't gather any 'rhythm'.

Before he could initiate any of his rehearsed sequences, they were consistently disrupted, throwing him off balance and severely impeding his ability to launch an effective counterattack.

Swoosh!

It was an annoying situation since it put him in a passive spot.

"Kh, damn it!"

Gritting his teeth, he slashed again.

"Wow~ Luxon seems to be having a hard time."

By the side, Josephine observed everything with open eyes. Blinking her eyes rapidly, she looked at Kiera.

"I'm not seeing things, right? Julien is actually holding his own..."

"....."

Kiera didn't answer.

Her eyes were currently fixed on Julien's form. At first, his movements were sloppy. At a glance, she could tell its faults and break them down.

Had she been in Luxon's position, she would've probably been able to deal with him in less than five bouts.

But...

Things started to change gradually.

The madness that lingered within his eyes started to intensify, and his movements were beginning to become more refined.

Not only that but upon closer inspection, she noticed a familiar set of threads moving around and shattering Luxon's rhythm, preventing him from fully tapping into his skill.

But it wasn't that which sent chills down Kiera's spine.

No, it was the fact that the more the fight progressed, the fainter Julien's image became in her mind. It was as if he was transforming into an entirely different person.

From his movements to his expressions, Kiera was starting to see a different person...

'What the fuck.'

It was a strange thought.

One that she had a hard time coming to terms with.

But...

Bang!

"Haaa-!"

Seeing Julien's lips tremble as his attack finally shattered Luxon's attack, Kiera noticed that the madness within his gaze further intensified.

The emotions he was feeling - Ecstasy, joy, excitement, she could see them in his expression as a genuine smile spread across his lips.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

He started a frenzy of attacks. Controlling the thin threads, he continued to shatter Luxon's movements.

With no other choice but to stay passive, Luxon could only cover his body with his arms.

Bang...! Bang!

The more Julien attacked, the more Kiera saw his emotions run rampant.

At this very moment...

"More."

He wasn't Julien. That person seemed to have been replaced by another entity, taking over his body as he attacked the flustered Luxon who despite not losing, was slowly and steadily getting pushed back.

Bang!

As another one of Julien's fists landed on Luxon's guard, Kiera stood up and appeared beside the two.

"Stop."

Kiera clasped Julien's fist.

"...."

"...."

For a brief moment, Kiera thought he'd attack her as silence ensued between the two, but gradually, his eyes started to return to normal.

Eventually, he calmed down and lowered his hand.

Turning around, he picked up his blazer and unrolled his sleeves. With his back turned, he asked,

"I take it that the result is clear, no?"

Kiera looked at Luxon who despite being unhurt was panting heavily. Turning to look towards the others, she closed her eyes before nodding.

"Yes."

".....Good."

With a small nod, he left the premises.

Staring at his back, Kiera's expression turned complex.

'What in the world... was that?

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Chapter 102 Team [3]

Shaa—

Feeling the cold water trickling down my face, I took a deep breath. Looking up, I stared at my reflection. A familiar visage met my gaze, but as I looked closer at my expression, I noticed the slight curl at the end of my lips.

Though I smiled, I wasn't actually smiling.

.....My body was smiling in my stead. No, rather, Alexander was smiling for me.

"Haaa..."

I let out a long breath and turned off the tap. Massaging my face, my smile gradually faded.

The same was true for the monotonous world around me as color started to return, and I felt my emotions become more pronounced.

The world...

It didn't feel as boring anymore.

"....."

Staring at the all-too-familiar expression, I finally relaxed.

'....It's a dangerous ability.'

I could still feel the lingering traces of Alexander lingering within the depths of my mind.

If I wasn't careful enough, then there was a chance that the Alexander in my memories would take over.

"I can't allow that."

There was a goal that I needed to accomplish.

I couldn't lose sight of who I was before I even achieved my goal.

Even so...

"It worked."

For just a few minutes, I was able to become 'Alexander'. It was sloppy, and I needed to put more work into it, but during the fight, I had become him.

It was for that reason that Luxon was thrown off during the fight.

While I still wasn't stronger than him, in this state, I could hold my own against him. Even hold him in a passive state.

The more I thought about this new ability, the more my heart thumped.

".....So many possibilities."

What if I were to memorize and mimic more than one style? Not just Alexander. What if I tried to assimilate myself with more personalities...?

What would happen then? Would I be able to call forth different types of combat styles?

Though my physical limitations constrained how much I could imitate, if I could switch between personalities, it would certainly throw off a lot of my opponents.

If at one moment I was 'Alexander' and the next switched to another personality, then it would make it impossible for my opponent to predict how I fought.

"It's an interesting idea."

One that I sort of wanted to put to the test but had to stop myself from doing so.

"....."

My neck was starting to feel itchy, and my hand twitched at the sensation. I almost started to scratch my neck to get rid of the itch.

Leaning forward, I grasped the sides of the sink.

"It's troublesome."

The new 'technique' sounded strong, but there were severe limitations to it.

It involved letting myself be immersed in the emotions and memories of another person. In the process, I needed to make sure to not lose sight of myself.

The more I immersed myself in them, the more I could copy and replicate their abilities, but at the same time, it also took a massive toll on me mentally.

I couldn't guarantee that I wouldn't lose sight of myself within those memories and emotions.

For that reason, I needed to be careful.

My neck felt itchy all of a sudden.

"....."

I stared at my reflection and clenched my fist tightly.

"Fuck off..."

Alexander was starting to take over my mind once again. It was an exhausting situation. However, I resisted.

I didn't let 'Alexander' take over who I was.

Grasping tightly the corners of the sink, I brushed my wet hair to the side.

"I'll control you."

Not just him, but whoever else I planned on assimilating in my mind.

I wasn't going to let them take over my mind.

That much, I was sure of.

The days passed and the day of the Midterms neared.

With the midterms being one of the main attractions of the Festival, it naturally attracted a lot of attention from the general public and big Guilds. But it wasn't without reason.

An announcement had been released by [Haven] a few days before the long-awaited midterms.

- [Announcement] -

In light of the delay with the midterms, the Haven facility has agreed with the other Academies within the Empire to open the midterms for all other Academies. This will now be a joint examination from students from all over.

- [Announcement] -

The news took over the Empire by storm as excitement boiled over the news.

Within a few days of the announcement, the Academy campuses became packed with people. From large sponsors to members of the fifteen Guilds. The Academy was filled with important figures.

Of course, there were plenty of reporters.

Cason Wallance, a rather renowned reporter walked around the Academy campus to interview the Haven cadets.

With their reputation, a lot of his audience was interested in listening to what they had to say.

Currently, he was interviewing a young cadet who appeared to be in his first year.

—How do you feel about the upcoming midterms? fre(e)

—Oh, I feel great. I think my team will perform well.

—You're that confident?

—Well, I wouldn't say confident, but I trust in all the work I put in with them.

—That sounds amazing!

The interview flowed smoothly.

Whenever he asked a question, the cadet would respond with picture-perfect answers.

—You're aware that the other Academies will be coming for the upcoming midterms. Do you fear them a little?

—Oh, yeah. Even though we at Haven are hailed as the strongest, the other Academies are not to be looked down upon. They are extremely powerful in their own right. We can't let ourselves drown in our own arrogance.

It was a picture-perfect interview.

Humble, and confident. The interviewer nodded along as he interviewed the cadet.

—Thank you very much for the interview! I hope you and your team manage to achieve some success in the midterms.

—Haha, thank you very much.

Wrapping up the interview, the cadet left and Cason looked at the recording in satisfaction. After a little editing, he could send the video directly to be broadcast around the Empire.

Turning his head, Cason noticed his producer's expression looked troubled.

"Is something wrong?"

"Hmm, well..."

"What is it? Spit it out? Did I make a mistake in the interview?"

"No, it's not that."

"Then...?"

"It's monotonous. Bland. The people at Haven all seem to reply in the same manner. It's rather boring, don't you think?"

"Oh."

When he put it like that...

Cason frowned.

"What can I do? It's all live, and it's not like I can tell the cadets to start behaving irrationally."

"No, I get that."

"Then...?"

"It's whatever. Just keep doing your job. I'll think of something."

With these words, the producer left. Staring at his departing back, Cason scratched the side of his face.

".....Bland."

Staring at the recording device, he sighed.

"It looks like I'll have to do more interviews."

In a sense, he agreed with the producer. The interviews were indeed a little bland when taking into account that all of them were real.

There was no 'spice'.

"Hmm."

All of a sudden, Cason's eyes widened as he caught sight of a group in the distance. As if they were magnets, they attracted the attention of all the people around them. Wherever they walked, heads would turn.

Walking at the front, was a familiar-looking cadet.

One that just recently had started to make waves. With an appearance that was hard to forget, Cason was sure it was him. Alongside him were four other cadets. Amongst them, one girl in particular stood out.

With platinum long hair and red hair, her appearance didn't lose out to Julien.

Without even thinking, he appeared before them.

"Hello, cadets. If you don't mind, can I do a quick interview?"

"An interview?"

A head popped up. With widened eyes, she looked at him with excitement.

"Of course! Of course!"

Cason sighed in relief. He didn't want to admit it, but he felt rather intimidated by Julien's gaze. That was despite him not doing anything that would warrant such intimidation.

"Keum."

Clearing his throat, he turned on the recording device and started to interview. This time, unlike the previous attempts, he decided to hold the interview live.

—Hello, it's nice to meet you. Please introduce yourselves. Are you a group?

—Oh, yes! We are. I'm Josephine.

Stepping forward, Josephine introduced herself before pointing towards the others.

—He's Julien, our team leader. He's Anders, and he's Luxon.

—Oh, I see. And...

Cason pointed the recording device in the direction of the platinum-haired girl.

—I think you skipped her.

—No, I didn't.

—Uh?

—You can call her 'it'.

Finally speaking, Kiera looked at her with a scowl.

—Do you want to get hit?

—Maybe, the violent gorilla? No differenc-hiek!

Cason blinked as Kiera slapped Josephine's head.

'This is live...'

With a forced smile, he tried to calm the girls down and focused his attention on Kiera.

—....Hehe, friendly banter. Seems like the team chemistry is high.

—The fuck you on about?

Kiera looked at him with an expression that seemed to say, 'Is this guy an idiot? Chemistry? What the hell is that...?'

—....

Cason felt his face stiffen. Suddenly, he started to regret a lot of things.

—Ah, well...

And he quickly asked a question.

—How do you feel about the current format? A lot of Academies from the outside will be coming soon. Do you have any opinion on that?

—What do I care? It's a pain in the ass. If anything, they're just going to be a bother. It's not like they are any good to-hmmm!

Kiera was stopped mid-way as Josephin appeared from behind as she went on to cover her mouth.

—What are you doing?! This is getting recorded! Everyone will see you say this stuff!

—Hmm!

—Ak! You're licking me!

—The fuck are you putting your hand over my mouth for?

—Crap! You...!

Quickly wiping her hand over her shirt, Josephine's expression twisted as Kiera laughed at her from the side. Staring at the scene, Cason felt his face twitch.

'This isn't good.'

This team...

What the hell was this team?

Feeling that the interview was going in the wrong direction, Cason looked around and finally settled his gaze on Julien.

'Ah, right... There's him.'

Despite how intimidating he looked, he appeared to be the most reasonable of the group. Cason decided to interview him.

—What about you cadet Julien? What do you think about the recent news?

—.....?

As if not expecting to be interviewed, Julien looked down and tilted his head.

—About?

Cason cleared his throat and repeated.

—About the Academy's decision to open up to the other Academies for the upcoming examinations. Do you feel anything about that? There are quite a lot of powerful cadets in the other Academies. I'm sure you must've already heard of a few.

Cason went on to list a few names

—Johnathan Monroe. Karl Redhouse. Amelia Clementine... They're all high-level prospects just like you. Do you feel anything competing with such cadets?

—.....

Julien's expression didn't change much despite the question.

Initially, Cason thought he was mulling deeply over their names. Especially since he noticed his deep frown.

'Ah, judging from his expression, he seems to take them extremely seriously.'

As expected. Even the Black Star of Haven has heard of their names...

Julien's mouth soon parted open and Cason moved the recording device closer to his face. There was nothing more exciting than high-caliber prospects talking about each other.

This was sure to get the audience to pay attention and let them forget about the previous encounter.

Such were his thoughts until he heard Julien's words.

—.....Who?

At that moment, Cason froze.

He recalled his producer's words, and his mouth twitched.

Because...

He knew a storm had just started to brew.

Chapter 103 Midterms [1]

With the incoming midterms, cadets were allowed to rent training grounds for a few hours each day. Although there were a lot of cadets, there were just enough for everyone to train without any issues.

In one such training ground.

"What are you doing?"

Aoife halted her practice to turn around.

Drip. Drip...!

Her entire body was soaked in sweat as a large metallic block dropped on the area before her.

Bang--!

Frowning, she looked at her team members.

Her eyes jumped a little when she noticed both Evelyn and Leon huddled next to the other team members, staring at the mana display in their hands.

It was a rather expensive device that allowed citizens to watch streams and recordings.

Aoife also had one.

She often used it to watch her performance back in the play.

"We're supposed to be training. What are you doing checki--"

Aoife's words halted mid-sentence. Stepping to the side, her eyes widened at the sight that greeted her.

Appearing on the screen was a familiar group.

[Ak! You're licking me!]

[The fuck are you putting your hand over my mouth for?]

"...."

Aoife's mouth opened in an 'o' shape as she watched the screen.

But if that wasn't enough...

[Johnathan Monroe. Karl Redhouse. Amelia Clementine... They're all high-level prospects just like you. Do you feel anything competing with such cadets?]

[...Who?]

Right then and there, Aoife almost smacked her forehead.

"...."

"...."

She wasn't the only one who felt that way.

Raising his head, Leon looked around. His gaze met with Aoife's and Evelyn's. The two of them looked at him with the same expression and sighed almost simultaneously.

"He's done it..."

"We're fucked."

"...."

Indeed, they were spot on. The moment the clip was streamed, it immediately made waves and started to be shared everywhere. Knowing how the media worked, it took no time for titles to appear.

[Who? A bold statement! Confidence or arrogance?]

[The Black Star announces his utter disregard for the incoming Academies.]

Shortly after, a Q and A was released.

It was from one of the cadets whom Julien had disregarded.

Johnathan Monroe of Montel Institute.

It went on as follows;

Q : What do you think about Haven's Black Star statement?

A : Quite frankly, nothing. I've also never heard of him. My only target is Aoife, whom I believe is the true Black Star.

Q : Are you saying that you don't take him seriously?

A : Who?

Q : I see what you did there.

The release of the Q and A sparked a new wave of conflict. To add fuel to the fire, the other two members joined in to release their own statements.

A : There's a rumor that he's the weakest Black Star in Haven's history. The standards seem to have fallen rather low.

- Karl Redhouse of Rodnea Academy.

A : Not interested. I have another target in mind.

- Amelia Clementine of the Silver Wing Institute.

Before the midterms could even start, sparks had already started to fly. Things were so heated that the topic became one of the most talked about throughout the Empire.

Just when everyone thought things couldn't get any more heated, a new interview was released.

This time, it was with none other than Haven's Black Star.

Q : There's a lot of buzz regarding what you said. Do you have anything to say to that?

A : No.

Q : Eh... Then, what do you have to say about what your competitors have said?

A : Haven't seen.

Q : You haven't?

A : No.

Q : Then... Do you have anything to say to the other Academies?

A : No.

Q : Should I repeat what they said...?

A : Annoying.

The interview ended there, but the buzz it created was even fiercer than before.

All of a sudden, Julien had become one of the central figures of the midterms.

With all attention focused on him, his performance in the midterms would be heavily scrutinized.

Unconcerned with all of this, Julien practiced with his team.

He was just about to spar with Anders when Kiera approached him.

"Hey, do you seriously not care?"

Stopping, Julien frowned.

"About what?"

"The interview thing, you know?"

".....no."

"Oh."

Kiera scratched the side of her face. It seemed like she wanted to ask something but was unsure of how to ask.

"What?"

"So, like..."

"Do whatever you want."

"Really?!"

Kiera's eyes lit up.

Looking at her briefly, Julien turned his attention away from her. He wasn't too bothered to figure out what she wanted. He just let her be. Wasn't as though she wasn't going to do it if he didn't give her permission.

"Yes."

"...!"

A new interview was released shortly after that.

Q : With a lot of the fire on your team captain, your team is currently under a lot of pressure. Do you have anything to say to that?

A : Yes.

Q : What is it?

A : Suck my ba-

There were only three days left until the midterms.

Classes had already stopped a week before the midterms. With cadets from the other Academies coming into the Academy, the air was rather tense.

All teams were getting ready for the upcoming evaluation. The same was true for my team as we all woke up early in the morning to train.

3 am.

"Fuck, kill me... Why are we doing this so early in the morning?"

We would start the day with physical training. Running for ten kilometers for the first ten minutes, and then going to the weight rooms to train our bodies.

Such was the plan.

5 am.

Clank--!

"Come here! I'll fuck you up!!"

We would then move to the dummy area where we spent the next few hours sparring against them. Kiera appeared rather aggressive today.

I didn't pay much attention to her and just focused on the dummy in front of me.

Time passed on like that.

It was now 8 am.

The team was now sitting at a large table where we all had our breakfast. Everyone seemed to be somewhat nervous about the coming examinations. Especially when considering the scale of the entire event.

"Are you not nervous?"

Overhearing Josephine's question, I turned to face her.

".....Nervous?"

Was I nervous?

I was extremely nervous. If I were to fail the examination then I would be in a lot of trouble. It wasn't something that I could fail.

It was for that reason that I pushed even more than before.

Still, I couldn't show that I was nervous. It wasn't because I didn't want to show weakness or something meaningless like that.

It more had to do with the fact that as the leader, I couldn't show them that I was nervous. A nervous leader wasn't a good leader.

So for that reason, I shook my head and replied.

"No."

"Wow~ Here I am, shivering every day."

"You and your nonsense again..."

Kiera grumbled by the side, scooping some of the cereal in her mouth.

"All ywo fwuking do... much... iws twalk a lot of nwonsense... munch."

"Ugh, speak after you swallow your food."

Gulp.

"I do whatever the fuck I want."

"Yah, yah. I saw."

"Kaka. What did you think of the interview? Did you see their reactions?"

"It's disgusting."

"You say that, but the same applies to you."

"That's disgusting."

"Enough you two. Stop trying to start a fight. After you're done, let's go to the training grounds. They're going to announce the name of the event soon."

In response to Luxon's words, Kiera and Josephine quieted down and hurried to eat their breakfast. Unlike the two, I kept at my pace.

While it was indeed true that the 'team event' would be announced today, that would be in two hours.

There was no need to rush.

"Eat slowly. We'll train more."

"Uh?"

"Ah? We're training more...? What sort of..."

I felt all eyes pause on me. I didn't pay attention to the looks they were giving me. Cleaning my mouth, I stood up.

"Team sparring. Let's go."

"....No way, we just came back from training."

"What sort of...!"

Ignoring their words, I headed out of the canteen and proceeded to head back towards the training grounds.

There was no time to spare.

Along the way, I sighed.

"Come on, make it quick...."

By now, I was just waiting for the quest window to pop up. Every day, I would wake up to check if I received a new notification.

With how things usually flowed, it was bound to happen.

I just hoped it'd show up early so that I could better prepare for it, but...

"It's not coming."

Regardless of how much I waited, the notification never came. There were only three days left now, and the more things were delayed, the more disadvantageous things would be for me.

I was just waiting at this point.

'Either nothing happens and the entire event is a good one, or something will happen and the quest window is going to appear soon.'

To be honest, I was leaning more towards the latter.

After getting a better idea of the sheer size and power of the organization, all hopes of the Academy thwarting whatever schemes they had disappeared.

While it was true that Delilah was present, thinking about the faceless man, I quite frankly didn't think she was as strong as him.

Rather, I thought she was inferior to him.

And not by a small margin.

"Crazy."

It was a crazy thought.

For someone to be stronger than Delilah...

Just what was stopping him from conquering the entire world?

"Haa."

The more I thought about the faceless man, the more nervous I became. But even so, I had no choice but to look ahead.

I still had time...

Not much, but I had time.

"—!" Just as I took another step forward, the world around me froze and I lost control of my body.

'Ah, there it is...'

A vision.

'As expected, some bullshit is about to happen.'

The world around me started to shift and turn. Blinking twice, I found myself inside a small restaurant.

Two unfamiliar people stood on the opposite end of the table. Their figures appeared to be quite hazy, making it hard for me to decipher their appearance.

No, in fact, the entire vision appeared rather blurry.

'What's going on?'

It was the first time that I had experienced a vision like this. It was odd.

"What do you think?"

Even so, I had no choice but to pay close attention to the conversation. All information was vital.

"...Well, I don't know. The situation is messed up. There's a lot of attention currently focused on Haven and the Chancellor."

A lot of attention focused on Haven and the Chancellor?

I perked up my ears to listen carefully.

"It can't be helped. After the incident during the midterms, there's been a lot of complaints. The Royal family is using the situation to take her down a notch."

"Ugh, how annoying. It wasn't even her fault."

"Not her fault? She's the one overseeing Haven. It's her responsibility to look after these things."

"Please. You know damn well it's not her fault. She may be strong, but she isn't omnipotent. If there's anyone to blame, then blame the inspectors. This is all their fault, to begin with. Had they not been so lazy...!"

"Stop, you don't know that."

"But...!"

The conversation started to get heated from that point. Straining my ears, I tried to pick up for any more words.

".....Oy."

But before I knew it, I was back in the training grounds.

Before me, Kiera stood.

Sporting a frown, she looked at me.

"What are you doing?"

"...Nothing."

I brushed her words away. However, from the corner of my eyes, I glanced at the notification that popped up.

My heart dropped.

[◆ Main Quest Activated : Midterms.]

: Character Progression + 207%

: Game Progression + 11%

Failure

: Calamity 1 + 15%

: Calamity 2 + 15%

: Calamity 3 + 15%

'....So the main storyline is starting.'

The stakes suddenly increased dramatically, and so did the rewards. Silently clenching my teeth, I brushed the notification to the side and stared at my group.

With heavy expressions, they all appeared to be stretching.

I pursed my lips.

"....About training."

Everyone raised their heads to look at me. Even though I hadn't said anything, Kiera's expression suddenly changed.

So did Josephine's.

"You wouldn't dare...!"

"No!"

I didn't care for their screams and curses.

Stretching my arm, I muttered,

"We're doubling it."

New chapters are published on

Chapter 104 Midterms [2]

"Everything is ready. There shouldn't be a problem."

Atlas Megrail casually sat on his chair while looking at the scenery outside. A small orb rested on the wooden table beside him.

"If everything goes well, then we can push the narrative forward. Add a little bit more oil to the fire, and we'll be able to get her out of the Academy."

—That's good.

A soft voice replied from the orb.

It was unknown to anyone but Atlas who the voice belonged to.

—What about the kid? Did you let him in on the plan?

"Kid? Hm, you mean Phecda?"

—He's quite a promising prospect. His talent evaluation has him as a potential 'Fiend Rank Prospect.'

"Fiend, you say?"

Leaning on his chair, Atlas thought back to Phecda.

Within the organization there were ranks. They went as follows; Discardable, Crazyed, Fallen, Fiend, Low-seat, High-seat.

The highest rank within the organization was the High-Seat, something of which he was a member of. It was the highest rank within the organization, with only the leader ranking higher.

Below them were Low-seats, those that had the potential to become High-seats but weren't quite there yet.

Fiends came after.

Strong members with a lot of potential, but easily controlled.

Thinking about the conversation he had with Phecda not so long ago, Atlas suddenly smiled.

".....I wonder about that."

—You wonder? Is there something wrong with Phecda?

"No, nothing."

Atlas shook his head. He had only had a brief conversation with him. He wasn't quite sure of whether he had a potential higher than his current 'fiend' ranked potential.

From what he saw, he had the makings of someone who could become a seat.

'Well, who knows...'

The future was hard to predict. He needed to observe more before coming to a proper conclusion.

In any case, he remembered what the question was about, and answered.

"I didn't let him in on the plan, but I'll probably tell him that something is going to happen."

—Oh?

There were no hints of surprise in the voice. It was as if they could tell exactly what Atlas was thinking.

—Let me guess. You want to see if he's capable of stopping what we've done.

"You know me well."

Atlas laughed as his finger drummed lightly against the wooden table beside him.

"If we let him in on the plan, and he tries to stop it to buy 'her' trust, then it might look too unnatural. It might even make things look suspicious."

—You're right.

"If he can stop it, then there's a chance he might earn her trust. If he fails, then our plan succeeds and we can push her out of the Academy. Both are tempting options."

—....It looks like you've thought about all possible scenarios.

"Hmm."

Leaning his head back, Atlas's gaze drifted into a haze, his eyes losing their focus. It was as if he had been transported to another realm, detached from the present moment.

Gradually, his eyes closed.

"Haaa..."

He let out a long breath.

"All scenarios... I wonder about that."

9:58 a.m.

A few minutes before the announcement.

"Haaa... Haaa... That's it....! Haa... The announcement is... Haa... about to come. I can't take it anymore."

"Yes... Haa..."

"No... More..."

"Huuu."

Taking a deep breath, I wiped the sweat from my body. My entire body was screaming with pain, and looking at the others who appeared to be utterly exhausted, I wiped my forehead.

"I guess we can take a break."

Thump. Thump...!

Kiera and Josephine dropped to the ground at the same time.

"Haa... I'm dying."

"W-water."

Perhaps because I had been training with incredible intensity ever since I had entered the Academy, I was used to the high-intensity training unlike everyone else who was showing signs of exhaustion. In particular, Kiera and Josephine were breathing hard as they lay flat on the ground.

The other two didn't seem to be as tired.

But I could tell from just a glance that they shared the same sentiments as the girls.

I shrugged my shoulders.

'....They're supposed to be the elites of this world. This shouldn't be too much for them.'

I was still weaker than them. That much was clear to me. However, the gap which seemed insurmountable at the start was starting to shrink.

It became clear to me why. Compared to them, I was putting an extra 3 to 5 hours into training. The extra hours were allowing me to close the gap between us.

"Oh, the announcement is here!"

Suddenly sitting up straight, Kiera took out a small orb.

There, she started to read.

[Midterm Announcement :

—Labyrinth.

Explore the artificial labyrinth with team members. Points will be awarded for each monster that is killed.

At the end of the labyrinth, there will be a boss monster.

Combat with other teams is allowed. The team with the most points will win.

Announcement End]

The awaited announcement regarding the midterms arrived just as anticipated.

"A labyrinth...?"

Everyone was staring at the orb in Kiera's hand as it displayed a message above, almost like a hologram.

'What happens if I pass my hand through...?'

Would it pass through the projection?

"This is interesting."

Kiera was the first one to voice out her thoughts.

"So not only do we get to fight monsters, but we also get to fight other cadets?"

"It seems like it."

Luxon replied from the side.

"If we defeat the other teams, all their points will be transferred to us."

"Hehehe."

Covering her mouth, Kiera started to laugh to herself while quietly mumbling things like, 'fucking bastards, I'll show you that I wasn't lying in the interview...'

Josephine's face scrunched up on the side.

"It can't be that..."

"Kakaka."

Briefly staring at them and then the announcement, I took my attention away from them and thought back to the vision. It had been nagging at the back of my mind for the past several hours.

'...As usual, there's not much I can work with.'

The only thing that I was able to pick up was that the backlash from the entire situation was going to affect Delilah.

Perhaps, this was in fact the goal of the organization.

It wouldn't come as a surprise to me if that were to be the case. I wasn't exactly sure what their goal was, but given that I was here, there was something that the organization wanted from the Academy.

If that was the case, then Delilah was most likely their biggest obstacle.

"Hmm."

But what exactly were they planning?

'Should I just go ahead and ask?'

This option wasn't exactly out of the table. I didn't want to, but it would clear up a lot of my troubles.

'Then again, if they wanted my assistance, I'm sure they would've told me something was up by now...'

Still, it wasn't as though I was without any clues.

There was in fact one clue that I had managed to pick up from the conversation.

'If there's anyone to blame, then blame the inspectors.'

It wasn't hard to piece out all the pieces from there. So long as I figured out who the inspectors were, and what their job was, then I figured that I would be able to figure everything out.

"Hoo."

Letting out a long breath, I stretched my arms a little.

'I guess I'll start there.'

But first...

"Are you guys ready?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Frowning, I stood up.

"We've had enough rest. Let's start again."

But just as I stood up, I stopped and noticed that something was wrong with the others.

Their expressions...

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

They looked like they were constipated.

Haven Education Department.

There was a conference held by the high-ranking members of Haven and the other Academies.

There were ten people in total, consisting of Haven Chancellor Delilah Rosemberg, Chancellor Joffrey Stein, Chancellor Merylin Parlias, and a few other notable figures belonging to the other renowned Academies within the Empire.

In order to ensure that everything flowed smoothly, a meeting was taking place.

With that being said, the current focus was on the expected viewership of the event.

"The last time we held a similar event, we reached a viewership count of about 20 million active watchers. The annual draft receives about 100 million, so realistically speaking, we should be aiming for 20 million plus."

The viewership was important. The midterms weren't only about testing the cadets so that the Guilds had more information about them, but it was also a source of income for the Academies.

With people subscribing to the event, the Academies would receive a percentage of the profit coming from the viewership.

It costs a lot of money to run an Academy.

For that reason, events such as these were regarded with high importance.

"We've already marketed our sides quite well. Johnathan has a lot of pull in our region."

"The same goes for our Karl. We've run a few promotional campaigns."

"We say that our goal is 20 million, but I think we can aim higher. This year prospects are very promising."

"Say, 30 million?"

All in all, it was a fairly normal conversation.

Sitting by the side, Delilah watched all of this with an indifferent expression. The reality was that she felt sleepy.

Hearing the other Academies brag about their cadets was something she wasn't particularly interested in.

That was until Joffrey Stein, Chancellor of Montel Institute spoke up.

"There's something that I'd like to address."

The atmosphere turned quiet as his deep voice echoed out. With everyone's attention focused on him, he tapped on his mana pad and displayed a certain interview.

It was an interview that everyone was all too familiar with.

—With a lot of the fire on your team captain, your team is currently under a lot of pressure. Do you have anything to say to that?

—Yes.

—What is it?

—Suck my ba-

His gaze turned towards Delilah.

"Haven needs to think of properly punishing their cadets. This type of conduct is embarrassing."

Following his words, Delilah frowned. Before she could say anything else, as if in agreement, several other members present spoke up.

"Her behavior is indeed inappropriate."

"....I agree. She must be punished."

"We can't encourage such behavior. It might impact the viewership rating of the event. We must do something about it before the citizens think that the cadets are some crude kids that can't control their mouths."

Words of criticism continued for a long time. Very obviously, the members of the other Academies weren't pleased with the way a few of Haven's cadets behaved during the interview.

After quietly accepting all the condemnations, Delilah looked around the room.

"....Is that what everybody thinks?"

"Yes, we must punish her and release a statement condemning her actions. There's a high chance we might lose viewership because of the interview. It's best if we do something about it quickly."

"I agree."

"Same."

It was the inevitable outcome. Kiera had indeed gone a little overboard with the interview.

The public backlash was quite severe with several hate comments directed towards her and her team.

Had it been any other occasion, Delilah would've agreed with their requests.

However...

"No."

Delilah shook her head.

"....There's no need to punish her. In fact, we should all be praising her."

"Uh?"

"What sort of..."

"We were at 15 million before the interview."

"....?"

Sliding a paper across the table, her eyes traced the very top of it where it read; Current subscription count: 83 million.

"We're now at 83 million."

The event.

It had blown up.

All of it thanks to one simple interview.

Chapter 105 Midterms [3]

"So I have to fill this first?"

"Yes, please. After you fill the sheet you can collect the bracelets."

"Okay..."

Staring at the piece of paper in front of me, I took a pen and started to fill it. It was just basic stuff. Name, date of birth, and so on...

Within a few minutes, I was done.

Or so I thought.

".....Team name?"

I paused to look at the last gap that I needed to fill. Team name. How was I supposed to fill this?

Looking around me, I could see hundreds of different cadets roaming around the hall. There were a lot of unfamiliar faces. Meeting the gazes of a few, I noticed obvious hints of hostility.

In particular, I noticed a few gazes in the distance staring at me with hints of mockery.

They weren't even trying to hide their disdain as they spoke in loud voices.

"He's weak."

"This is the best that there is in Ha-"

Just a lot of nonsense. I couldn't be bothered to hear all of it. Kiera would've been perfect for such occasions.

With how she usually acted, she would've probably beaten them all on the spot.

Currently, all team leaders for the upcoming event were called up to collect the rule book, and 'bracelets' which were supposed to be handed to all team members.

It was a low-ranked relic. A one-time use. In case a dangerous situation occurred, the bracelet would shatter and the spell [Barrier] would evoke, protecting the cadet from suffering any meaningful injuries.

Besides that, it also relayed the teams the overall scores of their team and the other teams.

It was a must-have item.

That said...

"Is it possible for me to come back in ten minutes?"

"Yes?"

"I wasn't told that I needed to come up with a team name. Can I talk it over with my team?"

"Ah, no. Unfortunately, not. We need the documents signed quickly, and an announcement was made. I'm not sure how you weren't aware of it."

".....Right."

So they made an announcement...

It was bullshit, but what could I do? Staring at the paper in front of me, I sighed before jotting down a team name.

"He..."

I decided to go with the most random name I could think of.

It wasn't going to matter anyway.

"Here you go."

Once I was done filling out the paper, I handed it to one of the assistants on-site who handed me five bracelets. They were rather heavy to the touch and were also rather thick.

Just as I was about to put on my bracelet, one of the assistants stopped me and warned me.

"The moment you put on the bracelet, you will feel a little bit of pain. Please don't worry. It's part of the procedure."

"Hm?"

Pain?

Why would there be pain?

"The bracelet does more than just protect you and display your team points. It also measures your heart rate and mana capacity. If something is wrong, we'll be quickly alerted. To do that, it'll insert small needles into your skin."

"Oh..."

That made sense, but needles...

"....."

I stared at the device before putting it on.

As expected, a pain did come, but it didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. Rather, it felt more like a pinch.

"Wow, you're rather resilient. You're the first cadet who didn't as much as flinch. I'm impressed."

"...Thank you."

I wasn't sure whether the compliment was real or not, but I still thanked him.

I was just about to leave when I heard a soft whisper reach my ear.

"There's no problem with your bracelet."

My steps stopped and I flicked my head to look back. However, the assistant from before had long disappeared from my sight.

"Where did..."

But it didn't take long for me to understand what had happened.

'...It's them.'

The organization.

Lowering my head, I stared at the bracelet again. For them to contact me now of all times...

"How annoying."

Especially since I already knew that there was something wrong with the bracelets. After a little investigation, the only possible inspectors that were mentioned in the visions were the ones who checked the bracelets before they were handed over to the cadets.

It was obvious to me that whatever was going to happen, had something to do with the bracelets.

They were the only things that the cadets were allowed to bring to the examination.

"...What should I do?"

It was a troublesome situation.

The only message that I received was a simple, 'There's no problem with your bracelet.'?What did this even mean?

Don't interfere? Interfere? Do whatever you want...?

"Haaa..."

I massaged my forehead.

"Why wou-"

Halting mid-sentence, I pursed my lips. I suddenly started to have an understanding of the situation.

"So that's how it is."

I didn't know how to react. No, rather. I felt like utter shit.

'In the end, they're just treating me as a pawn.'

It didn't take much for me to piece the pieces together. By telling me this information, they were essentially giving me a chance to prevent whatever they were doing.

It was almost as if they were treating this entire situation as if it was a game.

Either way, they weren't going to lose out.

If I were to succeed, then Delilah would 'trust' me more. If I were to fail, then their plan was going to succeed.

Whatever I did, they would benefit.

That feeling...

'It's disgusting.'

The feeling of being treated as a mere pawn. I had a hard time trying to stomach it. However, despite my apprehensions about it, I didn't let my frustrations out.

There was no need for me to show my disgust towards the situation.

At the end of the day, I was also playing with both sides.

"Haha."

The irony of the situation made me laugh.

"Right, right..."

Fiddling with the bracelets, I took a second look behind me before leaving the premises.

".....Guess I'll continue to play along."

Three days passed in a flash. It was now the day of the midterms.

[Is everyone ready...?]

The [Labyrinth Raid] was one of the most anticipated events in recent history within the Empire. The viewership, which had been expected to be within 20-30 million, surpassed that by a large margin, hitting numbers closely resembling that of the yearly draft.

The media was naturally very interested in the event with recording devices set up all over Haven's arena grounds.

Within the tunnels that led to the main stage, the loud voice of the announcer echoed through.

[...In a short moment, we will announce the participating teams' names. Please show your support once they come out. For now, let's welcome the members of Montel Institute!]

In the corner of the tunnel was a small display that flashed as Johnathan Monroe, the genius of Montel Institute proudly stood with his sword raised. Behind him were his other group members.

"Wooo—!"

The cheers of the crowd reached the tunnels.

"Wow, holy shit."

Staring at the end of the tunnel where the crowd was, Kiera blinked her eyes rapidly. Feeling the thunderous atmosphere outside, she felt subtle goosebumps run down her body.

".....I can feel the ground quaking by how loud they are."

Standing beside her, Josephine stood rigidly. Her face was entirely pale as she held onto the side of the wall to support herself.

"R-r-re-all-y?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"N-n-not-h-in-g. I'm f-f-ine."

"Pussy."

"Ah...."

"Knock it off, Kiera. Can't you see she's nervous?"

Unable to take it anymore, Luxon interfered. Instantly, Kiera's face scrunched up as she looked up at him.

".....Then get her to calm down. In her current state, she'll probably get knocked out by the wind."

"That's..."

Luxon's lips twitched.

He couldn't argue with that...

"But still. You're making the situation worse."

"Ah, please."

Kiera waved her hand dismissively before looking towards the end where a figure appeared. Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, he appeared to be deep into his own thoughts.

Kiera called out for him.

"Oy."

And he opened his eyes.

"....."

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

She pointed towards Josephine who was now on her knees, blankly staring towards the ceiling while silently mumbling, 'I'm not nervous. You're nervous. No, you.'

Kiera's eyes widened.

"Crap, she's fucking lost it."

"...."

Seeing that Julien was still silent, she frowned.

"What? Say something."

"Something."

"Uh?"

"I said something."

"The f-Haa, shit."

Covering her forehead, Kiera clicked her tongue. How useless could one get? She was just about to take matters into her own hands when she recalled something.

"Oh, right. What's our group name?"

At that question, all heads flicked in Julien's direction. Even Josephine's head turned as she finally seemed to have recovered a little bit.

The news about a sudden team name had left everyone stunned. Because that bastard-guy, had forced them to train so hard for over the past week, they hadn't seen the announcement about the need to come up with a team name.

In the end, Julien was the one who had named their team. Three days had passed since then, and even now they still weren't aware of what their team name was.

"....."

Feeling everyone's gaze, Julien remained silent.

"So...?"

Only when Kiera urged him did he reply.

"I didn't put much thought in the name."

"Okay, and...?"

"That's it."

"Uh?"

Kiera blinked. So did the others. Frowning, Luxon spoke in Kiera's stead.

"We're about to get called up soon. Shouldn't you tell us what the name is so that we won't get confused later?"

"Confused?"

Julien suddenly looked up. All of a sudden, the corner of his lips lifted and everyone's expressions froze.

They felt chills.

"Did he just..."

"Yeah."

"What is...? He can smile?"

"....."

Unbothered by their comments, Julien moved away from the wall and stepped ahead, heading deeper into the tunnel.

Just in time, the light that signaled for them to enter flashed.

As everyone stared at him in confusion, his even voice quietly reached their ears.

"There's no need to worry about getting confused."

"....?"

"What does that even mean?"

"Hold up, wait!"

Following him from behind, the five of them headed out of the tunnel. Along the way, Kiera would pester him for answers, but all she'd receive was the cold shoulder.

From the outside, the cameras picked up their appearance, and the stadium roared with cheers.

"Uwaaaah! Hooooo—! Kiera!!"

"Ahhhh! They're here! Kill them!"

"Boooo!"

It was a mix of cheers and jeers. Nonetheless, their appearance sparked something within the crowd as the entire stadium shook.

"Wow, shit!"

"Ah...! I think I'm going to faint."

Kiera flinched and Josephine almost tripped over her own feet. Thankfully, Anders supported her in the nick of time.

"Woooo—!"

The crowd's reception was drastically different compared to the other teams that had already set foot into the stadium. It was a lot more heated.

If not for the fact that a protective shield separated the crowd from the cadets, things would've been thrown at them.

The recording devices picked all of this up as their faces appeared on the magical screens up above the arena grounds, and finally, the long-awaited announcement came.

[Let's welcome the newest team....]

With a short pause, the recording devices zoomed in to pick up the faces of the team.

Staring up ahead, they seemed to be eager to hear their names. They were indeed eager.

Just what was their team name going to be?

With bated breaths, they waited for the announcement which came shortly after.

[.....Julien and his sidekicks!]

At that moment...

Besides Julien, all the other members' expressions twisted as their heads flicked towards him.

"....."

Staring back for a brief moment, his head turned and he acted as if nothing had happened.

However, if one paid close attention, they'd notice a subtle tremble of his shoulders.

"H-ho..."

Noticing this, Kiera felt her chest tremble. Taking a step forward, she brought her hands forward.

His neck. His thick and sturdy neck... In Kiera's eyes, it looked lonely.

The others quickly widened their eyes.

"Wait! Kiera...!"

"No, stop!"

"Not here!"

"I'll kill you!"

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Chapter 106 Labyrinth [1]

"Uwaaa—!"

The moment Julien and his team entered the stadium, all eyes fell on them as the audience thunderously cheered or booed them. Their reception was vastly different compared to the other teams who had already entered.

"...He's the Black Star?"

"As expected, he's not that strong."

Karl Redhouse, a cadet with short red hair and eyes stood with his arms crossed. Standing on his spot, he casually observed the new entrants.

His innate skill was [Aura Detection]. So long as the gap wasn't that big, it granted him the ability to have a general idea of someone's strength.

Generally, in his field of view, he was able to see hues. The thicker, and larger the hue was, the stronger the individual was.

"He's decent."

Such was his evaluation of Julien after using his skill on him.

A purple hue surrounded his body. It was neither thick nor thin. Just average.

".....That chick with platinum hair is strong though."

In fact, upon closer look, within his group, he had the weakest aura. All his other teammates had thicker aura than him.

'That said, I heard he's an Emotive Mage.'

His Aura Detection wasn't able to assess Emotive Mages. But it wasn't as though he was worried about that.

To him, the one that stood out the most to him was the platinum-haired girl. She was certainly something...

"What are they doing...?"

A cold voice echoed from the side. Turning his head, Karl caught a glimpse of a young woman with short blue hair and subtly smirked.

Amelia Clementine of the Silver Wing Institute. As expected, her aura was just as large as the platinum-haired girl from Haven.

Staring into the distance, her brows knit.

"Are they fighting?"

"They're a bunch of clowns."

Her voice was followed by an indifferent one from the side. Turning his head, Karl's eyes paused on the black-haired youth.

Johnathan Monroe.

"...."

Immediately, Karl's expression turned grim. It wasn't because he had bad blood with him, but his aura... It was shocking.

To the point where even Amelia's seemed to be overwhelmed.

'A monster.'

Such was Karl's evaluation of Johnathan. Still, swallowing his words, he remained calm and turned his attention back towards the group in question.

They were currently...

"Uh?"

Stunned, Karl blinked his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing wrong. Blinking again, and seeing the platinum-haired girl being held back by her other team members as their team leader stood still expressionlessly, Karl didn't know how to react.

"What the hell..."

"I guess they weren't aware that their team was going to be named as such."

Overhearing Amelia's words, realization finally dawned on Karl and he laughed.

"So that's how it is..."

Julien and his sidekicks. Looking at how the team was, he shook his head.

"It doesn't seem like we'll need to worry much about them, then."

Their overall strength was quite good, but compared to their teams, it was lagging by a little. With that being said, the main reason he didn't see them as a threat was that they didn't even seem to be able to work as a team.

"They don't have any chemistry."

It was an observation that everyone agreed to. It was a little disappointing when he thought about it.

After all that talk...

[Next up, let's welcome the next team from Haven.]

Yet again, the announcer's voice echoed throughout the entire arena grounds.

All heads turned towards a certain tunnel.

'The next Haven team.'

To be honest, Karl had some expectations. The team leader for the next Haven team was supposed to be Aoife K. Megrail.

In everyone's eyes, she was the real Black Star. It was still a mystery to them how she had not become one.

'.....I wonder how strong her team is.'

In Karl's opinion, it was going to rival Johnathan's.

And then, their team name was called.

[.....Please welcome, Dream Catcher.]

Booom!

The surroundings shook as the audience roared with excitement.

"Waaah—"

Aoife, as a member of the royal family, was an idol to most citizens. Despite some of the tyrannical rules implemented by the Megrail family, they were still extremely respected.

Therefore, the moment she stepped out of the tunnels, to reveal her long flowing red hair, peerless beauty, and yellow pupils, the entire arena grounds quaked with excitement.

"Aoife!!"

"Wooooo—!"

"Black Star!"

There were even chants about the Black Star mixed within. The sight was one to behold, but...

"W-what is this...? H-how?"

Karl found himself shuddering at the sight before him.

Not one, not two, but three.

Overwhelming their surroundings, Karl stared at the three massive auras off in the distance.

In particular, he stared at the aura that came from a young man with black hair and gray eyes. He was handsome, almost as much as Haven's Black Star, but unlike him, his aura...

"Ah, this..."

It was overwhelming.

Almost to the point where it felt suffocating.

"How is this possible?"

The moment Aoife's team, which included Leon and Evelyn, entered the arena grounds, the entire surroundings shook with fervor. It was to the point where I had to cover my ears given how loud the noise was.

From above, I could see the recording devices centered towards them.

"Ah, shit—!"

With how loud it was, I could barely hear Kiera as she covered her ears with both hands.

Thankfully, this didn't last for very long. Once the cheers ended, the announcer shared the rules of the match. It was something that we as a team had already gone over beforehand so it wasn't anything new.

In the end, after a few minutes of talk, we were all led towards separate tunnels.

[Exams begin]

And with the announcer's words, the test began.

Immediately, all teams entered their respective tunnel. We did so as well. But unlike the other teams, we weren't in a rush.

Tok—

The quiet sound of our footsteps echoed as we found ourselves in a large squared tunnel. Walking at the front, thin threads moved out from my hand.

They snaked forward, moving along the path.

As we moved, a small device hovered around us. It was most likely the monitoring device for the audience and staff.

Just as I took several steps forward, I heard Kiera's voice from behind.

"Oh, shit."

Turning my head, I noticed that she was staring at her bracelet. Curious, I looked at mine too and understood why she was reacting like that.

— [Team Score] —

[Dream Catcher] - 110 Points

[Swords of Fiest] - 85 Points

[Crow's Dance] - 66 Points

.

.

[Julien and his sidekicks] - 0 Points

— [Team Score] —

"Eh? How are they so fast...?"

"I mean, it's them, so..."

Anders was the one who responded to Josephine's question.

"Uh, yeah but still... This is crazy..."

The monsters within the Labyrinth were the same as the ones from the Mirror Dimension. Because of the general strength of the cadets, the monsters included in the dungeon ranked from Infant to Junior rank.

An infant-ranked beast was equivalent to 5 points, while a Junior ranked was 100 points.

"...Not even two minutes passed, and they've killed a Junior and two infants?"

Josephine muttered with a baffled look.

Staring at her watch, her face paled.

"At this rate, we might not even rank within the top."

"Fuck!"

Cursing, Kiera looked at me.

"Oy, you. Let's pick up the pace."

"No."

"Uh?"

"We go at the same pace."

"But—"

"No."

Kiera raised her hands again. It looked like she was eyeing my neck again. Without sparing her another glance, I elaborated.

"We've already discussed this beforehand. There will be a boss at the center of the maze. It will count for 5000 points. I'd rather conserve my energy and face the boss monster than waste time fighting a bunch of weak monsters."

This was something that we had already decided beforehand.

They were probably taken aback by the strong start from the other teams. I couldn't blame them, but if we wanted to win, this was the best method.

Furthermore...

I glanced at my bracelet.

'I'm sure things will become annoying further down the line.'

It was for that reason that we couldn't afford to waste any energy.

At least, not yet.

In another part of the maze.

Swoosh—

Several figures flashed quickly. Their speed was extremely fast, and wherever they passed, corpses would appear.

Hieeek—!

A screech resounded upfront.

"I've got it."

Aoife pushed her hand forward, and a large snake floated in the air. Waving her hand, the snake splattered against the wall of the maze.

A chime rang from the bracelet shortly after.

[+10 Points]

Swoosh—

The group didn't stop.

Kracka! Kracka!

From lightning to sword flashes. Wherever they went, all that would be left was devastation.

[+10 Points] [+10 Points] [+10 Points]

Chimes continued to ring constantly.

They were simply unstoppable. Such seamless teamwork and coordination, left the spectators watching outside in a stupor.

The team carried on like this for the next few hours.

They didn't have a direction. However, they didn't need a direction.

"Over here."

Leon had his instincts. Whenever they encountered a fork road, he'd follow his instincts. It was thanks to this that the team didn't encounter a single dead end.

"...Let's stop here for now."

But even so, at some point, they did stop.

"Hooo."

Aoife took a deep breath and wiped some of the sweat on her forehead. While she wasn't exactly tired, she was also not exactly energized.

Looking around, she leaned against one of the walls.

"Are you guys good?"

"Haa... A little. Could be better."

As a mage, Evelyn's stamina was amongst the lowest within the group. For that reason, she had a harder time conserving her stamina.

The two other members, Ronald, and Ainsla were also somewhat tired.

"Haa... Haa..."

Catching up her breath, Evelyn turned her attention towards Leon who was staring at his bracelet with a frown.

"What's wrong...?"

Staring at her watch, and seeing that they were first at 751 points, with over 90 points ahead of the second team, she was confused by Leon's reaction.

"What are you worried about?"

".....It's nothing big."

Though he said that, Evelyn could tell something was taking over his mind.

When she turned her head, she also noticed Aoife staring at the watch with a frown. What's up with these two?

"Are you guys worried that Sword of Fiest will catch up with us?"

"No."

"No."

The two replied almost at the same time.

Stunned, Evelyn looked between the two of them. Leon looked away from his bracelet and replied.

"I'm not worried about them."

"Then...? Crow's dance?"

They were the team headed by Karl Redhouse. He was a strong competitor, but Evelyn didn't think he was as strong as Johnathan from Swords of Fiest.

"Not that too."

"Not them too...? Ice twist?"

"No."

"No?"

Evelyn blinked and scrolled through the list. They were the top three teams and the ones closest to them. If it wasn't them, then...

"Ah."

Evelyn finally realized and her eyes widened.

"Them?"

What sort of...? While she had to agree that Kiera and Luxon were strong, the others were not as strong. Julien was also somewhat strong, but not to the point where he'd worry someone like Leon and Aoife.

"Julien and his sideki-"

"Kh."

A strange noise interrupted Evelyn.

Pausing, she looked up. Aoife and Leon were staring at her expressionlessly. They were looking at her with the same stoic look they usually wore. Hmm. Could she have heard wrong?

"Julien and h-"

"Pft."

Evelyn blinked.

Staring at the two of them, her lips twitched. Especially when she noticed that their eyes were both bloodshot.

What in the world...

".....Are you guys okay?"

In response to her question, Leon took a deep breath and nodded.

"Yes."

Aoife did the same.

"Oh."

Evelyn casually nodded. Then, just as the two seemed to have gathered their bearings, she quickly spat.

"Julien and his sidekicks."

"Pfttt—"

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Chapter 107 Labyrinth [2]

The raid was set to last for approximately ten hours. It wasn't a long time, but it also wasn't a short time for these types of events. There were some events that would even run for more than a few weeks.

This was a moderately small event.

Even so, it was one that was packed with non-stop action.

"Whaaa--!"

"Go! Kill them!"

"Ahhh!!"

The crowd maintained the same energy as at the start. In fact, the fervor only seemed to have increased as the rankings were displayed for all to see.

-- [Team Score] --

[Dream Catcher] - 915 Points

[Swords of Fiest] - 885 Points

[Crow's Dance] - 876 Points

.

.

.
-- [Team Score] --

Since the start, the rankings remained the same. However, slowly but surely, the other teams were slowly starting to catch up with [Dream Catcher] who took a brief pose to rest.

"Go!!"

"Johnathan--! You're only a few points away! You can do it!"

Needless to say, the atmosphere was heated.

Especially when they could see all the highlights displayed on the large projections up above. Because the broadcast wasn't solely focused on one team, the attention would shift from team to team on multiple occasions.

Thanks to this, all that the spectators saw was endless action.

"Uwaaa!"

In one of the VIP boxes, several important figures sat, staring at individual projections. Unlike the crowd, they could glance at the individual performances of the teams.

"It seems like this is going to be a close race."

Chancellor Joffrey Stein said while massaging his thick beard. In front of him, the team [Sword of Fiest] was displayed.

In particular, a figure stood out as he cleared most of the monsters by himself. It was none other than Johnathan, the pride of the Montel Institute.

With a talent that Chancellor Joffrey Stein believed to surpass Aoife of Haven, he was confident in the chance of his Institute team reaching the first rank.

Especially since they followed a heliocentric system, a system solely centered towards one outstanding figure, which was devised to perfectly maximize Johnathan's qualities while covering for his inadequacies.

'...And people said Helio doesn't work.'

The Chancellor chuckled slightly.

The scene before him was the perfect proof that it worked.

"Well, the race is indeed close, but at the end of the day, it'll all boil down to which team gets to the boss monster first and kills it."

Interrupting his thoughts was Chancellor Merylin Parlias of Rodnea Academy. Leaning back on his chair, and observing her own projection, she brushed one of her golden locks behind her ear.

"Right now it's just a warm-up. What really matters at the end of the day is the boss monster. Whoever gets to it first will most likely win the competition."

".....I'm not so sure about that."

Chancellor Joffrey shook his head in disagreement.

"While it is true that the boss monster will provide the most points, you forgot something."

A smile spread across his lips.

It was a disgusting smile that made Merylin frown.

".....Monsters aren't the only way one can get points."

"Ah..."

Realization dawned on the Rodena Chancellor as her expression scrunched up.

Indeed, monsters weren't the only way to collect points. So long as a team defeated another, they'd be able to collect the other team's overall points. The final boss was indeed not the last hurdle.

Right after defeating the boss, the teams had to find an exit and escape the labyrinth before passing.

Before that, it was all fair and game.

"The boss is nice, but just because you can defeat doesn't mean you'll end up becoming the victor."

"....."

At that, Merylin leaned back without saying a single word. The same was true for the other Chancellors as they stared at the screens with somber expressions.

While everyone already knew this, to say it publically like this left a distaste in the mouths of many.

"...."

The only one who appeared unaffected by the entire conversation was Delilah who stared at her projection. In fact, she hadn't been listening at all.

Her current focus was on the groups displayed before her.

All of whom belonged to Haven.

So far, they were all performing excellently. However, if Delilah had to be honest, her attention was currently focused on two groups.

[Dream Catcher] and [Julien and his sidekicks]. For some reason, staring at the second group name, Delilah found herself raising her brow.

'....It rolls well on the tongue.'

Still, that wasn't the problem.

Staring at the ranking board, Delilah was unsure of what to make of things.

[Julien and his sidekicks] - 105 Points.

Lagging far behind the other Academies, they appeared to be on a leisurely stroll. At the corner of the projection, Delilah could see the viewer count.

At first, it had been at over 7 million viewers.

It was now at 800 thousand.

She could also see that the public sentiment was getting worse and worse as time went by. Not only the public but subtly glancing towards the other Chancellors, she could feel from their expressions that they also felt the same way as the public.

It was embarrassing.

However, Delilah didn't think the same. Staring at Julien from the screen, her gaze turned somewhat hazy.

'....Are they finally going to make a move?'

"A monster ahea--"

"Ahhh!"

Booom--!

A fire bloomed in the distance as a powerful shockwave swept the surroundings. My clothes and hair fluttered as a result of the aftershock of the explosion.

"Th--"

Booom--!?Booom--!

Before I could say anything else, I was interrupted by more explosions as Kiera threw one spell after another.

"Fucking die! Die!"

Pursing my lips, I looked to the side and saw Josephine standing still with her mouth agape.

"Wow, she's totally lost it. Like, totally lost it."

"...."

"...."

Quietly, the others nodded alongside her comment.

Indeed, staring at Kiera, I could see that she had totally lost it. I couldn't blame her. While we weren't dead last, we weren't anywhere near the top.

For someone as competitive as her, this was torture.

"....Calm down."

Moving next to her, I pressed my hand against her shoulder.

"Wh-....!"

Her expression immediately changed. Her face morphed from angry to sad to then angry again to then happy.

"Fuck, shit!"

A curse inevitably slipped out of her mouth as her face twisted to show all sorts of emotions.

There were perks to being an Emotive Mage. One such perk was that I could manipulate Kiera's emotions to the point where she became confused about what she was feeling.

At the same time, it raised a thought in my mind.

'I wonder... if I develop my ability more, will I be able to stop them from experiencing a certain emotion?'

It was an interesting thought.

Currently, the best that I could do was insert a new emotion into the one that they were already experiencing. In doing so, I put them in a state of confusion which in turn, makes them forget about whatever emotion they were experiencing.

In this case, I mixed sadness and joy within Kiera's emotions, eventually toning down whatever anger she had.

While useful, it did take a bit of mana, and it didn't completely clear away her anger.

What I wanted to know was whether I could directly remove an emotion from their mind for a brief moment of time.

Fear, anger, sadness... If I could stop someone from experiencing such emotion for a brief moment, during critical moments, then it would prove to be an extremely useful skill.

Even better, seal all my emotions for a brief moment of time.

"Alright, stop. You can take your hand off of me."

Looking at Kiera, and seeing that she had calmed down, I removed my hand from her shoulder.

As I did, I noticed the others look at me with impressed looks.

Especially Josephine who raised her thumbs up.

"As expected of our team leader. You are useful after all."

"....."

Pretending to not have heard her words, I shifted my attention back toward the tunnels.

Closing my eyes, I extended the threads forward. The mana inside of my body started to drain at a faster speed as they extended. However, I continued to do so.

I wasn't doing this without reason.

Along the way, I'd be able to sense the monsters that were ahead. With that, we could prepare for the incoming monsters which would put us at an advantage.

'There's a total of ten...'

"Hm?"

I suddenly paused.

I sensed something else.

"Cadets?"

I blinked my eyes and turned my head. All of a sudden, everyone's eyes were fixed on me. Especially Kiera's. They seemed to be salivating.

.....If that was even possible.

"A group?"

"Yes."

"....Then?"

"They seem to be fighting monsters ahead. I'm not sure how many."

"Ho."

Kiera's fingers twitched. Raising her head, she looked at me with an expression that seemed to say, 'We're killing them, right?'

Well, killing is a bit...

"Are we?"

".....I guess so."

While we were indeed going at our own pace, we did need points.

I didn't see why not.

Thus.

"They're up ahead."

"Good, let's go."

Thankfully, Kiera didn't rush by herself and waited for us to come. Retrieving the thread, I led them toward where I had last sensed the group.

Tracing my memories, I hurried my footsteps while the others followed behind me. I wasn't worried about any of us losing sight of each other as I had one of my threads circle everyone's ankles.

Of course, it was with their permission.

As tiny as the threads were, they weren't hard to detect if they were near.

I hadn't yet reached a level where I could do that.

"...It's near here."

Coming to a stop, I brought my finger over my mouth. We were just by the corner, and with a turn, we'd be able to see the other cadets.

'If my estimates are correct, they should be fighting monsters.'

And as expected...

Clank—!

In the distance, we could hear the loud sound of metal clashing. Kiera's expression lit up at the sound.

Turning to look at me, I nodded my head and she immediately rushed forward.

A magic circle had already formed in her hand as her feet slid across the ground and she brought her hand forward.

"Die you fu-uh?"

The moment she turned the corner, her expression faltered and her circle shattered.

Noticing her expression, I instantly had a bad feeling and rushed to turn the tunnel.

"Oh, god."

"What...?"

"Ah!"

The expression of everyone present changed drastically. Perhaps because I somewhat expected for this to happen, my expression didn't change.

"...."

Standing over the corpses of several cadets was a single hooded figure. In his grasp was a cadet who flung his arms widely.

In his last moments, our gazes met.

His expression seemed to say, 'Help', but...

Crack—

His neck snapped before we could do anything.

Tik.

At the same time, the small recording device floating next to us fell on the floor, and the figure turned its head, its hollow gaze focusing on us.

My body tensed under its gaze.

The same was true for the others as they got into combat positions.

"...."

In the tense silence that suddenly overtook our surroundings, his gaze remained firmly locked on me.

I didn't flinch and stared back.

At that moment, I realized something.

'He knows me.'

No, Julien.

Chapter 108 Labyrinth [3]

"...."

A strange silence suddenly took over the surroundings. Standing face to face with the hooded figure, neither side moved.

....Or more like, the hooded figure was too concentrated on me to make any moves.

'He knows me.'

The more time passed, the more I was sure about it.

Whoever was beneath the hood, knew the previous Julien. My fingers twitched at the thought.

For some reason, I felt a different emotion rather than being scared. I wasn't sure what that emotion was, but if there was something that I was clear of, it was the fact that I...

I wanted to see his memories.

Thud.

The silence was shattered by the low 'thud' of the now-deceased cadet's body hitting the ground. From the side, Josephine flinched involuntarily at the sound.

On the other hand, Kiera frowned.

I couldn't tell what she was thinking. With her gaze fixed on him, it seemed like she realized something.

".....Oy."

And with such thought, she was the first one to speak.

Her voice attracted the hooded figure's attention as their head turned to face her. Lowering her head slightly, Kiera looked up.

"Who are you?"

It was an unexpected question. No, rather, it was a logical question, but from what her expression previously read, she seemed to be aware of something else.

"....."

Her question was met with silence.

A magic circle flickered in her hand. It was directed towards the hooded figure.

However, before she could even fully form her magic circle, he disappeared. Time seemed to slow down at that moment.

Before the others could react, the figure reappeared before me.

I didn't react at all.

But even so, as their hand grasped my shoulder, I felt my body lift up slightly. In the last few seconds, I watched as the others looked at me with widened eyes.

'Ah.'

Then...

The surroundings changed.

It all happened so fast that Kiera hardly had any time to react.

Her mind had been so preoccupied with thoughts of the hooded figure being connected with her aunt that she couldn't react at all when the hooded figure disappeared before her very eyes.

Shortly after, he reappeared right before Julien.

"Wa-"

In those last moments, her eyes met with Julien's.

They...

Felt oddly calm. Almost as if he had been expecting such a situation. However, Kiera wasn't sure if what she had seen was true or not as he disappeared alongside the hooded figure shortly after.

By the time she had moved, they were already gone.

"....."

In the silence that suddenly gripped the surroundings, Kiera's mouth opened and closed repeatedly.

She was unsure of what to say at the moment.

"Ha, this..."

Breaking her out of her thoughts was Josephine who was looking at her bracelet with a pale face.

"What?"

"T-that..."

Frowning, Kiera was about to smack her in the head when Anders spoke for her.

"The bracelet. It doesn't work."

"Mine too."

Upon hearing Luxon's confirmation, Kiera looked down at her bracelet and tried to activate it. However, besides the ranking, the emergency function wasn't working.

"Fuck."

A curse slipped out of her mouth then.

"W-what do we do?"

Hearing Josephine's panicked voice, Kiera didn't answer immediately. For some reason, she recalled a conversation they had a few days ago.

'If anything happens to me, you take the lead.'

Kiera didn't think much of it back then. She thought that in the case he got injured, or the other teams got him, she'd be the next one to take the lead.

It made sense since she was the strongest in the team.

However, thinking back to the calm expression on his face during those last moments, Kiera had another thought.

'What if... What if he expected something like this to happen?'

It was a ridiculous thought. One that made absolutely no sense.

So... why?

Why did such thoughts keep flashing in her mind?

"Ugh."

Groaning, Kiera ruffled her hair. Fuck, now's not the time to think about such things...! Looking around, Kiera's eyes suddenly paused.

"....."

They were fixed on her ankle. There, she could still feel Julien's thread. Her eyes widened all of a sudden, and she turned in the direction of where the thread was.

Gritting her teeth, she shouted.

"Fuck! Follow me...!"

This guy...

There was no way he didn't know about this!

—A few moments before the attack.

"....."

Delilah was quietly staring at all the projections of the cadets before her. There were plenty of projections, but with her mind, she could focus on all of them at the same time.

It was of no burden to her.

For now, everything was proceeding smoothly.

All the cadets were advancing at their own pace. Some faster than others.

Even so, Delilah didn't particularly care about the speed. At the end of the day, what mattered was the final score, not the speed.

The leading cadets were running through the maze fast because they wanted to get to the boss monster faster, but even that wasn't a viable solution since it expanded a lot of energy. Only the elites of elites could follow such a reckless strategy.

It was for that reason that Julien's team took her interest the most.

For them to go at such a pace... Surely, they had a plan.

"What the hell?!"

"....."

It was at that moment that Delilah noticed the first irregularity.

Lifting her head, she noticed one of the Chancellor's frowning. Setting her sights on him, Delilah recognized him immediately. He was the Chancellor of a medium-sized Academy.

The Astell Institute.

It was a respectable Academy.

However, for some reason, he was currently making a small fuss.

"What's going on here? Why is this not working?"

When she took a better look, Delilah did indeed notice a peculiarity with his projection. It was all black.

Immediately, her brows trembled slightly.

'...It can't be.'

Closing her eyes, she spread her mana outwardly. Within a few short moments, they covered the entire stadium and seeped into the tunnels.

However, she felt something block her attempt just as she did so.

Immediately, her eyes opened up.

"....."

There was no trace of panic in her expression. Looking around, she slowly stood up from her seat and excused herself. Her actions attracted the attention of a few Chancellors, but that was about it.

They were all too focused on their own cadets.

"..."

Moments after coming out of the room, her figure blurred and she arrived at the emergency entrance of the Labyrinth.

Located outside of the arena, and in a more secluded area of the Academy, where only a couple of small storage buildings stood, it was established so that the participants could be evacuated in case of emergencies.

The reason why she came here by herself was because she didn't want to let the news out that something had happened.

If the news were to spread, the audience would without a doubt start to panic which would cause quite a little bit of trouble. Concerning the other Chancellors, she couldn't trust any of them.

Delilah preferred to act before anybody noticed anything.

It was for that reason that she decided to operate by herself. Especially since she also had an idea as to who the ones involved were.

'It should be this one.'

Stepping over a certain area, Delilah waved her hand.

Immediately, the ground fluctuated, revealing what appeared to be a large metallic trap door. Glowing in a multitude of colors were a set of runes.

Delilah was just about to enter when she heard a voice coming from behind.

".....I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Without saying a word, Delilah turned her head.

An unexpected figure appeared.

"Aziel Kleber."

One that Delilah was somewhat familiar with. He was a known criminal within the Empire. Someone whom the royal family put a heavy bounty on.

'So he's also a part of them...'

It wasn't as though she didn't expect it.

With a wave of her hand, the space around them fluctuated, and a dome covered their surroundings.

'Space separation'

It was one of her spells—a creation that enabled her to fashion a separate dimension, isolating individuals within it.

With this technique, she didn't need to worry about anything getting destroyed or anyone finding out about their current exchange. To the outside world, it looked like nothing was happening.

"Wow, you're taking things rather seriously."

Standing taller than her, and leaning against one of the walls, Aziel's hazel eyes glowed mysteriously as he looked around.

A thin smile spread across his lips.

"Even so, I'm happy that the one closest to the Zenith recognizes me."

"....How did you get here?"

Delilah wasn't one to brag, but she was powerful. Her perception covered the entire Academy 24/7. Not only that, but the Academy also had several other powerful individuals whose perception was just as great as hers.

Added to the many devices installed around the Academy, Delilah found herself frowning.

'Something is not adding up.'

There had been too many problems as of late.

Clearly, something wasn't working within the Academy. A traitor, perhaps? ...And for them to be able to do something like this, they were without a doubt high up within the Academy.

The thought made Delilah's frown deepen.

'Who?'

In any case, Delilah couldn't dwell too deeply on the matter. She had a job to do at the moment, and sparing Aziel a single glance, she raised her hand.

Kraka—!

The space around him folded, then compressed, squeezing him into a pulp.

It had all happened so fast that he hadn't had any time to react.

"....."

Silence once again returned to the surroundings.

Just as Delilah was about to turn her attention back towards the entrance, a figure hovered in the air above her.

Wearing a smile, he looked at her.

"....You don't seriously think I'd let myself be that close to you, do you? I'm not suicidal."

Rubbing his neck, he chuckled before reappearing a few meters away from her.

He looked to be in a good mood, nonchalantly walking around as if he was enjoying the moment.

"Besides a few, I don't think there's anyone in this world that can truly fight on equal terms with you. Sadly, I'm not one such individual either. However, my job is to stall for time, so-Uh?"

His words stopped mid-way. All of a sudden, Delilah's eyes changed.

As if ink had been injected into her eyes, they turned inky black as the darkness spread to envelop the entire eye.

A change began to sweep through the surroundings.

Suddenly, the background began to fade away.

The sun transformed into a stark white orb, casting a hollow light over the landscape. The surroundings shifted to shades of gray, and the ground began to sink beneath Aziel's feet.

From the depths, black hands emerged, reaching out for him as he surveyed the grim scene with a solemn expression.

No longer did he appear as nonchalant and happy as he did before.

In fact, that expression was long gone. What replaced it was one of fear and apprehension as he went on to hoarsely say,

"Domain..."

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Chapter 109 Labyrinth [4]

Before I knew it, my body was lifted and my scenery changed. This went on for several minutes until we eventually came to a stop.

"Huff."

I stumbled forward slightly.

When all was said and done and I managed to recover my bearings, I looked up to see the hooded figure staring at me without saying a single word.

"....."

However, there was something about that gaze that felt familiar.

'...What do I do now?'

I was in a bit of a slump at the moment. From the way he was looking at me, it seemed as though he knew me.

Or more specifically, the previous Julien.

The problem was...

'I have no idea what his relationship with the previous Julien is.'

Were they friends? Colleagues? Enemies...?

Furthermore, if they knew each other, wouldn't it be easy for him to tell that I wasn't the real Julien? The more I thought about the situation, the tenser my body became.

"....."

In the silence that gripped the surroundings, I stood still while meeting the hooded figure's gaze.

That was until the figure brought its hands toward its hood and pulled it down.

"Ah..."

Immediately, my expression changed.

"Professor."

The one standing before me was none other than Professor Bucklam. Wearing his trademark warm smile, he greeted me.

"Phecda. It's been a while."

I blinked.

Ah, right. That was indeed my name.

Staring at his complexion and seeing that he was doing well, I nodded slightly.

"You're looking a lot better since the prison. I take it you've been doing well since I last saw you."

"Haha, well. It's a nice place."

"It is."

I looked around and leaned my back against one of the walls.

'....So the one who he was familiar with was me, but not the previous Julien?'

How odd. For a moment, I was convinced that the reason he looked at me like that was because he knew the previous Julien. Instead, it was me.

It took me aback.

Amid my thoughts, the Professor looked down at my ankles.

"That?"

"It's nothing."

I raised my arm to display the threads.

"....My teammates will come here soon. I did it so that I don't lose sight of them."

"Ah."

The professor nodded his head.

Then, as if recalling something, he handed me a small map alongside a device.

"This is?"

"It's a map of the dungeon. This device over here will tell you the general location of the other members within the Labyrinth. They will be represented in a red dot. On the other hand, the blue dots represent the cadets."

Other members...?

Although I somewhat expected the situation, it still left me slightly shaken. For them to have such a detailed map of the entire Labyrinth... Just how did they do it?

The thought lasted a few seconds before I was suddenly reminded of a certain figure.

'....No, rather, this makes sense.'

Atlas Megrail.

I had done a little digging up after our last meeting. It was there that I came to know of his identity.

It was also that understanding that truly made me aware of how powerful the organization was.

For them to have a potential contender for the crown and a high-ranking member of the Academy...

'It's no wonder shit keeps happening.'

To make matters worse, they not only operated within one empire but all four major ones. Their strength wasn't something a simple Academy could contend with.

The thought made me shudder.

"...."

Still, I took the map and device without hesitation.

The device was rather small. It was about the size of a stopwatch, and in it, I could see red dots.

'It's like a radar...'

No, it was practically a radar.

On the display, there were two red dots. It was probably us.

'This will be useful.'

Then, I turned my attention towards the map. Staring at it for a good moment, I found myself frowning after a bit.

'This is more complicated than I expected.'

While I had indeed thought that the Labyrinth was big, the map gave me a true view of just how big the Labyrinth was. It was massive.

In fact, judging from where we were, I felt my lips twitch.

'We're barely still at the entrance.'

We were nowhere near close to the center of the Labyrinth.

"Huu."

Taking another quick skim of the map, I folded it and placed it in my pocket. I then turned to look at the Professor.

"I've been wondering for a bit now. But how did you manage to get yourself involved in this mission?"

Professor Bucklam was a rather controversial figure within Haven. His appearance here wasn't something I expected from him.

Then again, if it was because he wanted to meet me again, it made sense.

"...It wasn't exactly hard. The mission was posted on the 'Mission Board' and I just took it. Since I met the criteria, it all went smoothly from there."

"I see."

I nodded, pretending to have understood what his words meant. For now, I kept the words 'Mission Board' in mind. It was a new piece of information.

In any case, there was something that I was curious about.

"If you don't mind me asking, what's the mission about?"

"Oh, that."

Pondering, the Professor began to explain.

"We have several units moving around taking care of the lower-rank cadets. The boss monster is also affected. We've drugged it with some Orphion. It was originally, a medium-ranking Junior rank monster. With the drug, it should be just beneath the threshold of Terror rank. Not quite there yet."

".....Oh."

I was only able to understand a small part of his comment.

However, I could more or less understand what he was trying to imply.

'The lower-ranked cadets don't gather much interest from the crowd. My best guess is that they want the higher-rank cadets to move toward the boss where they will all suffer critical injuries due to how powerful it is. At the same time, since most of the attention is on the higher-rank cadets, their suffering will be witnessed by the entire Empire which in turn can be used as a weapon to push Delilah out.'

It was a somewhat simple plan. One that I could follow.

But there were a few things that weren't clear to me.

"What about the Chancellors? How are you planning on dealing with them?"

Last I recall, they were all incredibly powerful people. There was no way they'd notice that something was amiss.

Especially Delilah.

Who could even stop her...?

"I'm not entirely sure."

The Professor replied with a helpless smile.

"It's information that's beyond someone of my rank. Most likely, a few big shots have been sent to take care of them."

"....I see."

That made sense.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

The Professor nodded.

"I just came here to give you the files. Since we're working together and all."

"Ah, I see. Thank you very much."

What a sweet guy. It was a good idea to work with him.

"For now, I'll complete the mission. What will you do Phecda?"

I thought for a moment before answering.

"...I'll probably interfere."

"You will?"

"Yes."

I could just ignore the entire situation, but I didn't want to fail the quest. I was still unsure of what the failure would bring, but the boost in stats was quite appealing to me.

....If I could do it, then why not?

"Do you need me to do anything?"

"No, that's fine. It's not ideal for you to move. We proceed as you planned in the prison."

"Understood."

With a nod, the Professor was just about to put his hood back on when I stopped him.

I held up the thread and showed it to him.

"If you don't mind, is it okay if I attach this to your ankle?"

Before he could ask why, I explained.

"The radar doesn't exactly tell me where you are. It only tells me the general location of every one. It would be better if I attach this to you."

".....I see."

The Professor didn't seem to be quite on board with the idea, but eventually, he sighed and agreed.

"Sure. I'll do it."

"Thank you."

With a flick of my hand, the thread moved down and attached to his ankle.

Perhaps surprised by how quick the process was, he looked up.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

What else was I supposed to do?

"Alright, I'll be leaving now."

"....Yes."

With a nod, Professor Bucklam donned his hood back on and turned to head in the opposite direction.

I stared at his back until it eventually disappeared from my sight.

It was nice to see his face again.

Within the quiet corridors of the Labyrinth, a hooded figure moved. It had been a few minutes since he had separated from Phecda, and after walking a few more steps, Giel stopped.

".....It's sad I wasn't able to get more information."

Contrary to his previous voice, his voice changed, becoming more hoarse.

"At least, he seems to be committed to his role."

Beneath the hood, the face wiggled, morphing from what had previously been the Professor's face to a new one.

With two glowing red eyes and a youthful face, the figure massaged its mouth.

"Umm, haa... Huu... Hee..."

Gradually, he started to get accustomed to his normal voice as he went on to mutter.

"....It's always a pain to change my voice."

Indeed, [Mimic] was a unique innate skill of his. It enabled him to change his voice and face as he wished. So long as he had a sample of them, it was no problem for him.

In any case...

"It was nice to see him again."

Phecda.

It was a familiar face.

They weren't close, but they knew each other.

"He's different from the past."

He was a lot calmer than compared to his past self. In fact, it was odd to see him like that.

"I better report this. It seems like Phecda is committed to following his role."

It was no coincidence that he had appeared before Phecda and his team. In fact, he had been waiting for them from the very start.

He had been assigned a goal beforehand.

One, to give Phecda the necessary tools to carry on the mission. Secondly, to gauge his intentions and gain some information from him.

Phecda's change in behavior was rather noticeable.

There were a few similarities to how he acted in the past, but he was also very different.

Giel was able to confirm this upon meeting him.

"I might need to observe more, but he is certainly different."

The reason Giel had disguised himself as Professor Bucklam was because he had been helped by Phecda to escape the prison.

It was also to check if there was anything between the two.

There were a few things that didn't make sense in the prison escape. For one, Phecda shouldn't have been aware of what was going on.

Secondly, there were a few things that didn't match up between the Professor's statement, and the other escapee's statements.

There were a few discrepancies that he needed to check out.

That being said, there was something peculiar that caught his attention during the conversation.

"Proceed as planned in the prison?"

It was an interesting piece of information. So was there really something between the two?

"I wonder, could it be that the t—Uh?"

Halfway through his sentence, Giel suddenly felt a discomfort.

The world suddenly looked unbalanced. Almost as if it was tilting. What came after that was a sudden wave of weakness.

Thud!

One that suddenly turned extremely painful as he fell to his knees.

"W-what...?"

Stunned, he looked towards the ground.

There, his eyes widened as he noticed a large pool of blood coming from his ankles. No, rather...

"M-my foot...!"

It was gone.

Tok—

Just then, the faint sound of a footstep echoed in the distance.

"It's..."

Giel's eyes widened as a dark figure approached from the distance.

Tok—

With another step, his figure became clear.

"...You."

Giel's expression changed at the sight of the person ahead. Before he could say anything else, a hand reached out for his face.

A cold voice followed after as Giel's world turned dark.

"...Like I said, it was nice seeing his face."

Chapter 110 Labyrinth [5]

"Huuu."

I took a deep breath and stared at the figure beneath me. He was dead. I made sure he was.

Killing... It was starting to become easier for me. It was still hard on the mind, but the more I did it, the more I was getting accustomed to it.

I wasn't sure whether this was a good thing or not.

'I'm slowly starting to lose sight of my old self...'

Perhaps, I was. But it didn't matter. People evolved based on circumstances, and this was how the circumstances had made me.

....I didn't regret it.

At the end of the day, people always change.

There was nothing wrong with changing.

"But who would've thought...?"

I looked at the corpse beneath me. My chest itched a little and I ruffled my hair into a mess. The raw emotions that I felt were still lingering in my mind. It was hard to swallow, but I had already seen plenty before.

It took me a couple of seconds to fully recover.

Part of the speedy recovery was because another more important thought was plaguing my mind.

"It seems like they're taking notice of my strange actions."

I thought that I had been able to clear most of the suspicion based on my talk with Atlas, but it didn't seem to be the case.

There were still lingering doubts...

'Good thing that I was paying attention.'

The real giveaway was the way that he called me.

Phecda.

It made no sense for the Professor to call me like that. But of course, it could also be because he came to learn of my identity. But even so... for him to call me such a name more than once?

Something didn't quite make sense.

Even so, I pushed my doubts down and carried on with the conversation.

My attention had been fixed on the map and the 'radar'. They were useful tools. Still, what was the most impressive about the entire situation was that he acted and sounded the same as the Professor Bucklam that I knew.

There was only one problem.

'We proceed as you planned in the prison'

He had never planned anything. The fact that he acknowledged such a 'plan' was the greatest giveaway to me.

With that, I was certain and proposed to attach the thread to his ankle.

"....."

I wasn't sure about his strength.

However, he was most likely stronger than me. In fact, there was also a high chance he was stronger than my entire group combined.

But even someone like him...

Still fell by my hands.

"....."

Silently clenching my hands, I took out the 'radar' and map.

"So the red dots represent group members..."

Just as I said those words, a red dot popped up on the radar. I stared at it for a good minute before setting it aside taking the cloak from Giel's body and donning it on.

Raising the hood, I took one last glance at the body before leaving.

".....It's not your fault."

Such were the words I said before I took a step forward.

However, just as I did, I lowered my head to stare at the radar on me. More specifically, the red dot.

"....."

A thought suddenly entered my mind and I turned back to look at the corpse behind me.

"That might work."

*

The Labyrinth was large. A lot larger than I previously thought. However, with the map, I was able to navigate it smoothly.

As I moved, I stared at the thread behind me.

'....Should I detach it?'

The thread's range wasn't infinite. Its length was equivalent to how much mana I had. Therefore, the greater the distance between me and the others, the more mana I expanded.

It was a bit of a problem considering that there were things that I needed to do.

"Whatever."

In the end, I chose to keep it.

I was bound to reunite with them one way or another.

"Huff."

My steps felt a little heavy, but I kept at it and took a deep breath.

"Let's see."

Glancing at the 'radar' I came to a stop.

Thump.

Just ahead there was another red dot. Fiddling with it, I also saw that there was a small button at the side. While Giel hadn't fully explained to me how the 'radar' worked, I could tell this was some sort of signal that I could use to alert the nearby members.

Looking around, I took a deep breath and evened out my breath.

In the far distance, I was able to hear the loud 'clanking' sound of metal clashing.

'As expected, it's like he said. They're targeting all the low-ranking cadets.'

It was as Giel said to me.

"Huuu."

Taking another deep breath to calm my nerves, I lowered my head to stare at my forearm.

Two leaves were glowing.

Unlike the first clover leaf, the cooldown for the second was much lower.

About one hour.

That was enough.

Clenching my hand, I pressed the button.

"H-help...!"

The piercing scream of a cadet reverberated through the narrow corridor of the Labyrinth. Following closely were hurried footsteps as two cadets, under attack, attempted to escape the chaos.

Unfortunately, it was useless.

Spurt—!

"Uaakh!"

Blood gushed from the cadet's body as she collapsed limply to the floor, her eyes wide open in shock. Standing behind her, a hooded figure loomed ominously.

The figure stared at her with utter disregard as its heads turned to look behind where one last cadet remained.

"A-ha... Pl-ease...!"

As the cadet pleaded, he continued to press onto his bracelet. He was most likely trying to activate the emergency button.

But that was a futile effort.

The bracelet... It wasn't working.

As the hooded figure drew nearer, the expression of the cadet changed. In his last moments, he tried to launch an attack.

Clank—!

But it was deftly blocked by the hooded figure who merely raised his hand to block it.

"N-no...!"

In the end, all that the cadet could do was scream in despair as a hand reached out for his neck, snapping it in one go.

Cra Crack—

Thump!

"...."

Silence once again returned to the surroundings.

Staring at the corpses around it, the hooded figure lowered down his hood to reveal a youthful figure. With short brown hair and hazel eyes, he looked no older than the cadets around him.

And he was indeed their age. Arian had been a member of the Inverted Sky since he was a child.

Dealing with cadets of this level was of no trouble for him.

....Looking around, his expression was wholly indifferent.

As if what he had done was merely something trivial. Bringing his bracelet next to his mouth, he muttered,

"I'm done here."

After that, he went on to take out the detection relic.

He wanted to see if there were any other cadets around that he could target.

"Hm?"

When he did, he was surprised to see a red dot not far from where he was.

"....Could it be Giel?"

According to what he knew, the closest one to him was Giel. Last he recalled, his mission was to talk with an undercover agent.

"He."

A small laugh escaped his lips.

"....He sure has it easy."

While it wasn't hard to defeat the cadets, it was no easy work. Arian would much rather be the one to meet the undercover agent. But unfortunately, he wasn't quite familiar with him, so Giel was sent.

"I still don't know why they put such importance on hi-"

Beep!

He was just about to finish his sentence when his eyes widened slightly. The signal had been used.

"What's going on...?"

The signal was only used in emergencies.

Giel, of all people, was having trouble?

"Could it be that we have been betrayed?"

Without a second thought, Arian rushed forward. He didn't need to run very far, with his speed, it took no time to reach Giel. When he did, his eyes widened slightly and his steps paused.

"What's..."

Laying down on the side of the wall was what appeared to be Giel's body. Staring at the detection device, Arian saw that it was coming from the body a few feet away from him.

"It can't be...?"

Looking shocked, he neared the body.

Amongst the members that had joined, Giel was one of the strongest. It didn't make sense for him to put on an emergency distress signal.

"..."

No, it didn't.

Gradually, Arin's footsteps halted.

Staring at the hooded figure, he raised his hand quickly as a magic circle formed. The process was fast. Within seconds, the circle fully formed, and the temperature around rose.

"...."

Immediately after, a large fire spread as it enveloped Giel's body completely.

Swoosh!

The flames roared within the tunnel as they lit up the surroundings. Arian's robes fluttered in the aftermath of the attack.

"I don't know how you managed to defeat Giel, or if you have at all, but there's no way I'd fall to something like this."

While it wasn't obvious at a glance, Arian noticed a few discrepancies. But the biggest factor was the fact that he could notice curse magic from deep within Giel's body. It was thin, almost imperceptible, but he could feel it.

The flames persisted for several seconds before finally they disappeared.

What remained were the charred remains of a body. A small smile tugged at the corner of Arian's lips as he moved ahead.

But just as he did, he stopped.

".....!"

Looking around, his expression hardened.

"W-what in the...?"

Threads.

The surroundings were covered in thin, threads. Almost every single space was covered with them.

Most shocking was the fact that they had also made their way around his body.

But how...?

How was it possible? Was it because he had been too focused on the corpse that he didn't notice?

....Or was it something else?

"A-"

Before he could do anything, the threads shrunk rapidly.

"Hua!"

With a shout, he tensed his body and the threads broke. His expression lit up.

'They're weaker than...!'

He wasn't able to stay happy for long as his vision darkened shortly after.

Spurt!

And blood splurged everywhere.

Tok. Tok. Tok.

Gradually, footsteps echoed in the distance. A figure emerged. Coldly staring at the sight before him, Julien retrieved the threads and lowered his hand to place it on top of the corpse.

His indifferent voice echoed shortly afterward.

"That's two..."