

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 111 Different but the same [1] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 111 Different but the same [1]

Chapter 111 Different but the same [1]

There were disadvantages to the threads.

One such disadvantage was the fact that if one paid close enough attention, they'd be able to tell exactly where they were.

This was especially true when I combined [Hands of Malady] with Etherweave. The moment I combined the two, detecting the threads was almost a certainty. At the very least, to mages. Those that specialized in [Body] were less sensitive to the surrounding mana.

For that reason, I came up with a better way to use them.

"...."

I stared at my hand.

Four threads were hovering. In particular, my attention was on one thread where the very tip of it was purple.

"....Distraction."

Indeed, since it was easier to detect threads that were joined with [Hands of Malady] I used one as a distraction while I connected the other threads around in the meantime.

By the time he had realized that something was wrong, it was already too late.

"....."

Staring at the body lying beneath me, I closed my eyes for a brief moment.

I savored the scene that I had witnessed.

When I did, my entire body shook slightly. My chest felt itchy, and I started to ruffle my hair.

"Haa...."

When I opened my eyes again, the world around me changed a little.

I couldn't quite tell by how much, but it was certainly different. Even so, I couldn't pay much attention to it.

There were things that I needed to do.

Staring at the relic in my possession, I once again took a glance at the thread connected to my feet before donning a new hood and delving deeper into the dungeon.

Killing...

My chest trembled slightly.

"Ah."

There was a lot of killing that I needed to do.

—A few moments after the team [Julien and his sidekicks] met the hooded figure.

The broadcast for the event was going smoothly. With everyone capable of watching the stream from home or in the stadium, the excitement was at an all-time high.

Everything was going smoothly, until...

"What's going on?"

Some of the viewers noticed that a certain broadcast was shut off.

".....Is it just me or I can't follow [Julien and his sidekicks]?"

While it was impossible for people to individually follow each cadet, since the only people who were granted such privilege were the Chancellors, there were a few exceptions.

The exceptions were the teams that the broadcasters knew could pull large numbers of viewers.

One such team was [Julien and his sidekicks].

Given what had happened beforehand with the interviews, a lot of interest was placed on them. For that reason, they were given a special channel that one could use to follow.

While the broadcast wasn't very interesting due to its slow pace, people still tuned in to watch.

If it wasn't for their skill, then it was for their banter.

—Hey, Kiera. Hey, Kiera... Kieraa~

—Fuck!!! Shut the fuck up for a second. I'm trying to concentrate over here.

—No, but... I've been wondering.

—What?

—Do you have balls?

—....

Especially between Josephine and Kiera who ended up bickering every few minutes. It was entertaining enough to keep the crowd interested.

But...

Fifteen minutes into their dive, their broadcast shut off.

It was a peculiar situation.

One that didn't escape the sight of many viewers who started to complain to both Haven and the broadcasting stations.

"What's going on? Why did the broadcast stop?"

"It was just about to get interesting too!"

"Is it because the viewers were declining? Ah! I was still watching!"

[We're experiencing technical difficulties, causing the broadcast to halt unexpectedly. Our team is actively investigating the issue to restore service. We appreciate your patience during this time.]

Such was the response from the broadcasting station as they contacted Haven for some answers. Unfortunately, the only response they got was a flat 'We don't know'.

In a well-decorated room.

"....We've received another complaint. This time, it's from another Chancellor."

A tall and slender woman with long black hair and glasses approached the man seated behind his desk. He sported a black glove as he nonchalantly flipped through the pages of his book.

Flip—

"...."

For a brief moment, silence reigned over the room as the only sound that echoed was the sound of the pages flipped.

But gradually, Atlas lifted his head to reply.

"Tell him we're working on resolving the situation. Some of the recording devices are malfunctioning. I'm sure they'll understand given that several are failing at the same time."

"I already have. They are not satisfied with the response."

"Then you can tell them to come to me personally if they have any problems."

"....Understood."

With a slight bow, the woman left the room.

Atlas fixed his gaze on the door for a few moments, then adjusted his glove before turning to the next page.

Flip—

As he did, he casually spoke.

"So there's still no news about Phecda?"

—No.

A voice responded from the orb placed beside him.

"...."

Without saying anything, Atlas flipped over to the next page. As his eyes scanned the words on the book he was reading, he took his eyes away from it.

"....So no news."

While it was arranged for Phecda to meet with another member, the disturbance shouldn't have lasted more than several minutes. The plan was for him to resume the broadcast shortly after.

It was for that reason he chose a rather powerful member. To get things done quickly.

By now, his broadcast should've already been fixed.

...And yet, it wasn't.

"Something went wrong."

But where...?

Could it be possible that Phecda got rid of Giel?

"No, that's unlikely..."

Phecda was strong, but Giel was stronger. That being said, it wasn't exactly impossible.

"Perhaps, he decided to not turn on the stream. Hmm, indeed. Since he now has the map and relic, he might not want to be tracked by the recording device. It might look suspicious in the eyes of the audience and her."

That was a possible explanation for the situation.

Of course, it was just one that Atlas thought on the fly. Who knew what the real answer was?

".....Phecda aside, is everything proceeding smoothly?"

—Yes, for now, there are no irregularities. Delilah has made her move. She's currently being contained by the Seat below the Genesis.

"Ah, Aziel."

Within the Inverted Sky there were High-Seats and Low-Seats.

Low-Seats were generally individuals who had the capabilities of becoming a High-Seat. To become a High-Seat, one had to either defeat a High-Seat or become their disciple, eventually taking over their position.

Aziel was the disciple of the Seat of Genesis.

For that reason, his name within the organization was the 'Seat below the Genesis'.

In Atlas's case, he was the Seat of Dawn.

Unlike the Seat of Genesis, he had no disciple or someone he had decided to take over his mantle. There had yet to be someone who could catch his interest.

That being said, no one was interested in taking over his seat through challenge. His power... It was just that deterring.

Fip—

He flipped to the next page of his book.

"...How long do you think he'll be able to hold on? Even though it's his specialty, Delilah isn't someone that he'll be able to contain for long."

—Our estimates are about five hours. Taking into account the fact that she doesn't want to escalate the situation given the large number of audiences and guests, she'll most likely hold back a little. Three hours have already passed. He should be nearing his limit.

"Five hours? That's better than I expected... I guess I can understand why he's a potential High Seat. But even so, this is longer than I thought. Even I don't have the confidence to hold that woman for that long."

—There's no need to worry about that. The Seat below the Genesis isn't the only one we have sent.

"Oh, is that so...?"

Well, that made a lot more sense.

"Th-"

—Hm....?

A sudden sound disrupted Atlas's words as he looked at the orb.

"Is something wrong?"

—.....Yes.

The reply came after a few seconds.

Just as Atalas was about to ask what had happened, the voice beat him to it.

—There has been no movement from several members for the past few hours. Something happened.

"Huu... Haaa..."

Hours into their search for Julien, Kiera, Josephine, Luxon, and Anders were on their last breaths as they turned another corner of the Labyrinth. For how long had they been running?

"H-how long do we need to keep running for...?"

"Ha, fuck. I don't know...! I'm just following the fucking thread. Ah fuck!"

Cursing out loud, Kiera wanted to smack Josephine in the head but found herself unable to do much more besides cursing.

She was exhausted.

It wasn't just her, everyone was exhausted. They had been running for as long as they could remember, and just when she thought they were near to finding him, they would be disappointed to see that he was still nowhere in sight.

".....Conserve... Haa... energy bullshit."

At the rate they were going, they probably wouldn't have any energy to even touch the boss.

"Bullshit...!"

Though she complained a lot, Kiera continued to follow the thread.

For some reason, she believed that Julien was waiting for them. It was a crazy thought. One that she beat herself up for the entire time.

"Haa..."

They had just turned a corner and were about to head deeper when all of a sudden, they stopped.

"Haa... Haaa..."

A figure stood in the middle of the corridor.

He was a familiar figure

"You..."

The figure that they had been chasing after since the very start.

"F-finally..."

Josephine exclaimed while leaning against the wall, exhausted.

"You're okay...?"

"What happened... to you...?"

As the other questioned, he remained still. In Kiera's eyes, he seemed a little off. Setting aside the fact that he was by himself with no hooded figure in sight, his expression was also a little off.

'No, it's not his expression.'

It was his eyes.

They kept flickering. And just subtly, Kiera could also see his expression changing.

'What sort of...'

Kiera couldn't explain it, but it was creepy. Staring at him, she felt every hair on her body stand.

'Why...?'

Why did the scene feel so familiar?

This wasn't the first time she had seen him do something like this. In fact, this was the second time.

And seeing it once again sent shivers down her spine.

'....Why does it look like he's a completely different person?'

From Kiera's perspective, from his demeanor to his gaze and expressions, it seemed as though a complete stranger stood before her. One that was the furthest thing from the Julien she was aware of.

Blinking, his expression changed again.

So did his demenour.

"....."

Yet again, Kiera saw a different person.

He blinked again.

His expression changed again. And so did his demeanor.

Three blinks, three people.

"Crazy."

No, creepy

"Julien...?"

This all eventually stopped until Josephine called out for him. Blinking again, he turned his head and Kiera met his gaze.

Yet again, Kiera found herself unable to associate the Julien she knew with the one that stood in front of her.

Before her stood a stranger she knew nothing about.

However, that quickly changed after he blinked again, and his gaze returned to the one she was familiar with.

".....You guys are here."

His voice came out rather hoarse.

However, as if noticing this, he massaged his throat before looking into the distance.

"We don't have much time. We should go."

"Uh...?"

"What? What do you mean we should go?"

At Josephine's and Luxon's stunned voices, Julien looked at them briefly before massaging his neck.

"The boss. We're near."

Chapter 112 Different but the same [2]

I felt my face twitch slightly.

It was an involuntary reaction. Something that I couldn't control. Staring ahead, the world seemed a little bit blurry. It switched between clarity and blurriness.

....I felt sick.

And my head throbbed.

Even so, I had to keep moving forward.

"Boss monster?What do you mean we're near? How do you know?"

"I can feel it."

No, that was a lie.

I could just see it from the map. It was also for this very reason that I had led them here.

"....Wait, what? You can feel it? What sort of nonsense is this?"

I turned to look behind me.

Standing just a few feet from me were my team members. They were all looking at me with incredulous looks. I couldn't blame them.

I was just about to speak when Luxon interrupted.

"Before any of that, can you explain what happened?"

His deep voice echoed within the confines of the corridor of the Labyrinth.

"You were suddenly dragged by a hooded figure and then all of a sudden we found you here, claiming that you can feel the boss. How does this make sense? At least explain what's going on?"

His words were met with a wave of nods as Kiera and the rest seemed to be on the same page as him. I looked at them for a short moment before nodding my head.

"....Fair."

Looks like they didn't buy it.

Rummaging through my pocket, I took out a small map and came out clean.

"I managed to get my hands on this."

"Uh?"

At first, everyone was confused by the map. However, shortly after, their expressions changed.

"A map?"

"Wait, hold on... Look at the lines."

As if realizing what kind of map it was, their eyes widened. Pointing at it, Josephine stuttered slightly.

"H-how did you get this?"

Everyone raised their heads to stare at me. Taking in their expressions, I answered,

"From the hooded figure."

"....The fuck?"

I raised my hand to show them my bracelet.

"I'm not entirely sure about what's happening. However, it seems like we're currently under attack."

I went on to press the emergency button on the bracelet. When nothing happened, everyone blinked. They then looked at me strangely.

The first one to speak was Anders who stared at his bracelet with a frown.

"We already knew. We tried using the bracelet the moment that you were taken. However, it didn't work for any of us."

"Ah."

Right. That made sense.

In any case,

"I was able to get the map from the hooded figure."

Yet again, everyone blinked.

Staring at me with a frown, Luxon deeply said,

"You were able to beat him?"

Judging from his tone, he didn't seem to particularly believe him.

I couldn't blame him.

".....Don't get me wrong, but last I recall, he was very powerful. How in the world did you manage to beat him."

"I had help. I met a few cadets along the way."

"Uh...?"

Seeing the way Kiera was looking at me, it was obvious that she didn't believe my story. I shrugged.

"If the map is correct the boss is only a few corridors away. If you don't believe me you can test it."

Kiera's eyes narrowed, and I stared back without saying a word.

It was Josephine's voice that broke the silence between the two of us.

"We should try it."

"....."

Finally, Kiera took her eyes away from me and looked at the map. Then, staring at it for a few seconds, she clicked her tongue.

"Alright, fine"

"Uh, hey!"

Snatching the map from Josephine, she held it in front of her and proceeded forward. As she passed me, she mumbled,

".....I still owe you, so."

And proceeded to leave with that. Confused, I stared at her back.

'Owe? What did she owe me for....?'

"Wait, Kiera! Wait for me!"

The others were quick to follow her from behind. I could tell from their expressions that they had many questions in their minds, but chose to keep them to themselves. In all honesty, it was my fault.

I was currently not in the right state of mind to come up with a plausible excuse. Thankfully, they had left things here.

Otherwise, I really wasn't sure how to explain myself.

Standing still, I stared at their backs for a short moment before taking out the radar. There, I could see a few blue dots.

"The other teams are close."

But they were still a little behind. We were first.

Putting the relic back into my pockets, I slowly retrieved a small gray pill from my pocket.

"....."

It felt smooth to the touch. Almost like a pearl.

Orphion.

A powerful drug that served to boost the consumer's power significantly. It was the drug that was supposed to be handed to the boss monster just before the cadets arrived at it. While the pill was powerful, it had strong side effects.

For that reason, the pill was supposed to be handed to the beast just before the cadets arrived.

That was the original plan.

"...."

It was now in my possession.

Raising my head slightly, I stared at the others before placing the pill in my mouth. I didn't eat it quite just yet.

...I needed a proper audience for that.

*

A large chamber sat in the middle of the Labyrinth. It was where the boss monster was located. Inside a large room with a tall ceiling, a gigantic mammoth-like creature with long tusks and tremendous pressure sat in the middle.

With torches scattered around the room casting a dim light over the surroundings, the place looked extremely eerie.

Surrounding the hall were over a dozen different entrances.

Coming out of one, Kiera whispered.

"...Looks like you were right. We're the first ones here. How should we proceed?"

Staring at the monster's head, I didn't answer immediately.

I could tell from just standing where I was that it was extremely powerful. Perhaps, it was even just as strong as Giel.

Imagining its strength with the drug sent shivers down my spine.

'No wonder they were confident. There's no way any cadet can deal with that monster if it took the drug.'

It also made me understand just why the rewards of the quest were so good.

Indeed, if I allowed the incident to happen, then I didn't see how anyone would come out of it unscathed.

"Oy."

In fact, a lot of cadets were probably going to die.

"Oy!"

"....?"

Lowering my head, Kiera's face appeared just a few inches away from mine.

Staring into her deep red eyes, I was momentarily taken aback by her appearance. It went without saying that her looks were on another level.

However, I was quick to push down such thoughts.

"What?"

"....What do you mean what?"

Kiera's head flicked towards the beast.

"I said, what's the plan? As much, as I hate it, you're the team leader. Tell us exactly what we're supposed to do."

"...About that."

I suddenly looked towards the distance.

Towards one of the other entrances.

"We'll have to first think about how to deal with them."

"We're here."

Spotting the center of the maze, Johnathan and his team rushed forward without caution.

Their journey so far had been rather smooth, and staring at the leaderboard, he could see that they were a close second to the Haven team.

— [Team Score] —

[Dream Catcher] - 3915 Points

[Swords of Fiest] - 3901 Points

[Crow's Dance] - 3871 Points

.

.

.

— [Team Score] —

"Get ready to engage. If we defeat the boss, we'll be able to cinch first place."

According to Johnathan's calculations, they were probably the first team to reach the boss. The fact that he couldn't hear any fighting in the distance seemed to further fuel his hypothesis.

...But just as they neared the entrance of the middle area, Johnathan heard the soft sound of footsteps coming from behind.

Turning his head, his brows furrowed at the sight that greeted him.

"...."

"...."

Neither side said a single word as they stared at each other. Instantly, heavy tension plunged the space as Johnathan's gaze fell on Aoife, who stood indifferently.

Just as the tension was reaching its breaking point, Aoife opened her mouth.

"Now's not the time to fight."

Her voice was crisp, sounding rather pleasant to the ears.

Staring in the distance, she walked ahead calmly.

As she did, she passed Johnathan's group without a single care in the world.

In the briefest of moments, Johnathan was tempted to attack her exposed back, but just as the thought came, he felt a slight chill at the back of his neck and turned around.

There, two gray eyes stared at him.

'....Who is he?'

He appeared to be an unfamiliar face. No, rather, after a bit of thought, he remembered and his expression changed slightly.

'Right, there was someone else ranked higher than Aoife. It must be him.'

It was interesting.

Haven's ranking system. The more Johnathan thought about it, the more flawed it appeared to him.

'It's almost as if they are making fun of everyone.'

Ridiculous.

Especially when taking into account just how weak the current Black Star was.

He was pathetically weak.

How was someone that weak ahead of these two?

Taking into account just how powerful the two, no three... there was another powerful one. Johnathan suddenly spoke.

".....I have a proposition."

His words immediately attracted the attention of all present as they looked at him.

Taking note of their gazes, Aoife's especially, he went on to say,

"Let's work together until we defeat the boss. It's no use fighting here before getting to the boss. Since it seems like we're the first two teams, if we work together, we can get rid of it fast before heading for the exit. We won't have to go through the hassle of fighting against the other teams if we do this."

His words were mixed with half-truths.

While it was true that the faster they beat the boss, the less annoying things would be down the line, the real reason why he wanted to fight together was because he wanted to observe his opponents before fighting them.

Currently, he wasn't very confident in defeating them. Especially not when they had three people of similar strength to his with one just being a tad bit weaker.

However...

Things would be different if he had more information on them.

So long as he knew about them...

"Okay."

Aoife's voice broke him out of his thoughts. Lifting his head, he looked at her with a surprised look.

"Just like that?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

A surprising turn of events.

Johnathan previously thought he'd have to do more to convince them, but it seemed like they were more reasonable than he thought.

With that, the two groups headed for the main chamber together.

Of course, the two groups were still wary of each other. For now, it was all just a verbal agreement. Who knew when the other side would backstab them?

"....Huh?"

They had just arrived at the main chamber when Aoife's steps paused. Her expression hardened slightly.

It was an expression of graveness.

'What's going on?'

Following her line of sight, Johnathan's eyes jumped. Off in the distance, he caught sight of another group.

They too had noticed their appearance.

'How could this be?'

Stunned, Johnathan looked at the group.

"Ah."

But upon spotting a familiar figure, his worries were immediately swept.

'....So it's him.'

The Black Star. Lowering his head and staring at his bracelet, he looked at their points and almost chuckled.

450 Points.

A far cry from theirs.

Still, it wasn't as though Johnathan completely disregarded them. As his expression fixed on the platinum-haired girl, he somewhat frowned.

Kiera was it?

She was someone to look out for. But even so, he could deal with her.

"So-"

He had just turned around to address the other group when he stopped. Suddenly, his expression changed when he noticed Leon staring ahead with a similar expression to Aoife.

"What...?"

Stunned, he looked to see that they were both staring at the black star with grave expressions.

Blinking, he couldn't understand why they were looking at him like that. However, before he could say anything else, Leon spoke.

"...As expected. He's here."

Follow current s on .c(o)m

Chapter 113 Different but the same [3]

The recording devices picked up the entire exchange.

On the projections available to all citizens, and those above the arena grounds, three groups appeared from the sides of the main chamber.

They all stood still while staring at each other.

A tense atmosphere suddenly enshrouded the surroundings. Be it within the chamber, and outside.

All spectators stared at the scene with bathed breaths.

In the middle, a colossal figure resembling a large elephant appeared. It towered over everyone, restrained by heavy chains binding its legs, it remained at the center while all attention was directed towards it.

What particularly captured onlookers' attention was the creature's partially decaying form, illuminated by a subtle purple glow emanating from its body and the surrounding torches.

"It's disgusting."

"Uck...!"

Just looking at the creature sent chills down the spine the audience's spine. Even so, their eyes remained glued on the creature.

"...."

"...."

"...."

A strange silence suddenly took over the arena grounds as everyone's attention fixed on the screen.

They alternated between the three groups.

[.....What are you planning on doing?]

Johnathan's voice shattered the silence that took over the surroundings. All eyes focused on him as he looked towards Aoife.

Immediately, the audience became rowdy.

"What do you mean what do you plan on doing?"

"Get rid of the third group before attacking that beast!"

"They're the weakest group! There's no point in working together with them. Things will get too difficult for you both after you defeat the monster."

[Stick to the plan.]

Aoife's reply took the audience by surprise.

"What?"

"Stick to the plan? But why...?"

Frowning, Johnathan followed her line of sight.

His expression carried hints of doubt.

[What about them...?]

[Knowing him, he won't work with us. Hold them back.]

[What? Let's take care of them first-]

Johnathan's voice was interrupted by Aoife's gaze. The way she looked at him was as though she was looking at a fool.

[.....Tell your team to keep an eye on them. If they make a move, you can try to stop them or have your team delay them.]

[Delay? What are yo-]

His words were cut off as Aoife extended her hands outwardly before squeezing them together.

All of a sudden, the surroundings shook and the chains around the mammoth rattled. Its eyes, which had been closed the entire time flared open to reveal its inky black eyes that seemed to suck everything its gaze fell on.

[Rumble Rumble—]

The surroundings shook yet again. This time, with even more ferocity. The creature slowly stood up raising its head proudly as it growled in the air.

[Weeeeeee—!]

Its growl echoed loudly, making some of the audience members flinch.

A figure blurred above it all of a sudden, appearing just above it.

It was so fast that the audience was barely able to see it. Thankfully, the broadcast was able to slow the projection down.

"Wow...!"

"Ah!"

With a roar of excitement from the crowd, the projection gradually slowed, revealing two familiar gray eyes and a glowing sword. It was none other than Leon. With his looks, and rank within the Haven Academy, he was amongst the more popular male candidates amongst the masses.

With a decisive swing, his blade descended, cleaving down upon the enormous creature beneath him.

[BANG—!]

The recording device shook slightly from the aftermath of the attack as shockwave swept the surroundings.

Once the sound cleared everyone was stunned to see the creature to be completely fine.

"Whaaaaa?"

"So strong...!"

"Wait, look!"

As the confusion settled, amidst the collective belief that Leon's attack had done nothing, a handful of attentive spectators caught sight of a small dent on the creature's thick tusk.

"There's a dent...!"

"Ah!"

Similarly catching the dent, Leon took a deep breath and pressed his foot against the creature's tusk as he stood on top of it.

[BANG—!]

Leon's attack was followed by another.

And then another.

[BANG—!]

The resounding echo reverberated throughout the arena grounds, enveloping the spectators in an immersive sensation that made it seem as though they were reliving the entire experience through the lenses of the participating cadets.

Just as Leon was about to slash again, the creature let out a shrill cry and stomped the ground.

[Weeeeeee—!]

The chamber shook fiercely, and Leon was sent flying back.

"Ah!"

"No!!"

Panic erupted among the audience as Leon's figure was flung backward, hurtling towards the wall with alarming speed. Yet, moments before impact, his body abruptly halted in mid-air.

Before the audience could understand what had happened, Leon lowered his head to glance at Aoife whose face was twisted.

[.....Go again.]

And then, waving her hand, his body shot forward at rapid speeds.

[Kracka! Kracka!]

Bolts of lightning erupted from above, striking the creature's body with incredible force, etching scorched marks upon its surface upon impact.

[Hieeek—!]

The creature roared with pain as its trucks trashed around, sending a few cadets flying away in the process. Even Leon wasn't spared as he was unfortunately unable to reach it as he skidded back several meters.

[Haaa... Haa...]

In the process, the audience could hear his rough breathing as he looked ahead at the creature with a solemn look.

Then, gripping his sword, he whispered something to himself.

His voice was just loud enough for the recording devices to pick up as his voice gently echoed within the confines of the arena grounds.

[.....We've hardly scratched it.]

And indeed, upon closer look, despite everything that had happened, the creature looked relatively fine.

It was then that the audience understood the severity of the situation.

This...

...Was this creature even possible to defeat?

I stared at the scene in front of me with nothing but amazement. Leon, Aoife, Evelyn... They were all amazing.

I could just stand where I was and admire their fights for hours on end.

They were good.

Brilliant.

Amazing...

There were no words that I could use to describe how amazing they were.

But...

I rolled the pill in my mouth. It had no taste and simply felt like a smooth pearl.

Orphion. The drug was originally meant to be used on the mammoth-like creature in the distance. Ultimately, I took it. The pill had the effect of boosting one's strength for a while. However, at the same time, it also had severe consequences.

But...

I was willing to face the consequences.

For my future, I had to do it.

"...."

As the pill rolled around my mouth, my eyes focused on the recording devices in the distance. They were currently floating in the air, capturing the creature and everything around it.

Me included.

I stared at it and took a good long look at it.

'You're watching, aren't you?'

I was talking to the audience.

Perhaps, they weren't. I wouldn't blame them if they weren't looking at me.

But that was fine.

I was going to grab their attention soon.

I had a tale to tell.

One that involved ten people.

Ten people that all looked different, spoke different, had different backgrounds, and yet, despite their differences, they were the same.

It was a tale that I needed to tell.

To the audience, and for myself.

And with such thoughts, I bit the pill in my mouth.

Cra Crack—

Instantly, I felt my body tremble slightly. It was as if a volcano had suddenly erupted inside of my body.

It was hot.

Drip...! Drip!

Sweat dripped down from the side of my face.

....The change was subtle, but it was still picked up by Kiera and the others who looked at me in shock.

"Julien?"

"Uh? What..."

Before they could say anything more, I stared at them and nodded silently. A silent sign of assurance. In the process, I tried to make it seem as though I was fine.

However, I was anything but fine.

The pain I was currently experiencing. It was hard to describe.

But pain... I could handle pain.

And it was with such thoughts that I took my first step forward.

Tok—

That tale.

It was time for me to tell it.

Bang—! Skidding a few meters back, Johnathan eventually came to a stop.

"Ukh...!"

His breath was labored, and his mana was running rampant. Staring ahead and seeing Aoife's group, he clenched his sword and pushed himself forward.

Clank—

His sword cleaved at the exact spot where Leon had hacked during his first strike. Exactly as his sword made contact with the tusk, Johnathan felt his entire hand go numb.

However...

Cr-Crack—! His expression grew excited as he noticed fine miniature webs forming around the tusk.

"A-almost...!"

He was just about to follow up when the creature jerked, and Johnathan was thrown a few meters back.

Bang!

His back smashed against the wall, and he felt a sweet sensation at the back of his throat.

"Cough! Cough...!"

'...This, it's so strong '

He wasn't the only one struggling. Staring ahead, Johnathan could see that the combined effort from the two teams was hardly doing anything to the creature. It was at that moment that they understood just how meaningless their plan was.

....There was simply no way for them to get rid of the creature fast.

'Ah, at this rate, things will become more troublesome.'

"Haaa... Haaa..."

Johnathan's sword started to glow as he glared at the mammoth.

Looking around him, and seeing that everyone was struggling to deal with the creature, he was prepared to use one of his strongest moves when all of a sudden he felt a chill coming down from behind him.

".....?"

It wasn't just him.

The others felt it as well.

Looking back, a peculiar figure stood. He stood still, his clothes fluttering slightly alongside his hair as he stared at the mammoth with cold eyes.

"W-what are you doing...?"

Johnathan's voice came out hoarse. Having exhausted a lot of his mana, he could hardly speak properly.

Johnathan was just about to tell him to get away so that he wouldn't be a hindrance when he noticed his expression.

It was flickering continuously.

From the angle of his lips, the intensity of his gaze, and his expressions. They kept flickering into different intensities. Almost as if he was trying to replicate different people.

"What in the..."

Before Johnathan knew it, the glow around his sword had diminished.

"...."

Julien's current appearance seemed to suck away the energy out of him.

He didn't understand it at first, but lowering his head, he stared at his hands.

"Uh?"

....They were trembling.

"Haa... Haaa..."

His breathing started to grow rapidly. When he looked up again, Julien's expression had changed again. His eyes, they were empty. Devoid of any light.

And then...

"....!"

Before Johnathan knew it, threads appeared to surround the place. Covering every inch of the surroundings, everyone stopped.

All eyes fell on him then.

"Ah..."

Johnathan stopped circulating his mana as the sword in his hand stopped glowing.

In that moment, realization finally dawned on him. The reason for Aoife's words, and Haven's rankings.

"This..."

Why he was ranked first.

"...What is this?"

It all finally made sense to him.

.com

Chapter 114 Different but the same [4]

"H-help... me. I'm scared.."

Within a dark cave, a boy cried. He looked no older than eight, and he held his legs with both hands.

"Waa...!"

"Uha!"

In the distance, he could hear the cries of the other children. Hugging his legs tightly, he hugged his body tightly.

'Where am I...?'

'What's going on?'

'I'm scared.'

Such was Leonard's first memory at the Inverted Sky.

From then on he was subjected to endless torture.

"...I'm sorry..."

He was beaten.

"It... h-urts... It's my fault... Don't hit me."

He was forced to repeat the same words each day.

"For the inverted sky!"

And he couldn't remember the number of times he had starved.

"I'm hungry."

Everyday.

"....Sorry "

Life was hell.

'Ah... I can't do this anymore... It hurts...'

"Hic... Hic..."

His cries echoed quietly as he wept to himself.

"....H-here."

That was when another child approached him.

Holding onto a piece of bread, he handed it to Leonard. Raising his head, Leonard stared at the bread. He blinked, unable to understand what was going on.

"F-or me?"

"....Yes."

That was when Leonard first met Giel.

He was taller than the other children. He was also smarter. He'd give them his share of the food whenever someone was hungry.

It didn't take long for him to become the group leader.

But even then...

He could only help out so much. Even as he starved, and took beatings over the other children, the number of children within the group dwindled.

What at first had been a group of over one hundred children slowly turned into a group of thirty.

"I'm hungry..."

"My stomach hurts."

"It hurts... M-mom... I-want to go home."

"Here."

Giel continued to hand over his food. Even as his stomach roared in pain, and his arms were so thin you could see the bones, he gave his food to those who needed it the most.

"H-here."

Leonard followed after his example.

But even then...

The deaths continued.

In the end, only ten managed to survive.

"From this moment forth, you will be the Dragon Charred Unit."

Giel, Arian, Jacob, Clyde, Laura, Johanna, Karl, Rowan, Evan, and Leonard. These were the names of the members.

They were the last remaining survivors of the first trial.

Having survived, they had now become full-fledged members of the Inverted Sky. Because of the shared trauma, they were close to each other.

"Have mine..."

"Take my towel."

When one suffered, the other would sacrifice their comfort to help the other. It was like this that they carried forward.

In his time with them, it was a certain conversation that struck deeply with Leonard.

Sitting by a bonfire, he remembered asking,

"Do you remember your families?"

"No."

".....No."

"I do not."

As the flames from the fire reflected in the eyes of the children, one of them spoke.

"I do."

It was Laura. The second youngest of the group.

With an expression he had never seen her make, she went on to say,

"My mom. I think she had blonde hair and green eyes. I don't remember much, but I remember that she was warm. Like this fire. But it doesn't hurt like this one. I don't know where she is."

Looking up, she asked,

"Do you think she still remembers me?"

Crackle!

The fire crackled as the members remained silent for a brief moment.

Giel was the one who ended up answering as he threw a wooden stick to the fire.

"...Maybe."

To Leonard, Giel was an enigma. He was kind and helpful, but at the same time, ruthless when it was necessary.

He was a person whom he found hard to understand.

But at the same time... He was someone he looked up to.

Just what were his true thoughts...?

"I want to meet her."

"You will."

Another member said, staring at the fire.

"Once we reach a higher rank we'll get more freedom. By then, you should be able to meet your mother."

"I will help you."

"...Thank you."

The group was united. They had to be. They had only each other left.

That conversation became an irreplaceable memory to Leonard.

From then on the group worked together. They followed a similar routine. They would wake up. Train. Eat. Receive missions. Return, and repeat.

"Let's keep going."

".....Just hang in there for a little longer."

"Ugh, Laura, you aren't a very good cook."

"Then you cook!"

"Ah, well... I'm kind of lazy."

"Then shut up and eat."

"Hey! That's my bedsheet."

"Whatever."

"Here, have mine."

"No, I want his."

"Damn it!"

"Hahaha."

Their lives were slowly starting to get better. But... to Leonard, there was still something that he felt was missing about that life.

He couldn't quite explain it.

.....Every time he would go out for a mission, he'd feel that something was missing.

It only hit him in his latest mission.

They had fully grown up now. No longer were they children.

Standing further back from the crowd, Leonard stared at the sea of people heading for the stadium when he mumbled,

"....I envy them."

The members turned their heads to stare at him. Unlike in the past, they were all different. No longer did they seem as hopeful as they once did.

They looked like a shell of what they had in the past.

After everything they had been through, it was hard for them to not lose their humanity. But even then, they were the only ones Leonard had left.

"You envy them? Why?"

Why...?

Leonard looked at the crowd.

"....Look at them. All those people. They're all here to watch them."

"Them?"

"The cadets."

"....Ah."

A strange silence befell the group shortly after. As all members turned their heads to stare at the audience, Leonard asked,

"What do you think it's like?"

He nudged at them with his chin.

"....The acknowledgment of one's existence. How do you think it feels?"

In a world where the only ones who knew about their existence were each other, how did it feel to be acknowledged?

.

.

.

I pondered over Leonard's question for a very long time.

Looking around me and seeing everyone looking at me, I felt the center of everyone's attention. But even then. Even though I stood before them. I wasn't really there.

.....I was merely an abstract image of Julien Dacre Evenus.

They were looking at me, but not the real me. In a way, the story resonated with me. It was hard to keep going when nobody truly looked at you.

But...

I didn't need people to look at me.

I was fine with what I had. There was a goal that I had in mind. One that I had to accomplish regardless of how much it hurt.

....and it was exactly because of such thoughts that I was able to push away the current pain that I was experiencing.

"Haa."

The pain...

It was eroding every part of my body. From my muscles to my internal organs. I could feel a boiling heat from deep within me.

I could feel the pain swell with each second that passed. My stomach started to bloat, and I started to feel stiff.

"....."

The energy that was accumulating inside my core was threatening to take over my entire body.

I needed to let go of it.

Let it out.

Looking around and seeing everyone desperately fighting against the mammoth, I took in their struggling expressions.

It was obvious that they were having a hard time defeating the beast.

It looked imposing from where I was.

Powerful...

Tok--

I took my first step forward.

As I did, I extended my hand. The one thing that limited me each time was the lack of mana. However, things were different now. Mana. I had plenty of it. So much so that my body was starting to break down as a result of how much I had.

"Haa... Haa..."

As my breath grew labored, threads started to emerge from my forearm. One, two, three, four, five... ten.

"More..."

I could feel it.

With the amount of mana I had, I could create more threads.

I wanted to see it.

Just how many threads could I create with the amount of energy that I had?

"Twenty."

No, I could do more...

Even as my body started to heat up, I squeezed everything out of me.

Shhh—

"...Thirty."

Such were the number of threads that were currently enveloping my arm. Staring into the distance, I focused my attention on the recording device hovering in the air.

I took a good look at it before closing my eyes.

"Huu."

I took a deep breath and sunk my consciousness within.

...There I could feel four other faint personalities trying to take over. However, I didn't let them.

Not yet.

"...."

"...."

In the silence that took over my mind, I slowly opened my eyes again. When I did, I found the entire world before me covered in threads.

"Haa..."

Looking ahead, I could see everyone's attention fixed on me.

From the recording device to everyone else that was within the room. At that moment, they were all looking at me.

I was the center of everyone's attention.

I...

...Was existing.

Everything happened so fast that nobody knew how to react. In one moment, Aoife and Johnathan's team were struggling, and in the next moment, they stopped. It wasn't as though they wanted to stop.

It was more like...

...They had to stop.

[W-what is this?]

[Threads?]

Covering every inch of the chamber were threads. They surrounded the entire space without leaving anyone with any room to move.

"What's going on...?"

"What the hell is this?"

The unexpected change caught the audience off guard, prompting some to stand up for a better view of the projection above. However, just as they were trying to understand the situation, the recording device suddenly focused on a certain individual.

"Ah..."

He stood still at the center without saying a single word. He just stood there, and yet, the moment the recording device stopped on him, he seemed to suck the very air out of the surroundings.

"It's him..."

"...What is he doing?"

It was a figure that most people were already aware of.

Having witnessed his play, they were all too familiar with him. He was a sort of celebrity.

Back then, he had gripped the attention of the world with his acting. This time, he grabbed their attention for a different reason.

"...How?"

"The threads... They are coming from him?"

It was hard for the audience to make heads or tails of what was happening. Before his stream had turned off, everyone saw his group. It was nothing special.

Due to technical errors, their stream shut off and everyone turned to look at the other groups that were possible to watch.

Everyone had forgotten about them.

Him.

....With how everyone had been performing, it wasn't hard to forget about him.

But...

Staring at the very scene before them, the audience found themselves unable to tear their gazes away from him.

If they could forget about him before, they couldn't now.

He was deeply etched in their minds.

[Tok—]

The singular sound of his footstep echoed within the confines of the projection as he stepped forward.

As he did, the other cadets remained still.

It wasn't because they were scared, but simply put, they couldn't. The threads. Despite being so thin, they looked sturdy.

[Weeee—]

The silence shattered as the mammoth emitted a thunderous growl, its piercing cry echoing through the air as it fixed its gaze upon Julien.

Snap! Snap! Snap!

As it moved, the threads snapped.

"....!"

"Ah!"

The audience screamed as they watched this. It was a scene they were familiar with. Just moments prior, all the other cadets struggled to even put a dent in the creature's body.

The same could be said to be true for the threads which appeared to not affect the mammoth's body.

[...]

Standing still, Julien started at the incoming creature. He didn't seem particularly bothered by the mammoth.

Bringing his hand forward, he clenched his hand.

The threads compressed into the mammoth who let out a shrill cry.

[Weeee—]

Blood splurged everywhere.

But even so, it continued to change forward.

Snap! Snap! Snap!

10 meters.

[...]

Julien remained still.

8 meters.

[Weeee—]

The creature neared yet again.

Even so, Julien remained still. The audience watched this with bated breath as they clenched their hands against the seats tightly.

While he stood motionless, a certain voice floated in Julien's mind as he stared at the incoming mammoth.

'I'm tired.'

It was the continuation of Leonard's speech.

'And it's not the type of tiredness that sleep can fix. I'm tired of not existing. Not knowing whether, besides you guys, a person out there even acknowledges my existence. You guys also feel it, don't you? That we're slowly fading away.'

6 meters.

It drew nearer to him. Its massive presence loomed over Julien as the audience looked at the scene with widened eyes and looks of horror.

"Oh no!"

"Ah!! Get away...!"

But he didn't. Julien remained standing where he was, his expression changing again as he took on a new persona.

'.....It feels empty. I feel empty. I don't know why. I just feel this way. And it's sucking me deeper and deeper each day that I keep on living.'

4 meters.

It was now practically in front of Julien.

"Akh..!"

Some of the audience wanted to close their eyes. They wanted to look away from the bloody scene that was inevitably going to happen.

But...

For some reason, everyone kept their eyes fixed on him. It was as if their eyes were glued on him, making them unable to tear their gazes away.

'So if you ask me why I'm envious, it's because I don't get to have the privilege of even knowing what's it like to know I exist. I'm just a shadow. An endlessly drifting piece of nothing.'

2 meters.

[Weeee—]

The mammoth roared.

Its body elevated from the ground as its foot drew near to him.

'....I am nothing.'

And then...

Thump!

The mammoth fell flat a few inches before Julien. Around it were over a dozen purple threads. The audience started at the scene in shock. The same was true for the cadets.

As everyone wondered how it was possible? Julien turned his head to face the recording device.

His expression appeared for all those to see.

"....."

A strange silence suddenly overtook the arena as everyone stopped speaking. As he looked, his eyes seemed to say,

'Are you seeing this...?'

Seeing this? Who was he talking to?

His face changed slightly. So did his eyes. All of a sudden, it appeared as though he was a completely different person.

Julien's eyes widened as he looked around him.

'They're watching you.'

Despite his strange behavior, the spectators couldn't take their eyes away from him. Again, his expression changed.

This time, he appeared different again.

A new persona.

'.....All of you.'

He didn't seem to be addressing the crowd.

But something else.

'Your existence...'

He was speaking to the four entities within him. There were ten, but he could only enter the mind of four.

Even so, Julien understood that despite their differences, they were the same.

He had seen it through the four he managed to enter.

Giel, Arian, Jacob, Clyde, Laura, Johanna, Karl, Rowan, Evan, and Leonard. These were the names of the young children.

The Charred Dragon Unit.

This was the tale of ten young people.

It was a sad tale.

A tale of ten people who the longer they existed, the less they felt like they existed. In the end, they all wanted the same thing.

To have someone out there acknowledge the fact that they existed.

And he put on this performance to let the world see them.

'The world sees it. I've shown them.'

Staring into the recording device, he returned to his usual expression. His eyes looked down at the mammoth, and his lips parted slightly.

".....That you exist."

Existed.

Different, but the same.

Such was the name of their tale.

Sorry for the delay, very long chap.

Chapter 115 Interesting [1]

Swoosh—

"We're almost there."

Karl sprinted forward as his group followed him from behind. Turning his head, he stared at them and urged them to quicken their speed.

"....One last push. We should be amongst the firsts."

Though he said that, he didn't believe that to be the case. They had wasted too much time trying to catch up with the leading teams.

'Monsters.'

That was all Karl could think of as he looked at the scores on his bracelet. From the start until now, the top two groups had maintained a steady lead.

It only had stopped recently.

Most likely, there were already people fighting against the boss monster.

'That's fine, they'll be exhausted by the time we arrive. We can steal their kill after all parties are exhausted.'

It was a feasible plan.

One that he planned on doing.

Or at least, originally planned to do.

"W-what is this...?"

Standing by the entrance of the main chamber, Karl looked around with an open mouth. The same was true for his team members who looked around with similar stunned expressions.

"....Threads."

They covered the entire space.

Was the boss monster some sort of spider? Such were Karl's initial thoughts as he looked around and spotted a few familiar faces in the distance.

"This..."

From Johnathan and his team to Aoife, and her members. Wearing similar grim expressions, they were all looking towards a specific direction.

Towards a certain man.

When Karl turned his head to trace where their gazes were directed towards, his eyes widened.

"....Ah."

Him...?

His appearance alone stood out from the rest. Karl was familiar with him. Having scanned him before the examination began, Karl didn't think too much of him.

"Why is everyone-"

And then he stopped.

He realized. A massive creature rested not far from where Julien was. No, rather... It looked lifeless.

All of a sudden, he recalled the expressions of the other groups.

Slowly, the pieces started to piece together in his mind and his expression yet again changed.

"B-but how...?"

Unable to believe it, he used his skill. He distinctively remembered Julien's aura to be average to above average.

How cou-

"Ah..."

Blink.

Blinking once, he made sure to check if he was seeing correctly.

He didn't, and as if the words were stuck in his mouth, Karl swallowed his saliva. A

"Haaa..."

All of a sudden, he found it hard to breathe.

Despite Julien not meeting his gaze, it seemed as if invisible hands clenched tightly around his throat, suffocating him to the brink of breathlessness.

Staring at him.

Or more specifically the aura surrounding his body, he felt his throat grow dry.

"...That."

The aura surrounding his body.

It was overwhelming.

Absorbing one's memories and emotions wasn't easy.

Not only did I have to deal with the aftermath of reliving their memories, but I also had to get rid of their lingering emotions.

Were I not to do that, then they'd remain stuck within me, making it harder for me to absorb.

It was for that reason that I had to do this.

"....."

But it wasn't the only reason I did it.

Regaining control of myself, I looked down at the creature beneath me. It was lying motionless, on its last breath.

Even so, it was still not dead.

It had only been weakened due to my curse magic. And so, without thinking twice, I stared at its inky black eyes before clenching my fist.

Puchi!

Blood splattered all over me.

[+5000 Points]

Shortly after that, my bracelet buzzed and I heard a low chime.

"....."

Keeping my gaze focused on the mammoth, I gradually raised my head to stare at the recording device and the other cadets.

There was another reason that I needed an audience.

...I wanted the world to understand that I wasn't the Black Star for no reason.

I was at a point where I needed to appear stronger than I actually was. I was in a position where I couldn't hide my strength. I had to do the opposite.

And glancing around, I could tell I had done a very good job at that.

So....

Turning around, I looked at my group.

Besides Kiera who was looking at me with a frown, they were staring at me with open mouths.

"Y-you...? Since when were you capable of making such a move?"

I ignored Josephine's question and took a deep breath.

"Let's go."

Passing them, I headed deep into the tunnel.

As I walked, I never looked back. It wasn't because I wanted to keep appearances up or anything of the sort.

...It was because my body was breaking down.

The side effects of the pill were starting to show. The pain was starting to become unbearable. I needed to get out of here.

Thankfully, I was sure that nobody would come after me.

I had made sure to put on a performance that deterred others from doing so.

And I was right.

[You have exited the Labyrinth; Team Julien and his sidekicks]

[Your Team Score is — 5670]

[Rank 1]

The surroundings were gray.

In the distance, a white sun hung in the air. Hands crawled up from the ground, reaching out for the four individuals within the world.

Bang!

"Damn it...!"

"I need a little help here!"

The four attempted to resist, casting various spells and wielding their weapons to fend off the grasping hands reaching for them.

But...

"Ah, crap...!"

It was a futile attempt.

Regardless of what they did, the hands would regenerate and keep coming back for them.

"...."

Not far from them, a figure stood.

In front of her were two other figures. Aziel, and another individual of similar strength to his. He went by the name 'Black' and was a Fiend-ranked member. A mindless soldier whose only purpose was to follow orders.

With their weapons drawn, they attacked her.

SHIIING—!

But that was a futile attempt on their end. With a casual wave of her hand, the space before them folded and the direction of their attacks shifted away from her.

"What...?!"

Delilah remained expressionless.

'How long has it been....?'

She had lost count by now. At first, it was just one person. He was strong, but he wasn't something that Delilah couldn't handle.

However, at the exact moment she extracted her domain, five other figures appeared. They weren't as strong as Aziel, but they were still rather strong. But it wasn't their strength that bothered her. It was their utter disregard for their own life that made things difficult for her.

With their combined efforts, they were able to hold her at a stalemate.

"Ha..."

Seeing the look on Delilah's face, Aziel sneered.

"It's been several hours now. By now, all the cadets should've died or suffered serious injuries."

"...."

"How unfortunate. In the end, all of this is because you weren't able to deal with us quickly. Watch what happens when the entire world sees their best cadets die at the hands of the boss."

Aziel spoke in a tone that was filled with self-assurance. As if the result was predetermined.

Throughout the entire exchange, he had been rather talkative. His mission was to stall for time. He wasn't here to defeat Delilah.

She was simply not someone he could beat.

Pointing his weapon at Delilah, a long spear, his body erupted with a powerful wave of mana. The result of his action caused the nearby hands to shatter as the spear in his hand started to glow brighter.

".....Remember. When everything ends, you'll become the focal point of the world. And not in a good way."

Before long, the domain started to show signs of shaking as faint cracks appeared all over the world.

This was all due to the influence of Aziel's attack.

As a lower seat, he was powerful. He was the same rank as Delilah, Tier 9. Although he wasn't as strong as her, he wasn't a nobody.

He was sure that his attack would at least do something to her.

And then, taking one last look at Delilah, he thrust his spear forward.

"Go and greet the cadets you care so much about."

SHIIIIING—

As if the thrust sucked the entire space around it, the surroundings spun alongside the spear.

It was a devastating scene.

One which was accompanied by a gentle whistle that echoed in the air. Wherever the spear went, everything would shatter.

Crack! Crack!

"....."

In response to the attack, Delilah remained motionless.

Her eyes, which had become completely black were fixed on the spear as its image was reflected in her eyes.

Just as the spear was a few inches away from her, it stopped.

"Uh....?"

Aziel looked at her stunned.

His muscles tensed as he tried to thrust it forward, but it was to no avail. The spear. It refused to budge.

"....."

Delilah looked back at him with an empty look. Almost as if it was devoid of any life.

Then...

The world shrank.

Shlup—!

Color flooded back into the world as the blackness receded from Delilah's eyes, and she found herself standing in a familiar environment.

"...."

Silence gripped the surroundings as she stood still.

Extending her hand, a black pearl appeared in her grasp. Within it, several figures appeared. Delilah's attention focused on one specific one. He was looking at her with a horrified gaze.

Staring back, Delilah tilted her head slightly before pressing her two fingers together.

Cr Crack—

The pearl shattered in an instant.

Rubbing her fingers to get rid of the lingering shards of the pearl, Delilah turned around to face the entrance of the Labyrinth.

Bringing her foot up, she stomped the ground once.

A shattering sound akin to glass breaking echoed shortly after as an invisible film shattered under her step. Lowering her body, she opened the trapdoor that led to the Labyrinth. As she did, she extended her mana into the Labyrinth to see the current situation.

But...

"Hm?"

Her movements stopped when she did.

Blinking several times, she once again extended her mana around. Seeing that she got the same result as the first time, her eyes widened slightly.

"...Nothing?"

Delilah had originally expected to see a desperate situation upon entering the Labyrinth, but much to her surprise, everything was perfect.

Almost too perfect...

"What happened?"

To the point where she started to question whether something had truly happened or not.

Frowning, Delilah took out a small device from her pocket. It was a small cube the size of a small ball. Tapping on it, a small projection appeared.

A figure appeared the moment she turned on the projection.

"....."

A figure she was all too familiar with.

And...

He appeared to have ranked first.

Lowering her head to stare at the entrance, she looked back at the projection. Or more specifically, the cadet who appeared in it.

'Was it you...?'

New chapters are published on

Chapter 116 Interesting [2]

The moment Julien and his sidekicks came out of the Labyrinth, none of the spectators said a thing.

They just stood in silence to stare at them.

...Or more specifically Julien.

Yet again, he had pulled everyone's attention. He stole the show once more. What he had done, the public remembered.

It was that memorable.

In one of the corners of the arena stands. A man leaned on his seat while staring at Julien beneath.

He wore a brown top hat and brown coat.

"....It was a nice performance."

It was hard to tell who he was addressing. There was no one besides him.

"He's certainly a very powerful first year. But still, it's surprising how he had managed to singlehandedly defeat the monster just by himself."

The other cadets may have done a little by tiring it out, but at the end of the day, he was the one who had defeated the monster.

"It's crazy."

Extending his hand, he removed his hat to reveal his dark hair and deep brown eyes. He was none other than the Inquisitor.

Pinching his chin, he leaned back slightly.

"....It's almost as if he had taken something."

Just as he said those words, Julien, the main star of the show excused himself. The Inquisitor's eyes traced his back as he left.

"Uahg."

Closing his eyes for a short moment, he put his hat back on and stretched.

"....Looks like it's also time for me to go do my job."

"Haaa...."

I found it hard to breathe. Looking around, the world seemed to spin. I couldn't see straight and I had trouble walking.

Even so, I kept my expression firm and marched forward. I had long left the arena and my teammates.

They didn't stop me and let me go. They were probably surprised by my actions back in the chamber.

It was good that way.

"Haa... Haaa...."

I didn't know where I was going.

I was just mindlessly wandering around the Academy campus.

'At this rate, I'll die.'

That much was becoming obvious to me. My chest burned, and my legs were starting to give up on me.

The excess mana that was lingering within my body was threatening to erupt at any second. I could already picture a scene where I'd explode into millions of pieces out of nowhere.

'....That's not good.'

As I walked, I could feel the gazes of the passerbies on me.

Some stopped to whisper to each other, while others stared at me from the distance. I looked at them briefly before continuing forward.

I was so out of it that I couldn't tell if they were looking at me because they had seen my performance, or that I looked extremely sickly.

'....Where do I go?'

To the infirmary?

Yeah, no.

If I were to do that, they would discover all about the drug that I had taken. The only reason that nobody suspected a thing was because before entering the Labyrinth, all cadets had been stripped and searched by the Academy inspectors.

The only thing that we were allowed to bring was the bracelets. The Academy provided the weapons.

The drug was something that nobody would think I'd be able to access.

For now, I was in the clear.

....But I knew that I was still not out of the danger zone.

Were I to pass out here and sent to the infirmary, then it would instantly become clear that I had taken something. The Academy doctors weren't that naive.

'I can't allow for that to happen.'

It would destroy everything that I tried so hard to build.

"....."

Gradually, my steps stopped.

'Do I have no choice...?'

There was one place that I had in mind. A place that would resolve all my worries.

I clenched my fists and covered my mouth.

"Cough...!"

Coughing, I felt something spew out from my mouth.

Drip! Drip...!

I didn't need to look to understand what it was. Quickly wiping the blood away from my mouth, I closed my eyes and moved forward again.

This time, I had a direction.

"Hmmm."

Inside Atlas's office — a vast office that overlooked the entire Academy from the top.

"There have been twenty-seven reported deaths. All of them belong to cadets from lower-ranked Academies. We have yet to make the news public."

Listening to his assistant's voice, Atlas remained seated with an impassive expression. Carefully managing his expression, he closed his eyes for a brief moment as his assistant continued,

"Thanks to Julien and his sidekicks's appearance towards the middle we were able to appease some of the protests regarding some of the cadet groups not appearing in the main projection screen."

It was a general briefing about the situation.

Every time the name 'Julien and his sidekicks' was mentioned, Atlas would find his brows twitching slightly. However, he was quick to grow used to it.

The mid-terms had yet to end. However, the winner had already been decided. With an overwhelming point difference, they were ranked first.

Given the amount of time that the other groups had left, it wasn't impossible for them to get close to them, but they were probably too exhausted to do so.

In the end, it was safe to assume that the team [Julien and his sidekicks] would end up placing first by the end of it all.

The problem now was something else.

"How should we reveal the news to the Chancellors of the other Academies? Julien and his sidekicks' appearance calmed them down somewhat. In their minds they were probably thinking; If their recording device also stopped working and they appeared not long after, surely it suggested that it was nothing big."

The assistant paused.

"But..."

"...We won't be able to keep them calm for much longer."

Atlas finished the words for his assistant.

"Eventually, we'll have to tell them the truth about what happened."

"Yes."

Slowly opening his eyes to reveal his yellow pupils, he placed his hand over the wooden desk opposite him and drummed his fingers lightly.

"Tell them to come visit me."

"Yes?"

"I will tell them the news personally."

"Ah..."

His assistant showed a look of surprise. However, quickly recomposing, she nodded her head in understanding.

"Understood."

"...You may leave."

"I will bring them back as you've ordered."

With a gentle blow, she left the room, leaving Atlas alone in his office. As she left, he remained seated in his chair.

"....."

The room plunged into a state of silence. In the silence, Atlas lowered his head to stare at his drawer. He stared at it for a good minute before opening it and pulling out a pair of black gloves, slipping them onto his hands.

It was a sort of ritual that he had. For whenever he had to do something important.

He had just put them on when the door knocked.

To Tok—

"...That's rather fast."

Surprised, he opened his mouth to say,

"Come in."

Clank—

The door opened, but the people he had expected to come didn't appear. Instead, a young man with jet-black hair and hazel eyes entered.

Little needed to be said regarding his appearance; from the moment he arrived, he stood out distinctly. Yet, what truly stood out about him at the moment wasn't his appearance, but the mana coming out of his body.

It was rather intense.

"...Hm?"

Atlas's head tilted slightly at the appearance of the youth.

Phecda.

He hadn't expected him to be here.

Clank—

As Phecda opened the door and closed it behind him, he looked around the room for a brief moment before sitting down on the sofa opposite him.

He made himself comfortable before looking at Atlas. That was when Atlas noticed.

His gaze.

The way he looked at him.

It was one of indifference. A stark contrast from the first time they had met. Back then, while his gaze was somewhat similar, he could feel the apprehension within him.

And yet...

...That apprehension was completely gone at this moment.

"...."

"...."

The two stared at each other for a brief moment as the room stilled in the silence.

Then, breaking the silence was Julien who covered his mouth with his hand.

"Oh...?"

Drip. Drip...!

A red liquid seeped out from the narrow gap of his fingers.

Even then, he never took his gaze away from Atlas. Rather, his gaze intensified. It was as if he was telling him to keep looking.

".....I've done it."

His voice came out hoarse.

Despite that, his voice was clear enough for Atlas to understand.

"I've done my part."

Atlas nodded his head in acknowledgment.

"I saw."

How could he not have seen? He had stolen the show. There wasn't anyone that hadn't seen his performance.

Most likely, everyone was still talking about it.

So...

Why would the star of the show come all the way to his office? Clearly, he had a motive in mind.

"....Are you here to apologize for what you've done?"

It would make sense if he did.

They had indeed spent a lot of resources trying to get this plan to work. However, it had all come crashing down because of the young cadet in front of him.

"It wasn't easy to raise such a talented group."

Phecda's expression twitched slightly at the mention of the group. However, he was quick to recover as he shook his head.

"No...?"

Atlas thought the reason was that, but unexpectedly, Phecda shook his head.

"Then?"

Atlas wasn't offended by that. Rather, he had somewhat encouraged him to do what he did. For that, he didn't care at all for the apology.

He was just curious about his answer.

One that came shortly after.

"No. I couldn't care less about what you... think."

"....?"

Drip. Drip...!

As the blood continued to drip down from the gaps of his fingers, Phecda's lips suddenly started to close.

"I only want one thing..."

As they did, he managed to utter a few last words.

"Fucking... heal me."

His arm limped down shortly after and blood started to spill from all his orifices. Despite that, he maintained his gaze fixed on Atlas.

"He's out."

Even as his eyes remained open, Atlas could tell he had passed out.

It was quite a sight to see.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The blood trickled down on the ground in a rhythmical manner.

Almost like the arm of a clock.

"...."

It shattered whatever silence was about to take over.

Amidst all that, Atlas's mumblings overtook the repetitive sound of Phecda's blood dripping.

...It wasn't that Phecda's words had offended him. Rather, he couldn't care less about what he had said. It was more the tone in which he said those words.

How could he describe it...?

'It's as if he is certain I'll help him.'

Yes, it was that.

....It was a thought that made him want to laugh. Especially since he was right. Phecda was invaluable to them. His performance had not only solidified his spot as the Haven's top ranker but at the same time, helped Delilah out of a sticky situation.

Would that lead to her trusting him more?

Atlas wasn't sure. However, his action must've definitely made her confused.

Whose side was he on? Hers or theirs...?

"Haha."

The thought made Atlas laugh.

Lowering his head, he took a good look at Phecda.

'The difference between a potential Fiend and Low Seat isn't their strength but their ability to think for themselves.'

Phecda was evaluated to be a potential Fiend.

Looking at his state, and how he had gone to the extent of consuming the drug that was meant for the boss monster, Atlas could see why he was evaluated as such.

But at the same time, he could also see something else.

Something more calculated...

Again, Atlas laughed.

"...Interesting."

Chapter 117 Interesting [3]

The Evenus Household was unusually quiet. With servants running all over the place to hold ceremonies for nearby noble houses, the estate was usually busy.

Today, however, things were different.

In a highly decorated room within the estate, a man stood with his arms crossed while staring at the projection in front of him.

"....."

He stood in silence as he watched the scene in front of him replay over and over again.

Whenever the scene would end, he would bring his hand forward and shift the video back so he could watch it again.

It was a broadcast that had swept the entire Empire. Originally, Aldric wasn't interested. There were many things that he needed to take care of.

However, curiosity still got the better of him and he ended up getting a subscription for the event.

Aldric was curious about something.

His son, Julien.

Had he really changed as the reports suggested?

"....."

In the end, he ended up witnessing something that he hadn't expected to see.

"...Was he hiding his abilities?"

He watched as his son, Julien, completely took over the entire event with his abilities. The two of them had a slight resemblance with each other, but staring at the figure in the middle of the projection, Aldric didn't feel any of those familiarities he once used to feel.

Rather, he looked foreign to him.

Was this really his son?

"Father."

A figure appeared beside Aldric. It was Linus. His second child. He too was staring at the projection with a frown.

"That's Julien, isn't it?"

".....Yes."

"Has he always been this capable?"

"...No."

"Do you think it's possible that he improved so much after joining Haven? No, even then, he is the Black Star. He's been outstanding ever since his entrance, hasn't he?"

"He has..."

Aldric turned his head to stare at his second son.

Where was he getting with this?

"....."

Without saying anything, Linus turned his head and their gazes met. Just slightly, Aldric noticed something peculiar in his second's son expression.

However, he couldn't quite tell what it was.

"Do you think he's been hiding something from us? No matter how you look at it, that seems to be the case."

"....."

At his words, Aldric remained silent.

He couldn't deny his son's words. There was certainly something about Julien that didn't make sense.

"He must've had his reasons."

"Which are?"

"....I don't know."

"Ha."

Linus scoffed slightly. He found the situation ridiculous. Aldric on the other hand, remained silent while looking back at the projection.

"You don't have to worry about it too much."

"Why?"

Aldric didn't respond immediately.

Rather, he swiped his hand and replayed the video again. This time, he didn't focus his attention on Julien but a figure at the back.

With dull gray eyes, he stood motionless as Julien took the spotlight.

Raising his hand, he pointed it towards the projection.

"....Because of him."

"So they've all died...?"

In a quiet room outside of his office, Atlas leaned against the wall as he talked to the air.

"....Not even one survivor?"

—No.

A soft voice replied to his left.

"I see."

Atlas closed his eyes to absorb the information. One lower seat and several Fiend ranks had been sent to delay Delilah. The goal had been to delay her for as long as possible, which should've been possible given the strength of the group.

However, things took an unexpected turn.

"How did she do it?"

It had to be noted that the ones sent weren't just random people that the organization had sent. They were extremely powerful people.

Their loss was a pretty severe blow to them.

—I am not entirely sure. However, from what I was able to gather, she used a domain.

"A domain?"

Atlas frowned. A domain was something that anyone who reached Tier 5 would be able to create. It was usually something that most individuals would keep a secret since it was a sort of trump card.

That being said...

"...Have you gotten any information on what her domain does? I'm still struggling to comprehend the situation."

The fact that so many strong people had died was a big deal. Especially when it only took her four to five hours to do so.

Was her domain really that powerful?

—From what I'm gathering through the memory fragments of those who died, her domain is an entirely different world that absorbs the energy of anyone who is inside. I believe she's capable of absorbing their energy and making it into her own.

"Is that so...?"

—So far, yes. We're still looking into it.

"....."

Atlas frowned with a grim look.

Although it was still not fully clear, if her power was really like that, then something became clear to him.

"It seems like we need to re-evaluate her strength."

Not only that, but...

"If she's capable of absorbing their energy and making it her own, then she's also a lot more dangerous than we initially believed."

—I agree.

"Hmm."

Atlas's frown deepened. The situation was a lot more serious than he had anticipated. He was just about to say something else when his brow lifted and he turned to look away.

"Ah."

He suddenly felt a movement coming from his office and a smile finally appeared on his lips.

"It seems like someone is about to wake up."

I wasn't sure for how long I was out for. All I could remember was seeing the world turn bright before darkness engulfed my consciousness.

It was all a fog from there.

"...."

When I regained consciousness, I found that I was lying on the cold hard ground.

It felt rather uncomfortable.

"Ugh."

Groaning, I rubbed my head. It was throbbing in pain, and the light coming from the top was stinging my eyes.

My eyes squinted as I used my arm to cover my eyes.

"Where am I...?"

I was confused at first, but as I looked around, I realized exactly where I was.

"Ah."

And then I remembered exactly what had happened. For a brief moment, my body tensed. Where is he? Did he figure something out...? As I looked around tensely, I was relieved to see that I was the only one in the room.

At the same time, the fact that I was still alive proved that everything went well.

"Haaa..."

I closed my eyes to feel my body.

'It's a mess.'

The mana flow in some places was slower than others, and my core had shrunk slightly. However, besides all of that, it was safe to say that I was out of danger.

No, rather...

'I think I've gotten stronger.'

I wasn't very conscious back then, but the moment that I defeated the mammoth, I remembered seeing a notification.

The notification was accompanied by something else.

But I hadn't been able to tell exactly what it was. Thankfully, I could check.

?| EXP + 67%

As expected.

It was a notification indicating my increase in experience for having defeated the mammoth.

I hadn't felt anything back then because of my circumstances, but now that I was out of danger, I could tell that I had gotten stronger.

"....."

Lowering my head, I squeezed my hand. My grip was rather weak and my reaction was slower than my brain input.

"Doesn't feel like I've gotten stronger at all..."

Rather, it felt as if I had become disabled. Of course, I knew it was merely because I was still not in full health.

'Still, this is quite a lot of experience.'

But it made sense considering the strength of the creature which was around Tier 4 to High Tier 3.

But if that wasn't all...

[Midterms: You have overcome the event.]

A new notification flashed in my vision.

It was accompanied by another.

[You were able to prevent a tragedy from occurring in the midterms. Besides a few casualties, the midterms have proceeded smoothly.]

■| Game Progression EXP + 11%

Game Progression : [0%—[18%]—————100%]

"Aahhh..."

A familiar sensation washed over me. It was one that I thought I was starting to get used to, but unlike the previous times, I could feel the energy coming into my body was far more thick and pure than the previous ones.

My mana core started to expand rapidly and I felt my body surge with strength.

The bar continued to rise before my very eyes. It continued like this until it eventually stopped at Level 25.

■| Character Progression EXP + 207%

Exp : [0%—[23%]—————100%]

"Haha."

An unbelievable amount of progress. One that was supposed to take me months to achieve.

...And yet, I had managed to achieve it all in one single event.

'I'm starting to catch up with the top cadets.'

While I wasn't exactly sure about how strong they currently were, accounting for their rate of progress and the manuals they had, most of the top cadets were Tier 3 and above.

....And unlike them, I wasn't as talented. If not for the quest, I would've probably still been stuck at Level 20. Perhaps, not even in Tier 2.

It was the painful reality of my situation.

But I wasn't disheartened. Talent or no talent, I was going to work to the point where I became the best version of what I could ever be.

'That much I have to do.'

[Calamity Progress]

Aoife K. Megrail : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Kiera Mylne : Slumber

: Progress - 9%

Evelyn J. Verlice : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

A new notification appeared. One that I easily dismissed as I struggled to help myself up.

'How long have I been out for?'

".....!"

It was at that moment that I spotted a figure sitting down on the couch on the opposite end, and I froze.

He was staring at me with an interested look.

'When did he get here...?!'

I was so sure that I had been the only person in the room just a few moments ago.

How was he here?

"The more I look at you, the more interesting you become in my eyes."

His gentle and clear voice echoed within the room. As his golden pupils stared at me, he cocked his head slightly.

"I was just outside when I noticed something irregular coming from your body. I thought something had gone wrong and came to check on you, but..."

He lowered his head to scan my body up and down.

"Do you know how surprised I was to see your strength suddenly jump up out of nowhere?"

Atlas appeared just before me.

Before I even had the chance to say anything, he went on to grasp my hand.

I wanted to take it back, but as if I had lost all energy from my body, I found myself unable to resist.

"...."

I stared at him with bated breath.

I could practically feel the beat of my heart drum loudly inside of my mind. Anxiety was starting to creep within me. Did he find something out? Is he...

He eventually let go of my wrist before muttering,

"....So interesting."

Interesting?

What did he find out?

"You have an interesting constitution."

"....?"

"While your injuries are still present, you were able to absorb some of the medical properties of the pill. It's because of that reason that you were able to become stronger. From what I can tell, you're halfway into becoming Tier 3. That's a considerable jump. Not bad."

The fuck is this guy...

'Ah.'

Then I understood.

'....He's misunderstanding the reason for why my strength increased.'

He didn't find anything about the 'quest' or the fact that there was anything wrong with me. That I wasn't the real Julien.

I took the opportunity to roll with the misunderstanding.

"Thank you."

"Hmm, there's no need to thank me for something you were born with. You can however thank me for saving you."

"...."

I remained quiet at that.

"Oh?"

His brow raised as he turned to look at me.

"Not even a word of thanks? It seems like you're taking my abilities for granted."

"...."

I again said nothing.

However, as if understanding what I meant, he leaned back on his chair.

"You were lucky."

Raising his hand, he pulled his black glove down while clenching his hand at the same time.

"Orphion isn't a drug that is designed for human consumption. It was originally designed for the boss monster in the labyrinth. The fact that you were able to withstand so much energy is itself a miracle."

Closing his hand into a fist, the leather glove squeaked slightly as he turned his attention back to me.

"....The only reason you were able to survive is because of me. Besides Delilah, there aren't many people that are capable of taking out that much energy from you. But I bet you knew that."

He suddenly smiled.

"Is that why you took the drug?"

"....Yes."

I nodded then.

I wasn't carrying on with the misunderstanding this time.

It was the truth.

The reason why I took the drug while knowing the consequences that would come from taking it was because I was certain he would heal me.

I knew my worth.

....And so, I used it.

Them.

"Ha."

With a soft laugh, Atlas covered his mouth with his curled index finger. He seemed to be trying to hide his smile.

I just sat there in silence and waited for him to say something.

Eventually, he did.

....And his next words stunned me.

"It seems like we need to consider upgrading your potential within the organization."

Chapter 118 Trip [1]

Clank—

I was still in a daze as I came out of the office and walked past the corridor that led toward the exit of the building.

As I walked, I could hear the rhythmical echo of my steps.

They were soft, and yet, they powerfully rang within my mind.

'...Upgrade my potential?'

It wasn't as though I didn't understand what he was trying to imply.

After going through the memories of the few members of the Dragon Charred Unit, I was able to get a better idea of how things worked within the organization.

It was unfortunate that they had never been in the main headquarters. Otherwise, I would've been able to go myself.

There seemed to be a special requirement for one to be able to enter the main headquarters.

Or maybe there wasn't? It could just be that the group was too unimportant for the organization to have them enter the main headquarters. fre(e)

It was a bit of a pity considering that I wanted to see how it looked.

Still...

I thought back to Atlas's words.

"Crazy "

It was because I knew what his words meant that I thought the entire situation was crazy.

'What rank even am I...?'

Nothing within the memories of the four members of the Dragon Charred Unit told me anything about what the previous Julien's potential rank was. Was he planning on upgrading my potential to 'Fiend' rank?

There was still so much that I didn't know.

".....I'll need to figure things out better."

"What do you need to figure out?"

A soft voice reached me from the front and I stopped. Looking up, my brows jumped up slightly.

"Chancellor?"

Delilah.

She was standing before me. What was she doing here...? No, that was a stupid question. She most likely had some important business to attend to. This was after all where Atlas and a few other important figures's offices were.

"...."

As expected, Delilah didn't answer me and just stared at me.

She didn't need to say a thing for me to understand what her gaze meant.

'What are you doing here?'

I pursed my lips for a brief moment before answering,

"I was called here by the Vice-Chancellor."

"Atlas?"

"Yes."

"...."

For a brief moment, her eyes turned inky as they stared straight into me. In that short moment, it felt as though I was being sucked right into her eyes.

An unknown and desolate world flashed in my vision briefly before her figure reappeared before me.

"What did you do?"

"....I answered his questions."

I answered shortly after as I took a moment to adjust my mind.

It wasn't a lie. I was really answering his questions.

"He was interrogating me regarding the incident that took place in the Labyrinth."

"....And?"

"I am done. I was just about to go back to the dorms."

"...."

Yet again, Delilah didn't say a thing. She simply stared at me for a good moment before resuming her steps.

As she passed me, she glanced at me before mumbling,

"Get some rest."

Tak. Tak. Tak.

The sound of her heels clicking against the corridor's pavement echoed in the air. I stood still for a moment and stared at her departing back.

For some reason...

...Her back looked extremely tired.

That night, Aoife and Evelyn were just coming back from the arena grounds. Overall, their group managed to rank second. It was a fairly good result. However, neither of the girls spoke while walking back to the dorms.

They both seemed to be immersed in their own thoughts.

".....It's strange."

Perhaps not realizing it, Evelyn let her true thoughts out. Aoife's steps paused and she turned to look at her

"What is?"

"Uh, ah?"

Evelyn looked around stunned and her steps similarly paused. Then, as if realizing what she had done, she covered her mouth.

"Ah."

"...."

Aoife stared at her for a brief moment. She could more or tell what she was thinking about.

"Is it about Julien?"

"....!"

As expected. Evelyn's reaction told her all that she needed to know. And it was her reaction that made her curious.

"What do you mean by strange?"

"Ah, no, it's..."

Evelyn fumbled over her words. However, under Aoife's intense gaze, her face scrunched up and she eventually relented and shared her true thoughts.

"Julien. He's strange."

"As in?"

"He... He wasn't that strong before."

"...."

"Like, he was okay. He was supposed to be okay. Every time I see him, he changes. I don't know how to explain it."

Evelyn tried to find the right words to articulate herself. However, in the end, she could only look at Aoife with a helpless smile.

It seemed a little sad too.

"...I just don't think he's the Julien that I know. Whenever I see him, I see someone completely different. Even when he changed I could tell slightly it was him, but now?"

Evelyn shook her head and scoffed slightly.

"Ha. I don't know. I really don't know."

"...."

"...."

Noticing Evelyn's expression, Aoife didn't pursue the matter further. Rather, her words echoed deep within her mind. 'Someone completely different? Every time I see him, he changes...?'

Evelyn's words lingered in her mind, nagging at her even after they parted ways and she returned to the room.

Laying down on her bed, Aoife blankly stared at the ceiling.

"Changes..."

Muttering to herself, she closed her eyes. In the darkness that suddenly overtook her vision, a figure appeared.

He stood in the middle of a large chamber, his appearance seeming to eclipse that of everyone around him with his cold expression. Threads covered the entire space, with a gigantic creature standing not far from where he was.

It was the same scene from *The Labyrinth*.

Even now, it had been deeply imprinted in her mind, making it impossible for her to forget.

How could she forget?

Aoife doubted anyone could forget that moment.

'Someone completely different? Every time I see him, he changes.'

Yet again, Evelyn's words rang in her mind. They echoed over and over and over again. Almost like the buzz of a mosquito. One that she couldn't kill regardless of what she did. Eventually, opening her eyes to reveal her golden pupils, Aoife sat up.

Looking around, she reached out for her communication device.

"Ehwew."

Taking a deep breath, Aoife fiddled with the communication device in her hands.

She didn't really know why she was doing this, but it was starting to become impossible for her to sleep.

Therefore, pressing on the communication device, she started to speak.

"Hey, uncle~"

As she spoke, her voice came out rather coy. Were anyone to see her like this, they'd be stunned out of their minds.

But her uncle was an exception.

Besides her brother, he was the only person she respected.

"....Is it possible for you to check something for me?"

The next day.

News of the incident had been kept hushed by the Academy. For some reason, the Academies involved didn't utter a single thing about the missing cadets. In the end, the situation seemed to have been resolved by the higher-ups.

The details of how they had done it were not something that I was keenly aware of. However, I could more or less imagine what had happened.

'He's probably done something to them.'

Atlas.

Not only was he powerful. He was also a member of the royal family. If he wanted to keep a situation quiet, then he had the capabilities and resources to do so.

It was scary when one thought about it.

That being said, I didn't really understand why he had decided to cover up the matter when his goal had been to make this situation as big as possible. Did he think it was going to be a waste of time?

Perhaps.

"It's unfortunate that the collaboration with the other Academies has to be halted here. I'm not sure about what happened, but from what I've heard, the individual performance will be paused."

Currently, I was sitting in the lecture room. Everyone was present. From time to time, I would get an occasional glance, but I ignored it and kept my attention focused on Professor Bridgette.

She was currently detailing us on the situation.

"....I know that you are all disappointed by this. I am too."

As she said this, I looked around. Eventually, my gaze fell on Kiera. She was wearing the biggest smile I had ever seen her wear in a long time. She almost seemed to be gloating. No, rather, she was gloating.

I could more or less tell why she was like that.

'She hates studying.'

It became obvious to me from the moment we became team members. Even though we weren't meant to be a study group, there were times in between breaks that we took as a chance to study.

Kiera was the only one that refused to do any of that. I could still picture the look of scorn she gave us back then.

"...."

No, I didn't have to picture it.

Turning my head, I could see Kiera looking at me with that same expression of the past. It was as if she was telling me, 'See? You should've listened to me and just rested.'

That gaze was followed by a subtle laugh.

"On the bright side, however, I have great news for all of you!"

The Professor's bright words attracted my attention yet again. The same was true for the other cadets who all turned to look at her.

"We will be going on a trip!"

"...."

"...."

I blinked my eyes as the classroom fell silent. Everyone was having a hard time understanding what was going on.

Professor Bridgette went on to explain,

"After all that hard work, it's about time we all relax, no? While this excursion won't exactly be a vacation, we will allow you all to take some time to visit the place that we're visiting. It's a nice change of pace after all the time you've spent at the Academy."

The sudden news took everyone by surprise. However, shortly after many of the cadets waved their fists in the air in celebration.

I couldn't blame them. I too felt the same way.

....Well, maybe?

Was there ever a thing like a break for me?

'I hope I don't get a quest.'

Although I hated to say it, I needed a break. Not only because of the injuries in my body which had yet to heal, but also because I needed time to adjust my mental state.

Though I was able to keep myself from showing it on the outside, I was starting to pick up certain habits that weren't mine.

Like...

Scratch. Scratch.

'Damn itchy.'

The more time passed the more obvious it was becoming to me that the other personalities that I had tried to integrate with me were starting to take over if even slightly.

I needed time to focus on myself and separate my real self from the other personalities that were within my body.

That being said, I knew that I had to discard a few.

It was impossible for me to keep my sanity with the amount that I had. That was simply too much of a burden for my mind.

I needed to let go of a few.

'I'll find some time to do that later.'

Amidst the cheers of the crowd, Professor Bridgette clapped her hands. Clap. Clap—! In doing so, the classroom once again quieted down.

Sporting her trademark smile, the professor looked at us before taking out a sheet of paper from behind the podium.

"That being said. Just because the individual examinations have been postponed, that doesn't mean the written ones have. Please take out your equipment. The test will be—"

Bang—!

A loud banging sound echoed from the distance before the Professor could even get her words out.

It was followed by a high-pitched curse.

"Fuck!!"

This time, turning my head, it was my turn to laugh.

"Ha."

.com

Chapter 119 Trip [2]

Scratch-scratch

The sound of scribbling pencils rang out in the classroom. In the otherwise quiet classroom, the cadets were focused on the papers in front of them.

Some were scratching their heads in confusion, while others were fully focused on the paper.

I was too as I filled in the questions in front of me.

Flip—

Flipping the page over, my eyes paused on the next question.

[Describe the weakness of this monster]

"....."

I paused for a second and frowned. Not because the question was hard, but because it was a little too easy.

'Isn't this the boss monster of the Labyrinth?'

<<Glacial Behemoth>>

Staring at the image in front of me, I didn't know what to say. Was this on purpose? In the end, I answered with the only answer that I knew.

'The tusk.'

That was the monster's weakness. I had killed it using a different method, but that was the answer. If one would look back on the replay of the event, they'd notice that the tusk was the only area the cadets were targeting.

This was the reason.

'....This is going well.'

Flip—

Flipping over to the next page, I went on to answer the next few questions.

There were no more freebies like the mammoth question, but they were all something that I was able to answer. In the end, all that studying I paid off.

Before I knew it, time had passed and it was the end of the test. Marking the end of the examination was the Professor's voice.

"That's it for the examination. Please hand over what you have written."

Several groans later, the papers were all placed over the podium where the Professor was.

"...I'm done. I'm done."

Along the way, a listless Kiera handed over her paper.

This was probably hell for her.

"Wow perfect! I will be grading this over the next few days. Hopefully, all of you have done well."

Cheerfully stacking the papers together, she went on to speak about the trip.

"Going back on the news of the trip. We will be departing next week so all of you pack the necessary equipment and things before we leave. We will be there for about a week, or maybe more. It will depend on how long it will take for us to clear the problem."

Professor Bridgette went on to explain a few more details regarding the trip.

The location of the trip was 'Ellnor'.

It was a small town located on the outskirts of the Empire's border with the Aetheria Empire. There were no notable conflicts between the two Empires. In fact, they could somewhat be considered to be on even terms.

Standing at its center, the Nurs Ancifa Empire was surrounded by all three Empires.

Because it was the strongest, it was usually viewed as a dangerous entity. It was for that reason that the Empire tried to maintain a form of 'relationship' with the Aetheria Empire.

Ellnor was located near the border. Right next to a large ridge that separated the two Empires.

Currently, there was a little problem in Ellnor.

The Professor had yet to disclose what the problem was. However, given that we had been sent, it wasn't anything that we shouldn't be able to handle.

'.....Yeah, bullshit.'

I could just tell that a problem was going to come up.

Call it instincts.

"In any case. Please make sure that you are all ready for the upcoming trip. Oh, and before I forget. Make sure you study for the second part of the examination which will be held a day before the trip."

Professor Bridgette left shortly after that.

"....."

I sat in silence while the entire classroom stared at the door with blank looks. The silence was shortly shattered by Kiera who slumped down on her chair with a lost look.

".....Second part? This was only the first part?"

She went on to let out a hollow laugh.

"It's me. I'm the problem."

"At least you know."

Next to her, Josephine laughed. Kiera turned her head to glare at her, but it wasn't anything intimidating.

"Next time. When you see us studying, how about you study?"

"Ha... Shit."

I packed my stuff while I shifted my attention away from them.

As I packed up my stuff, a shadow cast over the area that I was in. Surprised, I looked up to see Kiera standing in front of me. When did she get here?

Her face was currently twisted. Almost as if she was constipated.

"What?"

I frowned.

She wasn't here to fight me for laughing at her, right?

"You..."

With a hoarse voice, Kiera fiddled with her fingers. It really did seem like she was struggling to speak.

I waited for a good couple of seconds for her to speak.

However, seeing that she was still not saying anything, I took my stuff with me and stood up. Only then did she react as she grabbed onto the sleeve of my shirt.

"Wait."

"What?"

"That..."

Kiera looked away.

I frowned again. What's up with her?

Her next words came out in a whisper, but I was still able to understand them. It was because I understood them that I had a hard time comprehending the situation.

"S...study... Help me."

"...."

So much that all I could do was stare at her with wide eyes.

"What?"

"...."

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"...."

"Ah, fuck. Whatever. Fuck it. Treat it as if I didn't as—"

"Why?"

Kiera stopped to look at me. She roughly tied up her platinum hair behind her while letting go of my sleeve.

"....I don't have anyone else to ask."

I blinked.

"What?"

"You heard me already."

"...."

I once again fell into silence. Eventually, my eyes fell on Josephine in the distance, but just as I was about to suggest her, Kiera cut me off.

"That idiot is dumber than me. And I can't stand her."

But you can stand me...?

"I'm busy."

In the end, I still rejected her.

"Busy with what? You also have no friends."

"....."

I had no words to say to that. I wanted to refute her words, but as I opened my mouth to do it, I found myself at a complete loss for words.

"See? You have no friends."

"....And you?"

"I..."

It was her turn to be at a loss for words. In the end, she changed the conversation again.

"Whatever fuck. Just teach me."

"What do I get in all of this...?"

The next set of exams was in a week. Taking into account that my body was injured and I couldn't train, I could help her study.

But it needed to be worth my time.

".....I'll let you hold my hand?"

Moving to the side, I prepared to leave when she pulled at my sleeve again.

"No, wait...!"

I stopped and looked back at her again. Her face twitched, and in the end, she mumbled,

"Money? Is that okay with y-"

"Meet me at six every morning at the dorm's study area. I'll help you out then. My fee is 100 Rend per hour. Don't be late. I will charge every minute that you're late."

I left after saying my terms.

Kiera stood stunned for several seconds before she screamed from behind.

"Wait, hold on! This is a fucking robbery! Hey...!"

—There's nothing strange about him.

A familiar voice echoed from the communication device in Aoife's hands.

—He seems to have changed a little when he was young but don't we all change after we reach a certain age? You've certainly changed a lot once you reached your teens. Uagh... Just thinking about what I had to go through.

Listening to his voice, her lips pulled into a slight pout. It was mainly because it was a voice message and she couldn't answer back.

'...What change? I'm the same.'

—This is all I was able to find. I'm not sure why you're interested in him, but this is all I could find for you. If you have anything else you want to ask me, you can just come visit me at the office. You know where to find me.

The voice message ended there.

"...."

Aoife stood alone with a frown. She wasn't satisfied with what she received from her uncle. In fact, Aoife was even more certain that something was up.

"He's not the type to answer like that."

Atlas. Her uncle. He was usually very thorough with his research.

The last time she had asked him to do something like this, he had given her a thorough file with all sorts of details.

"It's odd."

But at the same time, she didn't understand why her uncle of all people would lie to her.

....Was there some sort of secret that she wasn't supposed to be aware of? Something that only a few members of the royal family knew?

"Hmm."

The more Aoife thought about it, the stranger she felt the situation was.

"Aoife! Are you coming? Next class is about to start!"

"Ah...!? Yes."

In the end, however, she was unable to think further as someone called out for her. Quickly putting the communication device away, Aoife cleared her throat and followed.

As she walked, her hand kept fiddling over the communication device.

Something was up.

But for now...

Aoife took a deep breath.

'I'll take things slowly.'

It was early in the morning of the next day.

"Huaam."

Yawning, Kiera looked at the time. It was exactly 5:30 in the morning. Today was Saturday and so there were no lessons.

It was supposed to be her day off, but...

"Fuck."

Regret had already made its way into Kiera's mind.

"What was I even on?"

Ruffling her hair, Kiera dressed herself in casual clothes. Cotton white shirt, some jeans, and a white hat. This was how she usually dressed on weekends.

Coming out of her room, she did one last check of the place before coming down to the ground floor.

'He said he'll wait for me there...'

Indeed, the moment Kiera came down, she saw him sitting by himself on one of the tables with several books open and a 00:30

small pile of papers on his right. Judging from the empty cup of coffee on his side and the several books open, he appeared to have been here long before the arranged time.

"Crazy bastard."

The more time she spent with him, the more of a lunatic Julien appeared in her eyes.

He was simply...

Inhuman.

If he wasn't studying, he was training, and if he wasn't training, he was studying. In Kiera's mind, it was starting to make sense how someone like him was able to remain at the top.

Even Leon and Aoife weren't as crazy as him.

"Oy, I'm here."

Calling out for him, Kiera sat down on the seat opposite him.

".....What do I do?"

As she asked, she placed the book she brought from her dorm onto the table; [Magic Theory]

Flip—

Flipping it open, she paused on the last page she was on.

"I-"

"No."

Kiera was stopped halfway through her sentence. Blinking, she looked up to meet Julien's hazel eyes. Before she could say anything, he pointed at the piles of papers on his right.

"You're doing those."

"...."

Kiera closed her book without saying a word. She then stood up and turned around. Yeah, fuck that... But just as she was about to leave, Julien's cold voice echoed from behind her.

"You were the one who asked me to help you."

"Uh, yeah but..."

"Do you want to pass or not?"

"...."

Kiera's face scrunched up. Pass... She wanted to pass. No, she had to pass. It was a requirement her father had set for her in order to stay. Were she not pass, then she'd have to quit the Academy.

'I can't have that.'

It wasn't that she liked the Academy. However, it was less stifling than her home. There was no way she'd want to go back there.

"Ugh."

In the end, despite every part of her not wanting to be here, she sat back down.

Taking a deep breath, she took one of the sheets. There were over a hundred of them.

'I'll never be able to finish them...'

As she groaned, her eyes paused on the first question.

"Uh?"

A strange sound came out of her mouth the moment she stared at the paper. Blinking several times to make sure she was seeing correctly, her head flicked up.

Without hesitation, she went on to grab another paper.

"This..."

Her eyes widened yet again.

Opening her mouth, Kiera found herself losing her words. But in the end, grabbing another sheet, she managed to say,

"....Did you write all the questions yourself?"

Chapter 120 Trip [3]

"....Ugh."

Kiera groaned while staring at the paper in front of her. How much time had passed since she started? Staring at the clock, her expression twisted.

Three hours...

Kiera looked up with a hopeful look.

"Can I take a break?"

"No."

".....I'm going to die."

Kiera sprawled over her desk and groaned. She felt lightheaded and her body felt limp. She didn't feel like doing anything.

Akh. How many problems have I solved already...?

Too many. It was too many.

No, but that wasn't the problem. Frowning, Kiera raised her head and glared at Julien.

"Oy, at least teach me something! I've been spending all my time doing these damn questions. You've yet to teach me anything!"

Kiera was starting to get pissed off. Throughout the entire three hours that she had spent here, she had yet to learn anything from him. All she did was solve the questions in front of her.

....He had done nothing to help her the entire time.

"At least tell me how to solve this question. I've been stuck on it for the past thirty minutes."

Kiera pushed the paper Julien's way.

The entire time he had been absorbed in reading his book. Finally, taking his eyes away from the book in his hands, he looked up at her. Their eyes met and he closed the book in his hands.

Julien, who had been absorbed in his own studies, turned his attention to the question sheet.

"Rune study?"

"....Yes. I don't know how to do it."

"I see."

Julien nodded briefly before turning his attention towards the books scattered across the table. Carefully looking through them, he picked a book up and handed it to her.

"The answer is in here."

He then returned his attention back on his book.

"....Uh?"

Stunned, Kiera alternated her gaze between the book and him. What sort of nonsense...?

"The fuck? Aren't you supposed to teach me? I'm not paying so much money for you to tell me to look at a book. I can just-"

"That's not it."

Flip—

Julien flipped to the next page of the book he was reading. Without taking his eyes away from it, he went on to explain.

"I'm not here to teach you how to solve a problem."

"Wh-"

"I'm here to teach you how to study."

"....?"

Lifting his gaze, their eyes met.

"I'm not here to coddle you."

His tone lowered. So much so that Kiera suddenly found herself unconsciously sitting up straight. Wait, what the fuck?

"....I can teach you. I don't have a problem with that. Teaching others is one of the best methods to learn."

"Then...?"

"What about you? What will you do when I no longer decide to teach you or you run out of money?"

"I..."

Kiera frowned. She didn't really know how to answer. What will she do? Would she just hire another tutor, or just go back to her old ways?

"I'm not here to teach you subjects. That's the Professor's job. I'm here to teach you how to take care of yourself for the future."

Julien pressed his hand against the book and pushed it back.

"....I won't always be here to teach you. You need to learn to be self-reliant. If you want to improve your grades you should first learn to do it without relying on others. People will only help you out so much. The one person who will never fail you is yourself. Rely on yourself."

Kiera lowered her gaze to stare at the book in front of her. Doing so, her brows furrowed. She was just about to say something when she noticed his gaze.

"....."

The words that she was about to say never left her mouth. Eventually, she took the book and opened it.

"....What am I supposed to do now?"

"You look for the answer."

"Is that it? I can do that my-"

"Discipline first. You need to learn to be disciplined. If I tell you the answer, you'll eventually forget it. The same isn't true if you figure it out yourself. You need to discipline yourself to find the answer without asking. Don't look for a lazy way out."

"Ugh."

Groaning, Kiera proceeded to look for the answer.

'Fucking bastard. Just say that you don't want to teach me... No need to come up with such a roundabout way of saying it.'

"Ah, found it!"

It took her several minutes but she eventually found the answer. Her eyes lit up and she quickly started to fill the answer sheet.

Kiera felt a weird feeling of satisfaction as she answered the question.

It was hard to describe, and her lips unconsciously pulled up. Trying her best to keep them even, she went on to the next question.

Yet again it was a complicated question and she looked up at Julien.

"What about this one? How do I—Ah."

Halfway through her sentence she realized her mistake and covered her mouth.

"Fuck, this..."

Pursing her lips, she looked around and found the right book, [Body Studies], before proceeding to find the right answer. There were times when she wasn't sure about the answer even with the aid of the book, and ended up writing whatever she could piece together with the information.

Either way, Julien would just ignore her every attempt to talk to him.

At some point, she stopped looking for him and just focused on her task at hand.

"Ah, so it's like this."

"Ugh, fuck... My head hurts. I want to take a break."

"Shit."

"I want to die."

"I'm dead."

"...Oh, so it's like this."

Throughout the hours of the study session, Kiera would always let out an occasional complaint. However, despite that, she would always recover after swearing for a good minute.

Time ticked and before anyone knew it, a few more hours passed.

"...Uh?"

Opening her eyes, Kiera looked around her.

"The hell?"

Looking around, she noticed that it was dark outside. Wiping the saliva from her mouth using her wrist, she blinked several times.

"What time is it?"

Before she knew it, she had fallen asleep.

"....Ah!"

Her eyes widened when she looked at the clock.

It was 10 P.M.

Abruptly, Kiera stood up and raised her head.

"Hey, shithead! Why didn't you wake me u—Uh?"

Kiera stopped and looked towards the empty seat in front of her. Realization soon dawned on her and she slumped back in her chair.

"Ah, fuck. He left didn't he?"

Ruffling her hair, Kiera blankly stared at the ceiling.

"...."

She felt lightheaded and drained. She would much rather prefer his hellish training than this. Even so...

"....I guess I did good."

Kiera felt a certain sense of satisfaction from having gotten so much work done. Usually, she wouldn't have done more than ten minutes' worth of work. That would in turn make her feel like shit for an entire day.

Things were different now.

"I could get used to this feeling."

It didn't feel so bad.

But...

"....That fucker really went ahead and left without waking me up."

It sort of pissed her off.

"If that bastard charges me even a single extra Rend then—

Hm?"

Pausing, Kiera's gaze fell on the papers in front of her. She hadn't noticed because it was dark, but waving her hand, a trail of flames manifested in the air illuminating the surroundings.

"This..."

Kiera's eyes widened.

Taking a closer look at the paper, her eyes paused on the numerous notes around it. There was also a mark written above each paper.

<39/100>

[You did better here. However, there are a lot of areas you can improve on. For example, for this question, the answer was the 'Alpha Rune' rather than the 'Delta Rune'. Compared to the 'Delta Rune' which speeds up the gathering of mana, the 'Alpha Rune' slows it down so that the flow is smoother. For the spell [Fire Veil] the 'Alpha Rune' is more appropriate as the spell would shatter if created too fast...]

For every question that Kiera got wrong, she'd receive a long detailed explanation of what she did wrong and what the real answer was.

"What in the..."

Dropping the first paper, Kiera looked at the other papers.

Flip. Flip. Flip—

Kiera quickly skimmed through the numerous papers. Her expression changed with each paper that she looked through.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

All the papers. They were the same. Filled with the same notes and corrections.

Kiera had done a lot of questions today. There were at least more than a couple hundred.

Counting all the ones she got wrong...

"Fuuuuck."

Kiera let out a slow curse.

It was no wonder he didn't wake her up. How long did it take him to do all of this?

"This guy is crazy."

Batshit crazy.

Flip—

Flipping another one of the assignments, she noticed a note slipping from it.

"...Uh?"

Picking it up, Kiera noticed that there was something written on it.

Curious, Kiera read what was written on it.

[You owe me 700 Rend. I won't count the time you were sleeping. Make sure you pay up. Come at the same time tomorrow.]

The note ended there.

It was short but the meaning was clear.

"...."

Staring at it with a blank look, Kiera's lips pursed. Then, looking down at the documents and seeing all the notes written, she crumbled up the note in her hand.

".....This isn't good for me."

*

From that day onward, Kiera showed up every morning at the exact same time. There was a noticeable difference in her attitude compared to the first time she came.

While she did occasionally grumble, it wasn't as much as before.

In fact, most of the time she would remain silent while solving the problems next to Julien. It was an odd sight.

The two of them studying together.

"I'm not seeing things wrong, right?"

"Is this for real?"

"Quickly pinch my face so that I-Akh!"

Given how contrasting their personalities were, nobody expected such a development.

Regardless, nobody dared to ask anything about it. Julien and Kiera weren't exactly the easiest people to talk to.

"....."

"....."

Despite what seemed to be a tense atmosphere around the two, the reality was that it was strangely peaceful.

At least to Kiera who did nothing but focus on the questions.

"Ah, so it's like that..."

It was an odd feeling for her. She couldn't quite explain why she was like that. However, she had an idea of why.

Looking up slightly, her eyes paused on the figure that sat opposite her.

For the first time ever, she looked at him properly. From his neatly arranged hair and suit to his careful movements as he flipped over the pages.

He appeared flawless in everything that he did, but...

'His eyes.'

Just faintly, Kiera could see the dark circles beneath his eyes.

She pursed her lips at the sight as her head lowered to stare at the question sheet beneath her.

The reason behind his dark circles was clear to her. It didn't take a genius to understand. It was all because of her...

If she didn't...

'No, fuck.'

Kiera snapped out of it.

'Right, I need to focus.'

This wasn't the time for her to feel guilty. She needed to focus on studying. Looking away from Julien, Kiera once again locked in and started to fill in the questions.

With each passing day, the number of mistakes she'd make would decrease.

[51/100]

[67/100]

[73/100]

[81/100]

Seeing the noticeable improvement in her score, Kiera felt a strange sensation. It was hard to describe, but it filled her chest up with a pleasant feeling.

It felt addicting and she slowly started to look forward to the lessons. It was odd, but this was starting to become the reality of her life.

That was until...

"Everyone, the exam will be starting soon. You already know the rules so I won't repeat them."

The day of the exam finally came.

Taking a deep breath, Kiera stared at the paper in front of her. For some reason, she was shaking.

Holding her arm down she cursed to herself.

'T-the hell is wrong with you, stupid bitch? This isn't the time to be nervous.'

No, in the first place, why did she even feel nervous? She had prepared so much for it. Realistically speaking, she was ready.

So...

Why?

Why was she so nervous...?

Gradually, her head turned and her eyes locked on a certain person. An idea occurred to her and her expression twisted.

'No, no way.'

Clenching her teeth, she looked away from him.

Fuck that...

It was a ridiculous idea.

'It's not that.'

Kiera stubbornly clung to her refusal. Amidst her struggle, the Professor's voice echoed loudly.

"You may begin! Best of luck!"

Flip—

The classroom was filled with the simultaneous sound of pages turning as the cadets flipped through their textbooks in unison. Kiera joined them, and as she turned a page, her expression froze.

"Ha."

A soft laugh unconsciously escaped her lips as she stared at the question in front of her.

She didn't know how to react.

The question...

'I know it.'

She had done it before.

For the first time in a very long time, Kiera smiled.

It was a genuine smile.

And her pencil touched the paper.