

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 121 Trip [4] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 121 Trip [4]

Chapter 121 Trip [4]

"That's it. Pencils down!"

The exam ran for exactly an hour. Hearing Professor Bridgette's voice, I put my pencil down and rubbed my eyes.

"Huaam."

I unknowingly let out a yawn.

I was quite frankly tired. But it was a different kind of tiredness from the usual tiredness. For the entire week, I hadn't trained at all.

Not because I didn't want to but because I physically couldn't.

My body was still suffering from the consequences of having used the drug. I was still unsure of how long I was going to be like this.

While it sucked, it was also a good thing in its own way.

I had beaten up my body far too much over the past few months. It needed a well-deserved break.

That being said...

"Hmm."

I pinched the middle of my brows.

My head was hurting.

I was mentally exhausted. To compensate for the lack of training, I dedicated the entire week to studying. Not only that, but I also spent a major part of the time creating questions for Kiera.

In a way, it also helped me out a lot.

Staring at the question paper in front of me, I felt rather confident.

'I might even be able to get full marks.'

It wasn't exactly out of the question.

'.....I might not have slept much over the past week, but it ended up benefitting me a lot.'

The questions that I created for Kiera weren't some random questions that I copied from some exercise book. I had created each question myself. Before each question, I'd spend a decent amount of time studying the related subject before writing it down.

I only felt comfortable writing it down once I was confident I could answer it without any difficulty.

It was extremely tough on the mind but it ended up helping me big time.

...And it paid as well. It was a win-win situation for me.

'Talking about the exam, how did she do?'

I was a little curious.

She did after all pay me to learn.

I had just turned my head to stare in her direction when my eyes locked on her figure. Leaning back on her chair, she looked at her nails with a casual look. Almost as if she was expecting something.

The hell...

"Kiera, how did you do?"

That question was what she expected as she casually looked away from her nails to look at Josephine.

She lightly shrugged her shoulders while opening her palm to get a better look at her nails.

"Well, just the usual."

"So like shit?"

"Uh? No...?"

Kiera blinked and her facade broke in an instant.

"No?"

Josephine tilted her head with a frown.

"But isn't your usual shit? Like, lowest of the class type st-"

"Ugh, fuck. Alright, stop."

Kiera clicked her tongue and looked away. Drumming her hand over the table, her expression twisted. She looked rather grumpy.

I could tell at a glance what she was thinking.

I shook my head and almost laughed. What a weird girl. I was just about to turn my head away when her head turned and I locked sight with her ruby-red eyes.

Her expression changed slightly.

Staring at her for a moment, I eventually mouthed.

'Good job.'

Her brows jumped up slightly and her head turned. I shook my head yet again and covered my mouth.

"Huam."

Yeah, I really need to sleep.

".....I guess we have come to an agreement."

A man stood up and extended his hand towards Delilah.

"It's also perfect that I came at this time. I heard that the cadets are going on a trip. I hope you won't mind if I join."

"I don't."

Delilah shook the man's hand.

"Great."

With a happy smile, he lowered his head before putting his hat back on. Then, lowering his hat slightly, he excused himself and left the room.

"Well then, I'll be seeing you again."

Clank—

The door closed leaving Delilah standing by herself. Staring in the direction of where the man had left, Delilah closed her eyes and sighed.

"Inquisitor Hallowe."

Muttering to herself, she leaned to sit over her desk.

Her current feelings were mixed. Inquisitor Hallowe was a man of reputation. He was amongst the best Inquisitors within the Empire. In a sense, he was an 'ally'.

His nickname was 'The Hound'.

So long as he had a target, he'd find it no matter what. It wasn't just that, he was also extremely well-versed in finding clues and leads.

He was that type of person.

But there was one problem.

".....He works for Central."

That meant that he was directly under her father's orders. Delilah didn't feel comfortable knowing that.

Especially since she wasn't sure about his motives.

Was he here to monitor her, or was he here to carry on with his investigation?

"....."

Delilah pinched her brows. Her head was starting to ache. However, she soon calmed down.

"Right, he's going on the trip."

...The one that the first-year cadets were meant to go to. In that case, at least for now, she didn't need to worry about him monitoring her actions.

Rather, perhaps she was overthinking and he had indeed come on his own terms.

"It might be that."

She couldn't guarantee it, but at the very least, for now, she didn't have to worry about him.

Turning around, she reached for her drawer.

She needed something sweet at the moment. Something to take her mind off of the matter.

But...

"...."

Opening her drawer, all she saw were wrappers.

"....Ah."

Blinking, she slumped over her chair and blankly stared at the ceiling.

"What is life."

The next day, 11:30 A.M. on a Tuesday.

I arrived at the entrance of the Academy. I was among the last to come as most of the cadets were already present. They all appeared excited about the upcoming trip.

Me? Not so much.

'.....Just get it over with.'

The damn quest.

I had been waiting for it for an entire week, and yet, it had still yet to come.

"Haa..."

It was tiring.

"Everyone give me a second of your attention. I'd like to introduce you to someone."

Professor Bridgette was the one in charge of escorting us towards the location. Standing next to her was a man with black hair and hazel eyes. He appeared somewhat haggard with stubbles around his chin.

His hair also appeared to be in a mess, but other than that his appearance was clean.

"You may address him as Professor Hollowe. He will accompany us on the trip."

It was a rather short introduction. One that the cadets forgot shortly after as Professor Bridgette went on to say.

"Once we arrive at the city you can take some time off for yourselves. But before that, you will be paired up in groups of two. The groups will be random."

Professor Bridgette flashed a small box.

"....Please line up in a single line."

*

Ellnor.

Coming out of the portal, the first thing that hit me was the fresh air. The first breath felt almost overwhelming.

Then, it was the scenery that took my breath away.

'Wow.'

Large, towering mountains framed the horizon as a town appeared in my sight, enclosed by thick walls. With just one glance I was impressed by the sight before me. It looked like a scene straight from a fantasy book.

I wanted to get a better look at it from up close.

"Brrr~ It's cold."

Stepping out beside me, Josephine held onto her shoulders.

"T-this... Why did no one tell me it was going to be this cold?"

"F-fucking idiot. It literally said in t-the announcement."

"O-oh, yeah? T-then why are you in s-short sleeves?"

"I- I c-can take it."

Kiera tried to maintain a poker face but she was miserably failing as her lips started to tremble. Coming out from behind them was Aoife who paused to look at the scene before turning away.

Something told me she wasn't even surprised by what she was seeing.

'Why is she carrying so many books with her?'

In her hand were several books. Was she planning on studying?

But exams were over...

'Whatever. None of my business.'

Taking my eyes away from them, I looked to my right where a figure stood. Wearing a large coat that seemed to be way too big for him, Leon stared at me.

"....."

His coat was so large that the only thing I could see was his gray eyes.

Noticing my gaze, he asked,

"...What?"

"You look stupid."

"...?"

Leon cocked his head.

"It said it was going to be cold."

"And?"

"So I came prepared."

"Too prepared..."

It wasn't as though we couldn't use the mana inside of our body to heat ourselves up. At the same time, our bodies were also a lot more resistant to the cold.

He was simply being extra.

"Everyone please look over here."

Professor Bridgette waved at us with her hand.

"Like we discussed beforehand. You can take your time to explore the city. However, you must make sure that you stay with your partner. Don't separate."

My partner was Leon. I was fine with such a pairing. He was the one person I was the most comfortable being with. Not only because he knew my secret, but also because I didn't necessarily have to pretend to be someone else with him.

"It's still early in the morning. Let's meet up for dinner which will be at around 8 P.M. I wish you all the best of fun enjoying your short break."

Then, Professor Bridgette left alongside Professor Hollowe who smiled and nodded at all of us. For some reason, I felt his gaze pause on me for a bit longer.

I thought I was imagining things, but thinking about it...

'Yeah, no way I am.'

He was definitely looking at me.

I sighed internally. Hopefully, it was because of a stupid reason such as because he was a fan of mine or something like that.

Either way, I looked at Leon.

"...."

He stared back at me with a blank look.

I spoke first.

"So... What do you want to do?"

I looked around me. The other groups were still around, most probably talking about their plans.

"We have about eight to nine hours to kill. What do you want to do?"

"...Up to you."

"That..."

I sighed and nodded my head.

"Alright, let's just get into the city first. We'll decide what do to later."

"...Okay."

I looked ahead and a long road appeared. Briefly, I glanced at the mountains in the distance. I could see snow at the top.

The rocky landscape lacked greenery, with smoke billowing from within the city walls, starkly contrasting against the barren backdrop, faintly illuminated by the glow coming from the houses within the city.

I had just taken a step when I felt a tug from behind me.

"Hey."

It was Leon.

He appeared to be frowning behind his large coat.

"What?"

".....I don't look stupid."

Chapter 122 Ellnor [1]

A large gate stood before the walls of the city. As we approached, the gates parted, welcoming us into the heart of the city.

A sprawling cobblestone road unfolded before us, lined with sturdy wooden houses and bustling stalls beneath them.

"Get your fresh vegetables here! They're fresh from Arkana! You won't find fresher vegetables!"

"Buy one get one free!"

"Limited sale for today only!"

The scene was filled with clamor as the stall owners shouted on top of each other, trying their best to entice the crowd walking around the road.

I was left stunned by the unexpected sight before me.

'....This is a lot more lively than I originally anticipated.'

For a town located in the middle of nowhere, it sure seemed rather lively.

"Welcome to Ellnor."

Guards dressed in light armor welcomed us into the city. As if expecting our appearance, we didn't need to go through any checks and entered without problems.

As Leon and I passed the guards, I took notice of the strange looks that they were giving Leon.

He seemed to have noticed them too as he frowned.

I nudged slightly with my chin.

"See? They also think that you look stupid."

"...."

Without saying a word, Leon went on to take off his coat. The stares were starting to get to him. It was quite funny though. He seemed to be the type of guy to take anything literally.

"Now then."

I looked at the town in front of me and rubbed my stomach.

"....Should we get something to eat first?"

*

The town of Ellnor was a lot bigger than I originally anticipated.

In fact, it seemed to have everything that one would want from a major city. Restaurants, cafes, hotels, theaters, and even casinos.

"....Casinos?"

That...

I stopped to stare at the large building to my right. It was an eye-catching building. With the words [Casino] imprinted on the wooden board on top, a long line formed at the entrance of the building as several individuals stood by the entrance to check who entered.

'There's casinos in this world?'

The sight was something that I didn't think I could ever get used to. It just simply didn't make sense to me.

How could...

'No, never mind. I'm not here to question the decision of the game developers.'

This world. It wasn't fully medieval in style. I had long noticed this. There were a lot of modern touches added here and there.

'It's a mix of both, I guess.'

Medieval and modern.

"....Do you want to go to the casino?"

Hearing Leon's voice from beside me, I shook my head.

"No."

"Then?"

"I was just looking."

"Oh."

I tilted my head slightly to look at Leon. Why did it seem like he was disappointed?

"You want to go?"

"...."

So he did.

Well,

"Maybe later. Let's get some food first."

"....Alright."

A large river crossed the middle of the town. With the water coming down directly from the mountains above, it was extremely clear.

Around that area were several restaurants and stores. Leon and I settled for whatever looked good. Neither one of us was a picky eater so it didn't really matter.

"I'll take this."

The dish that I ordered was [Ember Roast] a slow-cooked roast that came from the meat of an Ember, an infant-ranked monster. It apparently had the properties of helping the muscles of the body recover so I deemed it fit considering my situation.

Once I was done ordering, I put the menu down and waited for Leon.

But...

"....Hmm."

He seemed indecisive about what to choose.

"There's so much..."

No, rather, overwhelmed seemed to be more fitting.

What in the...

"...This one looks nice too. Ah, no, but this one too."

Leon went on to run his forehead.

"What a dilemma."

"...."

This carried on for the next few minutes until I couldn't stand it any longer and spoke up.

"Are you ordering or not?"

".....Ah."

Leon made a difficult face. Then, looking at the waiter who also appeared exhausted, he went on to point at the menu.

"I want this."

"Starfire Curry?"

"Yes."

"Und-"

"And this."

The waiter paused. Looking at the menu, his gaze fell on me.

".....Ember Roast? The same as him."

"Yes, that too."

"Under-"

"And this."

Leon cut the waiter again as he pointed at another dish.

"...Wild dragonfish steak?"

"Yes."

"Ok-"

"Also this."

"..."

"This one too. I want to try it."

"How spicy is this one? If it isn't too spicy, I'll take this one too."

I sat baffled staring at Leon as he pointed at the dishes on the menu. Just how much is he going to eat...? What in the world?

"I'll finish off with this."

Plak—

Leon closed the menu with satisfaction. Just as he did, he frowned and opened it again, but as his eyes scanned the menu and he found nothing else, 'Plak—' he closed it again and nodded.

"Yes, that will be it."

"I-"

The waiter appeared to want to say something but held himself back. I couldn't blame him. In the end, Leon had ordered every single dish on the menu. He ended up wasting so much time when he could've just said 'I want it all'.

'This guy...'

Letting out a short sigh, I turned my head to stare at the scenery before me. It was stunning. From the tall mountains in the distance to the crystal clear river that passed through the middle of the town.

It gave off a completely different vibe than the Academy.

In a way, it was a nice change of pace.

"You know..."

Taking me out of my thoughts was Leon's voice as I turned my head to meet his gaze. The way he was looking at me was strange.

"What?"

".....You've changed."

"Uh?"

What nonsense...?

"I don't know. You just seem so different than the first time that I met you."

"....In what way?"

I didn't feel like I had changed at all if I had to be honest. Was he perhaps talking about my strength?

If so...

"That-"

"You were smiling."

"...."

I opened my eyes wide and touched my lips.

'I was smiling? When...?'

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile at all. It's weird actually."

He rubbed his arms and looked at me with an uncomfortable look.

"....Goosebumps."

"What? The fact that I smile?"

"Yeah. It's weird."

"....."

The fact that he agreed without even an ounce of hesitation was what took the words away from me.

Me smiling. Was it really that weird?

"Is it bad that I smiled?"

Was this his way of telling me that I was losing sight of the facade that I was trying to keep?

If so...

"Don't worry, I w-"

"No, not really."

"Hm?"

I blinked yet again.

"What do you mean, not really?"

"It's a good thing, I think."

"You think?"

I looked around before whispering.

"Wasn't the whole point of me doing the act so that I wouldn't be found out by the others?"

"....It was, yes."

"Then?"

"You didn't look like a person that wanted to live."

"....."

Stunned, I looked at him. I opened my mouth, but the words that I tried to get out refused to leave. Regardless of how hard I tried, I couldn't find the words to refute him.

He continued,

"I don't know about your past. In fact, I don't know much about you at all. The only thing that I can tell is that you're trying to achieve something."

"....."

"But whatever you're trying to do. It's eating at you from the inside. Or at least, used to."

"....."

"You seem more at peace lately. I don't know why. It's just that..."

Leon paused to look back. The waiter was coming with several dishes and a nice smell wafted through the air.

Wiping the corner of his mouth, he turned to look at me slightly.

".....It doesn't look like you want to die anymore."

At the same time, in a different part of the town.

"We have a situation."

Kiera stared at Josephine with a serious look. Rubbing her head, she looked to be struggling.

"What? What?"

Josephine looked at Kiera with a worried look.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Ah, well..."

Kiera eventually shook her head.

"No, never mind. It's nothing."

"Nnng? Come. Just tell me. Now I'm curious."

"I'm telling you, it's nothing."

"No, just tell me! You can't just do that and act like nothing happened."

"Haa, fuck. Whatever. You're so fucking annoying."

Glaring at Josephine, Kiera whispered something in her ear.

"Eh...? Ah. So it's just that?"

"What do you mean just that?"

"Well, it's normal, you know... Ah geez~ I thought it was something serious."

"Oy bitch, it is serious."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Go to the bathroom. I'll wait for you here."

"Are you for real?"

"Yeah."

".....Thank you."

Kiera muttered her words of thanks with a soft whisper. One that Josephine pretended to not have heard as she brought her hand near her ear.

"What? I didn't hear."

"Fuck off."

Flipping her off, Kiera walked in the direction of the bathroom.

Gradually her back faded into the crowd, and as it did, so did her direction.

"Hmm~"

And she started to hum to herself.

Turning to face the opposite direction, she headed toward a large building in the distance. One that said,

'Casino'

"Hmmm~"

Just like that, 'Kiera' had vanished.

On the outer walls of the town.

"....How is the situation? Do you notice anything out of order?"

"Not yet."

Two knights stood at the top of the walls, carefully overlooking the outside of the town with grim looks. The knight's captain, Sir Tristan Blackwood, a Tier 3 Knight, and a man in his mid-forties took out his pocket watch to look at the time.

"It's still early. We have time before the next wave."

"H-hoo."

The other knight let out a nervous breath.

".....What do you think? Do you think we can survive this one?"

"I'm sure of that."

Sir Tristan answered with a confident look. Turning his head, he looked towards the town beneath.

It was currently bustling with activity. From where he stood, he could see the smiles and happy expressions of the citizens.

But of course...

'They're used to it.'

Despite its outer appearance, the town was cursed. Behind their smiles was... a pain that only they could understand.

Sir Tristan Blackwood was one such person.

He understood their pain all too well.

'I'll be coming back soon. It's a promise. Keep this for me.'

Even now, he could still hear the sound of his sister's voice as she ventured outside of the town's walls.

But...

That had been thirty years ago. He had barely been eight back then. His sister... she didn't keep her promise.

"Huu."

Taking a deep breath, he put the pocket watch away.

The pocket watch. It was a gift from his sister. It was meant to have been a temporary gift to him. He was meant to use it to keep track of the time that she was away.

To this day, he hadn't stopped counting.

For what reason was he so uselessly clinging to the idea of his sister coming back?

"Ha."

The captain laughed to himself.

"Get the preparations ready. I'll be leaving for a while."

"Uh? You're leaving? Where to?"

Sir Tristan paused and looked back. Fiddling with the pocket watch in his pocket, he suddenly smiled.

"To meet our reinforcements."

Chapter 123 Ellnor [2]

Ding—!

A chime rang in the air as Aoife and Evelyn stepped out of the bookstore. The two of them had been paired up together.

Coming out of the store, Aoife held onto several books. The pile was quite long, with Aoife having to hold the books with both hands.

The two quietly walked around the town before finding a place with a nice view to eat.

"I'll have this."

"...."

Unlike Aoife, Evelyn took her time to choose her dish. Her eyes turned unusually serious as she scanned the menu.

Evelyn was taking so much time that Aoife felt compelled to say something.

"Are you ordering anything?"

"I am."

"It's been several minutes."

"I know."

".....So?"

"Quiet."

Aoife was taken aback. This was the first time she had seen Evelyn act that way. In fact, taking a look at her now, she seemed like a completely different person.

Even her aura appeared to be different.

What in the...

"I'll have this one, please. I'd also like it for it to be accompanied with some Givvon Wine."

"....?"

Aoife's expression turned even stranger. Givvon Wine? What the hell was that? Even though Aoife was a noble, she had never heard of such a type of wine. It sounded fancy.

Evelyn's response was cold.

"I take my food seriously."

".....I see."

The atmosphere turned awkward. But not for long as Evelyn shifted the attention towards the book on the table.

"Food aside, what did you get?"

Aoife had spent quite a bit of time searching for the books. Evelyn hadn't had the chance to check what she had bought.

"Oh, right."

Aoife flipped one of the books open.

"Besides study materials, I also got some information about the town. Since we're here on a mission, I thought it was appropriate to do so."

"Oh?"

Evelyn grew somewhat curious. Taking a sip of her water, she leaned back, brushing her purple hair behind her ear.

"What did you find out?"

"...Hmm."

Aoife frowned. Skimming through the book, she paused after a short while. Looking around, she lowered her voice to whisper,

"A necromancer."

"Eh...?!"

Evelyn had to hastily cover her mouth to prevent herself from shouting. Thankfully, no one noticed her outburst as she apologized to Aoife.

"Sorry."

"...It's fine."

Taking a breath to calm herself down, Evelyn whispered back,

"Did you say a necromancer?"

"Yes."

Aoife nodded her head with a serious expression and flipped the book to a certain page.

"According to the book, a necromancer has been haunting this city for over thirty years. Several raid parties had been sent by the town to fight against the necromancer, but unfortunately, they ended up in defeat every time. It's a powerful one."

"Wait, did you say for over thirty years?"

"Yes."

Aoife grimly nodded.

"...Thirty years."

Evelyn stayed quiet for a short moment to digest the information. Then, once she did, she asked,

"And they've never asked for help?"

"No."

Aoife shook her head.

Despite being from the Megrail family, this was the first time she had heard of such a case. This either meant that the Megrail family ignored the situation, or the town had never asked for help from outsiders.

Aoife was leaning more towards the latter.

Especially since the Empire took Rogue Necromancers extremely seriously.

Belonging to the [Curse] category, these beings possessed the ability to revive the dead and control them as 'puppets'. While individually not powerful, their power lay in their ability to amass an army of these 'puppets', rendering them a significant threat.

Especially if they were given a lot of time to grow.

".....What is this?"

Evelyn rubbed her forehead in shock.

As a noble, she understood well just how powerful a necromancer was. For the town to not have reported such a dangerous entity for so long...

"How strong is it now?"

"I don't know."

Aoife shook her head and closed the book.

"However, if the Academy sent us, it means that we can handle it."

"You think?"

".....Yes."

If the situation was serious, then her family would've already sent someone by now.

"That's a relief."

Evelyn patted her chest in relief. Just then, her eyes paused on one of the other books on the table and her expression scrunched up slightly. Raising her head, she looked at Aoife weirdly.

"Why do you have that?"

"What?"

Evelyn pointed at the book in question.

"That."

".....Ah."

Aoife covered the book with her hand.

"I wanted to cross reference some things. I have a similar book in English so I wanted to use it as a reference for when I'm learning."

"Oh."

Evelyn wasn't sure whether to believe her or not.

<Fun Jokes that will make you laugh all day>

".....How is that supposed to help? Don't tell me you actuall-"

"No."

"Rea-"

"No."

In the end, Evelyn stopped caring. There was something else that was more important. Their food was here.

"Here you go. Enjoy."

Immediately, a nice smell wafted through the air and Evelyn smacked her lips.

'Aroma. Nine out of ten. It's pleasing to the nose and isn't overbearing. It cuddles you like a warm blanket in winter.'

Picking up the fork, Evelyn was just about to dig into her food when she paused.

"Hu?"

Not far from where they were, she spotted two figures. The two were walking together without saying a thing.

It was an odd sight.

As if noticing her reaction, Aoife turned her head

"What... Ah."

The moment her head turned and she took notice of the two, her head flicked back into place. It was almost as if she was avoiding them.

Wait, what?

Confused, Evelyn looked at Aoife. However, before she could get any words out, a shadow cast over the area they were in. It was none other than Leon.

"Leon?"

"...Hello."

Looking behind him, Evelyn noticed that Julien was there as well. Looking at the river, he appeared to be lost in his own thoughts. It was a weird sight.

Turning her head, Aoife confronted Leon.

"What are you doing here?"

"...I was wondering if you found anything."

"Hmm."

Squinting her eyes, Aoife's head briefly looked back and then she sighed. Opening one of the books, she started to recount everything that she had told Evelyn.

It took no longer than ten minutes and by the time she was done, Leon was staring back at her with a frown.

"A necromancer?"

"Yes."

".....That's troublesome."

"It is. Especially since we don't know how strong it is. However, judging from the initial scouts by the Academy, it doesn't seem like something we can't handle."

"That's tr-"

Leon paused halfway through his sentence as his gaze fell on a certain book on the table. In a flash, his head flicked back to Julien and then to the book.

His unusual actions attracted the curious looks of the girls.

"What's wrong with you? Is-"

"This book."

Leon pointed at it while lowering his voice.

"Why do you have this?"

His gray eyes stared deeply into Aoife's. He almost seemed shaken.

"Didn't I tell you it's cursed?"

"...Uh? When? I just bought this—hey what are you doing!"

Splash—

Aoife's opened her eyes wide. By now, everyone's attention was on Leon who seemed like a totally different person.

"What the hell was that for?!"

Leon didn't appear all that bothered about Aoife's anger. Rather, he seemed relieved. But not for long.

Especially when he noticed Julien's gaze directed towards that crystal clear water.

His eyes seemed to be fixed on the cover of the book.

".....Oh, no."

And for the first time in Evelyn's life, she witnessed Leon's expression crumble.

Time passed. It was now time for dinner. The day had passed in a flash, and before I knew it, we had to return to the rendezvous point which was located in the hotel we were staying in.

It was a large building that stood out just as much as the casino.

The walls were adorned with paintings depicting all sorts of images, while rich wooden accents, from polished oak furniture to finely carved beams, added warmth to the ambiance.

"...It's a pity that we weren't able to go to the casino."

"Um."

Leon nodded in agreement as we entered the building.

After the meeting with Aoife, we spent the better second half of our day looking into the situation.

If I had one word to describe it then it'd be 'grim'.

The situation was grim.

While the place looked joyful and happy on the outside, it was merely an outer facade.

A facade that they had created just for us.

"Akh!! She's not here too?!"

A sudden shout snapped me out of my thoughts. Looking towards where the sound came from, I noticed a haggard-

looking Josephine by the entrance of the hotel.

With sweat dripping down the corner of her face, she frantically looked around.

"Oh, no... Oh, no..."

Leon and I exchanged glances as we both grew serious.

Don't tell me...

"What's going on?"

Aoife was the first one to step up.

She too appeared equally serious. Probably, she also realized what we had found.

And the fact that the professors weren't here yet added to the tension.

"Did something happen?"

"Ah, this...! Aoife!"

Josephine rubbed her hair in frustration and panic.

"What?"

The tension around the room elevated.

So much so that one other cadet urged from the back.

"Spit it out? What is it?"

"It's Kiera!"

Josephine said exasperatedly.

"Kiera? What about her?"

"She... She went missing! I've been looking for her the entire day! She was meant to have gone to the bathroom, but she never came back. Oh no...! What if s-"

Josephine stopped.

Blinking her eyes, she turned her head. In the distance, a figure appeared. Josephine blinked yet again to make sure she wasn't seeing things.

When she was sure it was indeed Kiera, her expression changed.

"Enng? ...Kiera?! Wait, why does she...? Nn?"

"That's...!"

"...?"

Everyone's expressions changed the moment they looked in the same direction she was looking at.

"What's going... Ah."

When I faced the direction they were looking at, I understood perfectly why their expressions were like that.

"What is she doing?"

No, more importantly.

Why was she dressed like that?

Puff

"Yo~"

Holding onto a big cigar, Kiera greeted all of us. Her nonchalant air mixed with the arrogant expression she was making stood out and people started to look her way.

It wasn't just her expression that stood out.

"Where did you get that?"

But the huge fur jacket that she was wearing as well. With black stripes across and the fact that it draped all the way down to her legs, she stood out amongst the crowd.

Coupled with a pair of sunglasses and a cigar, she looked like a pimp.

"Oh? You mean this?"

Kiera pinched and pulled on the coat.

Puff

And took a drag of her cigar.

Smoke lingered around her face for a couple of seconds.

"Nothing much. Just gambling and shit~"

"Gambling?"

Josephine's eyes widened.

"Wait, what?! You went gambling?!"

I stared at the scene speechlessly.

Kiera nodded while putting her hand in her pocket.

"No, for real. I went in there with all my money and..."

She scratched the side of her face.

"...I lost everything."

"..."

"But...!"

She raised her finger. As if trying to justify that she had gambled all her money away.

"I still managed to win myself this nice jacket! Made from real Belstron skin. Fucking awesome, right? Keke... Plus, I also got a free box of cigars. They're of good quality. Want to try one?"

"...."

Josephine opened her mouth, but the word just refused to leave her.

Misunderstanding her actions, Kiera stuffed a cigar in her mouth.

"...Ukeh!"

"There you go!"

And lit it up with her finger.

"Now take a big puff."

"Cough...! Cough...! Akh! Why do my eyes burn?"

"Kakakaka."

Slapping her thigh, Kiera bent over and started to laugh.

"Did you see the face you made?"

".....Akh!"

From that point forward, everyone lost interest in what was happening. It was just the normal stuff.

That was until...

WHIIII—

The large blaring sound of a horn echoed throughout the entire town.

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Chapter 124 The first wave [1]

WHIIII—

"What's going on?"

"What's happening? What is this sound...?"

The blaring sound of the horn echoed throughout the air. It was loud, and as if a spell had been cast on the entire town, the atmosphere drastically changed.

It suddenly became extremely tense.

Cli Cla—

The lights went out everywhere, and the shops closed, leaving everything deserted in an instant.

Just as we were wondering about what was going on, Professor Bridgette entered the reception with Professor Hollowe behind her. As compared to her, who had a grim expression, he seemed more relaxed.

"Everyone, please calm down. There's no need to be tense."

Her calm voice seemed to have an effect on the cadets, gradually easing the previous spreading panic.

"....I will let you know more of what's going on later. For now, please follow me. I would like for you to see what is happening for yourself."

Professor Bridgette left shortly after that.

We followed her from behind.

Tak. Tak. Tak.

The only sound echoing within the town was the sound of our footsteps as we walked across the now-deserted streets.

It was a strange sight. Especially considering how different it was from the day.

"....Wow, fuck."

Even Kiera appeared to be creeped out as she rubbed her chin against her fur jacket.

On the other hand, Leon walked beside me with the same look he always wore. Glancing at him, I couldn't tell whether he was concerned or not.

But it didn't matter.

Soon, we approached the city walls. Over a hundred guards greeted us near the stairs that led to the top, with a tall man in his forties taking the lead.

"You are here."

He almost seemed relieved by our appearance as his stiff face relaxed, slightly.

I took a moment to take a good look at him. He wore light armor, and with blonde hair and blue eyes, he looked no different than a noble. With that said, despite his appearance, I couldn't associate him with a noble.

There was something about his demenour that was vastly different than that of a noble.

He was more 'wild', or better said, 'rough'.

"Let me have a moment of your time."

Even his voice was rough, with his tone sounding rather deep. Clearing his throat, his sharp blue eyes scanned us.

".....I've been told that you are the cream of the crop of our Empire."

He started off with a very obvious statement.

"My name is Tristan Blackwood. I'm a Tier 3 knight and a proud citizen of Ellnor."

Pausing, his blue eyes paused on several of us.

I thought he was going to give us a stern lecture about us being young and reckless and all that, but I was wrong.

"I understand that you look young, but I won't judge you for it. In fact, I am proud to know that our Empire has young people like you in our midst."

Rather, he started off by complimenting us.

As his eyes scanned us, his expression turned extremely grim.

"With that being said, this will be no easy mission. In fact, I don't even know if I will be able to guarantee you your life. We have lost far too many people already. It's because of our stubbornness that the situation reached this level. And for that, I am truly sorry."

Bowing his head, he earnestly apologized.

"...."

"...."

No one said a thing. I didn't as well. Especially when I noticed the expressions of the other knights behind him.

"W-we... have suffered far too many losses to count. Everyone here, be it me, or the knights that you see behind you. We have all lost someone dear to us. And all of it is our fault."

They appeared to be pained. Some were even shaking.

"For-"

Growwllll—!

Just then, a loud growl echoed in the far distance, and the faces of the knights changed drastically.

The same was true for the captain who hastily turned his head.

"Oh, no..."

Without saying another word, he rushed up the stairs of the walls.

"Follow procedures quickly! Close the gates!"

WHIIII— WHIIII—

The horn sounded again, and the city gates began to close. Despite the suddenness of the situation, everything proceeded in an orderly manner, with all the knights following orders without a single problem.

As I looked around, Professor Hollowe's voice reached my ears.

"Cadets, make your way up. Captain's orders."

Looking up, the Professor beckoned us with his hand. Exchanging glances with Leon for a brief moment, we climbed up the stairs of the wall.

The walls stood about eight meters high and were constructed from solid stone. As I ascended to the top, the first thing that caught my eye was the large ballistae stationed there.

With arrows stretching over several meters and pointed metal heads, they looked extremely intimidating.

But that wasn't what caught my attention.

"Holy crap..."

I stared off into the horizon. A large cluster of...

"What in the world is that...?"

Humans? Skeletons? No... It was hard to describe. However, the only thing I could think of at the moment was.

"Zombies."

A large cluster of zombies.

Having overheard my mutter, Leon looked at me with a questionable look.

"...Zombies?"

"Yeah, zombies."

"What is that?"

"Uh? Ah, right."

Realization hit me not long after.

This wasn't a term used in this world.

I pointed at the monsters in the distance.

"Well, whatever that is."

Their movements were slow, with some of them wearing armor resembling that of the guards at the top.

Staring at the numerous such creatures, I shuddered slightly. The scene looked straight out of a horror movie.

The creepiest part was that many of their bodies were preserved due to the cold, leaving their skin blue as a result.

Just as I locked eyes with one of the zombies in the distance, their mouths parted open as they began to shout.

Growwllll—!

Their sound pierced through the air. Behind them, the sun was beginning to sink toward the horizon, casting the sky in a gentle veil of orange.

With one scream, the zombies made themselves known.

"Load the ballistae!"

It took three knights to operate a ballista. But even that was a struggle as they let out strained "Guoo—!" shouts as they loaded up the arrows.

"Shoot!"

Xiu! Xiuuu!! Xiu!

The air whistled as several enormous arrows shot forth, casting shadows on the land below. They streaked through the air and crashed into the hordes of zombies in the distance as a dust cloud formed.

Booom—!

Like bowling pins, the zombies scattered and flew everywhere.

"Oh!!"

"It hit...!"

The cadets threw their hands in the air in celebration the moment the arrow hit.

"That was awesome!"

However, looking around and taking in the grim expressions of the knights on the walls, I knew that things weren't as simple as they seemed.

And as expected.

They weren't.

"Ah! They're getting back up!"

"What the...!"

As if nothing had happened, the zombies regrouped from the ground and resumed their march forward. The creepiest part was when the zombies picked up their missing limbs and reattached them to themselves as if it were nothing.

Growwllll—!

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I felt goosebumps staring at the scene.

This really did seem like a scene from a horror movie.

"Reload the arrow! Reload the arrow! We need to hold them off until the sun rises again! They will leave right when the sun comes back up! Reload the arrows...!"

Accompanying the captain's shout, I heard a new piece of information.

'So the zombies only come out at night, and they will stop during the day?'

Now this...

It really did sound like a game.

"Don't falter! Keep reloading! This is just the start! You already know the drill!"

"Guooo—!"

The knights reloaded the arrows and prepared for the second round.

Xiu! Xiuuu!! Xiu!

A similar scene from before occurred. Enormous arrows shot forth from the ballistae, hurtling toward the large horde in the distance. Each arrow streaked through the air at incredible speeds before colliding directly with the horde.

But even so...

"Again!"

None...

"Again!"

Of the arrows...

"Again!"

Did a thing!

"Again!"

Xiuuuu—!

With each arrow shot, the knights grew increasingly fatigued. I could vividly observe this from where I stood. Sweat dripped down their faces, and their hands shook as they carried each arrow to the ballistae.

It was a tragic scene.

However, as if they were on some sort of drug, they continued to load the ballistae without letting out a single complaint.

Thump!

Even as some of them fell over due to tiredness.

"Quickly replace him! Go! Go! Go!"

It was a grim scene.

One that made me realize just how gruesome each day had been for them.

'So they've been doing this every single day for thirty years...?'

It made one wonder just why people still chose to remain in this town. It wasn't as if the citizens couldn't run away. It was possible. So...

'What is keeping them from leaving?'

"Sir captain, let us do something."

"At this rate, the soldiers won't be able to last much longer."

"Is there a better way of doing this? Do they not have any weakness?"

Snapping out of my thoughts, I turned to look to my right. A small circle had formed around the captain who had to halt his commands to look back at them.

It appeared as though some of the cadets could no longer take the scene they were seeing.

"Let us help!"

The captain dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

"Later! Later! Your role will come later. As for weaknesses, they don't have any."

"They don't?"

I was the one who said that as Leon turned to look at me. Feeling his gaze, I sliced my neck with my hand.

"Cutting their necks and stuff. That could work."

It worked in the movies.

"....?"

Leon tilted his head and looked at me with a gaze that seemed to say, 'Are you stupid?'. No, rather, I think he was just about to say that when I stopped him.

"You still look stupid."

"...."

He lowered his head with a frown.

Most probably, he was thinking about a comeback. I didn't let him.

"So cutting necks doesn't work?"

For a game, it sure didn't respect the main rules of zombies.

"What works then?"

".....Killing the one behind all of this."

A voice interjected from behind us. When I turned to look, my gaze met with Aoife's. As the wind blew, scattering her red hair all over her face, she went on to say,

"So long as the necromancer is alive, the undead will be able to revive infinitely."

Looking towards the hordes of zombies, Aoife frowned.

"....And that's the problem. Nobody knows where the necromancer is. It's for that reason that they've been stuck in this stalemate for so long."

"Ah."

It all clicked then.

"So the problem is finding the necromancer..."

"Yes. From what I've managed to get, they've sent several search parties in hopes of finding it. Unfortunately, none ever came back, and those that did weren't able to find a thing."

"....I see."

Moving toward the edge of the wall, I leaned slightly to get a good look at the zombies. Despite their slow speed and the barrage of arrows, they were steadily making progress, their numbers overwhelming.

"....."

barrage of arrows, they were steadily making progress, their As the cold wind pierced my skin, I had a sudden thought.

Since it was possible for me to use the second leaf on people I killed...

"Is it possible to use it on them...?"

Chapter 125 The first wave [2]

'....Is it possible?'

The idea seemed feasible. However, I wasn't sure if I could actually do it.

What if there was a limit to the second leaf? A limit that prevented me from using it on those who had died for far too long.

What then...?

Xiu! Xiu!

The thunderous echoes of ballistae firing resonated in the distance as I stood atop the city walls, gazing down at the unfolding spectacle below.

'The goal of this expedition is to find the necromancer. So far, in the thirty years that the attacks have started, they hadn't been able to find a single thing.'

Was the necromancer that hard to find?

...Or was it simply because they were too weak?

I turned my attention towards the knight's captain.

"Reload! Reload!"

"Someone has fainted again! Replace them quickly! Reload!"

He was barking out orders left and right as he ran around the entire walls. The organization amongst the knights was impeccable.

However, looking at their exhausted and haggard expressions, I could tell that they were on their last legs.

They were weak. Far too weak.

Even the knight captain was weak at only Tier 3. He was just about the same strength as us.

In fact,

I turned my head to look at Leon beside me.

'...This guy is probably stronger than the knight's captain.'

It was a bit of an odd realization.

"What?"

As if noticing my gaze, Leon flinched slightly. Yes, flinched.

"Hm?"

"...."

He stepped away too. Realization soon dawned on me and I sighed.

"I'm not going to call you stupid."

There was a time and place for such a thing.

"You won't?"

"Yeah."

I calmly nodded to reassure him.

"Your face does that for me."

"....."

"Ah."

I covered my mouth upon realizing what I had done. I was just about to apologize when...

"They're coming! Second battalion move out!"

The loud shout of the knight's captain echoed throughout. Finally turning his attention towards us, he pointed towards the horde of zombies who had nearly reached the perimeter of the walls.

"Cadets! Help out the second battalion! Please help us control and manage the undead!"

Growwwlll—!

"Wh, what...!? We're fighting now?"

The cadets were astonished by the sudden command.

At the same time, the gates beneath opened, and a group of over a hundred knights charged forward.

"Fight!!"

"Uwoooo—!"

Clank—

Sparks instantly flew in the air the moment the two sides clashed. What was most shocking was the fact that the zombies were able to keep themselves upright as their flesh remained intact.

It was as if their skin was made out of metal.

"The hell..."

Besides me, Kiera watched the scene with astonishment.

"What are these things even made out of? Not only are they immortal, but their skin is also as tough as metal. What kind of..."

"Don't worry about that now. Attack first."

Aoife stood on top of the wall.

As her red hair fluttered, she extended her hand forward.

Her expression quickly distorted as she focused her attention on the horde of zombies beneath.

"Ukh...!"

A groan escaped her small lips as over a dozen zombies clamped up together.

"What the...?"

"What's going on? Ah!"

The Knights, who had been in an intense fight with the zombies, halted for a brief moment as they noticed the zombies suddenly freezing on the spot and moving back.

Swoosh—

Shortly after that, a figure jumped down from the wall.

It was Leon.

Thump!

Softly landing on the ground, his sword glowed, illuminating the surroundings. Stomping his foot on the ground, he slashed.

SHIIIIING—!

His sword drew a beautiful arc in the air. At the same time that he slashed, Aoife compressed her hands together, clumping up even more zombies together.

And...

Bang!

The impact of his attack and the zombies resonated loudly in the air, the sound mimicking that of a bat hitting against hard steel.

It resounded throughout the air and spread throughout.

"Did it work?"

"Look! It worked!"

When all was said and done, over a hundred zombies scattered across the ground with their bodies cut in half.

Just as everyone was about to rejoice, a shocking scene occurred.

"Ah...!"

"They're getting back up!"

"What the hell is this...?!"

Indeed, it was just as they said. Seconds after Leon's attack, a purple glow basked over the zombies, forcing their bodies back together.

Groooowl—!

Getting back up, they stood up and proceeded to head for the walls. It was as if Leon's and Aoife's combined effort had done nothing.

"Fuck, even that didn't work?"

"Just how sturdy are these zombies?"

Kiera and Josephine shouted from the walls with incredulous looks.

Not far from them, the other cadets stared at the scene with a little apprehension. They were probably intimidated by what they had seen.

One could say that Kiera's personality was handy on these types of occasions.

".....Get the fuck out! Let me try!"

Jumping out of the wall, two orange magic circles floated on each of her palms. The mana condensed to her side as she pushed her hands forward.

Swoooo—!

The world illuminated as brilliant flames shone. They spread throughout, engulfing the incoming zombies like an avalanche of fire.

I stared at the flames that lit up the world for a brief moment.

They were gorgeous.

But even they had no effect in the end.

"What the hell?!"

This time, even Kiera was at a loss for words.

Given the power of her flames, I also thought she'd at least do something, but in the end, the zombies appeared completely unharmed, walking out of the flames at the same speed.

"Get back! Get back!"

The commander's voice reached us from beside us. His face was pale, and sweat continuously dripped down his face as he ran around the walls giving orders.

"Hold the undead back!"

"Prevent them from entering the city! Stop them at all costs!"

"Cadets! Conserve your mana! Just try your best to hold the undead back! Try to resist until the sun comes up! There is no use going all out against them!"

Stopping, he waved his hand.

"Fire!!"

Xiu! Xiu—!

The arrows shot forth.

Thump!

Alongside each arrow, a soldier would fall from exhaustion. They'd quickly be replaced by another soldier who carried on their burden.

"Fire!"

Xiu! Xiu—!

I stared at the scene unblinkingly.

"....Hey, what are you doing?!"

Before I knew it, I was standing on top of the walls of the town. My body was still in terrible condition, and Aoife was tugging at my clothes from behind.

"Are you going to try something too? Didn't you hear the captain's words? We need to contain them. Leon's and my attacks combined had no effect. We sho-"

"....No."

I shook my head while staring at the zombies beneath. The number seemed endless. They stretched for as long as the eye could see, and they were all headed towards the town.

For what reason?

I wasn't sure.

But...

"....."

Extending my hand, a thread flew out. My core burned at the usage of mana, but I didn't mind the pain and watched as one of the threads circled around one of the zombies's necks.

Making sure it was all secured, I pulled with my hand, flinging the zombie in my direction.

"What are you doing...! Are you crazy!?"

Aoife's surprised voice echoed from beside me.

I ignored it and opened up my palm.

Plak—!

Closing my palm and grasping its neck, I stared at its hollow eyes and pale skin.

Groowlll—!

It squirmed under my grasp. But I kept my grip firm. Staring at it for a good moment, I activated the second leaf.

My world turned dark.

.
. .
. . .

The sun shone brightly.

A group of four stood before the city walls. They stood tall, and towered over the surroundings.

Before them was a young teen. He looked familiar.

'Where have I seen him...?'

"Are you all ready?"

Ah.

It was his voice that gave it away. It was young, but it was also familiar.

'The captain.'

The young teen in front was Captain Travis.

...So this was from decades ago.

"We are ready!"

They looked nervous, but they held conviction as they stared into the distance. A burly man pounded his chest.

"Do not worry. We will come back and avenge our fallen comrades."

"That's right!"

They were young, and they were brave. The group of four seemed to be just a little bit older than the captain.

"Travis. Make sure you stay here. We will be back before you know it. With your sister too. You don't need to worry about our safety. We are the best knights in the village. You know of our abilities."

"...."

The young boy nodded his head.

"...Okay."

He appeared to be hopeful.

And with such thought, he brought his hand towards his forehead in a salute. His back stood straight.

"Subjugation force number twenty-seven. I wish you all the best of luck!"

The four saluted back.

"Subjugation force number twenty-seven will be departing!"

"Subjugation force number twenty-seven will be departing!"

"Subjugation force number twenty-seven will be departing!"

"Subjugation force number twenty-seven will be departing!"

The quartet embarked on their journey, striding forward along the road. I trailed behind, content to observe their progress from a distance.

"Let's do this!"

".....Let's avenge our predecessors. With our strength, we will defeat that darned necromancer."

They were all smiles along the way. They, who had been stuck in their town for their entire life, were finally on an adventure.

Along with the nervousness, was a strange sense of excitement.

I watched them laugh.

I watched them struggle.

I watched them help each other.

And I watched them bask in the sceneries that their adventures brought them.

"Amazing...!"

"Wait until we return and tell Travis about our journey. He'll be so jealous."

Amidst the struggle was a joy that one couldn't explain. But I felt it all as I followed them from behind.

The journey was a long one. I didn't know for how long they had walked. However, the scenes around all made up for it.

From waterfalls to rivers to rocky surfaces.

It was a breathtaking sight.

Sights that I wasn't able to enjoy for much longer as a large dome of purple appeared in the distance.

"What's this!?"

"The necromancer!"

Within the dome, a veiled figure stood. The moment I laid my eyes on it, I felt a sense of oppression coming from it.

"Ah...!"

"That!"

But it wasn't the necromancer's appearance that startled the group of four.

No, it was...

"Mom!"

"....D-dad! I see them again!"

The numerous figures that stood in front of the necromancer. Each one of them, they were a figure that the group was familiar with.

?| Lvl 1. [Anger] EXP + 0.2%

I felt their anger.

?| Lvl 2. [Sadness] EXP + 0.4%

But I also felt their sadness.

"Attack...!"

The group of four charged. Their target was none other than the necromancer. With their weapons drawn, they attacked.

"Ahhhh—!" That was the last thing I saw before the world turned black. That was when I understood.

Their journey. The one that I had followed from behind.

It had come to an end.

"Julien!"

When I snapped out of it, I found myself in a familiar environment.

"What are you doing with that thing?! Have you lost it!"

Aoife's voice was still echoing from behind me.

Groowlll—! In my grasp, the zombie struggled. I stared at it again. This time, an image overlapped with the zombie in my grasp.

It looked much younger and had a smile on its face.

Groowlll—! Opening up my palm, I let go of the zombie and flung it back into the distance.

As I did, I stared at the numerous zombies that were approaching.

"Thirty years."

For thirty years, this town; Ellnor, had sent its best knights to fight against the necromancer.

For thirty years, they failed.

"...."

Yes.

These thousands of zombies in front of me.

They were an accumulation of the thirty years of fallen soldiers who had died trying to fight the necromancer.

They...

Were the brutal reality behind the smiles of the citizens.

Chapter 126 Exploration [1]

Thump!

"Just a little longer! The sun is almost up!"

Thump!

"Don't give up now! We're almost there!"

Thump!

One by one, soldiers dropped down to the ground due to exhaustion.

"Keep going! Just a little longer!"

The captain's voice continued to echo throughout. He appeared to be the most tired of them all, but by sheer willpower, he kept himself standing as he continued to bark orders.

Clank—! Clank—!

The knights below were also on their last legs, struggling to contain the zombies.

"Akh...!"

And so were the cadets who, despite their strength, were also struggling.

It made sense when considering the fact that the zombies were immortal.

It also made one wonder how this town had managed to stay afloat with just one tier 3 knight.

It was most probably their ballistae and organization.

"One more minute!"

I also helped out here and there. Using the threads, I contained and pushed many zombies back.

I thought about keeping them separate, but the mana exertion was too much. In the end, the only thing I could do was push them back.

'...If only I wasn't injured.'

I felt a stinging pain each time that I used my mana. While I didn't mind the pain, I could notice it sharpening with each minute that I circulated my mana.

That wasn't good.

'I'm at risk of worsening my injuries.'

It was for that reason that I paced myself, unlike the others.

SHIIING—!

Especially Leon and Aoife, who were practically drenched in their own sweat.

"Haaa... haaa..."

Standing beside me, I could hear just how labored Aoife's breath was as she utilized her powers to create an invisible wall, blocking the zombies from advancing.

It had to be said. Just the two alone were of great help.

On the other hand...

Wooom—!

"Fuck!!! Why is my fire not doing anything!!?"

Keira's performance was not great. It wasn't because she wasn't trying or anything like that.

But it mostly came down to the fact that the zombies were fire-resistant. Whenever the flames swept, nothing would happen.

Kracka! Kracka!

Evelyn on the other hand was faring much better. Using her skills, she was able to contain quite a few zombies.

"Haaa... haaa... D-do something..."

"Hm?"

Turning my head, I locked eyes with Aofie. Breathing laboriously, she tiredly nudged at the zombies with her chin.

"Y-you can do more than this... D-"

"There's no need."

I cut her off.

"It's time."

"...U-h?"

Staring at the horizon, the plain began to be shrouded in a veil of orange, blanketing over the region and the horde of zombies.

The sun had started to set.

And following its appearance the zombies's movements started to slow down.

"It's over!"

It was one of the soldiers who shouted that. And as if his words had an effect, all the zombies magically stopped moving.

"It's over...?"

"Haaa... haaaa.... We can finally rest now?"

Everyone was exhausted. Be it the cadets, and the knights. Nobody could hardly lift up a finger.

Even Leon, who usually seemed expressionless, showed a reaction as he stared at the frozen zombies.

Wiping the sweat from the side of his face, he walked closer to one of the zombies to get a closer look.

But just as he took a step, something happened.

"Look—!"

All of a sudden, as a cadet pointed toward the zombies, I watched stupefied as a purple glow enveloped the zombies completely. I felt a familiar sense of oppression coming from the purple veil as it covered the zombies.

Before anyone could say or do a thing, the zombies faded.

"What...!"

"Did they just vanish?"

Unsurprisingly, the cadets were astonished by the development.

The same couldn't be said for the soldiers who slumped down on the walls tired.

"Treat the injured!"

"Count the casualties!"

The only one who didn't rest was the captain, who hurriedly moved around to check on every single person on the wall.

I stopped for a moment to stare at him.

The image of his younger self overlapped with his current image.

'He's no different than he is in my memories.'

Always prioritizes others over himself.

...But for him to have been at this for so long.

Just where did he get the willpower from?

'Is it from the constant deaths of his comrades? Or his drive to keep the people of this town safe?'

The more I looked at him, the more curious I became.

'Should I use my ability on him?'

My thoughts were stopped by the sudden appearance of the professors in the distance.

"Hmm."

They had unusually serious expressions.

'Now that I think about it, I haven't seen them the entire time.'

Where exactly had they gone?

I didn't need to wait for long to know the answer. Stopping before the Knight's captain, Professor Hollowe was the first one to speak.

"...We weren't able to fully trace the mana surrounding the undead. We managed to get a wisp of it, but as of yet, we still haven't locked onto it yet. We will need a few more days to fully lock into them."

"Ah, I see."

The captain nodded his head in understanding.

"....You can take your time. We've managed to hold on for so long. We have enough patience."

Realization dawned on me as I overheard their conversation.

'So they were tracking the necromancer.'

Indeed, all subjugation squads had died before returning to the town.

They still didn't know the location of it. But the same couldn't be said for me.

'I know where it is.'

I had seen it in my memories. In fact, I could even go right now.

But...

'No, not yet.'

I looked at my hands. They were shaking slightly. It was obvious that my body was still suffering from the after-effects of the drug.

I would be of no use if I were to go there. In fact, I'd be putting myself in danger.

Looking around, and seeing the exhausted looks on the cadets and the soldiers, I kept my mouth sealed.

It wasn't that I didn't want to tell them where it was. Not that such an option was possible since I couldn't just go up to them and say, 'Oh, I know where it is. Follow me.'

I'd have to explain myself.

....And there was a real possibility of my ability getting exposed.

I didn't want that to happen.

Not when the situation was still in control.

Since that was the case, I planned on letting things flow for as long as possible.

"Right, for at least until I can heal up."

*

I remained faithful to my words. For the next several days, I remained quiet and let the professors figure out the location of the necromancer.

Every sunset, at the same time, zombies would appear from the horizon.

Grooowlll—!

And every sunset, the knights, alongside the cadets, battled against the horde of incoming zombies.

"Fire!"

Xiu! Xiu!

"Open the gates! Cadets!"

Clank, Clank—

The scene from the first day repeated. It would first start with the rain of arrows from the ballistae. Then, when the zombies reached a certain distance, the cadets and knights would charge forward to repel their attacks.

This went on for several days, and by the time it was the fourth day, finally, the Professor managed to trace the mana locked onto the zombies.

"I've gotten a trace!"

A meeting took place shortly after that.

The meeting took place in the knight's headquarters. In a fairly large space, the knights and cadets gathered around a large dimly lit wooden table.

".....The location is quite far from here."

Professor Hollowe was the one to speak. With his usual laidback expression, he unfurled a map and placed it on the desk.

"The journey will probably take one or two days. Even now, I am unsure of how the necromancer is capable of controlling so many undead from such a distance. We will only find out once we get there,"

Professor Hollowe explained. Taking out a pen, he circled a large area over the map.

"My detection skills tell me that the necromancer is over around this area."

"Uh...?"

Coming closer, the Knight's Captain frowned.

"That's quite a large area. Not just two days, it might take you more. If you're planning on going on an expedition and taking the cadets with you, then I'm not sure if we'll be able to last much longer. The reason we've asked for reinforcements is because we can no longer hold on."

"There's no need to worry about that."

Professor Hollowe reassured as he looked towards Professor Bridgette.

"She, alongside several other cadets will remain here. On the other hand, I will go and check out the area alongside a few elite cadets."

"That's..."

Before the Captain could say a thing, Professor Hollowe placed his palm over the map.

"I've already made my decision. With Professor Bridgette here, you won't have to worry about anything bad happening to the town."

He wasn't wrong there.

Professor Bridgette was a Tier 4 mage. Besides Professor Hollowe, whose strength I didn't know, she was by far the strongest.

In fact, she alone could handle a large portion of the incoming zombies.

The reason why she and the Professor hadn't intervened over the past few days was probably because they were trying to provide us with some real-life experience.

At least, that was my guess.

It became apparent to me when the two would intervene when certain cadets were placed in difficult spots. It made sense when one thought about it. We were the elites of the Empire. The loss of a single cadet was big.

Other than that, the two were also busy tracking down the necromancer.

"Now then. Regarding the teams. I've already made up a list of the cadets that I will bring with me."

The air around the room changed as the Professor's gaze swept the room. For a brief moment, his gaze paused on me.

'This is the second time.'

I knew it from before, but he wanted something from me.

What exactly...?

"Julien Dacre Evenus."

My name was called up expectantly.

"Leon Ellert."

And so were the rest of the members.

"Aoife K. Megrail."

It was the strongest cadets of the year. Or those that performed the best during the past few days.

"Kiera Mylne."

Even Kiera was called up. However, when thinking about it, she was of no use staying back and she probably knew it as she clicked her tongue.

"Tsk."

Clap, Clap— Clapping twice, the Professor gathered our attention.

".....Those whose names I've called please get ready. We will be departing in an hour Please get ready.."

"An hour?!"

Kiera stood up in shock. Her face was still somewhat pale from the last wave.

"We still haven't slept. How is this-"

"The time for sleep will come later. For now, get ready. It is currently daytime. We can't leave when the undead will come back."

"But—"

"That's it. Meeting dismissed. If there is anything else we can talk about it later."

Standing up, Professor Hollowe proceeded to leave the meeting room.

"No, wait! I—"

Tracing his back with my eyes, I leaned back on my chair.

"Haa..."

Though I looked tired on the outside, my mind and body were fresh.

Unlike the other cadets, I didn't go all out. I rested my body and interfered occasionally. Just enough to make it seem like I was doing something.

I knew that something like this was going to happen.

"Good thing I did."

Lifting my head to stare at the ceiling of the room, memories flashed in my mind. There were several. About nine.

They were memories of nine different people who took the same journey.

Sorting them out, I frowned.

'Something doesn't make sense.'

There was something about them that bothered me. However, I couldn't quite find the reason for this.

The memories...

They always ended right as they attacked the necromancer. But there was something about the necromancer that didn't make sense.

But what exactly was it?

I silently clenched and unclenched my fist.

".....I guess I'll find out."

Chapter 127 Exploration [2]

The more I stayed in the town the more apparent it became to me that what I had previously seen was just a facade.

Walking around the cobblestone streets to head for the main entrance of the town, I could feel the gloom on the people's faces.

It hadn't been obvious before, but it was clear now.

"....."

My steps halted as I spotted a figure in the distance.

He was the captain. Currently taking care of the wounded, his face was pale as he ran around.

"Someone get me some water! Heal him up!"

Even now, he was still working.

Despite his pale face and the fact that he was limping, he put it all to help those who were in need. It was a scene that would move anyone.

But there was something about him that didn't quite make sense to me. So much so that I found myself moving towards him.

"What are the injuries? Any dead? Alright, good! It seems like the reinforcements have been of help."

"Excuse me."

"Uh?"

Finally taking note of me, he paused.

"You are...?"

"I'm a cadet from Haven."

"No, I know that."

"Julien from the Evenus Barony."

"....Julien, okay."

He nodded and looked around, taking a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Is there anything that I can do to help you?"

"Yes, actually."

"What?"

"....What's the number of the last subjugation squad?"

"Uh?"

He looked taken aback by my sudden question.

I explained to him.

"I overheard some people saying something about subjugation squads. I presume they're the squads that have been sent to fight against the necromancer. Im curious. How many have been sent so far."

"...."

The captain didn't answer immediately. Rather, he made a difficult face. Almost pained. Eventually, lowering his head, he answered.

"...If we count your group, then it'd be subjugation squad number 255."

"...."

255...?

I drew a cold breath.

Just how many people did they send over?

"The amount of people that we've sent. I've already lost count."

He continued while I remained silent. I could hear the sadness in his voice as he spoke.

"Everyone that you see here. They've all lost someone precious. We're the last remaining people of the town."

That sadness quickly shifted to anger as his fists clenched together tightly.

"Every damn year, we have to watch as our population dwindles and our best warriors die. Every damn year, I have to watch as the young recruits of the town are trained to be sent to their death!"

"....."

I stared at him without saying a single thing. I looked deeply into his expressions and the emotions he was letting out.

At a glance, there didn't seem to be anything wrong. Rather, I somewhat was starting to believe him.

But there was something that kept nagging me at the back of my mind.

"Why?"

".....Why?"

He raised his face to meet my gaze.

"You speak as though you care so much about the people. So why? Why haven't you gone there yourself?"

"...Ah."

The captain's expression froze, and his lips trembled.

If before I could see anger and sadness, now I could see guilt. A lot of guilt.

"T-that..."

He didn't even seem to be capable of formulating his own sentences. It was as if something was eating at him.

But what...?

What exactly was that?

If that wasn't enough, there was something else that bothered me. Especially when I sorted through the memories I had looked through.

"What about the first subjugation squad?"

"...T-the first? What about them?"

The captain's reaction was all that I needed to know.

"I've heard your sister participated in it."

"Ah, yes..."

"Were they also there to fight the necromancer? From what I-"

"Captain! Captain! We need your help!"

Unfortunately, my words were cut short by a shout in the distance. The captain, who was called, found this opportunity to excuse himself.

"...I can't thank you enough for your help. If you need any help, I'd be more than willing to offer it. But as you can see, I have to go now. If you would excuse me."

Those were his last words before he left.

"....."

I stood in silence, staring at his departing back. Within the memories, I had seen him grow up. From a young boy, to a teenager, to a young man, to the middle-aged man that he was now.

Every time, he'd salute the subjugation squads as they left.

...And every time, he'd remain back in the town.

It had been a long time since he had become the strongest person in the town. And yet, people who were weaker than him had still been sent.

For what reason did he choose to remain here?

'Something doesn't add up.'

"What are you doing...?"

A sudden voice jolted me out of my thoughts. When I turned my head, I met eyes with Aoife and the rest of the members who were set to depart for the exploration.

"I was just talking to the captain."

I answered, adjusting my backpack.

While I still felt that there was something odd about the captain, I didn't have anything to work with.

'Maybe, I'll find something out when I get closer to the necromancer.'

I was rather curious about it.

...Especially since it had something to do with [Curse] magic. Although it had only been in visions, I felt a strange sense of comfort in the purple dome that the necromancer was in.

I wanted to go there to make sure that what I had felt was real.

Perhaps...

I'd be able to find something that would help me grow my strength there.

'Hopefully, I won't have to learn necromancy.'

I wasn't really a fan of zombies.

"Let's go. The Professor is waiting for us at the entrance."

"Alright."

Nodding slightly, I followed the group from behind, walking alongside Leon who looked at me strangely.

"Did you find anything?"

"....Not quite."

"Not quite?"

"I don't have much to work with. For now, I just find the captain suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

Leon frowned, turning his head to stare at the captain in the distance. As his eyes locked onto him, his brows gradually rose.

"Hmm."

"....What?"

I looked at him in surprise.

"Did you find something?"

But how could that be? He had only just looked at him.

"You're not wrong."

Leon eventually answered.

"....He is hiding something. Or more like, the events seem to be centered around him. No, rather, the entire town?"

He cocked his head.

"It's difficult to tell. But he is hiding something."

"What? How did..."

"I've got good instincts."

"...."

What the hell is this guy on about...?

Was this something that main characters were just born with?

The worst part was that I couldn't even ask him about it since he probably wouldn't answer. So for that reason, I rubbed my forehead and asked,

"How confident are you about your instincts?"

"They've never failed me before."

"....I see."

I once again turned to look at the captain.

'So even Leon thinks that there's something off about him and his story...'

Since he felt like this, chances were that there was indeed something. However, despite knowing that, I decided to leave him alone and follow the group from behind.

So far, I still didn't have a lot of information.

I couldn't just confront him without reason. More than anything, I was more intrigued by the necromancer. Or the dome that was surrounding it.

....There was something about it that I felt resonated with me.

"Is everyone here?"

As our group arrived at the entrance, greeting us there was Professor Hollowe who rubbed his eyes.

With a large backpack behind him, he blinked his eyes and did a short head count. Once he was sure that everyone was present, he turned around to face the town's gates.

"Since everyone is here, let's prepare to depart. We don't have much time."

With light steps, he went ahead and crossed the gates.

The others followed shortly after him.

"...."

I stood in silence for a short moment before taking a step forward and following them from behind.

Thinking about the large purple dome that awaited us in the distance, I knew that it wasn't going to be an easy trip.

That being said,

'I'm surprised I still didn't receive my quest window.'

At the top of the town's walls.

A man stood solitary, staring at the departing group in the distance. Clenching onto the pocket watch and holding it closely to his chest, he repeatedly muttered the same words over and over again.

"Sorry... Sorry... Sorry..."

There was no one aside from him.

...And it was for this reason that he allowed the tears to stain his cheeks.

Drip. Drip.

"Sorry... I want to go... Sorry... But I have to keep my promise..."

The man was none other than the Knight's captain.

Holding onto his pocket watch, he bent over with exhaustion.

"I promised..."

And then, mustering every little bit of strength he had left, he brought his hand towards his forehead in a salute.

"Subjugation force two hundred and fifty-five. I wish you all the best of luck!"

The journey was a quiet one.

"...."

"...."

Besides Josephine and Kiera who would bicker from time to time, and Professor Hollowe, who would occasionally talk, nobody said a word as we tracked forward.

I preferred for it to be that way.

Staring at the familiar environment, I couldn't help but pause on certain occasions. It wasn't that I wanted to pause, but every time I would see a familiar spot, images would flash across my mind.

'....Do you think we'll be able to make it back?'

The images were followed by their conversations.

'We will. I'm sure of it. Even if we don't, we should at least try something to help out those that will come in the future.'

'Wooooow! I suddenly feel energized. That sleep sure did help! Haha, now that we don't have to constantly fight the undead, we can feel energized again.'

'Let's go.'

I saw countless memories and countless people.

Walking along the familiar path, their images would appear whenever I reached a familiar spot, reminding me of the history that this path had.

'Hehe! It's my birthday today. I'm turning fifteen.'

'Happy birthday! Let's celebrate your birthday now. Once we return, we will make sure to celebrate it with everyone.'

'Hehe.'

Wherever I walked, familiar faces would show up.

I had never physically crossed this path before, but it felt as if I had crossed it several dozen times. All with different people.

'I've decided. When we get back, I'm going to propose to Emily!'

'Hahaha. You only have the guts to say this now because we're on a journey. You were scared shitless the last time you even saw her.'

'Bah!'

From laughs to tears...

I had seen and experienced them all.

Immersed in the memories, I didn't realize that it was already dark.

"Let's stop here for the day."

What brought me out of the memories was the Professor's voice as he came to a stop. Within the rocky region, we found ourselves in a flat piece of land. The perfect place to set up camp.

"Let's set up our tents and start a fire. We will resume our journey tomorrow morning. We aren't far from the destination."

I turned to look back in the direction of where we came from.

'They're probably fighting against the horde by now, right?'

Given the time, it made sense. I was sort of glad that I joined the exploration group. This was especially true since it meant that I could rest even more.

"Alright."

Stretching my body, I started to help out the other cadets as we started to set up camp. Thankfully, the process wasn't hard. Within ten minutes, the tents were set up and a fire lit up in the middle.

On top of it was a pot where our food was cooking.

Crackle! Crackle!

A strange silence suddenly took over the group as all eyes fell on the fire burning in the middle.

The silence, however, was broken by the Professor who stirred the pot with a spoon.

"I keep a photo of my wife and my kids in my wallet."

Everyone looked up at him as he stared at the fire.

I did too.

Suddenly, I felt like he was going to speak about himself to break the silence, but...

"I use it as a reminder as to why I never have money."

"...."

"...."

"...."

"No? No one? ...And here I was trying to liven up the mood."

Stirring the pot, Professor Hollowe muttered,

"Tough crowd."

The previous silence that took over the group returned. This time, it felt strangely tense as the expressions of all the cadets turned weird.

This was especially so for Leon who looked at me.

His face... It looked extremely strained.

"He."

Amidst the silence that took over the camp, I found myself covering my mouth.

As all eyes fell on me, my chest trembled. Leon looked at me with widened eyes as he shook his head.

It was as if he was saying, 'No, don't...!'

But it only made things worse.

Clenching onto my shirt,

"Hehe."

I burst out laughing.

And the previous tension that lingered within me vanished.

Chapter 128 Necromancer [1]

Sometimes, all it took was one mutual interest for people to hit it up with each other suddenly.

"...The fuck am I witnessing?"

"This..."

"I'm not seeing things wrong, am I?"

"...."

It was the next day. The expedition group had resumed their walk towards the necromancer. However, compared to the previous day, things appeared to be different.

"Hahahah! You're good!"

".....Thank you."

It was Julien and Professor Hollowe.

Walking ahead of everyone, the two had been inseparable since last night. But that wasn't the most shocking thing.

'He can laugh like that...?'

Seeing the subtle smile on Julien's face as he talked to the Professor, and recalling how he had laughed the previous night, Aoife had a hard time making heads of tails of the situation.

It was as if she was seeing a completely different person.

"...."

Turning her head, Aoife's gaze fell on Evelyn.

She appeared to be the most shocked by the scene that was unfolding before their eyes.

"How...?"

And Aoife once again recalled the words she had told her not so long ago.

'He's changed.'

Julien certainly did seem like a different person than he usually appeared. It could just be that he found himself comfortable with the new Professor.

Perhaps she was overthinking. And she probably was.

But...

'Why do I feel like something isn't right?'

Turning her head, her eyes paused on another figure. With long platinum hair and red eyes, her gaze was locked on Julien.

It was hard to read her thoughts.

However, the sight of her made Aoife frown.

'Right, I did hear rumors about the two of them spending time together. Could she know something...?'

At first, Aoife thought that way, but the more she looked at it, the more unlikely this seemed.

Just as she had taken another step forward, she hastily covered her mouth.

"Achoo!"

Aoife sneezed.

Covering herself up, she pursed her lips.

Looking up at the sky, she frowned.

"Is it just me, or is it getting colder?"

It was almost as if I had met a long-time friend. No, rather, I had never had a proper friend. Be it in this life, or my past life.

It was hard to tell.

However, for some reason, I felt extremely comfortable when talking to the Professor.

....It was weird.

"I heard you were one of the cadets involved in the incident that happened in the forest?"

That was until a certain event was brought up and my heart twitched. I didn't show it on the outside and merely looked at the Professor who was looking towards the distance with a serene look.

We weren't far off from the destination.

I could feel it.

"....Are you perhaps referring to the incident with Professor Bucklam?"

"Yes."

Professor Hollowe turned his head and our gazes met.

"It was an unfortunate event. I was quite close with Robert."

"You were...?"

What bullshit.

I had seen his memories. There was no such figure in his life.

With that being said, I pretended to understand.

He went on to elaborate.

"...Well, you can say we knew each other? Acquaintances?"

"Oh."

I still didn't believe it.

Rather, I raised my guard up without showing it outwardly.

"How was he?"

I asked, pretending to be interested in the conversation.

"He didn't speak much. Always played checkers by himself at the Academy campus and all. He was a peculiar fellow if those are the right words to describe him."

"That does sound like him."

It was no secret that the Professor spent most of his lunchtime playing checkers by himself.

That much, everyone knew.

"Hehe, yeah. He was quite known for it, wasn't he?"

".....Yeah."

Just as I thought he was going to continue the conversation, I was surprised to see him leave it there. It made me question whether I was being overly cautious or not.

In the end, I still kept my guard up.

That was until...

"Achoo!"

I heard a sneeze.

Turning around, I noticed a few cadets, Aoife included covering themselves up.

"It's getting quite cold."

".....Y-yeah. I c-can barely feel my lips."

I frowned at the sight. Cold? While it certainly was cold, it wasn't nearly as bad as everyone was making it out to be.

Something wasn't quite...

"We're almost there."

Professor Hollowe's words brought me out of my thoughts. Just as he said those words, I felt a weird energy pulse spread throughout the area.

"W-what the...!"

It made my chest heavy, and my breathing became rougher. But outside of that, I was able to suppress the discomfort.

"Cough! Cough!"

"Ahk...!"

To my shock, the same couldn't be said for the others whose faces paled.

"I-I can't breathe!"

"Huu...! Huu...!"

'What's going on?'

I looked around in confusion. Not only did the others seem to be dying, but there were several who dropped on the floor on one knee. Kiera and Evelyn in particular.

Leon seemed to be faring better.

"...This is troublesome."

Professor Hollowe's voice echoed from beside me. Raising his hand, a transparent dome covered the area around us.

Almost instantly, everyone felt a sense of relief as everyone slumped to the ground.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

"W-what the hell was that?"

"Huagh...!"

I was curious too. Unlike them, I didn't feel that much. Lowering my head to stare at my hands, I raised it back up to stare at Professor Hollowe. I was just about to ask him for an explanation when he beat me to it.

"We're currently in an elemental heavy region."

Tracing his finger in the air, the Professor went on to say,

"...The curse element appears to be the most predominant here. For those who specialize in elemental magic, you'll find yourself struggling to breathe. It's normal. You just need to adjust your body to the high density of curse mana in the air. You may also find that the affinity with your own element will decrease. This is a side effect of such an environment."

His explanation wasn't long, but I was able to understand it.

Elemental heavy region...? This was a new term for me.

Closing my eyes, I felt the mana in the air.

"Ah."

As expected. It was just as he said. It was thick in the [Curse] element. That said, curse element? It didn't quite sound right. But I was no game developer.

"For those that do specialize in curse magic..."

Professor Hollowe turned to look at me.

"You'll find that it's become much easier for you to circulate your mana. Not only that, but it's also faster and easier for you to create spells."

It was as he said.

With just a thought, I knew I could summon [Chains of Alakantria] and [Hands of Malady] with little to no delay.

I could also probably channel them for a longer period of time and much more efficiently. The best part of it all was that it didn't hurt.

I could hardly feel my injuries.

"This..."

It was great.

How long had it been since I had felt like this?

"All that aside,"

The Professor's expression turned grim.

He stared into the distance with a frown.

"...It looks like the situation is a lot more dangerous than I previously anticipated. I can feel that we're very close to the source."

And we were.

Although such a scene never occurred in my memories, I could more or less tell from the landscape that we were near.

How many times had I been here in my memories?

"We'll take a moment to wait for you guys to adjust yourselves to the environment."

The decision was as such.

I had no complaints.

Rather, I sat down on the ground and guided the mana inside of my body.

There was something that I wanted to test.

'Since the curse element here is thick, what happens if I practice my spells...? Will it boost my progress?'

I put that to the test.

"Ah..."

?| Lvl. 1 [Hands of Malady] EXP + 0.1%

?| Lvl. 1 [Hands of Malady] EXP + 0.05%

?| Lvl. 1[Chains of Alakantria] EXP + 0.1%

?| Lvl. 1[Chains of Alakantria] EXP + 0.05%

Notifications flashed before my very eyes.

Both spells started to increase in proficiency at visible speeds.

I started to grow excited.

What would happen once the spells reached the next level?

Would they evolve...?

If so, what would become of them?

"....."

I sat there in silence and basked in the environment.

The visible improvement felt exhilarating. But even then, I knew that I couldn't enjoy such a sensation forever.

"Seems like everyone is ready. Let's head deeper."

Rubbing my face, I stood up from the spot.

'...What a pity.'

If possible, I would've preferred to stay a little longer.

'Maybe I'll find a way of doing so later.'

For now, there was something else that I wanted to figure out.

"I will try my best to guarantee your safety. However, there may be circumstances where I may be unable to assist you. Since that's the case, I hope you all get yourselves ready and react for the worst-case scenario."

Everyone heeded the professor's words, channeling their mana and drawing their weapons out.

Only then did we proceed forward.

Unlike before, our steps were slower and we were more careful.

We were following the right direction, I could tell.

In the mountainous area, we followed the only path forward, winding its way through the rugged terrain as jagged rock formations towered on either side.

"....."

A strange silence took hold of the group as we marched forward.

Everyone could tell we were just a few meters away from the source of all trouble. It was for that reason that everyone remained quiet.

And then...

"Ah."

A familiar purple-shaped dome appeared in the distance.

It was large.

Far bigger than what it was in the memories.

"What is that....?!"

"Ukeh!!"

"I-I can't breathe."

And the same was true for the sense of oppression that lingered in the air. It was a stark contrast to the one in the vision.

So much so that the Professor was forced to take a step back, raising his left hand to shield us.

"....Stay back."

But it was too late.

In the distance, within the sphere, over a thousand familiar figures entered our vision, their heads robotically turning to face our direction. Each one seemed to be fixated on our presence, their gazes piercing through the space between us with an unsettling intensity.

"Uh?"

"H-how are they here? Weren't they..."

But if that wasn't bad enough.

A cloaked figure, shrouded in darkness, stood in the middle. The moment its gaze fell on us, it felt as though my entire body had frozen in place as if caught in the grip of an icy hand.

The same was true for the others who stopped dead in their tracks.

"Ah, this..."

Professor Hollowe's bitter voice echoed from beside us.

".....Who exactly did the scouting?"

Chapter 129 Necromancer [2]

The air was tense.

Feeling the necromancer's gaze, it felt as though I was on pins and needles. My skin crawled, and my legs felt like lead.

Breathing alone became hard.

"Huff."

It felt as though a heavy truck was weighing down on our chest.

"Haa... Haaa..."

Thousands of eyes were locked onto us.

"Hiek—!"

A screech came out of the necromancer's mouth. It was hard to see its features, covered beneath the cloak, but the necromancer wasn't tall. From where I stood, it appeared to be rather small in stature.

About that of a young teen...?

"Hiek—!" "Hiek—!"

Screeches continued to come out of its mouth. Their sound resembling that of a strangled beast.

"W-what the hell is it trying to say?"

"Is it even saying anything?"

The sounds were starting to get to the group.

....And just as it screeched yet again, Professor Hollowe stopped in his tracks as his eyes narrowed.

"You've got to be shitting me."

His words came as a wake-up call to me. Staring in the direction of where he was looking, I saw it too.

"Ah."

Faint cracks around the space near the necromancer.

They hovered in the air, attached to the very fabric of space.

"Mirror Crack."

The words effortlessly came out of my mouth.

It was one of the gates that led to the mirror dimension.

"This..."

How did the Mirror Dimension expand?

The Mirror Dimension was a separate reality from the known world. However, its expansion and influence were real.

From within the cracks, monsters would emerge. Like viruses, they would come out and reign their influence over the land near the Mirror Crack, slowly turning it into the same environment as within the Mirror Dimension.

By killing all the monsters, one could contain the Mirror Crack and stop it from letting the monsters come out of it to expand their influence over the land.

A Mirror Crack needed constant surveillance since there was no way to close it.

In total, there were about twenty contained cracks within the Empire. One within the Academy, fifteen others with the Guild, and the rest with the Megrail family.

And now...

The twenty-first crack had appeared within the empire.

".....The situation is a lot more serious than anticipated. We will have to retreat for now."

This was Professor Hollowe's evaluation of the situation.

It was an evaluation that I could agree with.

"This isn't something that mere cadets should be handling. We'll have to get Central to take care of this ma—"

His words were cut short by a distant shriek.

It came from the necromancer.

Hieeek—!

Before I could even react, something flashed above us as Professor Hollowe rapidly spun and brought his hand up.

Clank—!

The surroundings shook.

"Hiek...!"

And the Professor groaned as he retreated several steps back.

A towering beast, resembling a wolf but twice its size, loomed over us. Its massive fangs dripped with saliva, and its piercing black eyes bore into us, locking us in its fierce gaze.

Drip...! Drip!

The hair on the nape of my neck stood on edge.

"Careful! This is no ordinary monster."

The Professor's words came out as a warning.

".....Remember when I said I might not be able to protect you?"

With both hands positioned in front of him in a fighting stance, he grimly stared at the monster.

"Now is that time!"

Boom—!

His body shot forward like an arrow, appearing right before the creature in a flash.

"Everyone move back!"

At the same time as Aoife's shout, the Professor's fist clashed against the wolve's claw.

Bang!

The space around us shook.

"Uekh!"

"....Akh!"

Just the after-effect of the attack was enough to push us all back several meters.

"This, fuck..."

As everyone looked back, all eyes fell on the Professor who stood evenly with the beast.

"This is absurd..."

One of the cadets muttered, staring at the fight in the distance. Just from the mana pulses the two were emitting, the cadets could tell their strength.

It was for that reason that everyone was shocked.

"A terror rank?"

"....If that's the case, does that mean Professor Hollow is at least Tier 5?"

Evelyn questioned, staring at the Professor in the distance.

"Wait, hold up."

And as if realization suddenly dawned on her, she rigidly turned to face the necromancer.

"Ah."

Evelyn covered her mouth.

"....This is ridiculous."

Hieeeeekkk—!

A powerful shriek escaped the necromancer's mouth as it leaned in our direction.

"Ah...!"

"Move back quickly!"

"Damn it!"

Just as Aoife's shout came, two shadows cast over the area we were in. The first one to react was Leon who pressed hard against the ground and slashed upwards.

Clank! Clank!

His attack was quickly followed by Aoife who raised both her hands in the air.

"Auakh!"

Her face paled significantly as two smaller wolves appeared above us.

"J-Julien! Do something...!"

Even without her saying it, I was already on it.

Clenching my hand, eight threads burst out of my forearm and latched onto the wolves in the air. If there was a difference between these threads and the usual ones, it was that the purple glow was more prominent and darker.

"Hm..."

My face twitched slightly as threads moved forward.

'....It's nothing.'

But I brushed it off.

Awoooo!

The moment it latched onto the wolves, they howled as their bodies spasmed.

"Fucking die...!"

This was quickly followed up by Kiera who brought her hands forward and flames engulfed the entire surroundings.

SHAAA—!

"Haa... Haaa..."

Thump Thump!

Accompanying her heavy breathing, two black lumps dropped to the ground.

"T-that wasn't too hard."

Kiera managed to mutter amidst her heavy breath. I was just about to tell her to stop talking when another shriek echoed and several more shadows cast over the area around us.

"Uh...!"

I was the first one to react this time.

As if my body acted on its own, I raised my hand up and shot the threads up. One, two, three, four... I pushed myself to the limit, with ten threads that covered the space around us.

But it wasn't enough.

Snap! Snap! Snap!

"Ugh...!"

I felt a sharp pain for every thread that snapped. The mana inside of my body started to drain rapidly, and before I knew it, I was on my knees.

Thum!

Drip! Drip...!

Sweat poured down from the side of my face.

"Ah, fuck..."

Although I had originally thought I was fit enough to fight, it became clear just now that I was merely lying to myself.

I was nowhere near fit enough to fight at the moment.

"Huaaa!"

The fact that my vision was blurry and my chest was hurting was perfect proof of that.

"Oy, get up! What the hell are you doing?!"

I felt something grab onto my shoulder amidst my blurred vision. Red, white... It was something of that nature.

Kiera...?

"Fuck, what's wrong with you? Weren't you supposed to be the strongest her—Akh!"

A nearby growl told me that another monster was near us.

"I-i'm fine."

"Oy."

I pushed Kiera away and stood still.

Looking around, the world appeared blurry and the sounds were hardly reaching my ears.

"Haa... Haaa..."

The only thing I could hear was the sound of my own breathing.

"Huff."

It was getting rougher with each second that passed.

'Why is my body not responding?'

Regardless of what I tried, it seemed as though my situation was getting worse. The pain also intensified, as if my insides were twisting together.

With each blink, my vision would alternate between clarity and blurriness.

Clank! Clank—!

"Ah...!"

From the wolves to the cadets. I could see the bitter struggle everyone was going through. Currently, I was the only one that was doing nothing.

I lowered my head to stare at my hand.

I tried to channel my mana, but all that did was twist my insides further.

"W-what..."

It was a despairing situation.

One that was further solidified by a loud shriek in the distance.

Hieek—!

It was the necromancer.

All stopped at that moment. Be it the cadets, or the wolves.

All eyes fell on the necromancer and the horde near it.

"....."

A strange silence enveloped the surroundings. One that was quickly broken by the sudden movement of the necromancer and its army as it started to move.

Grrroowl—!

Growls accompanied the necromancer's screech as the zombies came alive.

Thump!

They stepped forward in unison, the ground shaking as a result.

Thump!

Then came the next step.

Thump!

And then the next one.

The unified sound of their steps felt despairing as they drew nearer to us. And yet, despite the situation, I couldn't take my eyes away from the necromancer who stood at the center of it all.

Even as the zombies drew near, I fixed my gaze on the necromancer.

"Run...!"

"Retreat!"

Cadets ran past me at that moment, their faces pale with fear.

"Leave this! We can't fight this!"

The same was true for the Professor who ran turned back and ran in the opposite direction. At the same time, he tried to contain the Terror Rank wolf who for some reason, remained still and didn't chase.

Rather, it was looking at...

"Oy! What are you doing...!"

"Julien!"

I was the only one that didn't run.

"What are you doing!"

"Run...!"

Thump!

The zombies drew nearer to me.

I wasn't sure though. I wasn't looking at them. Blinking my eyes, I stared at the group of people in the distance.

They had only just noticed the fact that I was still standing where I was.

"Julien...!"

Their expressions.

They were a mix of surprise and worry.

Worry...?

"Ha."

I wanted to laugh then. What sort of nonsense.

Thump!

The tremors became more apparent. I could feel the zombies a few meters away from me. However, I wasn't scared.

"...."

The sound of their steps drowned out the noise around.

Soundlessly.

I stared into the distance.

Towards the other cadets and the Professor. They were all looking at me, probably saying something, but it was hard to hear.

Not that it mattered.

The zombies.

They had surrounded me from all sides.

...It was too late for me.

Chapter 130 Necromancer [3]

It all happened so fast that nobody even had the time to react.

"Move! Move...!"

"Fall back!"

"Retreat...!"

Seeing the incoming waves of undead, the cadets had no choice but to retreat.

The same was true for Leon who hastily moved back.

SHIING--!

With his sword, he slashed past everything that was in his way, helping some of the cadets along the way.

Pfttt!

"Let me help!"

"Akh...!"

They were a group comprised of fifteen cadets. The elites of Haven, and yet, they were all struggling so much.

"Fall back!"

All of a sudden, the Professor's loud voice echoed in the distance.

Just in time, Leon turned his head to stare in his direction.

The Professor was running at full speed towards them. Behind him was the giant wolf. Its towering figure and pressure loomed over them from the distance. However, much to everyone's relief, it wasn't chasing the Professor.

Rather, it was looking at the approaching hoard of the undead.

"Retreat! Retreat--!"

Though the Professor didn't look like he had suffered any serious injuries, seeing his disheveled state, one could see that he had spent a lot of energy.

The fight wasn't an easy one.

Thump! Thump!

The ground shook with each step the undead took.

Everyone moved further away.

"Ah, wait..."

Everything was proceeding smoothly until someone stopped to stare into the distance.

"There's someone still there!"

Their gaze was locked on a certain figure.

"What are you doing?!"

"Julien...!"

Indeed, a single cadet stood motionless in the distance. He wasn't far from the horde of undead. In fact, he was merely a few meters away from getting swallowed up by them.

"Ah!"

As if noticing Julien, the Professor, who had just managed to retreat to them, opened his eyes wide.

"I'll go ge--"

Awoooo--!

His words were cut short by the wolf's owl. All of a sudden, the atmosphere changed again. The pressure that surrounded the space intensified.

It became apparent that the wolf was about to attack again.

The target? No one knew, but they had no time to dwell over such a matter. Especially when the pressure that surrounded them increased by the second.

"Khh...!"

So much so that Leon could not breathe for a short moment. The same was true for the other cadets.

"Haa... Haaa..."

"Hua..!"

"Damn it...!"

It took Professor Hollowe's spell to alleviate a lot of the pressure.

But by the time he had done that, it was too late.

The undead had reached Julien.

"....."

As if time had frozen, all eyes fell on him.

He stood with the same collected gaze of his. Staring at everyone equally, he appeared completely unbothered.

Alone, he stood in the middle.

And alone, he disappeared from their view.

"Ah--!"

Several cadets screamed horrified, unable to grasp the situation.

"Shit!"

Professor Hollowe was the one in most trouble. Alternating his gaze between the cadets behind him and Julien, he clenched his teeth.

"....Crap!"

He had made his choice.

"Retreat!"

"What?! Bu-"

Some tried to protest, but he cut them short.

"It's too late! It's either you or him! I can't risk you all dying here."

Once his mind was made, there was no changing it. Despite the protests, Professor Hollowe cast another spell and forced everyone to retreat.

"Retreat! Retreat...!"

It was chaos.

Utter chaos.

Nobody understood what was going on.

Or at least, they refused to believe the reality of the situation.

All besides one person.

"Leon!"

Leon lifted his head slightly. Fiddling with something in his hand, he placed it in his pocket before turning his attention back to the undead.

Grooowl--!

They growled in the air.

"....."

He stood in silence for a brief moment before turning away from them.

"Go! Go!"

In this chaos,

He followed the others back.

Not before muttering a few last words,

"...I'll be waiting."

I let my eyes stay closed for a moment, then opened them.

Groooowll--!

I was surrounded from all sides. The familiar-looking zombies, and the purple dome. It was all the same as before.

"As expected..."

I rubbed my chest and looked around.

There was a small space around me. Not a single zombie was walking near me. Rather, they seemed to avoid me as they moved forward.

"Why?"

Why weren't they attacking me?

I extended my hand to touch one of the zombies.

"....?"

The moment I did, they turned their heads and cocked their heads. It was almost silly, but they didn't do much after that.

They continued to march forward.

Awooo--!

A certain muffled cry echoed in the distance. It most probably came from the wolf.

'...Now that I think about it, the wolf stopped attacking the moment the zombies started to move.'

Was there a connection to this?

Could it be that the zombies only reacted because of the wolves, and not us?

"I wonder."

It was an interesting thought.

Awooo--!

The wolf howled again, but this time, its cry was a lot further than before.

'Is it running away?'

To where...? And why?

The necromancer maybe?

Thump! Thump!

The zombies continued to move forward, the ground shaking at their unified steps. It was hard on the hearing since it was so loud, but they eventually stopped.

Thump!

"...."

And silence returned.

That was until...

Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh--

Their heads turned and all eyes locked on me. It was only for an instant, but I flinched.

'How creepy.'

I felt like the protagonist of a horror movie.

"Hm?"

Sha—!

Amidst my thoughts, the zombies parted ways. With their gazes still lingering over me, they created a small path.

I unconsciously took a deep breath.

Because in the distance a figure appeared.

They weren't tall, and their features were covered by a large cloak.

It was standing there surrounded by all zombies, locking eyes with me.

I felt scared by it.

But despite my fear,

Tok—

I took the step that led to it.

Fear was a meaningless emotion in this situation.

What was the point of being scared when I was surrounded from all sides?

"....."

I only stopped when I was a few meters away from it.

If I could faintly feel it before, I felt it even more now.

'How terrifying.'

Just standing still proved to be a difficult task. The pressure coming out from the necromancer's body wasn't something that I had ever felt before.

Especially when I could tell that it was currently suppressed.

"....."

I quietly met its gaze.

It just stood there without muttering a single sound.

Carefully observing my every feature.

".....It's cold here isn't it?"

I was the one to first break the silence.

At my words, the necromancer raised its head to stare at me.

I wasn't even sure if it could understand my words.

"The cloak helps you, doesn't it?"

It was just small talk. I wanted to see if I could communicate with it.

"...."

But it didn't seem like I could.

Rather, I must've annoyed it as the pressure around me intensified.

"You're grumpy, aren't you?"

But it didn't really affect me as much as it did before.

Was it because it meant no harm, or because I was getting used to the [Curse] thick environment?

I wasn't sure.

"...."

Either way, the necromancer didn't react.

All it did was continue to stare at me until it turned around. A path cleared for it as the zombies parted ways.

Scrunch.

It stepped forward, heading deep into the horde.

"....."

It said nothing but I understood what it wanted.

'Follow.'

Was what it said.

It wanted to show me something.

Tak.

I followed it without saying a word.

The path was narrow and the zombies's gazes continued to fall on me as I walked. I learned to ignore them, but as I walked past, I couldn't help but see a few familiar figures.

'Hey, are you feeling okay?'

Their voices echoed in my mind whenever I passed them.

'Wear this. It's getting cold outside.'

With each step that I took, a familiar figure entered my sight.

'We're almost there.'

It was almost as if they were still alive.

'It was nice to celebrate your birthday with us, wasn't it?'

The twelfth subjugation squad.

The forty-fifth subjugation squad.

The One-hundred and eleventh subjugation squad.

The Fifty-sixth Subjugation Squad.

The soldiers that had been sent to subjugate the very creature that I was following.

They were all present.

"....."

The necromancer's back shrank as it walked faster than me.

Despite being surrounded by so many zombies, its backs looked rather lonely.

Like a kid who had a lot of toys to play with but no one to share them with.

"....."

And then, the necromancer stopped.

I did as well.

"Ah."

The sound inexplicably escaped from my lips as I looked up.

Cracks appeared in the very fold of space before me. But that wasn't what made me let out that sound.

Rather, it was the enormous corpse that rested in the middle.

It looked like a rock at first, but upon closer attention, rather than a rock, it was more like a...

"Dragon."

A rock dragon.

Its figure towered over anything around it, and if not for the faint purple film covering its body, I wouldn't mistaken it for a simple boulder.

'Purple film...'

My eyes widened as I lowered my head to stare at the necromancer.

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

A lot of the pieces within my mind started to piece themselves together.

All the collection of memories that I had managed to collect flooded my mind as the information that I had gathered became clearer to me.

There were still many questions that I had, but I understood something.

"....."

It was a sad realization.

The powerful necromancer before me.

The powerful 'monster' that everyone wanted to subjugate.

The focus of the town's hatred.

It had never been an enemy, to begin with.

But rather, another unlucky soldier like them. A member of the first subjugation squad.

"Haaa..."

I couldn't see the expression it was making from its turned back, but I could guess.

For the first time, it spoke.

"T-hirty years."

It was a high-pitched voice.

One that belonged to a woman.

".....H-here."

Her words ended there.

It had most probably reached its limit.

But it didn't matter to me. I didn't need a voice to speak to someone.

I took a step to approach the necromancer whose back was turned away from me.

Tak.

As if sensing my step, she turned to look at me.

I held out my hand to it.

Lowering my head in a sign of faith.

"I know you may not understand me right now, but I have a request..."

I wasn't sure if what I was doing was the right thing.

Whether what I had pieced together was the correct sequence of events. But I nonetheless tried.

I raised my head and tried to peer through what was beneath the cloak.

".....Will you let me see your world."