

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 131 Necromancer [4] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 131 Necromancer [4] **Chapter 131 Necromancer [4]**

It was a cold day.

Just like it usually was.

Ellnor was a city located high above sea level. The cold weather was something that Aurelia was used to by now.

"Here, wear this. It's getting cold."

She had a younger brother.

He was about to turn ten in just a few months. Aurelia herself was only fourteen, but she was talented in the field of magic.

It was her talent that allowed for her and her brother to survive in the treacherous conditions.

The two of them had no parents. They had died in an accident a few years prior. It was up to the then twelve-year-old Aurelia to take care of her younger brother.

"We've noticed a suspicious mana wave quite far from the town. We're thinking of creating a small squad to check the situation out. Aurelia, you're a mage. What do you say? Will you go? The pay will be good."

"Me?"

"Haha, yes. There's no need to worry about your safety. You may be weak now, but the people you will go with are strong. Very strong. They are just missing a talented mage. I'm sure you'll be able to help."

"....I'll go."

There was no hesitation in her answer.

Aurelia accepted the deal without a shred of hesitation.

"Hahaha, is this the young girl that will be joining us?"

"Welcome!"

"Wow! You're about the same age as my daughter. I wish she was as talented as you."

The group consisted of four members: a mage, a tank named Grock, a beautiful elder sister who acted as support, and a charismatic young man serving as the damage dealer.

Everyone was older than her but they welcomed her in warmly.

"There's no need to be shy."

"We won't bite. Well, Gork might. Hahaha."

"Oy!"

Aurelia felt a warmth that she had only felt with her brother.

It was as if she had found her second family.

The day for her departure eventually came, and a little boy stood near the gate of the town.

"Good luck!"

"....May you come back safe!"

"Come back to us quickly!"

Surrounding them were the citizens of the town, bidding them good luck and throwing flowers at them.

Amidst the cheers, Aurelia faced her crying brother.

"Hic... hic... S-siter."

"I'll be coming back soon."

She caressed his head.

"It's a promise. Keep this for me."

She handed him her pocket watch.

It was one of the last things that she had to remember their parents. Aurelia thought it'd be a great idea to give it to him.

"See this?"

Aurelia pointed at the watch.

"Make sure you keep track of the time, alright? Once I get back, I'll let you scold me for being late, alright?"

"....O-okay."

The young child quietly muttered while lowering his head and grasping onto the watch with both hands.

"Good."

Aurelia stood up satisfied, and turned around.

There, three figures stood, they stood smiling while staring at her.

"Are you coming?"

Gork said while crossing his arms. He looked like the older uncle she never had.

"He looks just like you. Come on! Let's do this quickly so that we can all come back to this quickly!"

"Haha, yes."

Ruffling her brother's head once more, Aurelia returned their smiles.

"Let's go."

Their journey began then.

An adventure that Aurelia was going to enjoy until the very end.

Would they come back?

Yes.

Aurelia was sure of it.

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"How do you even kill this thing...?"

I walked around the enormous boulder. It was huge. About the same height as the city walls.

A purple film covered its outline, allowing me to perfectly see the head of the dragon. It looked just as one would expect.

"Its strength is reduced quite a lot over the years."

A voice entered my head

I turned to see the necromancer, no, Aurelia standing next to it. Her voice was clear now. I could hear it perfectly.

It sounded sweet.

".....It was very powerful."

Three hooded figures appeared behind her.

Their frames looked familiar.

"We were able to suppress it until now. But that is our limit. We don't have the power to kill it."

"I see."

I looked at the rock dragon once again.

It wasn't noticeable before, but now that I took a good look at it, I could see its frame gently moving up.

Quite clearly, it was still alive.

"How do you kill it then?"

Was it simply not possible?

Or was there a means to do it?

"..."

Aurelia remained silent.

Then, turning her head, she looked at the three other people beside her. They turned to look at each other until Aurelia shook her head.

"Cannot kill."

"...Hmm."

I contemplated deeply.

'So it can't be killed. That probably means that it's too strong for them to kill it. But just how strong is it?'

Looking at the creature, I didn't feel a thing.

The purple film was doing a good job of suppressing it.

"Why did you not report this to the village?"

"....I cannot."

"Is it because you need to contain it?"

"Yes."

Aurelia nodded slightly.

"I see."

So she couldn't leave the area.

The situation was starting to become clear to me. Or, at least, some parts of it. There were still several things that didn't make sense.

However, now was not the time to dwell on them.

"If you were to leave now, how long would it take for the Dragon to awaken?"

"....Eight hours."

"Ah."

That was hardly any time.

Especially when it took days to get to the town.

"That's too little."

If there was one thing that I was sure about, it was that the Empire was soon going to send some reinforcements.

With the proper information about the necromancer, they were sure to send several powerful figures.

However...

I turned to look at the Rock Dragon.

"They'll all die."

Me included.

The moment Aurelia died, the Earth Dragon would awaken. And not only that but there was also a Terror Rank creature lurking outside.

I needed to find a way to get this information to them before it was too late.

There was only one problem.

"How can I get the information to them?"

It wasn't as though I had a communication device with me.

At the same time, it was also impossible for me to return. Who knew when the wolves might show up to assault me?

I wouldn't have been scared if the Professor was still with me.

However, considering that Aurelia could only cover a certain area, I knew that there was a chance of me dying if I were to step out of her zone.

The reality of my situation sank in.

"...I'm stuck."

And I had done this to myself.

'Do I just wait for the reinforcements to arrive so that I can tell them...?'

But for how long would I have to wait for that to happen?

"..."

I stood in silence for a moment before shifting my attention to the purple film that was covering the Rock Dragon.

An idea suddenly crossed my mind.

"That..."

I looked towards Aurelia.

"If I were to cast the same spell as you have. Is it possible for me to delay the awakening of the Dragon?"

".....?"

Waving my hand in the air and feeling the [Curse] element in the air, I showed her my hand. A magic circle started to form.

Tzzz—

It shattered immediately after.

However, that didn't matter. I just wanted to show her that I could do it.

I had seen it in her memories.

"How long do you think we can delay the Rock Dragon's awakening?"

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The concept was simple. Although I was nowhere near as strong as Aurelia was, if I were to cast a similar spell on the Rock Dragon, then it would be possible for me to prolong the time that it stayed dormant.

That way, I would be able to return and relay the information to the Empire which would immediately send adequate reinforcements.

At the very least, before things became too complicated.

Once the Rock Dragon woke up from its slumber, it would without a doubt attack the nearest town, Ellnor.

Success or failure really depended on how things would play out from this point on.

I faced Aurelia.

"Do you think it's possible?"

"...."

She remained still, staring at me from behind the cloak.

"How...?"

I could tell that she was taken aback by the fact that I could perform the same spell as her.

But that wasn't really it.

I had yet to learn the spell. It would take me some time for me to fully learn it. And even then, would my strength be good enough to help at all?

Aurelia wasn't originally this strong.

The ones who had put the beast to slumber were her comrades.

Thirty years had passed since then. Having spent so much time in this [Curse] filled area, she had grown powerful enough to keep the Rock Dragon dormant with her magic.

In a way, she had probably mastered [Curse] magic.

Would I be able to prolong the Rock Dragon's dormancy if I learned the spell?

No, I can.

I looked around me.

The environment was perfect. With the [Curse] element dominating the space, I knew that even if my proficiency over the spell was going to be weak, it would be boosted by the environment that I was in.

And not only that.

I once again stared at Necromancer. No, Aurelia.

"..."

She was still looking at me, demanding a sort of explanation for what I did.

I could understand her confusion but now was not the time.

Extending my hand, a magic circle floated. It wasn't the spell that she had shown before, but rather, another one.

[Hands of Malady]

The experience bar was currently at 55%.

It was just 45% experience from reaching the next level.

In hindsight, there was no need for me to learn that spell. Setting the fact that it was a spell too complicated for the current me to learn, most curse magic had similar principles.

To weaken.

'If I am to use Hands of Malady on the Rock Dragon and manage to weaken it, I might be able to increase the time it takes for it to awaken.'

I knew that it didn't really make sense considering my strength.

But what if I were to use the environment to my advantage and advance the spell to the next level?

What would happen then?

".....It's worth a try."

Insanity.

I was being totally insane for even thinking about it.

But it was the only thing that I could do.

"Huuu."

Therefore, taking a deep breath, I stared at Aurelia and the three cloaked figures behind her.

Despite having seen her memories, they stopped after a certain point. The current her was a lot more powerful than the past her.

I didn't know if she was going to accept me or if I was going to succeed.

But it was worth asking.

"Soldiers from the Empire will soon come to get rid of you. When that happens, the Rock Dragon will awaken and everyone will die. Most probably, the citizens of Ellnor as well. I want to stop that, so..."

We had the same goal after all.

"Please teach me everything that you know."

"....."

Let me reach the next level.

Chapter 132 Sorrow and joy [1]

"Haa... Haaa..."

Her breathing was rough and her entire body shook.

"D-did we do it...?"

Aurelia felt like her voice was hardly coming out.

Looking at the enormous creature lying down in the distance, her breathing stopped. What should've been an easy expedition turned into a far more difficult one than they had anticipated.

A monster of gigantic proportions showed up.

It was powerful.

To the point where it would leave one in despair.

"G-guys?"

Aurelia looked around her.

The land was scorched. Deep fissures marred the ground as debris lay strewn across the surface.

"I-it's dead, isn't it?"

Her eyes were locked on the gigantic creature. It was lying on the ground, with its eyes closed.

'I can't breathe.'

Just the creature's presence felt suffocating.

Her entire body was numb. Her breath was rough, and she felt pain everywhere.

".....It's not dead."

A familiar voice broke the silence.

"Gork?"

His entire body was covered in blood, and his face was pale.

"W-we only managed to deal it some serious injuries. It's still an infant after all, but we aren't strong enough to penetrate its body. T-this is our limit."

"Can't...?"

Aurelia blinked.

"Cannot."

Another voice echoed.

It was from Daphne, the support of the group. Her face was also pale. Turning her head, she looked towards the front.

She called out a name.

"Liam..."

He stood before the dragon, looking at it with blank eyes.

"C-can't. Can't defeat it."

His tone was flat. Something that was so unlike him.

"W-what do we do?"

Aurelia was starting to panic.

"At this rate once it wakes up then-no. I can't."

Thinking about her little brother, she forced herself forward.

"Aurelia? What are you doing?!"

Daphne stood before Aurelia and tried to stop her, but Aurelia remained stubborn. She couldn't let the monster awaken again.

Not when her brother was still in town.

"Kill it. H-have to."

"No, stop. We can't..."

"W-what do we do then?"

"We..."

Daphen's words stopped then.

"...."

"...."

"...."

Silence took hold of the space.

It was a silence that Aurelia broke yet again as she took another step towards the Dragon.

This time, none of them stopped her.

".....The area is thick with the [Curse] element. That's the element I specialize in."

She raised her hand and placed it right on the Rock Dragon.

"I know of a spell that can keep it sleeping, but..."

"But?"

"No, it's nothing."

Aurelia shook her head.

There was no time to hesitate. If it was for the sake of her brother, and the people of Ellnor, then she was willing to do this.

"We might not be able to return."

Her hand glowed as a purple circle floated before her.

".....The moment I cast this spell, I won't be able to return."

"What...?"

"What do you mean?"

The group members sounded startled by her statement.

Aurelia turned to look back at her other members. A smile finally graced her lips.

"I'll need someone to protect me. Will you do that for me?"

The smile.

It was the smile of someone who had made up their mind.

A mix of sorrow and joy.

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"You want me to teach you...?"

I could feel the doubt in Aurelia's voice as she looked at me.

"Yes, please teach me."

There was no better person to teach me how to control the [Curse] element than her. Even Haven didn't have such a person. At the very least, not the first years.

From the second year onwards, the Professors would change.

For first years, the Professors were at around Tier 4 to Tier 5. Second year and up, they would be of higher tier.

It made sense considering that the second and third-year cadets were stronger.

"....."

Aurelia remained silent at my request.

She didn't seem all too keen on teaching me.

"Come on, Aurelia. What are you waiting for?"

Gork spoke up, his tone sounding rather lively.

".....We've been here for far too long. I want to go back to see my family."

"Same."

"Yeah, I'm tired. It's time we take advantage of this opportunity to go back. Don't you miss your brother?"

"B-brother..."

Finally, the words came out of her mouth.

She mumbled them repeatedly until her head raised and our eyes met.

"How much time do you think before reinforcements come?"

How much time...?

"Eh."

I frowned. I wasn't quite sure.

"It can be a couple of days, to maybe more? A week? Months?"

I wouldn't be surprised if they took months. The situation was delicate, but it was still within control.

They weren't aware of the Rock Dragon.

In that case, they were probably discussing who to send to defeat Aurelia.

"You don't know?"

".....Not exactly."

And that was a problem.

Not knowing when the soldiers would come was a big issue. It meant that I needed to train with the thought that each second was the last.

If the reinforcements were to come, I couldn't guarantee I could stop them to explain the situation.

....It was possible that they would. However, I knew that the chance of something going wrong was possible.

I wasn't planning on sitting back and letting such a chance happen.

'There's nothing wrong with being prepared.'

Turning to face the Rock Dragon, I swallowed my saliva.

'I need to do this.'

For my sake.

"Sit down."

Aurelia motioned me down with her hand.

I did as she asked and sat down.

"I take it you agree to teach me?"

"....."

She didn't reply and stood behind me.

"Channel your mana."

"....."

I did as she told me.

In the moment that I did, I felt something cold. Almost chilling and touching my back.

"Don't look back. Focus on your mana."

My face twitched slightly the moment I called forth my mana and the chilling sensation from my back disappeared.

"You're injured?"

".....Yes."

"Why?"

"I took something that I shouldn't have."

"....It's a mess."

"I know."

I replied with a bitter smile.

There was no denying the current state of my body. It had healed significantly, but not enough.

I started to grow a little worried.

"Would this effect-"

"Yes,"

Aurelia cut me off coldly and stepped back.

"I cannot teach you."

"....Uh?"

I blinked and looked back.

"What do you mea-"

"It will break your body. You might die."

"I might die if I don't do anything."

"The chances of that are less likely."

"That..."

I covered my forehead, letting out a frustrated breath.

"Just let me be. It's not lik-"

"My decision is final."

Her tone was final. With those words, she turned around and walked up to the Rock Dragon where she placed her hand.

A powerful pulse swept the area.

"Ukh...!"

Groaning, I stood up and walked up to her.

"I don't understand."

"....."

"Aren't you desperate to meet your brother? If you don't let me do this and the soldiers attack before I can do anything, the rock dragon will awaken and once that happens you know what will happen to your br—Eukh!"

I felt another powerful pulse, and my breathing momentarily stopped. Holding onto my throat, I fell on both knees.

Thump!

"Cough...! Cough!"

And started coughing.

"Mind your own business."

"W-"

"Leave it."

Something cold grasped my shoulder. When I looked up, I realized that it was Gork.

"She's a stubborn one. Once her mind is made up, it's hard to convince her otherwise."

"Ah, I..."

"Come rest with us."

"....."

Silently clenching my fists, I wordlessly stared at Aurelia before standing up and following Gork from behind.

Sat on a couple of rocks were the other two members of the first subjugation squad.

Liam, their damage dealer and leader laughed.

"Hahaha, looks like you're having it rough."

"Oy, you..."

Daphne playfully punched his shoulder.

"Don't tease him. You know damn well how frustrating Aurelia's stubbornness is."

"Uh, yeah "

While the two conversed, I sat down on one of the rocks.

I tried to sort out her memories. And yet, regardless of how hard I tried, I couldn't find a single reason for her to reject my request.

Why?

'She clearly wants to return to her brother. This is the best option. So what if I suffer some pain? I'm used to damn pain...'

In fact, it was rather weird for her to say such words when she had turned so many of her people into zombies.

It was fucking bullshit.

"What are you thinking so deeply about...?"

Breaking me out of my thoughts was Daphne's voice. When I looked up at her, it almost felt as though she was smiling from beneath the hood.

"You're thinking about how unfair her decision is, right?"

"....."

"So you are..."

Was she a mind reader or something?

"Don't worry."

She reassured me.

"She may be like this, but she's a softie. She might not train you, but that doesn't mean you should give up, right?"

"....Hm?"

Right.

I lifted my head.

'Just because she isn't willing to train me doesn't mean that I should just give up on the idea.'

I looked up towards the sky. The purple dome still surrounded the space, and the [Curse] element was running rampant.

Recalling how fast I was progressing before, I snapped out of it.

"You're right."

I looked towards the three with gratitude.

"Huuu."

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes.

Then.

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

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

I started practicing.

?| Lvl. 1 [Hands of Malady] EXP + 0.2%

Time seemed to flow at a different speed when one immersed oneself in something.

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

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

The notifications kept pouring into my vision.

I wasn't sure how long had passed.

Drip! Drip...!

My vision was blurry, and I could hear the faint sound of my sweat hitting the ground.

'More.'

I just focused on the [Curse] element that was coursing through the air. There was so much of it, and everything was flowing so smoothly.

"Hm...!"

From time to time, I'd let out a pained groan.

It was sharp, and I could feel it worsen with every minute that I practiced.

But I didn't care.

'Again.'

Pain was something I was so used to at this point. If anything, it served to remind me of the fact that I was still conscious.

57%

61%

66%

70%

73%

The experience bar continued to rise.

Drip! Drip...!

It was starting to get cold for some reason. It didn't bother me at first. I was too immersed to care.

I was in a strange state.

It was as if the world around me had disappeared and it was just me in the middle.

I felt naked, but at the same time, I felt in utter control of everything around me.

It felt good.

So much so that I wanted to continue to bask in it.

Ah, This is good...

This is very...

Good...

I...

Swoosh!

I abruptly lifted my head and snapped out of the state.

"Uekh...!"

As if my chest was on fire, I clenched onto my shirt and coughed repeatedly.

"Cough! Cough...!"

It burned.

It hurt so much.

I tried to look around, but I couldn't see a thing. Everything was so blurry.

'Ah.'

No, I did see something.

A faint dark figure. It stood not far from where I was.

Aurelia.

Was she the one that brought me out of it?

I mustered up a smile.

"F-finally going to teach me?"

"...."

But all I received was silence.

The next time I blinked, she was gone.

"Haa..."

So it wasn't the case.

"Wow, look at you."

I heard faint voices coming from around me.

"Is he dead?"

"No, not yet. He's been pushing himself quite hard."

These guys...

"Oh look! His eye twitched! He can probably hear us."

"Hello~"

A large black hand waved at me.

"Hehe, you managed to get Aurelia to worry over you. That's a big achievement in my book."

A big achievement?

"Well, you still failed to convince her."

Ah, fuck.

I...

Was starting to really hate these guys.

The world turned dark shortly after that.

Chapter 133 Sorrow and joy [2]

The cold never ceased throughout the year.

Aurelia and the members of the first subjugation squad remained faithful to their commitment, standing where they were and guarding the Dragon.

"....Are you tired Aurelia? It's been several months since we've been here. Isn't it okay if you take a break?"

Daphne looked around.

"Reinforcements from the town should also get back here soon. When they come, we'll be able to tell them of the situation."

"....."

Despite Daphne's words, Aurelia's attention remained fixed on the Dragon before her.

The mana in her body was rapidly draining and her face was pale. She was hungry and she was thirsty. Her body ached, and she was cold.

Despite that, she kept her hand fixed on the Dragon.

"M-must..."

It was as if nothing else could distract her.

"Ah! They're here!"

Or at least, until she felt a few presences in the distance and her head turned.

Four silhouettes appeared in the distance. They looked familiar.

"Ah—!"

She was just about to talk to them when Daphne screamed.

Awooooo—!

And the cry of a wolf echoed in the air.

Before any of them had any chance to react, several wolf-like creatures appeared, lunging towards the reinforcements that had come.

"Ah, no...!"

Aurelia screamed, but her voice reached nothing.

"Ahh!"

"H-help!"

"Hellhounds! What are they doing here?!"

Blood littered the earth as Aurelia stood paralyzed.

"What are you doing Aurelia!?"

Even despite her party members' protests, she remained still.

Clank! Clank—!

The sound of fighting echoed in the distance.

One that eventually ended with the cry of the creature.

"....."

When all was said and done, silence reigned over the surroundings. One that was shattered by the voices of her comrades.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

"W-where did those beasts come from?"

"Oh, no...!"

Daphne rushed to aid the wounded, but it was already too late.

"Please hold on. I-I will... Jackson. It's me, Daphne. H-hold on."

Despite her words, Jackson lay on the ground with his eyes wide open. He wasn't staring at her, but at Aurelia who looked back at him.

He continued to stare at her until his very last breath.

"Jackson!!"

Daphne's cry of despair echoed throughout.

"...."

Aurelia continued to stand alone in silence.

One that she inevitably broke with her own step.

Scrunch.

She came to a stop when she was near Jackson's corpse. There were three other corpses around. Aurelia could recognize their faces. They had been at their farewell ceremony. Right before they departed for this journey.

Jackson, Monica, Clara, and Austin.

Aurelia knew their names too.

".....What are you doing?"

Disregarding Daphne's voice, Aurelia bent down and placed her hand over Jackson's corpse.

A faint purple glow emitted from her body.

[Corpse Control] - A beginner-type spell that allowed one to control corpses. Belonging to the [Curse] category, it wasn't a common spell and was somewhat frowned upon. However, Aurelia was in possession of it.

It was a spell that Aurelia hated with her guts.

Loathed.

The spell was after all the cause of her parent's death. Her outstanding talent in the [Curse] field was what pushed her parents to acquire the spell.

If not for the...

Groooowl—!

Jackson's eyes flared open as a growl escaped its lips.

"This...!"

Daphen's eyes widened, and her head snapped to face Aurelia.

"Did you just...?"

"Wait, what are you doing?"

The others also showed signs of protest, but Aurelia ignored them yet again and moved on to the next corpse.

Austina.

He was about a few years older than her. A talented archer. Had he been given a bit of time, Aurelia was sure he would've been one of the strongest people in the town.

Groooowl—!

Unfortunately, he too fell prey to her spell.

"Aurelia, you shouldn't be doing this. These are people that we know. We should—"

Groooowl—!

Despite what the others said, nothing could get through Aurelia as she continued to cast her spell over all the members of the reinforcement group.

Groooowl—!

When all was said and done, four familiar figures stood before her.

Aurelia could feel the looks of astonishment and disapproval from her friends. Just as they were about to say something, she cut them off.

".....They died."

"Yes, but—!"

"More people will come."

Aurelia continued to speak, her eyes slowly losing their luster.

"....This will happen again. We need to stop it."

"But—"

"This is the only way."

Aurelia turned around and moved back to the Dragon. As she walked, she looked for the hellhounds, but there was no sign of them.

It was as if they had no interest in them.

"I'll kill them all..."

She pledged to herself.

Time passed.

The next group came. This time, it wasn't just one group. It was several. Aurelia could recognize each member.

Awoooo—!

But the same scene from before occurred.

The Hellhounds attacked.

"Ahhh....!"

"H-help!"

She, alongside her group members, tried to help, but it was no use.

"Hic... Hic... H-how did this happen?"

Yet again, everyone died.

Groooowl—!

And more undead joined their group.

It was a never-ending cycle. Every few months, or year, the town would send its best warriors to where she was, only for them to die at the hands of the wolves.

Sometimes, they would be single groups, and sometimes, they would be large groups with hundreds of people.

But each time they'd come, they'd lose at the hands of the hellhounds.

"No, stop...!"

She screamed.

"Don't come."

But no one listened.

"You can't defeat them! Stop!"

She cried.

"Hic... Hic... C-call for help from the Empire."

But no one heard.

"Stop being so stubborn!"

Each year, Aurelia would plead with them. But her words couldn't reach them.

"....."

Gradually, she lost her voice.

Grooowl—

"Kill the necromancer!"

"I'll kill you!"

"You evil bastard...! If not for you my family would still be here! Fuck you!"

Aurelia could feel it. The deep-seethed anger and thirst for revenge were already rooted in the citizen's eyes, forcing members to come back each time even though the situation was hopeless for them.

And...

They were all directed towards her.

"Wakey, wakey~"

"...Um."

An annoying voice woke me up from my slumber.

My vision was clear once again.

It was Gork.

"Did you have enough rest...? You feeling better?"

"..."

I sat up and groaned.

My body felt like shit and my head throbbed.

Looking around, the sun was starting to set. Rubbing my neck, I was just about to stand when I paused.

"...Uh?"

"Hurr... Hurr..."

I heard a rough laugh coming from above. It was Gork.

"It seems like you've finally noticed."

Noticed?

Noticed what?

"Your body feels better, doesn't it?"

"...It does."

Or more like, I felt more in control with the [Curse] element in the air. It was flowing a lot more smoothly.

"Hurr... Hurr."

Gork laughed again.

Before he could explain, Liam, who was standing behind him, started speaking.

"A certain someone helped you while you were asleep."

"Helped me?"

I looked around.

Who?

"Ah."

And my eyes soon locked on a certain figure.

"Her...?"

I tilted my head.

"But didn't she say she wouldn't help me?"

"Hehe, she's a softie."

Daphne said from the side, playing with a wooden stick and drawing circles on the dirt. I looked at what she was drawing.

It looked crude. It was a small house with two people.

She continued to fiddle with the stick, adding trees, grass, and flowers. It looked like the drawing of a five-year-old.

Of course, I didn't tell her.

".....Even if she says she won't teach you, it's mainly because she doesn't want you to die."

"But-"

"Die because of her."

"....."

Daphne raised her head and our gazes met.

"Try feeling your body."

"....."

I did as I was told. Closing my eyes, I took a proper look at my body. When I did, my eyes flashed open.

"This..."

Maybe I was still unconscious and I was dreaming, but checking my body, I found that a lot of my injuries were healed. There was still some damage, but it was a lot better than before. Especially when I had damaged my body trying to practice my spell.

"She's shy."

That was all Gork needed to say for me to realize.

Aurelia.

Despite her cold response, she still wanted to help me.

In a way, this was her own way of teaching me.

Her way of acknowledging my efforts.

"....."

Staring at her back, I kept my mouth shut. There was no need for me to say anything. Even if I said it, she wouldn't react.

All I needed to do at the moment was train hard.

'Right, I need to train.'

Time was limited.

And each second mattered.

"Huu."

I had just taken a breath and gotten ready to start training when Daphne's voice reached my ears.

"Oh, it's starting."

Starting?

"What is st-"

I abruptly cut off my words as my eyes widened and I looked around me. Just as I spoke, the sun started to set and an extremely powerful pulse of energy swept the surroundings.

Following the pulse, the zombies that were surrounding the five of us disappeared.

It was a familiar scene.

"Uh...?"

I looked around in shock before settling my gaze over to Aurelia who still had her back turned against me.

"Where did they go?"

My voice didn't seem to reach her as she remained quiet.

It was Daphne who answered in her stead.

"You already know the answer."

"But-"

".....Focus on your training. You're safe around us."

"I..."

"Don't ask."

There was still so much that I wanted to ask. However, I could see that it was going to be pointless.

'Maybe she's doing it to stop the town's knights from coming here?'

It made sense when I thought about it.

Still...

'What if I give the zombies a message? Would they...'

"No."

I was quick to scratch such a thought.

Besides the fact that I had no pen or paper, thinking about how the knights would attack the moment the zombies showed up, the message was probably going to get destroyed in an instant.

Still, I raised my head.

"What about me? Is it not possible to send me back with the zombies?"

"Zombies?"

Daphne cocked her head curiously.

"....What are those?"

"Ah, right.

My lips twitched and I corrected myself.

"Undead."

"Zombies. I like that name."

Daphne seemed to smile beneath the hood. It looked as though she was about to answer when Liam beat her to it.

"It can only be done to the undead. Do you think we'd still be here if it was possible?"

"Right..."

That made sense.

The little hope that I held shattered just like that.

"Don't worry."

A hand pressed against my shoulder.

"Just keep practicing. We have faith in you."

Facing them, and seeing them, I eventually nodded my head.

"Alright."

Clenching and unclenching my fists, I let out a long breath and closed my eyes.

'I'm at 73%... I need 27% left. I can do it.'

Yet again, I fully immersed myself in training.

?| Lvl. 1 [Hands of Malady] EXP + 0.2%

?| Lvl. 1 [Hands of Malady] EXP + 0.07%

Chapter 134 Sorrow and joy [3]

Ellnor.

The day after. In the captains' room.

A visible gloom shrouded the space as several individuals sat alongside the table.

"There's a Mirror Crack, and a Terror rank Hellhound alongside a few lower ranked ones. That's not accounting for the Necromancer whose strength appears to be around the same level if not stronger."

Professor Hollowe was the one to speak.

"I've already asked for reinforcements. The Empire will soon send a platoon to our aid."

His expression was extremely gloomy, and besides him and Professor Bridgette, no one else from Haven was present.

The cadets had no business being here.

".....How long will the reinforcements take?"

Captain Travis asked from his seat.

"Will they send reinforcements immediately, or will they wait a while?"

"I don't know."

Professor Hollowe answered with a frown.

Central had only told him that they'd send some troops and high-ranking knights to deal with the situation.

However, he wasn't sure how long it would take for them to come.

Especially since the situation was still manageable on their side. While high-ranking knights weren't sparse, they were still highly sought after.

It was hard to mobilize them quickly unless it was an emergency.

"Tsk."

The Professor clicked his tongue at the realization.

Recalling the scene from the day prior, his eyes closed. Memories of the past resurfaced, and his eyes twitched.

'Again, I've failed.'

"Professor Hollowe."

A voice broke him out of his thoughts. It was none other than Professor Bridgette.

"What should we do about the death of the cadet....?"

"....."

What sort of expression was he currently making?

Hollowe asked him to himself, leaning back on his chair.

They had already relayed the news of the cadet's death to the Academy. Had it been any other cadet, the situation wouldn't have been as troublesome.

However, this was the 'Black Star'.

The strongest first year within Haven. One of the Empire's most promising geniuses.

It was an extremely sensitive situation.

Would the Academy send someone over to retrieve his body?

'But what if he's not dead?'

Professor Hollowe rubbed his forehead. He had seen him get swallowed up by the undead. There was no way he was able to survive.

It was unrealistic.

With such thoughts, he sighed.

"For now, nothing."

Gradually, Professor Hollowe found his voice.

"I've already relayed everything to the Academy. What happens next, will be up to them."

He helped himself up from his seat.

Taking a moment to look around, he grimly nodded his head.

"Meeting dismissed."

At the same time. In another part of the town.

Leon sat down and stared at the flowing river. The water was crystal clear, and the cold wind swept over, scattering his hair all over his face.

"....."

In the silence that surrounded him, the chair on the opposite end of his table scraped and a figure sat down.

"What are you doing?"

Leon turned to look in the direction of the figure.

With long flowing purple hair, it was none other than Evelyn. Her gaze. It looked strange to him.

"Do you..."

So was her tone.

It sounded like a mix of sorrow and confusion.

"... not feel anything from his death?"

"His death?"

Right.

Julien was dead.

Or at least, that was what everyone thought. He knew he wasn't. Especially not after seeing his gaze at the end.

Leon knew then that Julien had something planned.

He was always like this. At the very least, the current version of Julien. He was someone who surprised him time and time again.

It was for this reason that he wasn't worried.

Rather, he was curious.

What exactly was he going to do...?

'I'll play along for now.'

"....I don't know how I'm feeling."

"Haa."

Evelyn sighed while leaning her head over the table and massaged her forehead.

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

She appeared lost.

"Do I hate him? Or do I not hate him?"

Rumbling to herself, she ruffled her hair.

Eventually, she stopped and raised her head to face Leon.

"What even is he?"

"....?"

"Every time I see him, he's a completely different person. I know you told me he's not the same Julien from the past, but I can't get the image out of my mind. What the hell am I even supposed to do...?"

Evelyn's voice cracked at certain points but no tears came out of her eyes.

In Leon's eyes, he could tell that while her lingering feelings from childhood were still there, they had majorly faded.

They weren't romantic, but they were still there.

It was for this reason that her gaze felt burdensome.

Especially when she went on to ask,

"Which version of Julien died?"

"....."

Which version?

Leon didn't know how to answer that.

But since he said he was going to play along, he eventually gave her an answer.

"The one that you don't know."

"The one that I don't know...?"

Evelyn blinked, tilting her head in confusion.

"What does that eve-"

"The current Julien is not the same Julien from your memories."

"I know."

Leon placed his hand over the table and stood up.

"If you know then you should already know the answer."

"Uh...?"

Evelyn blinked again, seemingly unsure of how to react.

Taking one last look at her, Leon answered.

"Wiping away all previous memories of the Julien in your memories. What do you feel about the death of the Julien you met at the Academy? The Black Star."

He tapped on the table once.

"....That's the Julien that died."

Leon left shortly after that.

"What...?"

Evelyn sat there in silence for a long time. It appeared as though she was in deep thought. She wasn't the only one.

Not far from her, another figure sat.

Having overheard the entire conversation, Kiera put her pencil down.

"....."

Before her were several books.

Right, she was studying. Why was she even studying to begin with?

And these questions.

Why were they so fucking hard?

"Fucking hell."

Skrtrtckk—

Scrunching up the paper before her, Kiera cursed and tossed it to the side.

".....So annoying."

Studying was meant to be something she had started to like.

And yet...

Why was it so fucking annoying all of a sudden?

"Damn it."

"You're awake again. How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. My head throbbed, and just everything hurt. However, that sensation didn't last for very long.

".....Um."

Channeling my mana, I found that my injuries had healed yet again. Of course, they were still not fully healed, but I had worsened them during my training.

My gaze unconsciously drifted towards the one in question.

"Thank you."

And words came out of my mouth.

"...."

They were met with silence as she kept her back facing my direction.

I didn't mind it.

I had started to grow used to her quietness.

"What a rude lass."

Daphne, who was sitting beside me, shook her head.

"She used to be a lot more cheerful you know?"

"Hurr... Hurr... She used to swing on my arms at times."

"Right, right! I remember that. She was so cute."

"Hurr. Hurr."

"Aurelia? Do you want to swing on Gork's arms again?"

"....."

"Hahaha."

"Hurr. Hurr."

"Aurelia? Do you want to swing on Gork's arms again?"

"Hurr. Hurr."

While the two laughed, I helped myself up. My eyelids felt heavy, and I wanted nothing more than to sleep.

But I had no time for that.

I needed to continue to train.

I needed to upgrade [Hands of Malady]. I was close.

「95%」

I was just missing 5%.

I was close and yet it felt so far. Especially when the progress was starting to stagnate.

"Haa."

Right, whatever.

I should be able to get it in the next session.

Or the one after.

"....."

Yet again, I lost track of time.

Time seemed to flow at a different speed as I just focused on absorbing the [Curse] element in the air and tried to understand it.

A familiar pattern started to set.

I'd first lose track of time.

Drip!

Then, the sweat would come.

As if the two had some form of agreement, pain would come right after that.

It stabbed right through my body. Like thousands of needles had punctured every part of my body.

"Uhk...!"

I'd withhold the pain for as long as I possibly could.

My pain tolerance was high.

And yet, even I had no choice but to succumb to it after a certain point.

The world would turn dark, and I'd wake up again.

"Wakey~ Wakey~ How are you feeling?"

A familiar greeting.

It had almost become a routine for me.

"Like shit."

Rubbing my eyes, I looked around me.

The pain was gone again, and my body was healed. It was time to start again.

I waved my hand to check on my progress.

"...."

Only to find myself pausing and blinking my eyes.

「95%」

"Uh...?"

I covered my mouth. For a moment, I felt like laughing.

"Haha."

No, I did laugh.

It just came out of my mouth without my permission.

I blinked to make sure that I was seeing correctly.

And yet...

「95%」

The results remained the same.

There was no change.

I felt my lips tremble.

'Did I just waste a day...?'

All that pain, and time. What was it for?

I rubbed my head.

'No, now is not the time to panic.'

Perhaps I had not been training hard enough.

I looked around me. My gaze eventually paused on Aurelia. The entire time, her only focus was the Dragon.

It was as if everything else mattered little to her.

I opened my mouth but closed it again.

'Again.'

I repeated the cycle once more.

I had no choice but to.

The only person I could rely on was myself.

Closing my eyes, I went through the cycle once more.

It would first start with the immersion.

Then, the sweat.

Pain at last.

And then...

Black.

「95%」

"....."

I blankly stared at the window with my back on the ground.

"I don't understand."

Why...?

Why had the progress halted?

Was there something that I was missing? Clearly, this method had been working up to now. Why wasn't it working anymore?

"Why?"

My eyes yet again unconsciously drifted towards Aurelia.

I wanted to ask her but stopped myself again. I knew she wouldn't answer me. This was something that I needed to find for myself.

"....."

But regardless of how hard I tried, my mind remained blank.

I couldn't think of anything.

'This isn't something I can do.'

The painful realization of my situation became clear to me.

Raising my hand, I blocked the distant sun. It was shining brightly, and my eyes were starting to hurt.

A shadow cast over my face as I did.

Clenching my fist, my hand slowly turned purple.

"..."

Feeling the rough surface of the ground with my back, I turned my palm and looked at my hand. It was entirely purple due to [Hands of Malady] being in effect.

A simple touch and I'd be able to cast the spell on another person.

A rather convenient skill when used alongside Etherweave.

"I wonder how it feels."

I had used it so many times on opponents, and yet, I still wasn't sure how others felt when put under the spell.

Would they just feel weak?Or was there more to it?

"..."

A sudden thought crossed my mind.

Before I knew it, my hand was near my face.

And then...

I placed it over my face.

"..."

I couldn't remember anything after that.

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Chapter 135 Sorrow and joy [4]

Voom—

The space wobbled and a leg stepped out.

Coming out of thin air were three figures. The very air changed the moment the three stepped out.

Wearing thick metal armor with a golden lion insignia, they looked around.

"Are we here...?"

Captain Wesley Reijnder of the Hell-Lion Brigade asked.

Looking around, he could feel the cold tickle his skin. With a thick mane of blonde hair, a mustache, and a bulky body, he was a perfect fit for the Brigade.

"Brr, captain. It's cold~"

Behind him were the two other members of the Brigade.

With short black hair and blue eyes, Samantha had a distinctive mole at the bottom of her chin. At Tier 5, she was an important member of the Brigade.

On the other hand, standing beside her, with long black hair covering his face and a hunched back, Ray looked around while muttering to himself.

".....I'm tired. I want to go back. Why always me?"

"Stop complaining."

Samantha sighed.

Ray was a rather unique member. He was hard to describe, but if Samantha had to put it in words, it'd be 'Extremely introverted'.

If not for the fact that this mission involved a [Curse] heavy area, they wouldn't have brought him with them.

Brushing her hair, she looked towards the walls in the distance.

"Umm, is that the town?"

"It should be."

The captain replied.

Samantha nodded while her eyes fluttered with interest.

"They said it's a necromancer. I wonder how strong it is."

"We've got people coming."

Just as the captain spoke, a few individuals showed up. Recognizing one of them, a smile crept on the captain's face.

"If it isn't a familiar face. I didn't expect to see you here, Inquisitor Hollowe."

"You're finally here."

Brushing his hair back, Inquisitor Hollowe looked at the captain before him.

"You guys came a lot faster than I thought."

"Haha, well we had some free time, and given that it has something to do with a Mirror Crack, Central deemed this place to be rather important."

"That's true."

Turning his head to stare at the town, the Inquisitor nudged with his chin.

"Let's have a talk. There's a lot that I need to fill you on."

It first started with the weakness.

My body grew limp and I lost control of it. Blankly staring at the sky, I couldn't move at all.

It was as if I was completely paralyzed.

'....Is this it?'

It didn't seem to be that bad.

At least, that was until my head started to ache. The world started to spin and my stomach churned.

"...."

Something started to build up in my stomach.

With each minute that passed, the more it built up.

And then....

"Blergh."

It all came out of my mouth.

"...!"

But I was still paralyzed. All I could do was remain still on the ground as the puke flowed out of my mouth.

"Ukh...!"

There was so much of it that it started to suffocate me.

'I can't breathe.'

"Blergh."

And if it wasn't bad enough, the puke continued to flow out of my mouth.

With my eyes wide open, I lay on the ground unable to do a single thing as my breath left my body,

A weird, almost suffocating tingling permeated the depths of my mind as I tried to find some leeway to breathe.

But... it just never appeared.

"....!"

I was running out of oxygen.

The tingling sensation became more apparent as my body started to spasm on its own.

'Air...! I need air!'

I internally screamed to myself, but my body refused to listen to me.

Gurgle—!

The vomit continued to spill.

My knees trembled, and my neck twitched.

The world was starting to get dark.

The tingling was as strong as ever, and it felt suffocating.

But I could do nothing about it.

I was slowly starting to lose sight of my own conciseness.

And yet, there was an irony in all of this.

?| Lvl. 1 [Hands of Malady] EXP + 0.3%

?| Lvl. 1 [Hands of Malady] EXP + 0.01%

I had finally started to improve again...

'Haaa...'

My world turned dark after that.

"...."

When I woke up again, the first thing that I noticed was the large notification in front of me.

「97%」

It had worked.

"Looks like someone has woken up again. How are you feeling?"

"...."

I didn't answer as I usually did.

Rather, I helped myself up and faced the ground on both knees. I lowered my head to stare at my hand.

It was purple again.

"H-Hu."

My chest trembled with nervousness. I could see why. Recalling the pain that I had previously experienced, I felt hesitant.

It was a different type of pain.

A suffocating, and drowning one. I wasn't accustomed to such pain.

However, thinking about my current circumstances, I grit my teeth.

"I have to do this."

Turning my head, I glanced towards a certain figure.

.....I was sure I wouldn't die.

She was after all protecting me. Even if she didn't show it, she cared.

The only thing that I needed to handle was the pain.

"Okay."

I closed my eyes.

Then, I brought my hand towards my face.

Thump!

I fell forward this time.

Gurgle—

And I yet again started to choke on my own vomit.

The tingling sensation returned, and the suffering continued. Despite that, amidst the torture, I focused my perception entirely on my experiences.

From the paralysis of my body to the churning in my stomach, and the throbbing in my head.

I focused all my attention on those feelings.

I needed to properly understand how the spell worked to jump to the next level. What effects it brought to those that it hit, and how effective it was.

I focused my attention on such thoughts.

'It hurts.'

'I can't breathe.'

'I can't focus.'

'My stomach hurts.'

'I'm hungry.'

'I'm thirsty.'

The more I started to dissect the feelings, the more I started to understand the depths of the spell.

Not only did the spell weaken someone, but it also made them experience all sorts of pain.

It became clear to me the more I was under such a state.

'This sucks.'

"....."

When I woke up again, I immediately checked the progress bar.

「99%」

I was almost there.

I was just one experience away from leveling up [Hands of Malady]. Ideally, I'd have to put myself under such torture again, but I didn't.

"....."

I understood that there'd be no point in doing that.

Rubbing my eyes, I checked my body. As expected, it was all healed up again. Daphne's voice reached me from the side.

"Hm? Are you not going to do the same thing this time?"

".....No."

This time, I answered.

"Oh? You're finally talking to us again?"

Daphne raised her voice as if shocked. I scratched the side of my face. The puke that had previously been around me had disappeared, and my clothes were clean.

I looked towards her and lowered my head.

"Thank you."

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

She waved her hand at me.

"What I did is nothing compared to Aurelia. If you want to thank someone, you should thank her."

"Right."

I nodded at her.

There was no denying this. If not for Aurelia, I wouldn't have gotten to this point.

And at the same time, without her, I wouldn't be able to progress to the next level. Taking a few steps in her direction, I only stopped when I was a few meters behind her.

"....."

She, like usual, was staring at the Rock Dragon.

"I'm almost there."

I started to speak.

"I've hit the limit of what I can do by myself."

Indeed, I had hit the limit.

Although I was only missing one percent, I knew that I wouldn't be able to cross the one percent regardless of how much time I had.

"I don't know how long it will take for the Empire's reinforcements to come, but I am almost done reaching the next level. I don't know how to reach the next level."

"...."

Not minding her silence, I lowered my head.

"Please teach me."

Yet again, I asked her to teach me.

I knew that I didn't have to ask her. Despite her 'coldness' she had been teaching me diligently the entire time.

Every time my body recovered from one of those sessions, I felt a certain energy coming from her. It guided me on the paths I needed to use and how to use my mana more efficiently.

In fact, it felt as though my overall mana purity had improved.

'It was Tainted the last time I checked. I wonder what it is now...'

Too bad I couldn't check.

".....Why?"

Yet again, Aurelia asked me why.

I didn't hesitate to reply.

"Because I have to."

"...You have to?"

Aurelia's body turned and I came face to face with her.

Smiling, I replied,

"I don't want to die. I want to go back to Ellnor. Do you not want to go back as well?"

"...."

There was no reply but the answer was obvious.

I sat down crossed my legs and placed my back against hers.

"I'm ready whenever."

I could tell that whatever I needed to do to get to the next level would lead to unbelievable pain.

But I was ready for it.

If it meant getting over everything and reaching the next level, I didn't mind putting myself through this torture.

"...Why do you do this to yourself?"

Even Aurelia seemed confused by my perseverance.

"I have seen you torture yourself to the point of death each time. You have no regard for your body at all. It's as if you don't even care about yourself. Why...? Why are you doing this?"

"...."

I didn't reply immediately.

Without looking back, I stared ahead. In the distance, I could see Daphne, Gork, and Liam together. Noticing my gaze, they waved their hands at me.

I felt like smiling, but I didn't.

I couldn't find it in me to smile.

Still, when I thought about the situation, I pursed my lips.

"....It's for the same reason as you."

"Me?"

"I want to go back."

Yes, I wanted to go back.

But not to Ellnor.

Somewhere else. Somewhere further away from here.

A very far place that I wasn't sure I could go back to anymore. Still, it was worth a try.

For that reason, I could take on this pain and put myself under such pain.

"We are not that different."

Aurelia said, her voice reaching my ears from behind.

"That's why I didn't want to teach you."

"I know..."

A cold hand pressed against my back, and my body trembled. Yet again, I felt pain. It coursed through all corners of my body like molten lava.

"....."

I shouldered the pain in silence.

"People like us will never be happy."

In the silence, Aurelia's voice continued to echo.

".....We keep chasing for things that even we know are probably not possible."

I could hardly focus on her voice.

The pain was making its way through every corner of my body.

"And yet, despite knowing that we can't stop ourselves."

My shoulders trembled.

My heart trembled.

"We are cursed to be like this."

An unspeakable pain captured my body. It weakened my entire body and once again, I grew limp. Automatically, my body limped forward but a hand stopped me.

"Regardless of whether we like it or not. We still try to chase that meaningless goal of ours."

It held me straight.

"I hate it."

Stopping me from falling over.

"I hate you."

And it kept me upright.

"I hate you because I hate myself."

Allowing me to get a better look into the distance.

"....And for that, I can't help but want to cheer for you."

My vision changed.

A notification flashed.

And in that moment, all the pain that I experienced disappeared.

"Ah."

My shoulders felt light, and so did my chest.

All I felt was relief.

Lvl 1. [Hands of Malady] --> Lvl 2. [Grip of Pestilence]

'I did it.'

Chapter 136 Sorrow and joy [5]

It was hard to describe how I currently felt.

But I didn't need to describe it.

?| Lvl. 1 [Joy] EXP + 4%

I could see what I was feeling.

".....I-I did it."

Lvl 1. [Hands of Malady] --> Lvl 2. [Grip of Pestilence]

I had finally upgraded my spell to the next level.

'Grip of Pestilence'

It was as I predicted.

The name changed alongside the level increase. It was as if it had become a completely new spell. No, it had become an entirely new spell.

One that shared similar principles to the old one.

".....It looks like you've succeeded."

Aurelia's voice reached me from behind.

"H-ha."

Taking a deep breath, I pursed my lips before nodding.

"I did."

I truly had succeeded.

"Hahahaha."

A familiar laugh echoed in the distance as four figures showed up.

"Have you succeeded?"

It was Gork.

"Idiot, didn't you literally hear him?"

"Uh, yeah, but I just wanted to hear it from him."

As usual, Gork and Daphne bantered together.

I stared at them for a moment before taking a deep breath and standing up. My body still ached, but I could handle this much.

"So...?"

Liam alternated his gaze between the four of us, eventually settling his gaze over me and Aurelia.

"What's the plan now?"

"....."

Silence took hold of the surroundings after the question.

The answer was obvious, and I turned my body to stare at the enormous Rock Dragon. Even now, the pressure coming from it was terrifying.

There was a reason why I hadn't moved closer to it throughout my entire time here.

The pressure was simply too overwhelming for me to bear.

"Are you ready?"

I felt Aurelia's gaze. With a glance, I could tell she was encouraging me in her own way.

Meeting it, I nodded.

"...Yes."

Although I had just come out of an intense session, the adrenaline was still coursing through my mind. My mind felt clear, and all the details about the spell and what led to its creation were still fresh in my mind.

If I were to take a break then I wasn't sure I would be able to perform it as well.

There was no better time than now.

"Okay."

Aurelia nodded her head and walked up to the Dragon.

"...."

I followed her after a moment of silence. Looking at the enormous creature before me, I felt a little nervous.

This next step was going to be important.

'I'll be able to go back after this.'

To Ellnor, and where the others were. I was starting to miss the Academy and the town. This place felt a little too suffocating for me.

With such thoughts, I took my first step towards the Dragon.

Tak.

I didn't feel much on my first step.

Tak.

I felt something on my second step.

Tak.

In the third step, my brows twitched. There was a certain pressure lingering in the air that felt uncomfortable.

Tak.

The fourth step...

"....."

Tak.

The fifth step...

"....."

Tak.

The sixth step...

".....Hm."

The seventh step...

"Ukh."

I momentarily stopped.

"Huuu."

My entire body felt heavy. It was as if the gravity surrounding the space had doubled.

"Haaa."

I could feel my breath become heavier as a result. Still, I was merely a few steps away from the Dragon.

I could do it.

Drip...! Drip.

Ignoring the sweat that had accumulated on my forehead, I took the next step forward. Yet again, the weight over me intensified. It felt as though a massive boulder was hanging over my shoulders.

Pausing, I took one last breath and pushed forward.

"...Ukh!"

Groaning loudly, my leg felt like lead.

It took every part of me to lift it from the ground and push myself forward.

"Kh!"

The world turned hazy for a moment.

And then...

Tak.

I took the final step.

"Huff... Huff..."

Breathing heavily, I rested my hands over my knees. If before it felt as though a boulder was resting over my shoulder, it was now two to three boulders.

'Not sure that's even possible.'

It just felt like that.

".....Tell me when you're ready."

Aurelia spoke as she placed her hand over the Rock Dragon.

I looked at her with bafflement.

How could she even withstand such pressure...? Every second felt like hell to me, and yet, it didn't seem to bother her one bit.

'.....I guess she's used to it.'

"I-I'm... haa... ready."

Catching my breath, I took a short moment to stare at the Dragon.

I was currently by its head.

With a jaw lined with sharp teeth, its head was massive. Its eyes were shut tight, and its scales resembled hardened plates of rock. Occasionally, a wisp of steam would escape its nostrils as it breathed deeply in sleep.

'Fucking creepy.'

Extending my hand forward, a magic circle floated and my hand turned purple.

It was the same as in the past, however, compared to before, my hand was a deeper shade of purple.

Strange runes appeared all over my hand.

They were a further deeper shade of purple, and they pulsed as though they were alive.

It was a strange sight.

One that I couldn't observe for long as I closed my eyes and placed my hand against the surface of the Rock Dragon.

Right close to its eye.

Tzzzz—

Accompanying a sizzling sound, a sharp pain coursed through my hand making me flinch. It felt as though I had touched fire.

"I'll take care of most of the burden. Try your best to keep up with me."

I nodded through the pain.

".....I-I will."

I poured all the mana that I had into the Dragon.

The process wasn't very difficult. It wasn't as though I was doing anything hard. I just needed to use my new skill on the Dragon.

While it was true that the skill had gotten stronger, the main point was that I was inside of a [Curse] rich zone.

This meant that my spell was going to be further enhanced.

Coupled with Aurelia's help...

"Ugh...!"

I groaned and my head flicked back.

"Keep it steady."

".....Kh!"

The rate at which my mana drained increased all of a sudden. It funneled out of my body at a rate that I couldn't control and for a moment it felt as though I was going to get sucked completely dry.

"Resist."

Voom—

A humming sound reverberated in the air.

"A little longer."

Aurelia's voice continued to echo in the background.

Rumble! Rumble!

A trembling of the ground startled and I almost lost my footing.

"S-shit."

Thankfully, I was just able to keep myself from falling as I gripped onto one of the plates on the Dragon's head.

I was just about to sigh in relief when...

"....!"

All of a sudden, I felt my heart freeze.

So did my blood.

My expression froze shortly after.

"Ah."

Blinking once, I looked at my reflection.

Right...

My reflection.

Gulp.

I thought I had heard the sound of my own swallow. But I wasn't sure. I had no time to think about that.

"....."

My mind grew blank.

As if time had stopped, I stood still while staring right into the slit of the eye. It was looking right back at me.

A towering pressure concentrated over me as my legs started to wobble.

?| Lvl. 1 [Fear] EXP + 0.5%

?| Lvl. 1 [Fear] EXP + 0.7%

Notifications kept flashing over my vision.

I didn't need to be reminded to know what I was currently feeling. The paralysis that I was currently experiencing was the best proof of that.

"....."

The more I stared into the eye, the more it felt as though it was sucking me in.

It was a familiar sensation. One that I recalled feeling in the past before. It took a moment for me to recall.

'Ah, that's right...'

The only one to have ever made me feel this way was Delilah.

Her eyes...

They too felt like this.

Rumble! Rumble!

As my surroundings shook, and the air hummed, I continued to keep my eye fixed on the eye.

"....."

My heart had long stopped beating and my back was drenched in sweat.

Every hair on my body stood on end, and my breath slowly started to quicken.

Time continued to stand at a standstill.

I thought it'd last forever, but eventually, the eyelid came to a close and silence returned over the surroundings.

"..."

Despite it closing, I didn't for once a second feel like it had.

My mind still refused to listen to me.

"We're done."

".....!"

It was a sudden tug at my shoulder that snapped me out of it.

When I turned my head, I realized it was Aurelia.

"D-did we...?"

"Yes."

She nodded.

"We're done. We... can go back."

"Ah..."

I took a deep breath.

So it was finally over...

"It's not over yet."

"Hm?"

Coming to a stop, I looked at Aurelia. What did she mean by that...?

I was just about to question her when I looked up.

"Ah."

Realization finally dawned on me.

"My power has weakened. My presence can no longer deter the Hellhounds from attacking you. I also won't be able to defend you."

".....I see."

I could see that.

Especially when we were currently surrounded from all sides.

Standing in the middle of it all was a certain familiar Hellhound. The leader of the pack, and the one that had fought Professor Hollowe.

It was staring right at me.

The most terrifying part of all this was the fact that it wasn't the only one that was staring at me. All of them were.

"Hahaha."

A distant laugh echoed.

It was none other than Gork who stretched his body.

"What's this? It's just a bunch of dogs. There's nothing to be worried about!"

"Yeah, I agree."

".....We've been through much worse. Let's just deal with them first."

"Hahaha."

I could feel the excitement in their voices as they stretched.

Clearly, the prospect of returning back home excited them to no end.

I almost smiled then.

Having spent enough time with them over the past few days, I started to grow attached to them. They were quirky, but they were the reason I was able to remain sane despite all the pain I had experienced.

They were the best people I could've asked for.

"Can you hold out?"

I asked, turning to look at Aurelia. She seemed a little weak at that moment, and I could understand why.

It wasn't easy to put the Rock Dragon under such a powerful spell. It must've taken a lot of her energy.

The fact that the pressure coming out of her body wasn't anything I felt uncomfortable with was a testament to that.

"....I can hold out."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I somehow didn't believe her. However, thinking about how stubborn she was, I knew that I had no choice but to take her word for it.

And thus...

Shifting my attention toward the Hellhounds in the distance, I locked eyes with a particular one.

It was standing further back from the leader.

The already almost depleted mana depleted further as my hand turned a deep shade of purple.

Then,

"....."

As I extended my hand, the air in front of the wolf shimmered, distorting into a purple appendage that reached out and seized the wolf by the neck.

Awoooo—

Unlike [Hands of Malady] the hand didn't shatter at the simplest of touches.

With a tight grip against the wolf's neck, the hand clamped down as the Hellhound howled into the air. In mere seconds, the Hellhound's body began to convulse, foam forming at its mouth.

The process took no longer than a couple of seconds, and before anyone could react...

Thump!

The wolf had collapsed to the ground, convulsing violently as foam bubbled from its mouth.

"..."

A strange silence took over the place as I stared at my hand.

'So this is the upgraded version of [Hands of Malady].'

"...Not bad."

I looked up again, taking a moment to stare at the others beside me.

Finally...

It was time to return back.

Chapter 137 The end of a long journey [1]

BANG—!

The surroundings shook as I took several steps back.

"Ukh...!"

I felt a sharp pain in my chest as I clutched it to stop the bleeding.

"Hur! Hur! Hur! It seems like you're having a hard time, aren't you!?"

Gork's loud voice reverberated throughout the grounds as he laughed at my misfortune.

"You can do more than that!"

"Give him some slack!"

On the other hand, Daphne appeared to be on my side.

"He's tired after everything that he did with Aurelia. Don't be too hard on him!"

"Tsk."

Clicking his tongue, Gork charged at the Hellhounds.

SHIING—!

".....Let me have my fun."

Despite being surrounded from all sides, the atmosphere was rather lively. I stood at the center of it all as the Hellhounds attacked from all sides.

Groooowl—!

Unlike before, the zombies were on my side, covering my back. It was a rather new experience and I couldn't say I disliked it.

"I can get used to this."

"Pay attention."

At the front of all this was Aurelia who utilized the zombies in a way that made it hard for the Hellhounds to reach me.

It was an astonishing sight.

Especially after she had used so much mana to seal the Rock Dragon temporarily.

The fact that she was still able to fight so well was mind-blowing.

Does she even run out of mana?

"...Aren't you tired?"

"I am."

"How are you able to continue?"

"....."

Aurelia didn't answer immediately. After a short moment, she looked ahead and just faintly, I was able to catch a glimpse of her features beneath the hood.

"I want to go back."

Her gaze swept the surroundings.

".....That's why I can continue."

Swooosh—!

A thick pulse swept the surroundings following her words. A purple film covered the zombies on the ground, forcing their detached limbs back together.

Groooowl—!

A familiar scene replayed in front of me as the zombies stood up once more and returned to block the Hellhounds.

I stared at the scene in silence.

It was cold. Just as it had been on the very first day that I had come to this place.

"Hahaha! What are you bastards even thinking of doing!? You aren't getting past me!"

And yet, despite the cold, I felt that the scene before me was anything but cold. I couldn't see the expressions on their faces, but from their voices, I could see just how excited they were to go back.

They almost sounded like little children.

"Don't be reckless! Don't die before we manage to return!"

"Won't be a problem—Euk!"

"Idiot...!!"

"Help!"

Was it because I was also excited, or was it because I had already lost it? Seeing the scene in the distance, I felt the pain in my chest disappear.

My body also felt lighter as I took a step forward.

"Akh...! My leg! It's got my leg!"

"Stop! Don't move....!"

"You idiots!"

Even Aurelia was starting to speak more as Gork was flung in the air by a Hellhound.

"Nooo—!"

Seeing such a scene, I laughed.

"Looks like I really need to step up. At this rate, we'll be wiped out!"

Slapping my cheeks, I threw all caution out of the window and joined the fight.

In the rocky grounds where the cold pierced.

It didn't feel so cold anymore.

Ellnor.

"You're the strongest person in this town?"

Captain Reijnder's tone was deadpan. Lowering his head to stare at the middle-aged man before him, his eyes squinted.

"You seem a little too weak to be a captain. What's the deal with this?"

"Ah, well..."

Embarrassed, Captain Travis replied.

"We used to be a lot stronger. Our strongest warriors of the past may not have been as strong as you, but we were definitely not weak."

"Then...?"

"Thirty years have passed since we started fighting the Necromancer. In that time, all our best warriors have died during the battle. I'm only the captain because there's no one else that can take the mantle."

"I see."

Frowning, Captain Reijnder nodded.

He had been briefed beforehand about the situation. Glancing around, he sat down on one of the wooden chairs in the room.

Crossing his legs, he placed his hand on the table.

"So you're saying that this situation has been going on for thirty years?"

"Ah, yes."

Captain Travis replied curtly.

"Wow."

Captain Reijnder looked at him in amazement.

"You're also telling me that for thirty years you've sent over so many people just to deal with a single necromancer? I've heard you've sent over two hundred and fifty-five squads in the time that elapsed. Is that true?"

".....Yes."

Captain Travis replied with his head lowered.

"A squad comprises of four members. From the moment the second subjugation squad didn't come back, a large raid with over several dozen squads had been prepared."

"Ah."

Understanding dawned on Captain Reijnder who closed his eyes.

"So you didn't send 255 individual squads, but rather, large raid teams that comprised several smaller squads."

".....For the most part, yes."

"I see."

Ta, ta, ta—

The captain's fingers drummed over the wooden desk as silence reigned over the space. It felt rather oppressive. Especially since the two other members of his squad were standing behind him with straight faces.

They two gave off an extremely intimidating pressure.

Eventually, the drumming stopped and the captain's eyes locked onto the town's captain.

"There's a few things that I don't understand. I need you to clarify me on that."

".....Please ask."

Captain Reijnder leaned forward as his expression turned extremely serious.

"Explain to me why for thirty years you've allowed this to happen?"

The more the captain learned about the situation, the more unbelievable he found the situation to be.

For thirty years, this town had constantly sent over their best warriors to deal with the necromancer haunting them.

For thirty years, they were defeated. And yet, for some reason, they kept sending their soldiers to their deaths...?

What sort of nonsense was this?

"This whole entire situation would've been resolved had you called the Empire for help. Tell me. For what reason did you allow for this to happen?"

"....Ah."

Captain Travis's face turned pale at the question. Looking around, his lips quivered slightly. However, under Captain Reijnder's oppressive gaze, he had no choice but to open his mouth.

"T-the undead."

"The what...?"

"T-the undead. Th-ey... T-hey were all citizens of this town. Family."

Trying his best to suppress the quivering in his voice, the captain continued.

"I-imagine if your loved ones died and transformed into undead. Mindless puppets whose sole purpose is to come back to attack us?"

His body trembled, as his fist clenched tightly and his face turned red.

"How would that make you feel?"

The more he spoke the louder his voice became.

"To know that the ones you loved are being used to attack us...?"

The stuttering had also stopped.

"The seed of hatred and revenge has already corrupted the minds of all citizens. All they can think of is revenge! We have long known that what we've been doing is stupid, but we are reminded. Every. Single. Day. Of the their deaths."

Bang!

The captain's fist came smacking against the wooden table.

"It's as if the necromancer is sending them to us every day in order to remind us of what it did to us. To show off its trophies...!"

"...."

As spit flew out of the small town's captain's face, Captain Reijnder remained quiet the entire time.

He was starting to get a better picture of what was going on.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

And taking the opportunity when Captain Travis was out of breath, he calmly asked,

"How many deaths have occurred in the town when the undead attacked?"

"Haa... Deaths?"

Out of breath, Travis looked up.

"None... Haa... yet."

"None?"

"The... haa... undead aren't very strong... haa..."

Swallowing, Travis caught up with his breath.

"For now, we've been able to handle them daily. They are slow and aren't very strong. However, they don't die. For years, they've been trying to force their way into the Town. We've managed to hold them back for so long, but we can't do it anymore."

Lowering his head, Travis stared at his arm. It was trembling.

"...We can't hold on any longer. It's for this reason that we've asked for help. B-because after thirty years, we..."

He bit his lips.

"W-e understand that all our efforts have been meaningless. We can't get our revenge."

His head lowered after that. To all those present, it was clear that he was unresigned by the decision. The anger within him had been clear for all those to see.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

Turning his head, Captain Reijnder turned to face a familiar face.

"Inquisitor. Do you have anything to add to that?"

"No, not much."

Inquisitor Hollowe shook his head.

"The area is dense with the [Curse] element. I presume it's coming from deep within the Mirror Crack rather than the necromancer, but you already know that."

His gaze fell on one of the knights standing behind the Captain.

He was just about to continue when he stopped.

It wasn't just him, but almost everyone in the room stopped.

Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh—

In unison, all heads flicked towards a certain direction.

"This..."

The eyes of all those present widened as they rushed out of the room and made a run for the city walls. It took them little to no time to reach the walls, and without hesitation, they ran past the city gates where their figures blurred, only coming to a stop a certain distance away.

".....!"

"This...!"

Their expression changed as their gazes swept the distance.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

In the distance, thousands of figures appeared. Their steps echoed in unison as they marched forward.

At the helm, five figures led the march.

One figure, in particular, stood out. His clothes were tattered, and he bore cuts all over his body. Engaged in conversation with those around him, he abruptly halted his steps and glanced up as if sensing their presence.

His hazel eyes met with the group's and the army behind him stopped.

"Ha..."

A sound escaped Captain Reijnder's mouth as he looked at the scene ahead.

"Weren't they supposed to only show up at night? What are they doing here...?"

Chapter 138 The end of a long journey [2]

"Cough...! Cough!"

My chest ached.

Holding onto my mouth, blood dripped down from the gaps of my fingers.

Every part of me ached.

".....It's so beautiful."

"The scenery. It has changed so much."

I could hear the voices of the members of the first subjugation squad beside me. They were staring at the scenery with brilliant gazes.

"Was that tree there before?"

"No, it wasn't."

"And what about that rock?"

"How would I know?"

"This waterfall?"

"It was."

They just wouldn't stop talking.

I stared at them while holding onto my chest.

"Cough...!"

The fight had been a hard one. We didn't manage to kill the Hellhounds, but that had never been our goal to begin with.

We just wanted to get out of there.

To...

Get back home.

"Onward to Ellnor...! Hahaha."

Tud, Tud—!

The ground shook slightly. Turning around, I stared at the army of zombies following us from behind.

"You couldn't send them back...?"

"No."

Aurelia shook her head.

"I don't have enough mana."

".....That's fair."

She had been one of the most active in the last battle. It wasn't easy to hold back the Terror Ranked Hellhound. It was in fact a miracle for her to have been able to hold on after the last spell.

"What are you going to do once we go back?"

"....."

Aurelia didn't answer immediately.

In that brief moment of silence, I noticed that everyone was looking at her.

Eventually, the words did leave her mouth.

"I don't know. I never really thought about it."

"You didn't...?"

"I thought I'd be stuck here forever."

Strangely, Aurelia's steps seemed light as she walked.

".....I do have a little brother though. I wonder how he's doing. I remember telling him to keep count of the amount of time I would be gone for. Is he still keeping count?"

"Pfft, as if. He probably stopped counting a week in."

Daphne placed her hand over Aurelia's.

"You're such an adorable little thing. Even after so much time passed, you're still the same."

"Stop."

Aurelia brushed Daphne's hand away.

"Hehe, look at this cutie~"

Daphne ended up hugging Aurelia tightly as she struggled under her embrace.

"Ugh...!"

"Hahaha! Let me join!"

"No!"

"Akh!"

"Hur. Hur."

I stood to watch the scene with a smile. They looked like a family. A happy family of four.

"What about you...?"

And then, their attention turned to me.

"What are you going to do?"

".....What am I going to do?"

I wonder about that.

"Probably go back to the Academy."

Everyone besides Leon probably thought I was dead. But would they even care if I was dead...? I could still recall the faces of a few, but to what extent did they care?

"Haha."

I really didn't know.

"I also want to go back home."

"Oh, right. You're quite young yourself. I didn't really take note of it considering our situation."

Liam walked around me, closely patting my body in the process.

"Wow, what muscles."

"Did you say muscles...?"

"Crap! Stop him! He's going to—"

It was too late. Shoving Liam aside, Gork started patting my body all over.

"Wow! They're some developed muscles! I couldn't tell before, but you have some talent."

Smack—!

His thick hand smacked against my back, and I winced in pain.

"Ukh!"

"Hur! Hur! When you come to visit me, I'll make sure to teach you how to develop your muscles further."

"Stop it! Can't you see he's injured?"

"Cough...!"

Coughing, I glared at Gork who awkwardly turned his head.

"Uh, yeah."

"Anyways~"

Daphne turned to look at me.

"You're welcome to visit us anytime."

"Haha, yeah. Come visit us. Our journey is about to end, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't see each other again."

"There's no need to be so reserved. We still haven't taught you a thing. Only Aurelia had that pleasure."

Seeing them look at me like that, I could only shake my head.

"...Fine."

I was planning on visiting regardless.

"Come now! Our journey is almost over!"

"Let's go back...!"

Punching the air, Gork and the rest rushed ahead.

I stared at their back for a moment before shaking my head.

These guys...

They were such children.

Our journey continued.

The scenery continued to change.

Sometimes we'd stop to observe it. I had seen the scenery before, but it had been with different people.

"That's another new thing."

It was nice to see them enjoying the journey.

".....I wish this journey lasts longer."

Aurelia smiled beneath the hood as she spoke.

"It's so pretty..."

The wind blew, and her hood fluttered.

"Julien."

My gaze met with hers.

In that moment, I could see a change in her.

For once, her cold facade seemed to melt ever so slightly.

"It had been so long since I'd seen the outside world. I used to take it for granted, but..."

The wind blew again.

Her hood fluttered further.

".....I didn't know it was so pretty."

Right.

I turned my head to stare in the direction of where she was looking at.

'It's pretty indeed.'

Rocky peaks jutted into the sky, casting long shadows over the landscape. Besides us, a small stream flowed gracefully, its clear waters winding through the valley.

Trees flourished, their leaves rustling in the breeze.

"....."

Without a sound.

I imprinted the sight into my mind.

And then...

Several figures appeared in the distance.

They stared at me for a moment before rushing towards me.

"J-Julien...?"

The first one to come was Professor Hollowe. He seemed startled by my appearance. He probably didn't think I was still alive.

"Julien? Isn't that the name of the cadet that died?"

Another figure appeared.

I didn't know who he was, but I could more or less guess.

"You didn't die?"

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

My lips were parched.

How long had it been since I had last drunk something?

Before I could even say anything, a figure rushed from behind.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

I recognized him in an instant.

It was Captain Travis.

"You...!"

His eyes seemed to be fixed on Aurelia. There seemed to be a deep seethed hatred in his eyes as he looked at her.

That was when I finally found my voice again.

"W-wait."

All attention fell on me.

Before I could say anything else, the wind blew again.

Swoosh—

Aurelia's hood fluttered again, finally falling back to reveal her features.

".....Ah!"

Captain Travis's face underwent a dramatic change in that moment.

"S-sister...! H-how...!?"

I could tell he had recognized her.

I felt my head ache.

Just as I was about to explain, he rushed towards me and grabbed me by the collar.

"What happened?!"

His voice was hoarse as he spat to my face.

"Y-you, it's you isn't it?"

His grip on my clothes tightened.

"You're the fucking necromancer, aren't you? The one fucker who has been screwing with us for so long...! It-it's you...!"

"....."

I didn't reply.

Logically speaking, his accusations made no sense.

I was still young. The necromancer had been haunting the town for thirty years. It was a stupid assumption to begin with.

Even so...

I couldn't find the words to reply.

And as if he knew too, his grip on my clothes wakened.

".....W-why is she here? Y-you disappeared and then came back. E-everyone thought you were dead, but explain to me this..."

He pointed at Aurelia and the others.

"Why are they all dead?!"

"....."

I took a moment to stare at him and the people behind him.

They were all looking at me with the same skeptical gaze as he was.

I couldn't blame them.

Turning my head slightly, I fixed my gaze on the four other people who stood by my side. Without their hoods, I could see them clearly.

Their faces were pale, and their eyes were closed.

There was no trace of breath in them.

They were dead.

They had long been dead.

"...."

Overwhelmed, my chest trembled as I took in the sight. The memories of my time with them flashed for a moment and I reached out, placing my hand atop the captain's before finally finding my voice again.

"My name is Julien Dacre Evenus."

In the silence, I spoke. Not to Travis, but to the unfamiliar man that I presumed was from the Empire.

"I've come back with them to relay important information to the members of the Empire."

"....."

"These people over here are the members of the first subjugation squad."

I introduced each member one by one.

"Aurelia Blackwood, Gork Staten, Liam Markken, and Daphne Richards."

I spoke slowly.

"They, the first subjugation squad, had been wiped out during their expedition with the exception of Aurelia Blackwood who became the sole survivor. A Rock Dragon was found at the entrance of the Mirror Crack."

"W-what...?"

Directly support the authors on WebNovel!

Captain Travis's voice cracked as his grip on my clothes further loosened.

I turned to look at him.

"For thirty years, she kept the Dragon sealed. For thirty years, she..."

I pursed my lips and looked behind me.

"...Tried to bring the dead back to their families."

"A-ah..."

"And for thirty years, she had been scorned for it."

The grip finally completely loosened.

I kept my gaze fixed on the Captain.

"I-I ask you a favor."

I clenched my teeth.

It was starting to get hard for me to speak.

A familiar pain washed over me. It wasn't a physical one. Pursing my lips, I finally forced the words out.

"...Please welcome them back home. Their journey. I wish for it to finally end."

.

.

.

The cold pierced my skin.

A familiar road met my sight. We were close to the town walls.

"For how long did you know for?"

Aurelia's voice reached my ears.

"About what?"

"That we were dead."

"...."

How long had I known...?

"From the start."

".....Is that so?"

"Wow~ That's so unfair."

"Hur. Hur. Look at this guy. He's been happily talking to himself the entire time."

"....."

Everyone's voice continued to reach my ears.

But the only one that I could focus on was Aurelia's.

"....I'm sure everyone will be disgusted by what I did."

Her voice.

It was so clear.

"I've been thinking."

On the day that the raid failed, she knew the Rock Dragon would eventually attack the town.

Too weak to seal it, she used her life force.

That day,

She died.

"How could anyone accept us in the state that we are?"

In the last moments before her death, she used [Corpse Control] on herself.

With that, she was able to remain faintly conscious.

"Had I been stronger, would all of this have been avoided?"

That day,

She lost her voice.

"Would I have been able to warn them?"

The Hellhounds never attacked her for a simple reason.

They only attacked the living.

But without her voice, she couldn't stop the subjugation squads from coming.

In the end, everyone who came died.

"....Would things have been different then?"

From the moment someone dies, their life force depletes.

To keep the Dragon sealed, she used their life force.

And with time, her strength increased.

So did the number of people that died.

"Would I have been able to send them all back to their families?"

The attacks...

They had never really been attacks.

It had just been her attempt at trying to send the dead back to their family.

"Hey, Julien."

Aurelia's voice grew faint.

"Thank you."

"....."

"Talking to you. For the past few days, I felt like I was alive again. Even if I'm just a creation through of memories that you've seen."

"....."

"You didn't hate me for being cold, right?"

I shook my head.

"No."

"That's good. I'm tired of being hated."

".....I will never hate you."

A familiar set of walls appeared in the distance.

They were tall, and grand.

"It's been so long..."

Aurelia muttered faintly.

"....Home."

In the silence,

We stepped through the gates.

Thousands of eyes stopped on us as we entered. All of us.

Standing on each side, they looked at us.

The citizens of Ellnor.

It was a scene that was reminiscent of one from a memory I had buried deep in my mind. The memory of the time when the first subjugation squad had been sent out.

But in contrast to the warm atmosphere from back then, this one felt cold.

At least, until...

Clap—

Someone clapped.

Clap, Clap—

What followed the first clap was a second, and before I knew it, the entire town had started to clap.

Clap, Clap, Clap—

Amidst the welcome of the crowd, the cold that pierced the world seemed to have shattered.

What replaced it was a comfortable warmth.

But our journey wasn't over yet.

There was still one last step.

"Stop."

Adorned in brand new clothes, Captain Travis stood in front of us. That was when we all stopped.

"..."

The clapping stopped, and silence took over the place.

Without a sound, Captain Travis stared at Aurelia.

Fiddling with the pocket watch in his hand, he took a deep breath.

"15.598,467 minutes."

His voice echoed loudly throughout the entire town.

"That's how long it took for you to come back. Not a day has passed where I didn't count each minute. Like I promised, I didn't leave. I stayed here to wait for your return..."

Despite his best attempts, his voice eventually cracked.

"...I-I stubbornly waited each day. Even as the years passed for your return. Despite everyone telling me that you had died, I knew you would return. I... I..."

Drip. Drip.

Tears started to fall down the side of his face.

"M-my sister promised me. O-f course she'd return."

Keeping his face straight, he tried his best to stop the tears from spilling.

But that proved to be an impossible task.

"I-t must've been so painful. To hold on for so long despite everyone hating you. A lot of time has passed, and we thought we had somewhat moved on, but..."

Lifting his head, he looked around.

He took in the expressions of the citizens as they looked at the familiar faces of the undead.

"S-seeing everyone return, you've finally given all of us closure. A-and for that, thank you. As the town's captain, I..."

Forcing a smile, the Captain brought his arm to his forehead in a salute.

Drip...! Drip.

As his tears stained the ground, he stared at Aurelia.

"S-sister no... Aurelia Blackwood. As the Captain in charge of Ellnor, I welcome you, and all the members of the subjugation squads back to Ellnor."

Drip.

"You can rest now. You've done your job."

"...."

In the silence that took over shortly after, I met gazes with Aurelia.

Despite knowing that she was dead, for a brief moment, I thought I saw a smile on her face.

Not just hers, but Gork's, Daphne's, and Liam's.

I didn't say anything to them and just nodded my head.

'Go.'

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

The zombies at the back were the first ones to fall.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Gork, Daphne, and Liam followed shortly after that.

And lastly...

Thump!

Aurelia fell to her knees.

Without a sound, she stared into the distance.

"I can rest now...?"

Her voice yet again reached my ears.

"You can."

I replied with a smile.

"Hehe, it's a pity."

"What is...?"

"I-I wanted to enjoy the scenery for a bit longer, but..."

She looked at her brother and all the citizens of the town.

"....This is good too."

The cold returned.

It pierced at my skin.

Aurelia took one last look at the town before finally falling over.

Thump!

That day.

All members of the 255 subjugation squads returned.

At the helm of it all was Aurelia who brought them all back.

This was...

The end of a long journey.

Her journey.

Chapter 139 The end of a long journey [3]

I stared at Aurelia and the others for a long time.

At that moment, recollections of my time with them flashed before my eyes.

They may have not been alive.

But to me, they were.

".....You came back."

It was a familiar voice that broke me out of my memories. Before I knew it, Leon was standing beside me, similarly staring at the scene with his usually stoic face.

"You were taking longer than I expected."

He handed me something.

It was a small pearl.

"It pulsed not too long ago. That's why I knew you were finally back."

I grabbed the pearl.

It was a relic that belonged to the Evenus Households. Its purpose was to detect the general location of those it had locked on. In this case, me. With Leon being my knight and all, it was something that he naturally had.

If something were to happen to me, he'd be able to find me at any time.

"..."

I handed it back to him.

"You waited until now to 'save' me?"

"I thought you'd be fine without my help. You also looked like someone who didn't need help."

"You thought wrong."

".....Did I?"

Leon stared at the same scenery that I was looking at.

The citizens had already surrounded the dead bodies, with many of them embracing the loved ones they once knew.

I could hear their cries from where I stood.

They echoed loudly in my mind. Especially when I noticed the people surrounding the members of the first subjugation squads. There were a couple of elderly people and a few young kids.

"....Is this granddad?"

"Grandma?"

"Why do they look so young?"

"So pretty..."

For some strange reason, staring at the scene, I recalled a certain conversation that I had with Leon. One that I had not so long ago.

"You're right, I guess."

".....?"

I felt Leon's gaze from the side.

"About what?"

"What you said before to me. When we were sitting by the river."

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

The words echoed in my mind once more.

".....I think you're right."

"Think?"

"Yeah. Think."

I didn't understand what he had meant back then, but now I did. Staring at Aurelia and the others, it became clear to me.

Back then, the only reason I held on was because of my brother.

Even now, I still held on because of him. My goal still hasn't changed. I still wanted to go back home to him.

But...

"Death..."

Perhaps, there was more to life than just my brother.

".....Yeah, I don't really want to die."

That much became clear to me right now.

For once, I felt like life was worth living.

*

Things progressed quickly from there.

The corpses were all moved away, and the town became quiet again. I felt the cadet's eyes on me as I walked.

They were clearly curious as to how I had managed to survive, but before any of them could question me, I was dragged away from the scene.

"Tell me more about the situation."

I was currently sitting in a small room with the unfamiliar man.

He introduced himself as Captain Reijnder. Despite the pressure that was coming out of his body, I didn't feel intimidated.

Compared to Aurelia and the Rock Dragon, it was hardly anything.

"...Accompanying a Terror Rank Hellhound, there's a Rock Dragon. I am not entirely sure about its strength, but it's definitely stronger than the Hellhound."

While the Rock Dragon was most probably also Terror Rank, it was after all a Dragon.

I wasn't very familiar with the concept of Dragons in this world, but it was safe to assume that they were a tier above regular monsters.

"It is currently under a strong spell. However, the spell won't last for long."

In fact, it was already almost on the verge of breaking.

"There isn't much time. If reinforcements don't come, then..."

I didn't need to finish my sentence.

My meaning was clear.

"..."

The silence that accompanied my statement also served to indicate that the Captain could tell the gravity of the situation.

"Is there anything else that I need to take note of?"

"The area is saturated with the [Curse] element. It's best if you bring someone competent with [Curse] magic. It'll be more beneficial when dealing with the Rock Dragon."

One of the reasons why my spell was able to help Aurelia in sealing the Rock Dragon was because of how dense the surroundings were with the [Curse] element.

If not for that, this would've never been possible.

"Right, I am already aware of that."

Captain Reijnder stood up from his seat.

"...I'll request the Empire to bring a few more curse specialists. It'll make things less troublesome."

Pressing his hand against the table, he deeply looked at me.

"You did well."

He said I did well...

"If what you said is true, you potentially saved me, and my squad."

"..."

I sat quietly without saying a word.

"The same is true for everyone within the town. You've saved everyone."

"..."

"Take a rest. You deserve it."

The Captain smiled before turning around and heading for the door. Before he left, his steps paused and he looked at me.

".....It's a pity you aren't a knight."

And then he left.

"....."

I sat there in silence unsure of what to do.

"I saved everyone...?"

Muttering to myself, I laughed.

While true, I hadn't done what I did with the intent of saving everyone.

The only one that I cared to save was myself.

But it turned out like this.

"It's funny."

The misunderstanding.

It was a funny misunderstanding.

"Haa..."

Rubbing my forehead, I stood up and left the room. The cold yet again pierced my skin. It didn't really bother me.

Rather, I was starting to grow used to it.

".....Are you done?"

Coming out of the building, a certain someone greeted me at the entrance.

"Professor Hollowe?"

Leon was also next to him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to check up on you."

"You did?"

How kind of him.

I opened my arms and showed him my body.

"As you can see, while I'm a bit battered up, I'm doing fine."

"I see, that's good."

He looked relieved.

It was strange, but I could more or less understand why he was acting this way.

"You made the right decision."

"...Yes?"

He tilted his head in confusion.

"To not save me. It was the right decision."

"....!"

I'd have done the same if I had been in his position.

At the same time, it was also my fault. Back then, I had gambled with my own life. The citizens may not have noticed given that they wanted to stop the zombies from entering the town, but looking through the memories of each citizen, I realized something.

The zombies.

They never attacked anyone.

They just mindlessly tried to force their way into the town. Even if the citizens noticed, what else could they have done besides stop them?

That was why I didn't react back then and allowed myself to be swallowed up by them.

It was a gamble that ultimately paid off.

Still, it was ultimately my decision and if I were to have died, it would've all been on me.

"You had to prioritize the lives of the other cadets. I get it."

"No, it's—"

"There's something I'm curious about, though."

I cut him off before he could continue.

He stopped to look at me.

"...If I were to have died, would you have taken my body back?"

"....."

He stood in silence before nodding his head.

"Yes. That much, I would've done for you."

"I see."

It was nice to know.

Thinking about the last scene of the journey, I sort of realized why Aurelia stubbornly kept bringing the zombies back to this town.

While it was true that everyone was dead, closure only came after the bodies returned.

It was a meaningless act, and yet...

It carried such importance to those that were affected.

Although I wasn't sure about who'd feel that way about me, perhaps, the parents of the previous Julien would've felt better seeing his body return to them.

It was just some random thoughts that I had.

Meaningless thoughts.

"Although it doesn't happen often, cadets die on occasion. It is inevitable given the world we live in."

"....."

"Had your body not been in good condition, we would've cremated it before sending it back to your parents."

Cremated?

My finger twitched all of a sudden.

As if sensing my reaction, Professor Hollowe cocked his head.

"What is it?"

"No, it's nothing."

I turned my head to look away.

It was fucking stupid.

"I see. I won't push you to—"

"Urn it."

I muttered quietly.

"....Um?"

Pursing my lips, I shook my head and looked away. But just as the Professor was about to speak again, I found myself cutting him off.

"The cremation. Did I Urn it?"

".....!"

As if realizing what had happened, the Professor's eyes widened.

Taking a step back, he pointed at me.

His expression seemed to say, 'No you did not.'

Looking back at him, I held onto my mouth. My shoulders were shaking, but I couldn't help it. It was just... there.

The chances were too good for me to pass.

Or so I thought as I stopped smiling the moment the Professor's expression turned extremely serious.

"Oh."

Briefly, I started to regret my actions.

"You..."

The look of disapproval from Professor Hollowe was clear to see.

"...You should be ashamed of yourself."

"...!"

It was my turn to step back.

He similarly stepped back.

He did not...

"You're good."

".....You're still too young to deal with the likes of me."

"So it seems..."

Despite my appearance, I was technically twenty-four years old. I was proud of my jokes. But it became clear to me that there were mountains behind hills.

I hated to admit it, but he got me.

"Damn it."

It pissed me off.

I was just about to say something else when I paused.

I felt my expression change.

The hell...

"...Hm?"

As if noticing my strange reaction, Professor Hollowe turned his head. His eyes eventually fell on the same thing I was looking at, and his expression changed.

".....!"

He couldn't help it.

Leaning against the outside wall of a building, Leon looked at the sky with a hollow expression. He looked no different than the zombies from before.

His face was pale, and for a moment, I thought I saw his soul leave his body.

"Hey! Hey! Are you okay...!?"

Professor Hollowe shook his body, but it was no use.

Leon was completely unresponsive.

"What's going on—"

"He's fine."

"Fine? What do you mean fine? Can't you see his eyes!? They're so—"

"Hollowe?"

".....!"

Professor Hollowe's eyes widened as he let go of Leon.

This time, it was his turn to look defeated.

I was about to continue when a dripping sound caught my attention.

Drip. Drip...!

When I turned to look at the source, my eyes widened. So did the Professor's as he hastily grabbed onto Leon's shoulders and wiped the corner of his mouth with his handkerchief, staining it red.

"Crap...! Hold on!"

Hmm, okay.

Maybe it was serious.

Chapter 140 The end of the trip [1]

The Empire was quick to act.

With information about the Rock Dragon, coupled with the confirmation of the Mirror Crack, a new team was sent over in a matter of hours.

The situation was no longer under control as it had been in the past due to the necromancer.

Thus, the town of Ellnor welcomed new faces as an army of knights poured in from the entrance of the city walls.

Beneath the sun's glare, their golden-plated armors gleamed brightly, presenting an imposing sight to onlookers.

".....Not bad."

Sitting at the top of the castle walls, I breathed the fresh air while looking at the scene from above.

The collective pressure coming out of their bodies made me shudder.

But if that wasn't all, a new group emerged from behind. Wearing black robes with purple stripes, they trailed behind the knights.

"They should be members of the Magic Tower. Judging from the purple stripes, they should be [Curse] specialists?"

While most cadets aspired to join a Guild through the draft, there were two other destinations that the cadets wanted to join.

The Magic Tower, and the Knight's Council.

Under the direct control of the Megrail family, they only recruited those who had a certain level of strength and were amongst the very top in the Empire with regards to talent.

".....Sounds interesting."

Either the Guilds or the Magic Tower.

Such were my options for the future. I wasn't limited to joining them after graduation. I could join right after the first year.

For now, I was still unsure of which one to join.

Not that it currently mattered to me.

'I need to get in touch with Aoife later.'

There was something that I needed to ask her. It wasn't anything important. Just wanted to ask her about a certain book that I wanted to buy.

"Haa."

Taking my eyes away from them, I looked to my right side.

"What?"

"What? What...?"

I rolled my eyes.

"You're the one that showed up out of nowhere."

"So? I'm just enjoying the scenery."

"....Okay."

"Good."

"...."

"...."

Silence returned to the surroundings and I leaned back slightly to take in the breeze. As my hair fluttered, a lock of silver hair fell on my face and I looked at Kiera.

She looked back at me with a growl.

"Bastard, what?"

I brushed her hair away from my face.

"Move away. Your hair is getting on my face."

"It happens. It's long and shit, you know?"

"That's why I'm telling you to move."

"Tsk."

Kiera clicked her tongue. With a slightly angry look, she aggressively placed her hand in her pocket and shoved something onto my chest.

"Here."

".....?"

I looked down in confusion. When I did, I blinked several times to make sure I was seeing correctly.

Kiera's voice came shortly after.

"So, like..."

"...."

"That, shit you know?"

"....?"

"Ah, fuck. Whatever. I just owed you and stuff. I thought you had died and I felt shitty for not having paid you. Kind of felt like I robbed you and shit."

"...."

"What?"

In the middle of her speech, she bit her lips.

"Just wanted to make sure that the next time you die I won't owe you shit."

This girl...

"I'll take it."

Holding back my laugh, I put the money in my pocket.

In the end, she did all of this because she felt bad she never had the chance to pay me for the tutoring lessons.

'Usually people are happy to not pay for stuff.'

I guess she was different.

"Thanks."

"...Sure."

I thought she'd leave after that but she continued to stay. Meeting my line of sight, she pursed her lips and leaned forward to stare at the scenery beneath.

"....."

"There's still a few things that I need you to teach me."

"Teach you?"

"Uh, yeah. It's like—Ukeh!"

Kiera let out a strange sound as my fist came smacking against her head.

Holding onto the top of her head, she glared at me.

"The fuck was that for?!"

"....I said it before. Stop relying on me."

"No, that—"

"You should already know how to study by now. You don't need me."

"....."

Still glaring at me, Kiera remained silent.

"Kiera."

"What...?"

"Nothing."

"Uh?"

There was actually something that I wanted to ask but realized she probably wouldn't know either. It was about the thing with Aoife but recalling her relationship with her, I realized it was meaningless to ask.

"What? Don't leave me hanging like that?"

"I said it's nothing."

"No, fuck... You can't just say that after making me curious."

"I just did."

"Ah..."

Her mouth closed to a pout.

'Fucking shit,' muttering curses under her breath, she eventually let it go.

"Whatever, I'm leaving."

Waving her hand in dismissal, Kiera finally turned around to leave.

I stared at her back for a brief moment before finally shifting my attention back to the scenery beneath. Or so I thought.

"Oy."

Hearing Kiera's voice, I turned my head.

"....."

The words that I was about to say never left my mouth. How could they when I didn't know how to react at what I was seeing. Standing a few meters away from me, Kiera held her middle finger in the air.

"Take that you scum."

Below.

Near the entrance of Ellnor.

"It's nice to see you again, Princess."

Aoife stared at the man kneeling before her and then the several dozen kneeling behind him. She had vague recollections of him, but that wasn't important.

".....There's no need for such formalities with me. Right now, I'm a cadet at the Haven Institute. Treat me as such."

"I'm sorry but that's a difficult quest for us."

Aoife pursed her lips.

While it was true that she was the Princess of the Empire and the people before her were her subordinates, Aoife felt their attitudes to be rather burdensome.

Especially when she took note of the way the cadets around her were looking at her.

It made her want to sigh.

Still, holding herself back, she acknowledged their presence.

"Alright. That's fine, I guess."

Her gaze swept over the dozen members of the Knight's council and Magic Tower.

Each and every one of the people present boasted incredible power, and with just a single command from hers, they'd move at her command.

While she did have the authority to issue them orders, it was only limited to her title.

Perhaps, one day she'd be able to fully command both the Magic Tower and the Knight's council.

"How are the preparations?"

".....We are ready to depart at any time. We've already sent several scouting teams in advance, and the reports are true. A Rock Dragon has been found."

"I see."

Aoife nodded her head slightly.

Even though she was still stuck in Elnor, she could more or less guess that the Empire was in a state of uproar.

It had been a long time since a 'Dragon' type species had appeared within the kingdom.

They were extremely rare, and at the same time extremely fierce.

But that wasn't the reason why the Empire was in uproar. The reason why the Empire was probably in uproar was because there was a high likelihood that the Rock Dragon would have a transfusable bone.

Unlike most creatures that had a small chance of containing a transfusable bone, 'Dragon' type creatures had a greater chance of dropping such bones.

Not only that, but the [Innate] ability they would grant to the user would also be in a league of its own.

....And coming from a Terror Rank creature, Aoife could already foresee the trouble that was destined to come in the future.

'I wonder what they'll do with the bone.'

In a way, the news was both a blessing and a disaster for the Empire.

Terror Rank bones were extremely rare let alone one that belonged to a [Dragon] type creature.

Whoever came into possession of such bone would most likely soar in the future.

The other Empires were probably aware of that.

The likelihood of them doing something in the future was rather high. Especially when considering that such events had occurred in the past.

As such, Aoife found the situation to be both a blessing and a disaster.

Aoife could already feel the incoming headache.

And all of this was because of one person.

"....."

Raising her head, Aoife stared at the city walls above her. At that moment, her gaze paused on a certain person. Lazily leaning on top of the walls, his cold gaze swept the area beneath with no regard.

He was someone that should've been dead and yet wasn't.

If not for him, none of this would've happened. Even now, she was curious as to how he had done it.

For some strange reason, the more Aoife knew about him, the more mysterious he became to her.

His skills, which she had previously thought were lower than hers, proved to be superior to hers.

Not only that, but he was also able to survive an encounter with several Terror-rank creatures and a necromancer.

It was ridiculous.

He was ridiculous.

"Haa..."

And yet, letting out a long sigh, Aoife couldn't help but be impressed.

And that was also,

"....Ridiculous."

That night.

Leon returned to his room and immediately slumped over the wooden chair.

"...."

He sat there in silence.

He liked the silence.

Today, he had come dangerously close to his death. The memories of his childhood flashed before his eyes in those moments.

Such memories...

"....Never again."

What do I even do about it? Leon pondered about the situation. It had been manageable before, but things took a drastic turn at 'his' arrival.

"It's as if there's two of him."

He was already having a hard time dealing with one. How was he going to deal with two of them...?

It was impossible.

Holding back his frustrations, Leon sighed and prepared to get to bed. It was late, and he was feeling extremely tired.

In particular, his head ached.

"....."

He had just arrived at his bed when he frowned.

There was something about it that didn't seem quite right about it. By nature, Leon was a paranoid person.

It had been something that he developed over the years of being hunted.

For that reason, he noticed the slightly dispositioned cushions, and wrinkles that hadn't been on his bed before he left.

"....Someone's been here."

Leon deeply stared at his bed before his head flicked to look around. His eyes quickly scanned the room for anything else that seemed out of order, but it was all just as he remembered.

The only difference was his bed.

'Did a cleaning lady stop by...?'

It was a possibility. Yeah, it was...

Swoosh—

With quick movements, Leon flicked the bedsheets up and gripped his sword. He was ready. He was prepared.

....Or so he thought.

"H-ho."

His entire body froze at the sight that greeted him.

An innate fear he hadn't experienced in a very long time took over his entire body as his expression crumbled.

Splash—

Just faintly, he could hear the sound of something splashing in the distance. But that didn't make sense.

There was no river nearby.

"O-oh, no..."

Leon took a step back.

"C-cursed. I-I knew it... I-was right..."

His entire hand was trembling.

He just couldn't understand how this was possible.

Leon blinked to make sure he wasn't seeing things. Unfortunately, the image didn't change.

"H-ha..."

His chest trembled as a result.

A book rested on his bed. It was wet, staining the sheets beneath it. But that wasn't the problem.

He recognized the book.

How could he not when he distinctively remembered throwing it in the river.

<Fun Jokes that will make you laugh all day>

With a pale face, he took several more steps back.

"Cursed..."

It really was cursed.

The source of this content is [free\(w\)ebnovel](#)