

## **Advent of the Three Calamities**

### **#Chapter 141 The end of the trip [2] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 141 The end of the trip [2]** **Chapter 141 The end of the trip [2]**

The sun rose from the east, casting an orange light on the rocky terrain.

Crunch...!

The silence that took over the surroundings was broken by the single sound of a step.

"We're close."

Captain Reijnder stopped and turned around. Behind him, several dozen knights neatly lined up. Their golden armor gleamed beneath the sun's glare, making them look all the more imposing.

Standing in formation, they protected the magicians who stood at the back.

"Captain, here is the report."

Receiving a paper from one of the knight members, the captain read the contents before frowning.

".....We need to hurry."

Handing the paper back, he beckoned the members with his hand.

"The fight has already started. Let's hurry."

Indeed, just as the report stated. The moment they arrived at the destination, pulses of mana swept the surroundings as the heavy sound of metal clashing reverberated through the air.

Clank, clank, clank--

Members of the advanced squad were already fully engaged with the Hellhounds who attacked fiercely.

Awooo--!

Their howls pierced the air.

"Foolish...!"

Standing close to them, the Captain signaled with his hand and the knights behind him charged forward.

The same was true for the members of the Magic Tower who cast all sorts of spells toward the Hellhounds.

Awooo--! Awooo--!

Their unexpected interference took the Hellhounds by surprise as they howled in the sky.

But it was too late.

Pfft--!

Blood spilled into the air.

It was a brutal scene. Even the Terror Ranked Hellhound wasn't spared from the massacre. With over a dozen Tier 5 knights attacking together, its resistance was futile.

In a matter of minutes, its body cleaved in half.

Thump!

"We are done."

"...All Hellhounds have been cleared."

Once all was said and done, the Knights and Magicians went on to report to the Captain who stood before a large boulder.

His expression was grim.

"This is a lot more difficult than I anticipated."

Why am I shaking? The captain wondered, staring at his trembling hand. Supposedly, he shouldn't be scared considering the squad he was with. Even so, the innate fear that the Dragon brought wasn't something he could brush off.

"...It makes one wonder how a single squad from such a small town was able to reduce it to such a state."

In all honesty, the answer was obvious.

The Rock Dragon had most likely still been in its infant stages back then. The Mirror Crack must've just formed, and the Dragon was still not fully acclimated to the new environment.

Typically, the best time to deal with monsters coming from the Mirror Crack was during their first appearance.

The environment within the Mirror Dimension and the outside world was quite different.

It took time for the creatures to get used to the new environment, making such a situation the most ideal for humans.

"It's a pity we only found it now."

With thirty years having passed, although it had been sealed, its body was now most likely accustomed to the environment and it had reached full maturity.

It was for that reason that the pressure felt overpowering.

"Get the preparations done quickly!"

There was not much time to waste.

The only reason he had been standing still and waiting was because he alone had no chance of killing the Rock Dragon.

It wasn't its strength that was terrifying, no.

What was truly terrifying about the creature was its large and almost impenetrable outer layer.

.....He couldn't defeat the Rock Dragon.

It wasn't his job to defeat it.

He was only here to block it if anything were to happen.

The same was true for the knights. Their job was to protect the magicians who were getting ready to cast a large spell.

They were currently the only ones that were capable of subduing the Rock Dragon.

"How lon--!!!"

The captain's words fell short.

Staring ahead, he caught sight of his own reflection.

At that moment, his entire body shuddered and he brought his hand toward his broadsword.

"Get ready...!"

Rumble! Rumble!

His words were accompanied by a rumbling.

The boulder shook, and so did the surroundings.

"Akh...!"

"Ah!"

Fully focused on the large spell they were preparing to cast, many of the mages were caught off-guard, losing their footing in the process.

"Protect the mages...!"

The knights stood in formation.

"It's awakening! Raise your shields!"

Captain Reijnder held his broadsword forward. A tremendous wave of mana poured out of his body.

Rumble--!

The ground continued to shake.

In the chaos, rocks fell down the large boulder as something protruded out from its back.

Swoosh, Swoosh--!

Two distinctive shadows cast over the knights.

The atmosphere surrounding the terrain changed.

"Don't panic! Stay in formation...! Protect the magicians!"

Captain Reijnder continued to bark orders.

In the meantime, the color around them started to fade.

The world turned gray.

And the captain felt his heart squeeze.

The same was true for the knights who silently swallowed their saliva as they cranked their necks to look up.

Swoosh, swoosh--!

Lifting from the ground, a strong gale poured down on the knights.

At that moment, the Captain looked up.

His eyes locked onto the Dragon's.

And then...

Roooooooooar--!

The Dragon roared.

After thirty years.

It had finally awakened.

\*\*\*

---Moments prior.

Ellnor.

I stood amidst several graveyards, enveloped by greenery. With a light heart, I sank to the ground.

"You've finally decided to visit us...?"

"Hur. Hur. Took you long enough to visit us."

"It was getting quite annoying staying with these three. Good thing you've come."

I could still hear the voices of Daphne, Gork, and Liam in the distance.

Couldn't help it considering that I was standing before their graves. They were well polished, and flowers filled the space beneath.

There were many of them, and I could even see a few letters scattered.

I was tempted to open them, but I held myself back.

It was none of my business.

Instead, I focused on their graves.

"It's not bad."

Their graves.

They were quite beautiful.

"What do you think? Mine has more flowers than that big bastard."

".... It's not a competition."

"Stop."

It was odd, but the three just wouldn't stop talking. The funniest part was that they were just fruits of my own imagination.

Not that it mattered.

To me, they were alive.

Within me.

"Haaa..."

I leaned back to stare at the sky. The sun hung brightly, casting its light on the graveyard beneath.

Hundreds of graves encircled the space, each one belonging to a member of the subjugation squads. I knew the names of each and every one of them.

In a way, it was because I knew everyone that I felt a little overwhelmed.

"Why aren't you saying anything?"

"....You going to keep ignoring us?"

Drowning out the noise from the three, I leaned back and basked in the rare warmth coming from the sun.

'....Can't say this was a bad trip.'

I started to reminisce about my time here.

In particular, I thought about my gains.

While my tier may not have risen by much, my overall strength was far stronger than it had been in the past.

Not only was I able to upgrade [Hands of Malady] to [Grip of Pestilence] but I was also able to gain a lot of memories.

Gork's, Daphne's, Liam's, Aurelia's and so on...

I had lost count of the number of memories I had looked at.

It had to be noted that every member of the subjugation squad had been amongst the strongest warriors within the town.

In essence, I had over several dozen memories from them.

That meant that I had a lot of untapped knowledge that could be useful further down the line.

I still hadn't gone through them and sorted them out, but if I were to, then I was confident I'd be able to further improve my strength.

It didn't end just there.

While many memories were of no use to me, such as those that belonged to knights, they weren't technically unusable.

Well, to me they were.

But that didn't mean they were useless for others.

What if I were to teach them to others? ...Or what if I could sell them?

Would I even be able to do that...?

Would it be disrespectful to them?

"....."

I pondered for a moment before shaking my head.

They were dead.

What point was there to think about such a thing?

Either way, teaching others the techniques I knew wasn't exactly easy considering that I only had superficial knowledge about the techniques.

But at the very least, it helped me understand how others fought.

If I encountered someone with similar fighting styles, I'd know more about how they fought, making things easier for me.

"Haa..."

Letting out a long breath, I closed my eyes.

Only for me to open them up again as I turned to look in the "...Terrifying."

Sensing the energy coming off from the distance, I shuddered.

distance.

"It has begun."

The fight with the Rock Dragon.

I could tell from a glance that it wasn't a fight that I could've ever hoped to be able to participate in.

Perhaps one day, but not the current me.

"It's a bit of a pity."

I was thinking about the Dragon bone.

It would've certainly helped me out a lot.

Unfortunately, I had no way of killing the Dragon.

The same was true for the Hellhounds.

Still, I was satisfied with my gains.

I only had four more bones that I could integrate within me.

I needed to be careful with what I needed to add.



Especially since I couldn't remove a bone after integrating with it. Once I integrated with a bone, that was it. There were no takebacks.

Swoosh—!

Feeling the breeze, I ruffled my hair and stood up.

It was time for me to return.

Standing up, I looked towards the distance. There I could see Daphne and the others waving at me.

"You're leaving already?"

This time, I nodded.

"What?! You only just came!"

"You didn't even talk to us!"

The three glared at me and I laughed to myself.

".....Next time."

"Tsk, whatever."

"Don't break your promise though. It gets quite lonely in here."

"Sure."

I smiled and in the next moment, they vanished from my sight.

That was except for a single figure who stood in the distance.

With short blonde hair and blue eyes, she sat on top of a black tombstone. She looked young. About 14 years of age.

With her legs dangling over the tombstone, she looked up.

Meeting my gaze, she raised her hand and waved.

In the next moment, she too disappeared.

"....."

Just like that, I found myself standing in the graveyard by myself.

I took in the sight before me and closed my eyes.

Without looking back, I headed back into the town.

This journey.

.....It had also come to an end for me.

### **Chapter 142 The end of the trip [3]**

It was unfortunate, but I was never able to see the fight between the members of the Empire and the Rock Dragon.

We were evacuated from the town shortly after the fight began and sent back to the Academy.

The same was true for the town natives who were brought back to the Academy for temporary shelter.

Everything moved by so fast that before I knew it, we were all back in the Academy.

"It's Sunday today. You just came back from a long trip. Take some time to cool off. Classes will resume as usual tomorrow."

Professor Bridgette's voice echoed from the front.

Her words were accompanied by subtle groans. Couldn't be helped, everyone was tired and nobody looked forward to resuming classes so fast.

I was the same.

"Oh, right."

And then, as if recalling something, Professor Bridgette smacked her palm with her fist before smiling.

It was a smile that gave one chills.

"Your test results. They'll come out tomorrow."

"....Hiek!"

I heard a strange sound from the back.

There was no need to look. I could more or less guess who had made the sound.

"Well then."

Professor Bridgette clapped her hands.

"Enjoy your day off!"

She proceeded to leave shortly after that.

The same was true for the other cadets. Sadly, I wasn't one to have such privilege. Turning around, my eyes locked with Professor Hollowe's.

He had an unusually serious expression.

"Get ready. They're waiting."

".....Yes."

Unlike the others, I didn't get to rest.

Understandable considering what had happened to me. The Academy wanted a clarification of what had happened.

It was for this reason that I was being singled out.

"Let's go."

Professor Hollow had just turned to head in the direction of where we were supposed to go when I caught sight of a certain figure in the distance.

With a pale face, the glaring black circles beneath his eyes especially stood out. In particular, I could hear his faint mutterings from where I was, 'cursed... knew it... book...'

Just a bunch of nonsense.

As if noticing the abnormality in him, the Professor stopped.

"Looks like the situation is a lot more serious than anticipated."

".....Yeah."

"What do you think happened?"

"I wonder..."

My lips twitched.

"Maybe, he didn't sleep."

"Nightmares?"

"....Hmm, probably."

"Isn't he your knight? You don't seem particularly worried."

"No, I'm very worried."

"Really...?"

The Professor tilted his head to take a better look at me.

After a few seconds, he leaned his head back.

"I don't see it."

"I've been told I've got a very stoic face."

"Huh, I guess."

Taking another look at me, the Professor eventually shook his head.

"Well, that's fine. I'll check up on him later. Let's see if my worries are meaningless."

"....Sure."

Like that, the two of us left.

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"Huuu."

It was late into the night, and I stood outside the interrogation Hall.

The interrogation took more than a few hours. Facing the heads of the Academy, I could only relay to them everything that had happened in the time that I had 'died'.

Of course, I omitted a lot of information considering that a lot of them had to do with my second ability.

Nonetheless, I was able to get out of there without revealing too much.

Even if they were skeptical, it wasn't as though they could force information out of me.

Especially since I ended up resolving the entire incident by myself.

"Hmm, right."

I paused for a moment.

".....Now that I think about it, I did resolve the entire situation by myself."

At the very least, the necromancer part.

"You did."

A familiar voice sounded from behind me.

When I turned to look, I found Delilah standing a few meters away from me.

"Chancellor?"

Instinctively, I reached out for my pocket but stopped when I realized it was empty.

"....."

Feeling her gaze, I pursed my lips.

"Just came back, so..."

"....?"

"...Got nothing on me."

"Oh."

Delilah's eye twitched.

"I'm not here for that."

Why do you look so disappointed then?

"Anyways, I have a couple of things that I need to speak to you about."

".....A couple of things?"

"Yes."

"First thing."

Delilah waved her hand and handed me a letter.

"This is?"

"An invitation to an important event that will take place in a month. You can check it out later and if you want to come, tell me."

"Uh?"

Before I could even voice my doubts, she continued.

"Other than that, the results of the Jovinc Award will also be revealed soon. I've been asked to relay the information to you. You will soon receive an invitation for it."

Jovinc Award...?

It took me a couple of seconds to remember, and when I did, I smacked the palm of my hand.

"Ah."

It was the acting award.

'Good, I need some money.'

The award was going to be a great opportunity.

I didn't vote for myself for no reason.

Just as I thought that was it for the information, Delilah spoke again,

"There's something else."

"More...?"

What else was there?

"Although we haven't discussed what exactly it is, we're planning on rewarding you."

"..."

It took a moment for me to process her words, but when I did, I opened my eyes slightly.

I wasn't surprised by the news.

Rather, I was hoping it would happen. I did after all do a lot of the work.

"What sort of reward?"

I made sure to contain my excitement as I spoke.

"Undecided."

"Can I decide?"

"...It depends."

"Hm?"

Depends?

Depend on what?

"The Academy isn't the only one that is considering rewarding you."

I blinked for a moment before realizing,

"The Megrail family?"

".....Correct."

I closed my eyes for a brief moment.

Right.

Yet again, I wasn't surprised.

"It'll either be like this,"

Delilah spoke again.

"The Megrail family contributes individually. And if such a case occurs, we'll also reward you individually. Or, we both decide on a reward together. The decision hasn't been made yet. A major reason we interrogated you today was to decide what option we'll go with."

"I see."

That made sense.

Realistically speaking, I was fine with either option.

Either two rewards or one bigger reward. I was fine with either. Especially since I couldn't choose.

"...Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Hm."

I nodded my head slightly.

This was quite a pleasant piece of news.

'I wonder what type of reward they'll give me.'

A better manual? A bone? Money...?

I'd be fine with either one of those three rewards. However, if I did have to choose, then it'd be money.

After all, with the right amount of money, I could buy something similar to the first and second rewards of my own choosing.

"I will update you more on the first two pieces of information that I told you."

Delilah's voice broke me out of my thoughts. Looking up, she was staring back at me with her inky black eyes.

'Again...'

A familiar sensation washed over me the moment I looked into her eyes.

The sensation...

It was familiar to the one that I felt when meeting the Dragon's eye.

'Is there a correlation...?'

It was odd, but for some reason, I didn't feel disturbed by the sensation.

Rather, it felt as though I could do something similar.

'Uh, maybe I'm going crazy.'

Not yet, but given time, perhaps it was possible.



My fingers twitched.

I really wanted to ask her more about it, but before I knew it, her figure had already vanished from my sight.

"Ah..."

I hadn't even noticed.

Leaning my head back, I let out a long breath.

Perhaps next time.

There was no need for me to rush it.

Especially since I was just going based on speculation.

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The first thing that Kiera did upon returning back to her room was clean up her place. Changing into a set of casual clothes, she started to polish every nook and cranny of her room.

A week had passed since she had left her dorm and while it had been clean since the last time that she had left dust had started to accumulate.

Kiera couldn't stand such dust.

So,

Brush. Brush.

Kiera started to clean.

From the area beneath her bed to the corners of the room. She left nothing untouched and within an hour she was done.

".....Phew."

Wiping her forehead, she looked around the room.

It was sparkling.

.....At least, in her mind.

"Better."

Only now did she feel satisfied and relaxed.

Going to her bed, she opened one of her drawers and paused. Locking eyes with the box resting there, her expression changed.

"Fuck me."

It had been a while since she had last seen it.

...Been a while.

"Crazy."

This was an all-time record for her.

For an entire week, she hadn't had any cravings to smoke.

It used to be a daily thing, but...

"Haha. This is fucking nuts."

Kiera had mixed feelings about this.

Especially since the reason she stopped smoking was silly.

"Sniff, sniff."

Pinching her shirt up to her nose, she sniffed it.

"Even the smell is gone."

Kiera felt that she was almost unrecognizable.

....She was starting to change.

"Haa..."

Tossing the pack back into the drawer, Kiera dropped on her bed and blankly stared at the ceiling of the room.

For a moment, she let herself drift into her own thoughts.

"....."

She remained like that until eventually, she pursed her lips.

"I'll get the results of my exams tomorrow."

The grading system within Haven was rather simple.

From F to A.

Kiera's grade bordered the E's and D's.

Never in her life had she ever received anything above a C.

Was tomorrow going to be the first time for her...?

Ba... Thump! Ba... Thump!

For some reason, Kiera started to feel strangely nervous at the thought.

She was confident of getting an E, perhaps even a D.

However,

".....I don't want that."

It wasn't even because she wanted to prove her own efforts.

Rather, it was more because it would serve to further prove the fact that she was changing.

Just maybe...

"No, fuck."

Kiera slapped the sides of her cheeks.

"Don't get ahead of yourself bitch. There's no guarantee that you did well."

Flipping her body to the side, she tucked herself into bed and closed her eyes.

".....Right, there's no need to get my hopes up."

### **Chapter 143 Progression Analysis [1]**

The next day.

It was finally time for the results of the exams to be revealed.

"Huu... Huu... Huu..."

Kiera sat in her seat with her eyes closed. Though she was trying her best, she was unable to stop herself from breathing heavily.

She was nervous.

Very nervous.

After all, she was going to see whether her efforts had paid off or not. The fact that failure would mean expulsion didn't mean much to her.

No, that was a lie.

It did mean something.

However, when taking into account that this had been the very first time she had actually tried to do well in an exam, that concern seemed rather irrelevant to her.

For once, she wanted her effort to be acknowledged.

"Huuu..."

"Can you stop?"

"...Uh?"

Kiera blinked and looked to the side.

Josephine, sitting a few spaces to her right was glaring at her.

"What are you, in heat? I can't focus when you're breathing so heavily!"

"...?"

"Huu! Huu! Huu! The hell..."

"....."

For the first time in a very long time, Kiera didn't know how to retort.

In heat?

When what she said did sink in, her expression crumbled.

"Oy bit—"

"I will now be handing over your examination papers back."

Kiera's words were abruptly cut by Professor Bridgette's. Her head flicked, and her back unconsciously straightened.

"We had two written exams. I will be handing the papers to all of you at once. I've graded them all during the trip and double-checked. If you aren't satisfied with your mark you can come talk to me and we'll see if adjustments can be made."

Professor Bridgette proceeded to hand over the papers one by one.

A strange silence suddenly took over the classroom as the cadets who received the papers immediately flipped over the pages to look at their scores.

Some showed looks of despair while others showed looks of excitement.

It was a bit of both.

Flip, flip, flip—

The sound of the pages being flipped was agonizing to Kiera.

Licking her lips, she rubbed her hands together. They had unknowingly become rather sweaty.

And then,

"Here you go."

Her papers finally came.

"....."

Kiera sat still for a moment. Though the papers were right before her, for some reason her mind blanked.

It was just...

"Ah, fuck."

Kiera pinched her arm.

'.....Since when have I been such a pussy?'

Right, it was just a fucking exam result. Or at least, Kiera kept repeating to herself before reaching out for the first paper and turning it over.

Score : 17/63 [27%]

Grade : E

Her body froze and her hand trembled.

For a brief moment, her mind blanked. To the point where Josephine, who had already looked through her paper, managed to sneak a glance.

"Wow. Damn."

All it took was the sound of her voice to make her snap out of it.

Blinking, Kiera massaged her mouth.

'Right, this is to be expected.'

This wasn't the paper that she had studied for.

That one was,

"....Uh?"

Where was it?

Looking around, Kiera started to panic. It was just in front of me, where in the world...  
And then, her face twisted.

The paper. It was in none other than Josephine's hands.

"Oy, what are you..."

She was just about to snatch it back when she noticed the expression on Josephine's face. It was as if she had seen a ghost.

"T-this... What, no? Eh?"

"....?"

The hell was this bitch...

"What did you do?"

Josephine's gaze slowly traveled towards Kiera.

"....H-how much did you sell your hands for? Who in the right mind would even pay for that?"

"Uh? What...? Give me that!"

Kiera snapped the paper from Josephine's hand.

Then, lowering her gaze, she looked at the score.

"Ah..."

Kiera couldn't quite tell what sort of expression she was currently making, but she could more or less guess.

It was probably something similar to Josephine's, but...

".....Hehe."

A laugh soon escaped her lips.

As if some sort of spell had been cast over her, all her stress vanished in that moment. Her hands felt tingly, and so did her body.

Biting her lips, she looked at the score again.

And again...

And again...

Maybe, one more time?

Score : 48/71 [68%]

Grade : B

"Hehe."

For the first time in her life.

Kiera felt like she had achieved something with her own merit.

And,

It felt great.

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Karlson Hall.

I found myself in the familiar training grounds.

The morning classes were over and it was now time for the afternoon classes. The results from the examination were one B and an A.

A score that was below what I expected of myself.

However, I wasn't disheartened.

'It hasn't been long since I've come to this world. It's already a miracle that I was able to get such grades.'

No, rather than a miracle, it was more like the fruits of my own work.

Right, I had worked for those results.

"The first semester has already ended. It's been several months since you all have taken your progression analysis. With the exams over, it is now time to check on your overall progress."

Professor Olivia J. Kelson started to explain.

"Everyone should already be familiar with the process. Given how we have already done this before, I don't think there's a need for me to introduce you to the examination, right?"

Nobody said a thing. Clearly, everyone was already familiar with the process. The same was true for me. I mean, how could I forget? It was here that I bled from my eyes.

"Perfect."

The Professor clapped her hands.

"Since you are all familiar with the process. Let's get started!"

Pointing at the different stations, she went on to say,

"The groups will be the same as last time. The assistant professor in charge of you will also be the same."

My mouth twitched slightly.

Great...

"Off you go."



Following her words, the cadets dispersed. I was the same and headed towards a burly man with thick eyebrows and a bald head.

Gilbert was it?

Whatever.

Not worth remembering.

Unlike the last time, he didn't openly look at me with hostility. It was a lot more subdued than last time.

Nonetheless, I could still feel that it was there.

"Gather around, cadets."

I didn't make a scene and just followed along.

Doing a quick headcount he put the pad down and led us towards a familiar spot.

"The order will be the same as last time. Our first test will be the mana test."

Within a space no larger than a classroom, a sizable magic circle adorned the ground. Positioned above it, a desk held three distinctive orbs.

"Since most of you are already familiar with the process, I won't say much."

He turned to look at me and I stepped up.

"First test. Mana concentration test. Place your hand on the orb."

All eyes fell on me then.

"..."

Without a sound, I followed his instructions and placed my hand on the orb. At the same time that I did, I channeled my mana into the orb.

Mana started to drain from my body as a white glow spread out from the orb.

It wasn't quite blinding, but enough to make me squint.

The process didn't take very long.

By the time I was done, I received my score.

"Score value; 2.581."

His words were met with a subtle silence.

"....Your previous score. 1.716. An improvement of 0.865."

When I turned my head to look at him, I almost smiled. His expression. It looked like he had swallowed a bug.

"Grade; Excellent."

I felt like laughing but held myself back and moved on to the next orb.

The mana purity orb.

"..."

Unlike the previous examination, I was rather nervous about this one.

Mana purity wasn't something that could be changed easily. It signified the degree to which the body converted the mana in the air into usable mana.

The purer the mana, the more powerful and effective a spell was.

'My previous score was tainted. I wonder what mine is now.'

"Place your hand on the orb."

Having recovered from the previous score, the assistant professor nudged at the orb before me.

I did as he asked and placed my hand on the orb.

A familiar glow surfaced from the surface of the orb. It lasted no more than a couple of seconds before the assistant's voice rang again.

"Mana Purity; Standard."

Standard...

'So it really did improve.'

I had somewhat of a hunch from back in Ellnor. I had felt it from my mana flow, and the subtle increase in power of my spells despite not having ranked up in any other way.

The real question was,

"How?"

The assistant professor's voice broke me out of my thoughts.

When I turned to look, he had an incredulous look on his face.

".....How did you manage to improve your purity and quantity at the same time?"

He wasn't the only one that was looking at me strangely. Almost all the other present cadets were giving me the same looks.

I couldn't blame them.

After all, it was hard to improve one's mana purity while at the same time improving the quantity.

"Did you eat some sort of medicine? Some—"

Ignoring him, I placed my hand on the last orb and channeled my mana.

It was simply my own way of saying.

Mind your own business.

\*

The physical exam came after. Unlike the previous test, I hadn't improved much in this aspect, but there were still improvements.

Having integrated a bone in my body, it was only natural that my physical fitness increased by a few degrees.

That was excluding the fact that I trained every single day.

To me, such improvements were to be expected.

'.....I'm also not the only one that improved a lot.'

"What a monster. I can't believe he scored 3.671 on the physical score. Doesn't that mean he's close to reaching Tier 4? That's on the level of our Professors..."

"Aoife too. She scored 3.553 on the physical score. And that's not even her forte. Evelyn and Kiera also improved significantly."

"Why did we have to be in the same year as these monsters?"

Such scores were to be expected from them.

I wasn't the only one that was training like crazy every day.

Further onto that, with maybe the exception of Leon, the others had access to far better resources than I had.

There was no point in comparing myself to them.

"Julien."

I only snapped out of my thoughts when my name was called up. Looking up, I headed forward and took a seat.

Clank—

A black bracelet clamped down on my wrist.

It was time for the last test. The mental examination test. I could still recall the exact details of it.

This was the one test I could never forget.

I was just about to get myself mentally ready for the incoming pain when a hand pressed against my shoulder.

"Let me warn you."

It was Professor Kelson.

She was looking at me with a serious expression.

".....Moderate yourself, cadet. I don't want you to go blind like last time. If something similar to last time happens, I'll end the examinations and fail you on the spot."

Her voice was firm.

I could tell at a glance that she was being extremely serious.

"Okay."

But that was fine.

'My body should be able to hold out this time.'

Previously, my body had been what set me back. Things were different now. I was sure it could hold out for longer.

The real question was whether I could withstand the pain.

Pain...

Right, pain.

I no longer carried a single pain.

I closed my eyes and let the darkness take hold of my vision.

Within the darkness, over a dozen figures appeared.

Each figure carried a different pain.

A pain that I experienced and was all too familiar with.

From the pain of burning alive, to the pain of being tortured every day and brainwashed.

Within me, I carried such pains.

This test,

I wasn't the same as last time.

"....."

Opening my eyes, I realized that my surroundings were quiet.

All eyes were on me.

Be it the Professor's and the cadets from the different areas

At this moment, I was the center of attention.

Fine.

I'll show you.

Our pain.

I looked at the Professor.

"Start it."

## Chapter 144 Progression Analysis [2]

"That marks the end of your examination. I will hand over your scores later. For those that haven't seen a massive jump in their scores, please don't be disheartened. There will always be a next time."

Hearing the assistant Professor's words, a few cadets showed downcast expressions and nodded.

The harsh reality of the matter was that not everyone was able to improve significantly.

At least, when compared to Leon, Aoife, and the others.

Their progress was rather minimal.

But if that wasn't bad enough, those who saw the least amount in this round would be put on a watchlist.

If the next progression analysis hardly saw any improvements, then they would, unfortunately, be held back a year or expelled from the Academy.

The Academy poured a lot of resources into sustaining the cadets.

The Academy was a harsh place.

Only the top of the top were allowed to stay.

"You've improved a lot."

Aoife said, standing with her arms crossed beside Leon.

She was looking towards the assistant professor in charge of their group.

"You too..."

Leon replied curtly.

He more or less was already aware of what his results were going to be.

Hence why he wasn't surprised.

Aoife continued,

"With your scores, you should be first overall."

"....I think so."

"I see."

Unlike last time, Aoife didn't seem to be particularly hung up at the fact that she wasn't first.

While it was indeed true that he had ranked higher than her, the gap between the two of them hadn't widened at all. In fact, Aoife appeared to have shrunk the gap.

Especially the mental fortitude part.

In that, she had managed to surpass him which was a bit of a surprise for him.

Leon was just about to mention it when he noticed a change in the atmosphere.

A strange silence suddenly took over the training grounds.

Turning his head, Leon immediately understood the reasoning behind the silence.

"...."

'So it's that again.'

Julien was about to take the mental fortitude examination.

Everyone present could still vividly recall the previous time he had taken the examination.

How could they not when he had created such a scene?

It was still vividly imprinted in the minds of all those present.

And looking around, Leon could see that he was right.

As of right now.

This very moment,

All eyes were locked on Julien who had his eyes closed.

Not a single soul said a word as they simply stared at him.

Then,

His eyes opened and his voice quietly echoed within the confines of the training grounds.

"Start it."

\*\*\*

It was a familiar sensation.

It tickled my body. Almost as if a current of low-voltage electricity was coursing through my body. From the bottom of my feet, all the way up to my head.

The sensation ran through every corner of my body.

"0.1"

Just like before, the assistant professor quietly called out the pain level.

The score was rather simple.

It went from zero to ten. The higher the score, the more painful it was.

Typically, mental scores were in line with, if not below the tier someone was in.

Since I was tier 2, my pain tolerance was expected to be around 2.

The higher-tiered a mage was, the more powerful their pain tolerance was.

"0.2"

The score increased.

It hardly tickled.

"0.3"

Back then, it was at this point that I started feeling something.

But,

'Nothing.'

I felt nothing.

"0.4"

"0.5"

"0.6"



The numbers continued to increase.

Even so, I still felt nothing.

It was odd.

Back then, I was sure that by this point I had felt something.

"0.7"

"0.8"

The numbers continued to climb.

Opening my eyes, I looked around me. Everyone was staring at me intently. It was weird.

Why was everyone so concerned with my score?

"0.9"

"1.0"

The assistant professor continued to call out the score.

"1.1"

Ah, there.

I felt something there.

My chest grew heavy, and my leg twitched.

The discomfort had started.

"1.2"

"1.3"

It had yet to reach the point of becoming a pain, but it wasn't anything pleasurable.

"1.4"

"1.5"

"1.6"

The numbers were continually getting called, and the sense of discomfort became more apparent.

With that said, it was still discomfort.

The pain had yet to come.

"1.7"

"1.8"

"1.9"

"2.0"

By now, I could tell that the gazes at which everyone was staring at me had changed. It was as if they were looking at some sort of maniac.

It couldn't be helped.

"2.1"

"2.2"

I had yet to feel any pain.

The situation was so weird that Professor Kelson started to have some doubts herself. She had been monitoring from the side the entire time to make sure that everything flowed smoothly.

"Do you feel any pain?"

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

I calmly replied while the assistant professor's voice echoed in the background.

"2.3"

"You don't?"

She frowned, lowering her head to check the bracelet.

"Could it be malfunctioning?"

I wondered that too.

Though I did feel something, it wasn't anything like the previous time. It also made me question whether the bracelet was malfunctioning or not.

"No, no problem."

After a quick check, Professor Kelson moved away.

The way she looked at me changed.

"You really..."

Her words ended there.

"2.5"

"2.6"

"2.7"

The count continued.

By now, the assistant professor's voice was the only thing that was echoing throughout the training space. Everyone was too busy staring at me with heavy expressions.

"2.8"

"2.9"

"3.0"

"....!"

Finally, I felt something.

My left arm twitched and so did my face. Looks of relief appeared on the faces of many of the cadets.

"3.1"

"3.2"

The pain increase was rapid.

In just a few seconds after the pain started, it intensified. It was so fast that for a moment, I almost let out a groan.

"....."

My entire body hurt at this point.

A certain heat was covering every inch of my body, giving the illusion that I was currently on fire.

"3.3"

"3.4"

With each count, the pain grew progressively worse.

I clenched my teeth and gripped tightly onto the armrest of the chair.

"Kh...!"

Finally, I started making sounds.

"3.5"

The sensation of my flesh tearing apart consumed my thoughts as the fire seared through my skin. The pain was excruciating, stealing my breath and leaving me gasping for relief.

"Huuu.. huu..."

Taking deep breaths, I closed my eyes.

'Remember, remember....'

I sank into my consciousness. It was dark, and it was empty. However, within that emptiness was a certain figure.

A disfigured one.

I walked towards it and placed my hand over its head.

Memories flooded my mind.

A young child. A sister. A burning mansion.

The pain he felt.

All of it, I relieved it.

And...

"3.6"

"3.7"

I was finally able to calm myself down.

Compared to that pain, this was nothing.

Hence,

"3.8"

"3.9"

Even as the numbers increased, my body stopped shaking and I sat still.

Unmoved.

"4.0"

The burning stopped.

I felt a new pain this time.

Suffocation.

I was currently being suffocated.

"Ukh...!"

Though I couldn't see, I could imagine my face turning entirely blue. Submerged beneath the depths of the ocean, I found it hard to breathe.

"4.1"

"4.2"

The air vanished, and I felt a crushing weight over my chest.

"4.3"

Panic clawed at my throat.

I started to grow desperate for air.

"4.4"

My muscles strained, and my lungs burned with every attempt at breathing.

"4.5"

Gripping tightly onto the sides of the chair, my legs started to spasm.

"Kh...!"

My previous record was 5.04.

I was extremely close to reaching such a score.

I was close, but...

'Can I surpass it?'

I thought I could've, but I was starting to doubt it.

Right now, the pain was so intense that I could hardly keep myself from falling unconscious.

Unlike last time when I had secluded myself into the depths of my mind, I was conscious of everything.

I could hardly remember what had happened in the first attempt.

Before I knew it, the score was that and my body started to fail. This time, my body wasn't failing.

There were no excuses for me.

'Should I just do the same thing as last time?'

Turtle myself into my inner consciousness?

That wasn't hard for me to do.

I was sure I'd be able to easily surpass my previous score were I to do that.

But,

'No.'

"Kh....!"

That was the same as running away.

That place...

It was a place of comfort that I had created back when I had cancer and was suffering from pain every single day.

It had been useful back then since I needed to run away from the pain.

The same couldn't be said for my current self.

I didn't need to run away from the pain.

I needed to withstand it.

My enemies weren't going to let me enter that state of comfort.

I could only endure.

"5.0"

"Huaaa...!"

I caught my breath.

For a split second, I could breathe again.

Only for me to be unable to do so in the subsequent second.

"Akh!"

My entire body was hunched down.

The gravity surrounding my space intensified.

I could hardly keep my back straight.

"5.1"

"5.2"

"5.3"

Clank! Clank!

My right hand slipped down from the chair and my body lurched down.

"Akh...!"

In that split second, I saw black and I thought I had fallen unconscious.

"N-no."

But I was quick to stop myself.

I bit my tongue and clenched my teeth.

"N-not yet...!"

"5.4"

"5.5"

"5.6"

The numbers continued to rise and so did the gravity surrounding me.

Although it was only imaginary, my entire body was starting to lean forward as a result. Before I knew it, my face was in my lap.

"H-huu... H-huuu..."

I struggled to breathe.

It felt suffocating.

"5.7"

"5.8"

I knew I could let go as of right now.

I had already surpassed my previous self.

Nobody was going to say anything.

That the previous score was a fluke or the like.

"5.9"

But I wasn't doing this for them.

I was doing this for myself.



"6.0"

I wasn't trying to prove anything to anyone.

I wasn't withstanding the pain for some silly recognition.

No.

....I just didn't want to run away from it.

"6.1"

Since it was bound to come, I had to get used to it.

"6.2"

Pain grows when one doesn't grow from it.

I was trying to grow from the pain.

And for that simple reason,

"6.3"

"6.4"

"6.5"

I allowed myself to experience it.

I allowed myself to memorize it.

....And I allowed myself to embrace it.

"Cough...! Cough."

Coughing, I looked up. Towards the assistant professor who was still counting. Towards Professor Kelson who was looking at me with concern, and towards the other cadets.

"..."

I stopped coughing then.

"6.6"

Clenching tightly against the armrest of the chair, I pulled myself back up and straightened my back.

"6.7"

Looking around, I sat there without saying a single word.

"6.8"

Even as the numbers continued to rise, I remained quiet.

"6.9"

My back.

"7.0"

It remained firm.

"7.1"

"7.2"

"7.3"

"7.4"

"7.5"

"7.6"

"7.7"

"7.8"

"7.9"

"8.0"

"8.1"

"8.2"

Till the very end.

I remained unmoved.

And then,

".....That's enough."

I finally ended it all.

"....."

The count stopped and the pain vanished.

When I looked down, my entire body was trembling. In fact, I had lost complete control of my body.

"Haa..."

Closing my eyes, I leaned my head back.

And then,

"8.23"

The assistant professor spoke.

"...That's your final score."

### **Chapter 145 Progression Analysis [3]**

"What the hell..."

It was hard to describe the scene that was unfolding before their eyes. From the focus of everyone's attention to the fact that the surroundings were eerily quiet.

"....."

"....."

No one said a single word and focused on the cadet who sat by the chair with a stoic expression.

His back was straight and so was his breathing.

It was strange.

From the way he was sitting, it didn't seem like he was in any pain at all.

"What sort of..."

Olivia Kelson stood by the side with open eyes.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"7.9"

"8.0"

The disbelief became more apparent with each word that came out of Gilbert.

It was just...

"...Unbelievable."

Mental fortitude was an extremely important category. To be able to remain clear-headed under pain was extremely important during raids and fights. But not only that. Several known monsters had the ability to 'brainwash' and 'manipulate' humans at will.

A strong mental fortitude would prevent one from falling into such a skill.

It was normal for mental fortitude to rise with time and strength. Generally, the stronger one was, the stronger their mind was.

That was generally how it worked, and yet...

"How...?"

How was this even possible?

"8.1"

"8.2"

The numbers continued to rise.

"....That's enough."

It was only after his voice echoed that the counting finally stopped.

However,

"8.23"

The assistant professor spoke.

"...That's your final score."

There was nothing Olivia could say about the score.

8.23

It was an absurd number.

A number that was almost unheard of with only a few people capable of achieving such a feat.

'Unless someone has suffered an incredible amount of pain in the past, it's almost impossible to achieve such a result.'

No, rather.

It was impossible for someone so young to have suffered through so much pain.

Even if he were to have been afflicted by the worst of diseases, it still wouldn't be enough to be able to help him achieve such a score.

So,

"How?"

How was it possible for him to achieve such a score?

The Professor wasn't the only one who was baffled by the results.

The ones who were most baffled by the results were none other than the cadets. They had, after all, gone through the same examinations just moments prior.

They all understood just how painful the examination was.

"Crazy bastard."

Kiera grumbled under her breath while staring at her hand.

It was shaking slightly.

Her turn had yet to come, but just recalling the pain she had gone through the first time around, she found herself shaking.

Back then, her score had been 2.93.

It was a great score.

Amongst the very top of the year.

And yet, here she was, staring at the anomaly who scored a ridiculous 8.23.

"....Maniac."

Such was the only word she could use to describe him.

Kiera wasn't the only one who had such an evaluation of him.

Aoife shared a similar opinion to hers.

But at the same time, her gaze couldn't help but drift slightly towards the man on her right.

"....."

He had been standing quietly the entire time while staring at Julien who had an indifferent gaze. She had a hard time understanding his thoughts, but that wasn't an issue for her.

Shifting her attention elsewhere, her gaze locked onto Evelyn's.

Unlike Leon, her expression was like an open book.

There was visible confusion etched on her face as she looked at Julien.

It was intriguing.

Especially since Aoife was still hung on the words that she had previously told to her.

'He's different.'

...And not only that.

For a cadet to be able to reach such a score at such an age...

He was definitely hiding something.

Of that, she was sure.

It made her more intrigued.

\*\*\*

My hands felt like jelly.

No, rather, my entire body was like jelly. It was hard for me to stand, and if not for the Professor's help at the end, I would've been in trouble.

"Are you alright...? Should I send you to the doctor?"

".....I'll be alright."

Shaking my head, I rejected the Professor's good intentions and found an area to sit on.

As I moved, all gazes fell in my direction.

The looks the cadets were giving me. I was already familiar with them.

"Haaa...."

Sitting down, I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

My mind was exhausted and I could hardly think. Despite that, I couldn't help but feel excited at the score that I received.

8.23

It was significantly higher than I had anticipated.

With my body sturdier than before, and the fact that I carried with me all sorts of pains from all sorts of people, I was able to achieve such a score.

As of right now, that was my limit.

I knew that if I were to push myself further than this then I would've been in big trouble.

It was a satisfying result.

One that didn't leave me feeling like shit like the previous one.

"That will be it for today's Progress Analysis."

Professor Kelson's voice broke me out of my thoughts.

Before I knew it, a few hours had passed and all the examinations were done.

".....You should all have received a score. Please make sure to train hard for the following one which is set at the end of the year. It's just right before the Draft."

Speaking, Professor Kelson made sure to emphasize the last part.

There were certain criteria that a cadet needed to have in order to become eligible for the draft.

One such criterion was a minimum score of 3.0 in either the physical or mana examination.

I had yet to reach either, but I was confident that by the end of the year, I'd have my mana score at around 3.0.

Clap, Clap— Clapping twice, Professor Kelson gathered the attention of all cadets present before speaking again,

"Do take what I said to heart. For now, this is the end of the class. Since it is the last one of the day, you're free to do whatever you want after this. Have a good day."

And with that, the cadets proceeded to leave.

Well, except me who remained seated on the ground.

What else could I do....?

I could hardly move.

"Do you need a hand?"

Thankfully, I had a knight for these types of stuff. Lifting my head, I reached out for the outstretched hand and helped myself up.

"....."

Once I was standing, I thought about taking a step forward, but I only stopped at the thought.

As if they were made out of lead, my legs refused to budge.

Taking note of this, Leon shook his head.

"There was no need for you to go that hard. Just staying at the same score as before would've been as impressive."

"...I guess so."

But that wasn't the point.

I just wanted to test myself.



"Still...."

Leon scanned my body from top to bottom.

"...Seeing the state that you're in. I don't think it was the right idea for you to push yourself to this extent. Next time try to moderate yourself."

"I'll try."

"Don't try. Actually do it. You might end up crippling yourself if you go too hard."

"....."

How long was he going to nag me for?

"You understand that—"

"I've been wanting to say. I've got a new joke that I've been meaning to tell you. Do you want to hear it?"

"..."

"Is that a yes?"

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

"What do you mean?"

"I'm helping you out."

"And? Aren't you supposed to be my knight?"

"I am."

"Okay, good. Are you ready to hear it?"

I cleared my throat.

Just before I could get my words out, Leon spoke.

"...What do you want from me?"

I paused and looked at him.

He looked like a defeated man.

Such a look.

Yes, this is how it's supposed to be.

"Stop speaking for a while. My head hurts."

"On it."

Leon pursed his lips and stopped speaking.

Staring at his figure from the side, I finally felt a little sensation in my hand as I brought it to a close.

...I felt oddly powerful at the moment.

With that, he helped me back to the dorms in silence.

\*\*\*

The next day.

My body was still extremely sore from the mental examination, but I felt a lot better than before.

"Huuam."

Sitting in the classroom, I yawned.

The classroom was unusually quiet today. Apparently, there was an important announcement. I was a little curious, but I was in no state to properly focus.

"huaam."

Especially when I couldn't stop myself from yawning.

I was too tired.

"May I have your attention?"

The Professor in charge of the announcement was...

"Hm?"

Professor Hollowe.

I sat up slightly.

In the meantime, Professor Hollowe placed a stack of papers on the podium before speaking.

"Some of you may already know what's going on, but I'll say it for those that aren't aware."

His gaze swept the classroom.

"After witnessing impressive performances from several cadets during the mid-terms, the Guilds have reached out to us to collaborate on a program tailored for these promising cadets."

The faces of the many cadets in the classroom changed.

I couldn't quite understand why they were reacting the way that they did, but I soon understood.

"Remember, achieving a specific perimeter score and meeting draft eligibility criteria doesn't automatically ensure selection by a Guild. Another crucial aspect influencing their decision is personal preference. This underscores the significance of this opportunity for each of you."

The air grew tense at his words.

"....For that reason, when you enter the Guild for the experience, you must do your utmost to impress them. We're talking about your future here. Don't throw it away."

Reaching out for the papers on the podium, Professor Hollowe waved them in the air.

"I don't need much from you. Once the lesson is over, come over to the podium and select which Guild you want to enter for the experience. There's no guarantee that you will be able to enter your selected Guild, but it doesn't hurt to give it a shot."

With that, he placed the paper back on the podium.

"Wait, don't stand up just yet."

The cadets had just started to head for the papers when Professor Hollowe raised his hand and stopped them.

At that moment, I felt his gaze pause on me.

....Me?

"One last thing."

And then, it paused on someone else.

"Uh?"

I was starting to get a bad feeling.

"...There's another request from the Guilds."

All cadets stopped whatever they were doing and looked up.

"Leon."

Professor Hollowe called out his name.

"Julien."

And then mine.

I swallowed my saliva.

"They've specifically requested the top two cadets fight each other in a demonstration. They want to properly assess your skills."

I turned my head and I met gazes with Leon.

He also seemed shocked. But within the shock, there was something else...

I then recalled what had happened the day prior.

Ah.

Fuck...

## **Chapter 146 Beneath the moonlight [1]**

My mind blanked temporarily at the announcement.

"The demonstration will be between the top two cadets of the year. It'll be a fight that will demonstrate the general skill level of our top cadets and something that will be viewed by the top executives of the fifteen guilds."

From how he spoke, he was making it seem as though it was something important. It probably was, but...

".....Is it compulsory?"

I blurted out all of a sudden.

The gazes of everyone in the classroom fell on me.

"Compulsory?"

Professor Hollowe looked at me with a strange look. He seemed to be getting an idea of what I was about to say next.

"Well, I wouldn't say it's compulsory. Howev—"

"I forfeit."

"....."

The classroom turned silent.

Feeling everyone's gazes, I shrugged. What? Did they really expect me to accept this absurd request?

Firstly, I could fight Leon whenever I wanted. He was my knight.

Secondly, I was still not up to par with him. Simply put, I didn't have the confidence to beat him.

Since I was also not gaining anything from this, I didn't see the need to accept this.

"Wait, Julien. Don't act rashly. Let me finish speaking."

"....."

I leaned back in my seat and allowed him to speak.

Nonetheless, my mind was pretty firm.

I wasn't going to accept the offer. And if they were to force me to take it, then I'd just forfeit.

"Eh, so..."

The Professor massaged his forehead. Most probably, he was feeling a headache. I did feel a little sorry for him, but I was currently feeling a greater headache.

"...This is a great opportunity for you to enter a Guild's good graces. Not only will it be beneficial for you in the coming draft, but it will also help convince them to give you a great contract in your rookie year."

"And?"

"If you do this, you'll be able to increase your draft stock which in turn will get you a better deal for the future. This is a lot of money we're talking about."

"I see..."

Even more of a reason why I had to reject this offer.

If I were to lose, which was extremely likely, my stock would drastically fall and the reputation that I had built up until now would crumble.

All my hard work.

Gone.

Just like that.

'Fuck that.'

"Still no."

"....."

Professor Hollowe stood in silence while staring at me. He seemed to be trying to gauge my real intention, but I didn't budge.

"I'll ask again. Can you think about this carefully? There's a chance you might get on the bad sides of the guilds and—"

"I'll just join the Magic Tower, then."

There was no rule that said that I needed to join a Guild.

In fact, was it possible to create a Guild?

'Hmm, maybe not. Guilds exist, to begin with, because they have control over a Mirror Crack.'

There weren't many Mirror Cracks to begin with.

If I wanted to create a Guild then I needed an unclaimed Mirror Crack, and...

'.....'

My thoughts stopped there.

It took several seconds for them to come back.

When they did, I felt my heart race.

Could it be possible...?

"Alright, I won't force you."

Professor Hollowe's voice broke me out of my thoughts.

In the end, with a sigh, he turned his head to look at someone else.

"Aoife, how about you?"

Ranked third, Aoife was the next one in line.

"...."

She didn't answer immediately. Rather, she turned her head to look at me. Her golden pupils locked onto me for the briefest of moments before looking away.

"I'm also not interested."

Her cold voice echoed within the classroom.

".....Ask someone else."

"You too...?"

Professor Hollowe massaged his head again. It looked like he was seriously feeling the headache.

Not that he didn't understand Aoife's choice.

I could understand why too.

.....She had nothing to gain from the demonstration. The Guilds. What did it matter to her? She was already familiar with most of the heads. Not only that, she was also from the Megrail family.

She had access to her own private Mirror Crack.

Aoife had no need to impress them.

"Evelyn?"

".....I can."

Finally, someone agreed and the Professor finally relaxed as he quietly murmured, 'Thank god,' to himself.

The selection ended there.

Exhausted, the Professor looked around the classroom before pointing at the papers.

"Choose the Guild that you want to join for the experience and hand back the sheet by tomorrow. I'll go and inform that facility about the matchup."

Before leaving, he threw one glance in my direction before shaking his head.

As he left, his back looked rather lonely. Like that of a man who says 'I'm home honey' to a honey jar.

I felt a little bad, but there was nothing for me to gain and so much to lose.

That being said,

'.....Is it possible?'

My mind couldn't help but continue to wander back to the thought that I previously had.

Realistically speaking, it wasn't possible.

I had a higher chance of receiving the dragon bone. Even so, my mind couldn't help but lean towards that possibility.

It was nuts.

I was nuts.

"Haaa...."

Letting out a long breath, I leaned my head back.

"...Doesn't hurt to ask."

\*\*\*

—How long will you stay there? It's been over a week already, Inquisitor.

"Uh, yeah, give me a second..."



Moving a couple of files around the large table of his temporary office, Hollowe opened up a drawer and stuffed the documents in. Then, relaxing his upper lip, a pencil fell on the desk with a small, 'Tack'.

"You were saying....?"

—.....

There was a brief silence before the voice finally returned.

—When are you returning? You've been at Haven for over a week. Your investigation shouldn't take you so long. We need you here.

"Ah, that..."

Hollowe looked around before scratching the side of his face.

With a bitter smile, he flicked the pencil on the table.

"I think I might need more time."

—More time?

"Yeah, I still need more time. There's not much that I managed to find in the past week considering that I was out of the Academy, however, if you give me more time, I feel like I'll be able to find something."

—...How sure are you of that?

The voice spoke after a brief moment of silence.

Hollowe didn't answer immediately.

Instead, his gaze hovered over a small picture frame on his desk. Besides the small lamp that dimly lit the surroundings, it was the only piece of decoration on his desk.

Staring at the picture, Hollowe's eyes changed slightly.

Then, recalling everything that he knew, he leaned back on his chair before answering.

"About ninety percent."

—Ninety percent?

"Ninety percent."

Hollowe flatly repeated.

\*\*\*

"....You want to talk about your reward?"

"Yes."

I sat on the opposite end of Delilah. The moment class ended, I headed for her office. Being her assistant, it took me no time for me to reach her office as no one obstructed my path.

"Didn't I say that we're still discussing it?"

"I know."

"Then...?"

I rummaged through my pocket before sliding it over the desk.

"..."

Delilah's gaze alternated between 'it' and me.

"..."

The silence continued.

I slid it further closer to her.

"..."

She didn't budge.

The bar did.

"..."

And then,

Placing her hand over it, she leaned back on her chair.

"Are you trying to bribe me?"

Crinkle~

"I wouldn't dare."

".....It's good that you... munch... know. I'm not someone that would... munch... be bribed so easily."

"I understand."

"To bribe... munch... someone like me, you'd need far more than... munch—"

I slid another one over.

"....."

Delilah's lips pursed.

Crinkle~

"...What do you want?"

There we go.

"It's nothing much, to be honest."

It was my turn to lean back on my chair. Well, in all honesty, there was no way I could bribe her.

This was just me lightening up the mood before making my request.

Staring at her, I hesitated for a moment before speaking,

"Regarding the reward, is it possible for me to request something?"

"Um?"

Delilah blinked her eyes and brought the bar away from her face.

"You want to request something?"

"Yes, is that possible?"

"....."

Her inky black eyes locked on me and her back straightened. Putting the bar down, she dabbed her finger over the empty wrapper of the previous bar before subtly placing it in her mouth.

"What do you want to request?"

"Well..."

I scratched the tip of my nose.

I sort of already knew the answer to my request but I still asked.

"The Mirror Crack in Ellnor. Can I have the rights over it?"

"....."

As expected. The moment I revealed my request, Delilah's eyes widened. It was the first time that I had seen such a reaction from her and it took a moment for me to snap out of it.

When I did, her face still hadn't changed.

"You, do you have any idea how big your request is?"

"...I do."

While the Mirror Dimension was dangerous, it was also a land filled with opportunities. The monsters inside. Not only did some drop bones which could go for an absurd amount of money, but their skin and regular bones also sold for a lot of money.

Simply put, it was a gold mine.

Further adding to that, the Mirror Crack needed to be contained.

One needed enough strength to prevent it from expanding.

In the short term, what I was asking was simply impossible. I understood that, but it wasn't as though I didn't think it through.

"I'm not asking for it to be handed fully to me. I understand that it's impossible given my current strength. However, I'd like the chance to be considered as one of the candidates for the Crack."

Within the absurdity of my request, I didn't feel like the possibility of my request being accepted was zero.

The reason for this was simple,

'Atlas Megrail.'

Such a person existed.

...What if I were to use him to get this opportunity?

Perhaps, create an outpost of some sort for the Inverted Sky. Not only would that enable me to become closer to the organization, but it would also serve to help them monitor them better.

As if realizing something, Delilah remained quiet.

"....."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Her slender fingers drummed over the wooden desk.

Then, closing her eyes, she nodded her head.

"You'll most likely be rejected, but I'll let them know."

"...That's all I ask for."

I stood up from my seat and nodded.

Then, placing another bar on the table under her gaze, I left the room.

"Haaa..."

The moment I did, I felt a huge weight lift over my shoulders.

The chances of my request getting rejected were high, however, if I were to present my cards correctly, then the possibility wasn't non-existent.

'I just need to convince him.'

Atlas.

"Hmm, it's already dark?"

Coming out of the building, I looked at the sky. It was dark, and the moon hung in the sky, blessing the campus with its faint glow.

The surroundings were quiet and serene. A rare occurrence in the busy and loud campus streets.

In such a calm environment, I headed back to the dorms.

I was tired and needed to catch up on my sleep.

"Huam. I'll study a little before heading off to bed."

At least one hour.

It was always a good idea to study right before going to sleep since it was proven that studying before bed helped the brain learn new things.

Nothing heavy, but mostly look through of lecture material.

"....I wonder if she's doing it."

I had also taught Kiera to do this. She seemed pretty excited about her score.

I had been watching.

"Hm?"

Just as I arrived at the dorms, I stopped and raised my head.

A figure sat on the stairs that led to the building.

Holding onto a wooden sword, I recognized the figure "....."

immediately.

It was Leon.

".....That duel you rejected. Want to have it privately?"

## **Chapter 147 Beneath the moonlight [2]**

After finishing his evening training, Leon headed back to the dorms. He had picked up quite the sweat. More so than usual.

Leon wiped the sweat from his forehead and reached the dorms.

".....Coming from training?"

But at the entrance of the dorms, a purple-haired girl greeted his sights. She seemed to be studying on one of the common room tables.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you see...?"

Evelyn pointed at the books and notebook on her table.

"I'm studying."

"No, I saw that."

He wasn't blind.

"Then why did you ask?"

".....You don't usually study here."

"Ah, I guess..."

Evelyn brushed her hair behind her ear.

"Did you know Kiera got a B on her score?"

"Hm?"

".....So you don't."

Evelyn laughed.

"She's been bragging about it the entire day."

"Oh."

And...?

What did that have to do with studying here?

"Before the exam, I saw her study here the entire week. I wanted to see if it makes any difference."

"....?"

Leon cocked his head.

Then, moving forward, his eyes paused on her exam paper.

"Ah, wait...!"

Evelyn tried to cover up her score, but it was too late. He had already seen it.

"You also got a B?"

"Uh, yeah..."

Evelyn lowered her head.

"...I tried hard, but this was the best that I got."

Things started to click in Leon's mind.

"And so you wanted to study here because you thought it'd help you?"

"Well, yeah..."

"....."

Leon didn't know how to reply from then.

He had also seen Kiera study here. However, there was a slight problem.

She hadn't been studying by herself.

There was someone else with her.

Leon just wasn't sure whether to bring that up or not.

"I know."

But it didn't seem like he had to.

Evelyn could pretty much tell from the expression he was making.

"...The reason why she got better is because of him, right?"

Evelyn raised her head and their gazes met.

Leon was just about to say something when she stopped him.

"I get it. Not the same person. That much became clear to me after today's ordeal."

Closing her notebook and the books piled up on the table, Evelyn stood up.

"If it were him from the past then he would've taken the challenge and forced you to give up in a way to make himself look good."

"..."

Leon didn't say a thing because she was right.



Had it been the previous Julien, that was exactly what was going to happen.

He was that type of person.

"But he didn't do that. It's obvious to me now that he's changed. To the point where I find myself wanting to ask for his help too."

"....?"

"Not that it matters."

She paused in front of him.

"....I'm now the one that you need to fight during the demonstration."

"Yes."

"I'm going to prepare a lot."

"Me too."

"...I want to win."

Leon remained quiet.

He locked gazes with Evelyn for a few short seconds before finally, she turned away from him and left with her books.

Leon stood in silence for a brief moment while staring at her back.

Evelyn.

She had always been rather competitive.

He had lost count of the number of times she had challenged him in the past. He would always end up losing, but things were different now.

Leon was sure he could beat her.

But that was the problem...

Although she was a good opponent, she wasn't the person that he wanted to fight.

His stupid jokes aside, Leon had caught glimpses of Julien's true strength several times. His instincts also warned him about him.

Not even Aoife gave him such a feeling.

'I want to fight him.'

It turned out. Evelyn wasn't the only one that was competitive.

Leon was pretty competitive himself.

For that reason, coming out of the dorms, he sat by the staircase with his wooden sword. It was currently dark outside, the moon shining on the landscape beneath.

Leon didn't know for how long he sat there, but gradually, a figure appeared.

It was a familiar figure.

"...."

One that eventually stopped not far from where he was.

With sharp features that made it seem as though he was looking down on everyone he cast his gaze upon, Julien's gaze locked onto his.

As usual, his gaze was overbearing and Leon smiled at the thought.

'I really do want to fight him.'

That stupid face of his.

".....That duel you rejected. Want to have it privately?"

He wanted to beat it.

\*\*\*

'Has this guy lost it....?'

I couldn't for one second understand what was going on. Staring at Leon who stood on the opposite end with a sword in his hand, I felt my face twitch.

"You want to duel with me?"

"....Yes."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Why not...?

The hell was this guy thinking? There were over a thousand different reasons why.

For one,

"Because I don't want to?"

Was that a good enough excuse?

"But I want to."

"...."

Seriously?

"You're my knight."

".....And it's my duty to make sure that you're strong enough to deal with potential threats when I can't cover for you."

What bullshit.

"Here."

Leon tossed me a small bracelet. It was rather heavy, and when I looked at him, he started to explain.

"There's a difference between our mana pools. Since that's the case, I'll restrict my mana to be of the same level as yours. Wouldn't that make things fairer?"

Fairer?

Fairer my ass.

The experience difference between the two of us was huge.

Uh, no, wait...

Thinking about it, I wasn't exactly inexperienced.

There were a dozen different memories within me. All belonging to different people who walked through different paths.

But even then, they were all strong people who had their fair share of fights.

If I were to include those then...

"...Why do you want to fight me so badly?"

"Is there a reason why I need a reason to want to fight you?"

"Yes, actually."

Who'd want to fight another person for no reason?

"Fair."

Leon shrugged, playing with the wooden sword in his hand.

".....I just want to see who is stronger between the two of us."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"...."

I stood in silence while observing his expression. I wanted to see if he was just making a random excuse up, but seeing the graveness in his expression I could tell he wasn't lying.

He really did want to fight me for that simple reason.

And what about me?

Did I want to fight him...?

'It isn't as though I don't want to fight him.'

Before, the only reason I rejected the offer was because it would potentially affect my draft stock.

The chances of me losing against Leon were rather high. In fact, I didn't think I could beat him at all.

And yet...

That didn't mean I didn't want to fight him.

Truthfully, I also wanted to see the full extent of his powers.

My powers too.

Just how big was the difference between us?

....With everything that I had experienced, would I be able to fight him properly? Not just with my skills, but with the memories of the people within me?

"Ah, fuck..."

Ruffling my hair, I cursed.

"Fine."

Looking around, and I pointed in a certain direction.

"Let's go somewhere else. This isn't the right place for us to fight."

We were right in front of the dorms.

Our fight would wake everyone up. Furthermore, fights between cadets were prohibited unless it was in the training grounds which were currently closed.

"....."

As if taken aback by the fact that I had accepted the offer, Leon didn't react immediately. Rather, he looked at me with an incredulous look.

I nudged him with my hand.

"Why are you acting like that? You're the one that wanted to fight me. Let's go. I don't have all day."

I really didn't.

Especially since I still needed to revise for an hour before going to bed.

"....Alright."

In the end, Leon snapped out of it and followed me from behind.

Catching up to me, he asked.

"Where are we going to fight?"

"Don't worry about that."

I answered flatly.

".....I know of a good place."

That said, Delilah wouldn't mind me going there, right?

\*\*\*

Aoife's schedule was rather packed. From her daily training to studying, she had a lot of things that she needed to do.

With that being said, it was usually manageable.

That was before, however.

"The fliers are almost ready."

".....We have already done a survey. There aren't any noticeable competitors. You should be able to win."

"We're done on our side too."

The elections for the student council were just a few months away.

Aoife had been eyeing the position ever since joining the Academy. The position, while not as important as that of the Black Star, was also quite an important one.

Since she couldn't be the Black Star, she hoped she'd at least be able to join the student council and become its president.

That way, she'd be able to influence a lot of the important decisions of the Academy.

There were a lot of things that she was unsatisfied with.

It was for this reason that she was busy.

"Huaaam."

Before she knew it, the night had already come and the Academy grounds were empty.

Holding into a large stack of papers, Aoife was on her way back to the dorms when she heard a voice coming from the distance.

".....That duel you rejected. Want to have it privately?"

Her steps paused.

She felt that the voice was quite familiar.

But just who did it belong to?

"You want to duel with me?"

"....Yes."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Another familiar voice.

'What's going on...?'

Curious, Aoife kept her presence hidden and moved forward. It was then that she caught sight of two familiar figures.

It was Julien and Leon.

Why would the two of them...

".....I just want to see who is stronger between the two of us."

Overhearing their conversation, her eyes widened.

'He wants to duel Julien...?'

Was he perhaps not satisfied with his rejection before?

Aoife half expected Julien to reject, but contrary to her expectations, Julien actually accepted the offer.

"....!"

Baffled, she could only look at him with wide eyes.

He had actually accepted?

But wasn't he the same guy who had rejected him in front of the entire class? Why the sudden change in heart?

Lost in her thoughts, Aoife didn't realize that Leon and Julien had already started to leave.

"....."

For a brief moment, Aoife didn't know how to react. Standing behind a tree with a stack of papers in her hands, her eyes traced the backs of the two before shifting towards the papers and then back to the two of them.

"....."

This went on for a couple of seconds, until..

"Huu.."

Aoife bit her lips.

Putting the papers on the ground, she followed them from behind.

'I can't miss this. I have to see it.'

Her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

### **Chapter 148 Beneath the moonlight [3]**

The location that I chose was near the cave where I had previously trained. I still had access to it, and used it now and then. The only problem that I had with the facility was that I'd return all battered up and bruised by the end.

It usually made the days after a complete nightmare for me.

".....This isn't a bad place."

Leon murmured while looking around.

Surrounded by trees, the area was one of the few flat spots within the forest outside of the Academy campus.

Technically speaking we weren't supposed to be here. In fact, we weren't even supposed to be outside of the Academy campus.

The only reason why we hadn't got caught was because I had explicit permission from Delilah to go out of the Academy walls. The guards in charge knew me which hence why they granted me leave.

And since Leon was my knight it was also not a problem getting him out.

Most likely though, they would notify Delilah of the situation.



I was fine with that.

Clank—

Clamping the bracelet on his wrist, Leon looked at me.

I stared back before putting my own.

Clank—

"There's three settings. Put it in the second setting. It should limit our mana to the same level."

"Got it."

Listening to his words, I did as he told me and adjusted the setting of the bracelet.

It wasn't hard. There was a small display at the top, and all I had to do was turn the small wheel that was on the side.

[II]

Locking onto the second setting, the mana within my body started to drain.

It wasn't much but I felt a little uncomfortable.

".....Are you ready?"

When I looked up, I noticed that Leon's expression was rather pale.

"Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine."

He didn't seem fine at all.

"I'll take your word for it, I guess."

Bad condition or not, I was sure he'd still be able to hold well against me.

"H-haa."

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes. Though I didn't show it, my hand was currently shaking. It would be a lie if I said that I wasn't nervous.

Leon.

.....Besides being my knight, he was the true strongest cadet of the year.

The main character of this world.

He was someone that even Aoife would have a hard time defeating, let alone me. It'd be delusional to say I wasn't nervous, but,

I opened my eyes.

'I want to try.'

.....I wanted to see just how far I had gotten over the past half a year in this world.

"Are you ready?"

"....."

I didn't answer immediately and channeled the mana inside of my body.

Clank, clank, clank—

Chains wrapped around my left arm.

Then,

Staring directly into Leon's eyes, I nodded my head.

"I am."

"...I'm coming."

Leon's voice faded into the night, his figure blurring away from the spot he had previously been standing on.

In the next moment, he was right before me.

I instinctively raised my left hand.

Clank—

Despite the fact that he was using a wooden sword, the moment the sword came into contact with the chains, a loud metallic sound reverberated through the air as I slid back several meters.

"..."

In the silence, I looked at my arm which was entirely numb.

The pain that accompanied the numbness was something else. Thankfully, pain was something I could deal with and I brushed it off just in time for Leon's second attack.

I raised my hand again.

But as if the sword was a snake, it curled around my arm and directly aimed for my exposed torso.

".....!"

In that brief moment, I caught sight of Leon's face.

His gaze...

It was almost unrecognizable. He was usually stoic and hardly showed any emotions, but at this moment, there was something more to that gaze.

It was cold.

.....Chillingly cold, and,

The wooden sword hit my torso.

Bang!

"...."

I remained quiet.

The pain was there. It was certainly there. I could feel it.

My left eye twitched involuntarily as I met Leon's gaze. Then, in that brief moment when our gazes met, I squeezed my right hand.

Threads encircled the surroundings.

They neared his neck, his arms, his legs, and almost every part of his body. Wherever I looked, there were threads.

"..."

His movements halted then.

The two of us stood face-to-face with each other.

Such a moment lasted only for a brief moment before Leon's body suddenly blurred, reappearing off into the distance.

In the moment when his figure appeared again, I reached with my hand in his direction. The mana inside of my body drained rapidly and my hand turned purple.

At the same time, a translucent purple hand materialized right beneath his chin.

".....!"

His expression changed the moment the hand appeared.

Still, he was quick to react.

Bending back, he just narrowly missed the hand.

"Tsk."

I clicked my tongue.

'That was close.'

Still, I didn't stop. I knew that I needed to be aggressive.

Without hesitation, I reached with my hand again.

At the same time, I withdrew the threads.

Swoosh—

Dodging again, Leon slammed his foot against the ground and pushed his body in my direction.

Bang!

It was as if the earth had exploded.

In the instant his foot made contact with the ground, everything beneath it shattered, and he appeared right before me. I could hardly catch his movements, but I could more or less guess what he was trying to do.

Bringing my hand forward, I managed to block his first attack.

Clank—

Sparks flew and I staggered back.

"...Ukh."

Before I even had the chance to catch my breath, he was on me again.

Clank, clank, clank—!

Leon was relentless with his attacks.

Regardless of what I tried, he just wouldn't give me any breathing room. To the point where I started to feel suffocated.

But such a feeling...

'It's similar to the mental examination one.'

Could there be a correlation?

Clank—

I was pushed further back.

"Huaa...!"

Halfway through my breath, Leon was already on me. With the wooden sword above his head, his muscles tensed. Instinctively, I brought my hand up to block.

Bang—!

But I had clearly fallen for his trap as his foot smashed against my stomach, sending me flying back.

".....Ukeh!"

A sound escaped my lips as I fell on my back.

It came from me hurriedly taking in a breath. Leon's relentless attacks had made it impossible for me to breathe.

The sensation wasn't one that I particularly enjoyed.

And yet, it was also not the first time I had experienced such a sensation.

Rather, I experienced it during the Progression Analysis.

"....."

Blinking my eyes, the world around me felt blurry.

Moving my hand, I felt the coarse texture of the ground beneath me. It was rough, brittle, and...

"Hu!"

I quickly rolled to the side.

Bang—

Dirt flew on my back as I pushed myself up from the ground.

I then brought my knee in front of me and shielded myself from the incoming strike.

Swoosh—

"Ukh...!"

The attack came.

Clank—

My entire body shook.

I felt it within my bones.

Ta...! Ta!

Taking several steps back, I caught a glimpse of the deep imprints I left behind on the way.

"Kh."

My face twitched the moment I paused.

'I think I broke something.'

Still, I could move it and without a second thought, I moved to the side and dodged his strike.

Bang—

The tree behind me shattered in one single hit and I secretly swallowed to myself.

'I tanked that?'

How was my body still in one piece?

I took that moment to distance myself from him.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

By now, my breath was heavy.

While I couldn't see myself in the mirror, I knew that I was currently looking extremely pathetic.

'....Good thing I rejected the Professor's offer.'

Had I accepted the proposal, I was almost certain the outcome would've been even worse than the current one.

"Are you trying?"

There were hints of disappointment in Leon's voice.

Looking up, he was standing where he previously was with a frown.

"....I've seen your strength. Why are you holding back?"

Strength my ass.

I was on drugs.

"Are you going to take the fight seriously?"

"....."

Without making a sound, I closed my eyes.

It became clear to me after the exchange I had with him that the gap in our skills was still quite noticeable.

....And that was fine.

I didn't for one second believe that I had a shot at beating him.

That said, it wasn't as though I had revealed all my cards just yet. There was also a certain trump card that I was hesitant to use.

If possible, I didn't want to use that move.

"Huuu."

Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes again.

The world that I knew had turned gray. Looking around, everything felt dull to me.

Leon was staring back at me with the same indifferent gaze of his.

"....Are you ready?"

Even his tone sounded indifferent.

I wanted to laugh, but I couldn't. I simply... was not me at the moment.

Swoosh—

Without saying a word, I had already made a dash for him. Chains wrapped around my left hand.

He raised his sword and swung downward diagonally.

".....!"

I didn't dodge.

Bang!

The hit landed exactly on my shoulder. My body shook, but I didn't care. The only thing on my mind at the moment was Leon.

I stared at his image before me and felt my lips curl.

Without hesitation, I clenched my right hand and threads emerged from behind him, stopping his movements.

Bang—

My fist hit him squarely in the cheek and he staggered back.

For the first time, I had hit him.

The damage didn't appear to be much, but in that moment, something dripped down from his nose.

It was, red...



"Haaa... Haaa..."

My breath quickened. So did my heartbeat.

More...

That red.

I wanted to see more of it.

Within the colorless world, the only color staining it was red.

Swoosh—

Without care, I charged at Leon.

Bang, Bang—!

A familiar scene repeated.

Dashing at Leon, he'd counter-attack and hit me all over. I'd disregard each and every one of his attacks, exchanging blow for blow with him.

Through his footwork, he was able to mitigate the damage that his body sustained.

Sometimes, he'd tilt his chin just enough to reduce the impact from my punch or sometimes even avoid the threads carefully set up around him.

Not that it mattered to me.

'More, more...!'

At this very moment.

All I cared about was red.

I wanted to see red.

Bang, Bang, Bang—!

We continued to exchange blows. I ignored the pain, and just went wild. Such reckless fighting method clearly flustered Leon who started to look overwhelmed.

"Hahaha."

I laughed then.

I felt like I was close.

Close to seeing even more red.

Swoosh! Swoosh!

I continued to swing and charge forward.

'More...!'

Leon took a step back.

Clank!

And then another.

Clank...!

And then another one.

"Mo-Ukh...!"

But that all came to a stop after a certain moment.

Just as I had taken a step forward and was mid-swing, my body froze. It just stopped moving.

"Uh....?"

My arms sagged and I blinked.

"What the, huh?"

My body.

It refused to listen to me.

Regardless of how hard I tried, it just wouldn't budge.

And just as I tried again to move my body, something flashed from my right side. Before I even had the chance to understand what it was, I was lying on the ground.

The moon shone brightly from above and the left side of my face hurt like hell.

'...Ah, so it's come to this.'

I looked up slightly to see Leon in the distance, supporting his body slightly on the nearby tree.

"Haaa... Haa..."

I could practically hear his breathing from where I was. I could also see the bruises and cuts all over his face.

He clearly didn't have an easy time.

Still, compared to my injuries, they were probably nothing.

The victor was clear for everyone to see.

He had won.

.....And I had lost.

"....."

This was the expected outcome, and yet...

'Why do I feel so frustrated?'

My left hand twitched.

I could now move my arms, if ever so slightly.

"H-huu..."

Taking a deep breath, my chest trembled.

I hurt all over, but that pain...

It was nothing compared to the sense of frustration that I was currently feeling.

'I don't want to lose.'

It wasn't as though I didn't accept my loss.

He was clearly better than me.

Still, I didn't want to lose.

'...Not when I've yet to do everything.'

There was still something that I could do.

It had been a while since the last time I had used it.

The mental toll it would have on my mind wasn't something I could deal with for a short period of time.

In fact, it had taken me several months just to feel okay again.

It wasn't an experience that I wanted to relieve again.

But...

Rustle!

Hearing the faint rustling sound, I bit my lip.

Leon was coming over.

Rustle!

"....."

His steps drew nearer.

In that moment, I brought my left hand over my right where a tattoo rested.

Rustle!

'.....'

He was just a few meters away from me.

I could feel it.

....And when I raised my head, my eyes met with his.

That was when our eyes locked.

And just before he could say anything else, I pressed it.

The first leaf.

## **Chapter 149 Beneath the moonlight [4]**

I stood in a familiar black world.

It had been a while since the last time I had used the first ability. Unlike the second ability which granted me the ability to feel and experience one's emotions, the first ability subjected me to the selected emotion to the extreme.

Because it made me experience an emotion to the extreme, I always felt hesitant to use it.

Unlike the second ability, the mental toll it took on me wasn't something that I could easily brush off.

There had been times when I had acted out of character because of it.

It was for that reason that I was hesitant to use it.

?| Red - Anger

?| Purple - Fear

?| Blue - Sadness

?| Green - Surprise

?| Orange - Love

?| Yellow - Joy

The wheel appeared in front of me.

Looking at it again, it felt rather daunting.

'.....Anything but love.'

The goal in using the first ability was so that I would have a chance at beating Leon.

Love wasn't going to help me.

I shuddered at the thought.

Trrrr—

The wheel spun.

I stood in silence while the colors alternated.

I felt nervous staring at the wheel. I could more or less imagine the pain I'd have to go through but at the same time, I was looking forward to it.

I had delayed this for too long.

Trrrr—

In the darkened world, the wheel continued to spin.

It spun and spun and spun.

Until,

It stopped.

?| Purple - Fear

I blinked.

'Fear....?'

Again?

The world around me shifted.

I was back in the forest outside of the Academy.

Leon was standing in front of me.

"Hm."

I found my voice again.

"...Did something go wrong?"

Everything was the same as before. From the little details to everything else. It was the same as in my memories.

No, wait...

'I can feel my body.'

Realizing that I was standing and that my body was in top shape, I realized this was all an illusion.

But why Leon?

How was that going to induce fear over m—

Spurt—

I felt a sharp pain in my neck.

The world turned upside down and I lost my voice.

Tak.

The last thing I saw before the world turned dark were two leather shoes.

'Ah.'

It was then that I realized what had happened.

I had died.

Darkness overtook my consciousness shortly after that. Only for light to return shortly after that.

"....."

Yet again, I was standing before Leon.

I felt a sharp pain in my head. One that I was able to brush off rather quickly as I focused my attention on Leon.

This time, I was able to catch a glimpse of his face. It was cold and almost emotionless. It felt extremely intimidating, and before I knew it, I had unknowingly taken a step back.

'This...'

Ba... Thump! Ba... Thump!

The powerful beat of my heart drummed in my mind.

It echoed louder and louder.

The Leon in front of me. He looked so much like the Leon in the first vision I ever had.

"Wh—"

Spurt—

Before I could even react, I felt a familiar pain beneath my neck.

The world yet again flipped and darkness overtook my consciousness.

"Haaa... Haaa...."

The scene repeated.

Breathing heavily, I looked at Leon.

I was soaked in sweat.

Leon yet again stood before me. His cold gaze bearing down on me.

Lifting my head, I stared at him.

"F-fuck...!"

Clenching my teeth, I charged forward. Threads appeared all over the place and I raised my left hand.

But,

Spurt—

Darkness yet again took over my consciousness.

"Haaa... Haaa...!"

Leon stood before me again.

The sight of him sent chills down my spine. Recalling the amount of times that I died, I secretly swallowed my saliva.

Despite knowing this was all an illusion, the deaths were real.

I felt and experienced all of them.

"Kh...!"

Yet again, I charged forward.

Unlike last time, I tried to dodge his attack, but...

Spurt—

The result didn't change.

I hadn't even made it a single step before the world flipped.



'...What do I do?'

I looked around.

My head felt light and my hands were trembling.

The world around me felt sharp and I started to perceive the little things. From the raising of my hair?to the quickening of my breathing.

Fear.

It had started to take over my mind.

'I don't want to die.'

Even if it was fake.

'I don't want to die.'

"Huu."

I stepped back while keeping my eyes fixed on Leon. I needed to think. Think of a solution to get out of this.

I could still vividly recall the time when I had experienced 'anger'.

Back then, I had lost track of the amount of time that I had been stuck within the imaginary world.

I wasn't sure for how long I'd be stuck in this world too.

For that reason, I needed to think.

Thi—

Spurt—

"Huaa...!"

I was standing before Leon again.

"Ah, this..."

I had died again before I knew it.

"Ukh...!"

I held my head with both hands. It was quick, but the pain was still lingering within the depths of my mind.

It just wouldn't disappear.

I was used to pain but this pain wouldn't disappear.

The more I died, the more it seemed to accumulate.

"Haa.... Haa..."

I felt helpless.

"W-hat do I do?"

It was such helplessness that added to the fear.

Drip. Drip...!

My entire body was soaked in sweat. My shirt was practically sticking to my body.

Turning to look at Leon, my heart froze.

"No, no..."

An intense feeling built up within me.

Before I knew it, I moved back and...

Ran!

"....I need to get away. Buy myself some t—"

Spurt—

The world turned dark again.

"O-oh, no..."

Yet again, I stood before Leon.

"No, no, no, no... Ukh!"

My head throbbed again.

The pain from before returned. It was far more intense than it was before, and for a moment, I staggered.

I was quick to brush the pain away.

How could I not when I knew that I didn't have much time?

'I need to think of something, I need to...'

Looking up, my pupils dilated and I stepped back.

Fear had started to imprint itself within my mind. All I felt was fear whenever I looked at him. It felt agonizing, and the sound of my heart continued to drum loudly within my mind.

It was so loud that I had a hard time thinking.

It was then that I caught it.

Placing his hand over the hilt of his sword, I tensed my body.

And then...

Spurt—

The world tilted.

Yet again, I had died.

"....."

Leon stood before me yet again.

Ba... Thump! Ba.... Thump!

The only sound within the surroundings was the heavy sound of my heartbeat.

"Haa.. Haa..."

I tried my best to suppress my breath but it was hard.

Still, I remained rooted in my spot and stared at Leon. My entire body was shaking, and every part of me told me to run.

Even so, I remained rooted where I was.

And,

Spurt—

Yet again, I died.

".....Ukh."

I flinched at the pain that engulfed my mind. It was as though my entire skull was being split open.

Even so,

"....."

Suppressing the pain, I stood firm with my gaze on Leon.

The fear that I was currently experiencing.

It was more prominent than ever before.

"....."

Despite every part of me telling me to run, I remained still.

My lips trembled and so did my entire body.

"Haaa..."

Spurt—

The sound of my breath was the last thing I heard before the world turned dark.

"....."

Leon stood before me again.

I remained still.

At the same time, my face spasmed. The pain was starting to get harder and harder to contain.

Spurt—

Yet again, I died.

Spurt—

And again.

Spurt—

And again.

Spurt—

And again.

.

.

.

"Akh...!"

At some point, the pain in my head became unbearable.

I screamed my heart out.

But no one heard.

Spurt—

.

.

.

"H-how many times does this make?"

My lips felt numb.

Looking around, the world appeared hazy.

I had started to lose track of the amount of times that I had died.

Spurt—

It just wouldn't stop.

.

.

.

It was just an endless cycle of death, fear, and pain.

It was torture.

"Akh...!"

My screams filled the surroundings.

Spurt—

And so did the sound of my death.

.

.

The cycle continued to repeat.

I had started to lose count of the amount of times that I died.

'Why do I do this to myself?'

'Just run.'

'Why aren't you running?'

'It hurts...!'

Voices echoed within my mind.

I had long lost track of time.

The only things I could feel were the fear and pain.

Spurt—

Yet again, the world turned upside down.

"....."

Coming to, I made no sound.

I just stood still and stared at Leon.

The pain within my mind was hard to describe. It hurt to the point where I could hardly think.

Still, it didn't last long.

When it did disappear, it was just me and Leon.

Again.

The two of us.

He placed his hand towards the hilt of his sword and I closed my eyes.

Spurt—

The inevitable came.

So did the pain and the fear.

But this time, there was something else that was starting to enter my mind.

'Numbness'

Yes.

I was starting to feel numb to everything.

Spurt—

Death no longer scared me as much.

"....."

Rustle, rustle—

Standing before Leon, I perceived my surroundings better. A gentle breeze wafted through, and the trees rustled.

"....."

It was quiet and the beat of my heart finally steadied for once.

In the silence that suddenly took over the surroundings, I stood before Leon. He stared back at me with the same gaze of his.

It felt chilling to look at.

....But I had started to grow used to it.

It didn't scare me anymore.

As if noticing this, Leon frowned.

For the first time since appearing in this world, he showed a reaction.

I didn't do anything and just waited.

Waited for him to make a move.

Spurt—

He eventually did, and the world turned dark.

When I opened my eyes again, the first thing I saw was the moon.

It shone brightly from above.

My entire body was in pain and I could hardly feel it. Even so, when compared to the pain I had previously experienced, this was nothing.

Rustle!

I raised my head.

"....."

My gaze fell on the set of grey eyes that were locked on me.

In that moment, time seemed to come to a standstill.

His figure overlapped with the one within the illusionary world and my body trembled. At the same time, something flashed before my vision.

?| Lvl 1. [Fear] EXP + 17%

It was a notification.

One that was accompanied by another.



Lvl 1. [Fear] --> Lvl 2. [Fear]

And then,

I spoke.

".....When was the last time you were scared?"

### **Chapter 150 Beneath the moonlight [5]**

The very air chilled.

".....When was the last time you were scared?"

Julien's voice layered, echoing in the air.

Leon's steps came to a sudden halt.

In that moment, his body stopped listening to him. Sweat started to form in his palms and his breathing started to quicken.

"Haa... haa..."

It all happened so suddenly that Leon had a hard time understanding what had happened.

Before he knew it, Julien had already helped himself back up.

He struggled to do so, but he was still able to get up.

Julien's body was battered, and blood was leaking down from the cuts all over his face. He looked extremely frail.

He looked like he'd topple over with just a touch.

And yet,

His body refused to move.

'Why?'

"Looking at the way you look right now, perhaps you have."

Julien's voice was like a quiet whisper.

It smoothly transmitted in the air before entering his mind.

"Haa.... Haa..."

Leon felt his breathing quicken yet again.

'What's going on...?'

He looked down to check his hand.

It was trembling.

"Ah."

And then he realized.

'Emotive Magic.'

Julien had finally started using Emotive Magic.

Fear.

"H-haha."

A laugh escaped his lips.

So this was how his emotive magic felt.

He had always been curious. Wondering just how immersive it was considering that it had enabled him to rank first within the year.

He now knew.

Gripping his shirt, he clenched his teeth.

It felt suffocating.

"Ha... Haa..."

To the point where he almost stepped back.

".....It's intriguing, right?"

Julien's voice continued to echo in the background.

"It first starts with the sweats."

He seemed to be describing his current situation.

"Then, your heart starts to beat faster."

For some reason, his words...

"...Your breathing hurries to match that pace."

They synchronized perfectly with everything that he started to feel.

"The sound drums at your mind."

It felt creepy.

"Thump! Thump! Thump!"

Leon swallowed his saliva.

He was having a hard time keeping his head clear.

"It goes something like that, right?"

Before Leon knew it, Julien was already standing a few feet away from him.

He was merely a step away from him.

"....!"

His entire body froze the moment he looked up to meet Julien's gaze.

Memories of the past replayed themselves and his body started to shake.

A distant past that he wanted to forget.

But that wasn't all.

Currently, the Julien that stood before him.

....He felt extremely pressuring

To the point where Leon had a hard time meeting his gaze.

"It's annoying, right?"

Julien's head slowly reached for him.

As if time had started to slow down, Leon stared at the hand which reached for his shoulder.

Leon stared at the hand, frozen.

His entire body simply refused to list him to him.

The hand drew near.

And then,

"N-no..."

Leon snapped out of it the moment the hand was about to touch him.

Bang!

Sinking his foot against the ground, he mustered every little bit of strength he had to push himself back.

Swoosh—

Just narrowly, he managed to avoid his hand.

"Haaa... Haa..."

But it was close.

Had he been a second later then he was sure Julien's hand would have reached him. He could only shudder at the thought of what would've happened had the hand touched him.

"..."

The surroundings turned quiet.

Leon looked up and met Julien's gaze as he stood quietly.

The two eyed each other from their respective distance.

Neither said a word.

"Haa... Haa..."

The only sound that Leon could hear was the sound of his heavy breath.

The more he looked at Julien, the more intimidated he felt.

It was steadily piling up with the seconds.

Standing a few feet away from him felt like he was holding onto a large boulder over his shoulder. One that progressively grew heavier by the second.

'...I don't have much time left.'

That much was becoming clear to him.

There was no second that passed where he didn't notice the worsening of his condition. From the sweat to the beat of his heart. All of them were getting worse.

"Haa, this..."

Quite frankly, he had been confused.

Back at the mid-terms he had shown skills that were far superior than what he had shown now.

Based on what Leon had managed to glimpse of Julien, he hadn't been confident before the fight.

He thought he'd lose.

Or at least, put up a good fight.

And yet...

The fight turned out much different than he had anticipated.

Yes, he had been flustered at times, but he had been in utter control throughout the entire exchange.

It had been disappointing.

...But that was the past.

'Right, I keep forgetting...'

Julien's forte.

It wasn't his individual skills.

No, rather.

It was his emotive magic.

"Are you not going to make a move?"

Julien's voice echoed again, and Leon's head flicked up to stare at him.

The back of his hair stood on end the moment their gazes met and his face showed signs of cracking.

'How am I going to handle this...?'

He was stumped.

The fear...

It had taken over his mind and was making it hard for him to think clearly.

Still, he had to do something.

Staring at Julien, he could tell that he was injured. In fact, the only reason why he didn't move was because he couldn't move.

'Right... I can do this.'

Clenching his teeth, Leon gripped onto the handle of the wooden sword.

He had just taken a step forward when,

".....Uh?"

He tripped onto something and stumbled forward.

Thump!

Before he knew it, he was on the ground on all fours.

Turning his head back, he noticed a small thread on the area he had been in

'When did it...'

"Ah..."

A shadow cast over the area he was in.

Leon looked up and his gray eyes met with Julien's hazel eyes.

At that moment, Leon opened his mouth but the words refused to leave it. The fight. He could still continue. He still had a few cards up his sleeve, but,

"....."

"...."

Staring into Julien's gaze, whatever resistance he had vanished.

In the end, he let go of his sword.

"Fine."

And he tossed it to the side.

"...You win."

He had lost...

Leon closed his eyes.

'It's all on me.'

In the end, the main reason for his loss was due to his negligence. He had been so focused on his skills that he had forgotten the one thing Julien was known for.

His emotive magic.

"Haaa..."

He took a deep breath.

Sitting down, he placed his hands over his knees.

Overwhelming.

That's how he'd describe Julien's emotive magic.

Having felt it for the first time, he finally understood why people feared Emotive Mages. The craziest part was that this was most likely just the starting point for Julien.

Leon could already envision how nightmarish Julien was going to be in the future once he developed his emotive abilities further.

'.....It's frustrating.'

Dealing with someone like that.

"You lost."

"I know."

".....I just wanted to remind you."

Julien sat by his side.

He too placed his hand over his knees.

Taking a quick glance at him, Leon got a better look at his face. It was battered up and was bleeding everywhere.

His face cracked, and before he knew it,

"...Haha."

A laugh escaped his lips.

Taken aback, Julien turned his head.

"What?"

"No, it's..."

Halting his laugh, Leon massaged his face before feeling the corner of his lips lift.

Julien frowned.

"....It's what?"

"Your face."

"My face?"

".....It looks stupid."

"....."

A silence ensued after his words.

Staring at Leon, Julien didn't say a word. Perhaps because he was too tired to argue, he eventually shook his head and leaned back to stare at the moon.

"Perhaps."

He ended the conversation there.

Rustle~



The breeze wafted through, scattering Julien's hair.

Leon stared at him for a short moment before also leaning back to stare at the moon.

'It feels oddly calming.'

Beneath the moonlight,

The two enjoyed the brief moment of peace.

In the end, Leon lost.

But,

Oddly enough,

'.....I'm not disappointed.'

\*\*\*

Not far from them, Aoife stood in silence.

She had witnessed the entire fight from start to finish. With her abilities, it wasn't hard to conceal her presence from them.

Furthermore, with her family name, she had no trouble going out of the Academy.

What could the guards do?

At worst, they'd report the situation to her uncle.

Not that she was scared.

He knew about how much of a busybody she was.

It was just who she was.

Currently, she was at a loss for words.

It was hard for her to describe what she had witnessed.

"....."

Just like Leon, she had expected Julien to fight with the skills that he had displayed several times in the past. In particular, the ones he had shown back in the mid-terms.

And yet,

He hadn't done that.

Rather, he almost appeared like a completely different person.

It made Aoife question whether he truly was taking the fight seriously or not.

There were changes here and there, but in the end, Leon was able to overpower him. Aoife had just been ready to leave when a change occurred.

'.....When was the last time you were scared?'

Even now, she could recall the words he had spoken.

She may not have experienced it first hand, but taking note of the changes in Leon's demeanour, she knew that it was no joke.

Emotive magic.

Julien had finally used it.

.....And it was overwhelming.

Leon.

The second person who had ranked above her. He looked completely powerless under Julien's words.

It was as if his body refused to listen to him.

That was probably when the fight ended.

There was not much else that happened. It was sort of one-

sided. With 'fear' completely taking over his mind, Leon had been unable to notice the thread placed beneath his foot, tripping over it.

That was the moment that marked the end of the fight.

In the end, Julien had won.

"...."

Pursing her lips, Aoife turned around and quietly left the scene.

On the way back, Aoife's thoughts continued to drift towards the last scene.

In the end, the only thought in her mind was,

'Emotive Magic.'

She needed to find a way to counter it.

It was far too scary.

".....Aoife."

She had just taken a step further when a warm voice called out for her.

Her body froze.

Rigidly turning her head, her eyes fell on the familiar figure. With his long blonde hair, piercing yellow eyes, and striking features, he looked like the sun himself.

"Uncle."

Aoife felt her left eye twitch.

"So, like..."

And she tried to make excuses.

"I was just going out to take a brea—"

"I already know."

Atlas cut her off and Aoife lowered her head.

"....."

"You still haven't changed. Regardless of how old you are, you're still a busybody."

"....I know."

Aoife pouted.

She didn't like to be reminded of this.

It was just that whenever something piqued her curiosity, she'd stop at nothing to relieve her curiosity.

"It was a good fight, wasn't it?"

Hearing her uncle's words, Aoife blinked.

"...You saw?"

"Oh, oops."

Atlas covered his mouth.

"Ha."

Aoife didn't know how to react.

No, she did.

Hopping forward, she hugged his arm.

"Uncle~"

And started to act coy.

It was the surefire way of getting him to calm down.

"You also watched it? You're just as guilty as I am. Forgive me for this one. Let's just leave it at this, okay?"

"Alright, stop. I'm not mad."

And it worked.

With a helpless look, he gave in.

"I didn't see a thing."

"....Thank you!"

Aoife happily hugged his arm.

But what she didn't notice was the subtle narrowing of his eyes as he gazed back towards where she had come from.

In that brief moment, Atlas's lips curled as he mumbled,

".....Interesting."

Once again, his interest had been aroused.

Phecda.