

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 151 Exhibition [1] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 151 Exhibition [1]

Chapter 151 Exhibition [1]

"Cough...!"

Holding my mouth, I forced myself to lie on the sofa.

"Fucking hurts..."

Every part of me hurt.

".....Why do I even do this to myself?"

While it was true that I could withstand pain, it didn't mean that I was immune to it. It was uncomfortable.

But still,

"Ugh."

There was something else that was taking over my mind.

I stared at my hands.

They were both trembling.

"Haa... Haa..."

My breathing was quick as well. The back of my hair stood, and from time to time, I'd look behind me to check if someone was there.

That alone felt more annoying than the pain I was experiencing.

There was a reason why I tended to not use the first leaf. The side effects of using such a skill were not something I looked forward to.

"...Damn it."

It was an annoying feeling.

And yet, I knew that I couldn't do without it.

I had managed to rank up my [Fear] thanks to the skill. Unlike the second leaf, the first leaf produced far better results.

But it came at a price.

"H-huu..."

Taking a deep breath, my chest trembled.

Emotive magic.

....It was powerful. The fact that I was able to beat Leon showed just how powerful it was.

Unfortunately, it wasn't there yet.

I wasn't there yet.

"I need to improve it."

For now, [Fear] and [Sadness] were the only spells I could use to induce the emotions through my voice.

The other spells weren't quite there yet.

From the fact that I needed to touch someone to use them, to the fact that they weren't still powerful enough to completely break someone down.

I needed to find time to improve those.

Other than that, I wanted to get [Fear] and [Sadness] to the next level. I was curious as to what that would bring.

"Perhaps affect more than one person?"

Currently, I could only affect one person with my voice. It was good when facing one opponent, but when dealing with multiple it was useless.

But what if I could directly influence a lot of people at the same time with just my voice?

That would be pretty handy.

"H-haa."

But those were all thoughts for later.

Right now, I was not in the right state of mind.

Laying down on my sofa, I placed my forearm over my eyes and took a deep breath.

My main priority right now was to not let myself be consumed.

Consumed by fear.

In a different room.

Leon sat by his desk, placing ointment all around his wounds. There weren't many. Rather, there was more on his face than anywhere else on his body.

It was almost as if he had purposely only just targeted his face.

"....."

His left eye twitched.

.....He recalled a certain memory.

'Your face looks stupid.'

"Ugh."

His face flinched as he felt a sharp pain in his rib area. Looking down, he spotted a massive bruise.

He quickly dabbed some ointment over that area.

Almost immediately after doing that, he felt better. It was probably going to take a few days to heal.

Leon went on to do this for the next half hour.

Once he was done, he sat in his room in silence.

"....."

His thoughts continued to drift away to the fight.

'I should've done that.'

'...I was careless.'

'How could I forget that.'

'I just wasn't ready. If I had been ready...'

'I didn't know he could do that.'

A thousand different excuses floated in his mind.

"Haa."

At some point, Leon closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself down.

Losing...

It wasn't as though he had never lost before.

Coming into the fight, he had expected the match to be difficult. Losing also seemed like a very real possibility.

It was just that,

"...I should've done better."

For the majority of the fight, he was the one who had the upper hand.

Though he wasn't sure why Julien hadn't used the same power he had demonstrated back in the mid-terms, Leon felt like he should've won that fight.

.....All until he used his emotive magic.

Even now that a while had passed, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

His hands... They were still shaking from the experience.

Not just his hands.

His entire body and mind remembered.

It was hard to forget the suffocating feeling he felt during the fight. It felt almost as though he was slowly sinking into the depths of the ocean with no way up.

Such feeling.

It was hard to forget.

"....."

In the silence that took over the room, Leon closed his eyes.

He was frustrated by himself.

However, he also accepted the result.

At the end of the day, Julien was the Black Star.

He had only proven why he was the Black Star.

And,

".....He's also the one I serve."

The days flew by.

It was the day of the demonstration between Evelyn and Leon.

Their fight wasn't going to be broadcast anywhere, but all the first years had been called to the arena grounds to witness their fight.

The representatives of the major Guilds were also going to show up.

There was some excitement about that.

"Huaam."

The sun was shining and it was pretty warm outside.

It was a great day.

"Huaam."

Of course, it would've been greater had I been able to sleep.

Hadn't been able to do so for the past couple of days.

'.....I regret so much.'

Every little thing bothered me in my sleep. The little sounds, and the occasional breeze that would make my hair stand on end.

It was clearly nothing, but under the influence of the first leaf, I started to get scared by the little things.

Just like,

"Ah, fuck, shit!"

I flinched and moved back.

"Where did this gremlin-looking midget come from?!"

"....."

Taken aback, a little child with black hair looked at me with wide eyes.

"Oh, it was you."

I placed my hand over my chest and sighed.

It was not good.

".....Gremlin-looking?"

Delilah blinked her eyes while looking at me.

She was currently in her child form.

Looking around, I sighed in relief when I noticed that nobody was around.

It would've been troublesome if they saw me like that.

"Why are you like this?"

"....."

Delilah didn't answer.

With her head lowered, she continued to murmur, 'Gremlin-

looking?'

I scratched the side of my face.

It wasn't exactly my fault. She had appeared out of nowhere, and with my mind not in the right state of mind, the words just slipped out of me.

Still, why was she in this form?

"Are you planning on watching the fight like this?"

Delilah looked up.

"Yes."

"Why?"

".....It's too bothersome to go in my normal form. I don't like the people from the Guilds."

"Ah."

That made sense, but...

"Wouldn't you be more noticeable this way?"

"Why?"

"....."

I looked at her.

Couldn't it be more obvious?

"It's fine."

Delilah interlocked her hands behind her back. Then, turning around, she made her way into the arena.

".....Nobody will notice."

'No, they will.'

I wanted to say such words but stopped myself. In the end, with a sigh, I followed her from behind and entered the arena grounds.

The grounds were somewhat familiar.

I had been here before.

During the mid-terms. But unlike in the past, I was now standing in the audience area where I could overlook everything from above.

It felt completely different.

"This is quite tall."

What was especially interesting was the fact that the seating areas were about five to eight meters above the arena grounds.

Holding onto the handrail and looking down, I felt slightly nauseous.

Superpower or not, if I were to fall from this height, I'd turn into a pancake.

"Who do you think is going to win?"

"Why are you even asking? The answer is already obvious."

"That's true."

Overlooking the arena grounds from above, I could hear the discussions from the cadets near me. All of them were talking about the fight and who they thought was going to win.

There was a general consensus among them.

...And that was that Leon was going to win.

I couldn't argue with that.

I also felt the same way. Having fought against him, I knew just how strong he was.

Evelyn was also strong.

However, she was a little lagging compared to him.

'I'd probably lose against her too.'

That was unless I used the first leaf. Perhaps then I'd be able to win against her.

It wasn't worth it, though.

"What are you doing?"

Hearing Delilah's voice, I turned around. Sitting on one of the seats, she pointed at the seat next to hers. Almost as if she was telling me to sit down.

"....."

I did just that.

For a moment, neither one of us said a word as we looked at the arena grounds beneath.

Delilah was the one to shatter the silence.

"Who won?"

"Hm?"

I looked down to meet her gaze.

Staring into her inky black eyes, I almost lost myself in them.

I was quick to snap out of it.

"Between you and Leon. Who won the fight."

"....."

I felt my heart stop for a second.

However, when I thought about it, I relaxed.

For her to know. I sort of expected it. There was no way she wouldn't have known considering that she probably had every area of the academy under her grasp.

"I won."

I replied after a while.

".....The fight. I won it."

It felt nice to say it.

I knew that if the two of us were to fight again, I probably wouldn't have won.

But still.

A win was a win.

"I see."

Delilah didn't seem to be surprised by the result.

Or was she? I couldn't tell. It was usually hard for me to read her emotions.

I was just about to turn my attention back to the arena grounds when a figure walked by. With long platinum hair and glaring red eyes, she stood out from the rest, attracting the gazes of all those that she passed.

She had just walked by me when she paused.

With a frown, she turned her head and our eyes met.

Then, lowering her head, her gaze fell on Delilah.

And then back on me.

"You're a father?"

"....."

"....."

I was at a loss for words.

The same was true for Delilah who looked at her with a blank look.

"No, she's not."

".....Kek, I know."

Kiera bent down and pinched Delilah's cheek.

"She cute though."

I opened my eyes wide and hastily looked at Delilah who was looking at Kiera with a blank look. To make matters worse, Kiera started to pinch her cheeks with both hands, pulling them apart and squeezing them back in.

"Feels like I'm touching marshmallow. Holy crap."

She pulled and squeezed.

"What a cute child."

Patting her head, and ruffling her hair into a mess, Kiera placed her hand in her pocket before tossing a small bar in Delilah's direction.

"Eat it."

After that, glancing at me, she left.

I sat rigidly with my back straight. Swallowing a mouthful of saliva, I turned my head to look at Delilah.

Expecting the worst, I thought of ways to calm her down, when,

"That girl..."

Delilah spoke, her eyes lingering over Kiera's fading back.

Crinckle~

"....She's a good girl."

Munch.

"....?"

"Good girl."

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Crinckle~

"Munch... Munch...."

I sat in silence while Delilah ate her bar beside me. From time to time, a few cadets would stop by to look at her before leaving.

At first, it was fine, but it started to get worse as more cadets appeared.

Enough to arouse a reaction from Delilah who stopped eating.

"I'm getting a lot of stares."

".....I told you so."

"It's fine."

Delilah replied nonchalantly.

Then, glancing at me, she replied,

"I've got you, no?"

"Me?"

What does that even mean?

".....Take a look around."

I did as she asked.

That was when I realized it. The moment my head turned, so would the heads of all the other cadets around.

'This...'

I didn't know how to react.

Was I that scary?

"See? I don't have to worry."

Sticking her little fingers into the wrapper to grab all the crumbs, Delilah dipped her finger in her mouth.

I stared at the scene unsure of how to react.

I wanted to judge her for it, but then again. I was also guilty of doing such a thing.

"You alone are enough to stop them from approaching me."

"....."

I had no words to say.

She was right. There was no denying her words.

Just a single look and everyone would turn away from me.

I wasn't sure how to feel.

"It's starting."

Just as Delilah spoke, a voice echoed throughout the entire arena grounds.

--Cadets, please take your seats. The exhibition fight will begin shortly. I repeat. Cadets, please find a seat. The exhibition fight will begin shortly.

I exchanged glances with Delilah who scrunched up the wrapper with her small fist.

She didn't say a word, but just looking at her, I could see that she was interested in the fight.

I was as well.

Having fought with Leon already, I more or less understood the extent of his strength. While I was sure that he had some cards he had left hidden, I didn't think he'd use them here.

"Huu."

Taking a deep breath, I leaned back on my chair and crossed my arms.

But who knew?

Evelyn was a tough opponent.

Perhaps, she was going to get Leon to show his hidden cards.

It was just a thought.

Still, I was curious.

What would've happened if he had used them?

The delegates of the fifteen Guilds were seated in a private area that enabled them to view the entire arena ground from where they were.

It was a room that only the top VIPs were allowed to use.

".....Is the Chancellor perhaps not coming?"

A lanky man with short black hair and a long nose asked.

He was one of the delegates of the Black Hound Guild. Currently, they were ranked fifth in the Guild rankings based on what they had achieved the previous year.

"About that..."

With a difficult face, one of the Academy elders, an old woman with white hair, bitterly smiled.

"We are trying our best to find her. She might be doing an important task. It tends to happen from time to time."

"It tends to happen?"

The delegate looked at the elder with a frown.

"Are you saying that your Chancellor has this little sense of responsibility? Shouldn't she have already been aware of our presence? Why is sh--"

"Shouldn't I be enough?"

A warm voice cut through the delegate's.

There was a certain magnetism to the voice that made all those in the run turn their heads.

"Ah...!"

"....!"

Their expressions changed.

"You Highness."

"Your Royal Highness."

All members in the room stood up and paid their greetings.

The man standing before them was none other than Atlas who returned their gestures with a warm smile.

"There's no need for such polite greetings. If that's okay with you, I'm only here to make up for Delilah's absence."

"....We wouldn't dare refute!"

"It is the greatest honor!"

A stereotypical reaction. Atlas took their actions with a calm smile.

Brushing his hair to the side, he politely gestured with his hand.

"I'm glad that you all feel that way. Should we take a seat?"

"Yes."

".....Hahaha."

Dogs.

Atlas's smile almost faltered.

Their expressions. Their attitudes, and their looks. Almost all of it looked dull to Atlas. If he wanted to he could just squeeze his hand, and...

"Your Highness, I've been wondering about something."

Breaking him out of his thoughts was the delegate of the Black Hound Guild.

Sitting on the seat beside him, he wore a flattering smile.

"....Do ask."

"Haha, thank you. Thank you."

He continued to put a subversive attitude.

"I've just been wandering about the Black Star. Why did he not accept to be in the exhibition?"

In the moment he asked the question, the room turned silent.

Clearly, all the delegates were curious about the same thing.

"The Black Star...?"

Atlas was of course well aware of the situation.

He had already been informed about Julien's rejection to participate in the exhibition match. In a way, he wasn't surprised. He had only known him for a little bit of time, but Julien wasn't the type of person who would do things just because others asked him to do it.

'.....It's also why he can't be classified as Fiend.'

He was a hard person to control.

A double-edged sword, perhaps.

.....One that strangely interested him. He had a certain charm that made it hard for Atlas to dislike him.

"Yes, the Black Star. Do you think he had some sort of reasoning for rejecting our request? Surely it's not for the simple reason that he doesn't want to, right? That would make no sense. He should be well aware of our influence, and--"

"He's not someone that needs to please you."

Atlas cut the delegate off.

Stunned, the delegate threw all decorum out the window.

"Pardon? What sort of—"

"It's the opposite in fact."

Atlas turned his head to meet the delegate's.

For a brief moment, his yellow pupils shone, and the delegate's face numbed. It was only for a split second.

But it was just enough to stop the delegate from speaking.

In that brief moment of silence that took over the room, Atlas looked around the room before leaning back on his chair.

"...It's not him that needs to please you. It's you who needs to please him."

The same was probably true for Leon too.

—The two contestants will now be entering the arena.

At the announcement, the surroundings turned quiet. There was a palpable tension in the air.

It was strange.

Especially since from the way everyone was talking, the fight's winner was already decided.

'I guess it's more from the fact that they want to see the underdog win.'

Who didn't like underdogs to win?

—On our left side, please welcome Evelyn Jannet Verlice!

The arena gates from the left side opened and Evelyn entered. Appearing on the projections above, her closed-up image appeared for all to see.

She was beautiful.

To the point where many of the cadets around found themselves unable to tear their gazes away from her image.

I also thought she was pretty.

....But I was practically immune to looks by now.

Involuntarily, my gaze fell on the little girl beside me. In her full form, she outclassed Evelyn in almost every way.

As if sensing my gaze, Delilah turned her head.

"What?"

"....It's nothing."

I looked away from her.

It was then Leon's turn to be announced.

—On our right side, please welcome Leon Rowan Ellert!

Was there anything that I needed to say about his appearance?

Just like Evelyn, the moment he entered, he attracted the gaze of the cadets. In particular, the female cadets who looked at the screen awestruck by his appearance.

Thinking about it, there were quite a lot of good-looking people in the Academy.

It mostly had to do with the fact that we were capable of handling mana which nurtured the body for the better.

Of course, that didn't mean that there weren't ugly people.

It was just that they were in the minority.

—Contestants, please get into positions.

The arena grounds turned quiet once more.

Standing on opposite ends, Leon and Evelyn stood face-to-

face with each other. There was visible tension between the two at the moment.

With his hand over the hilt of his sword, Leon got into position.

On the other hand, the mana around Evelyn grew rampant.

"...."

"...."

Just when everyone was wondering whether the fight would start or not, the announcer spoke.

—Start!

The first one to make her move was Evelyn who brought her hand forward, channeling two magic circles at a speed that I could only envy.

Kracka—! Kracka—!

The air crackled, and bolts of lightning shot in Leon's direction.

They moved at an impressive speed. By the time it took me to blink, they were already upon him.

But Leon appeared unperturbed by the attack.

With the same indifferent gaze of his, he stepped forward and unsheathed his sword.

And then,

Swoosh—

He swung horizontally.

In that moment, the lightning that was heading his way coiled around his sword before scattering toward the ground.

Tzzz~

Two black marks appeared on the arena grounds and silence gripped over the surroundings.

But the silence didn't last for long.

"Whoooooo—!"

The roar of the crowd followed shortly after that.

They were so loud that for a brief moment, I had to cover my ears.

"That was awesome!"

"I told you Leon was going to beat her!"

".....It's not over yet!"

That simple exchange the two had pretty much dictated whose side the momentum was going to be on.

Bang!

Without hesitation, he pushed himself forward and appeared before a slightly flustered Evelyn.

Swoosh—

His sword cleaved down from above.

'I'm getting flashbacks.'

The move he had currently performed was one that I had experienced firsthand.

It wasn't something I liked to remember.

Certainly, I was also sure Evelyn would feel the same way by the end of the fight.

Swoosh, swoosh—

The fight progressed.

It pretty much started to pan out the way most people expected it to pan out.

Kracka!

Evelyn was certainly putting up a fight.

She was doing a far better job than I had been. However, there was a clear gap in skills between her and Leon.

From the way he could predict her movements, to the way he nullified every one of her attacks.

It was simply one-sided.

So much so that I started to drift into my own thoughts and no longer started paying attention to the fight.

It therefore came to me as an utter shock when the result was announced.

—Winner of the duel, Evelyn Jannet Verlyce.

".....Uh?"

I blinked and looked around me.

The entire arena grounds were quiet with everyone sporting similarly stunned expressions.

"This..."

How?

How was this possible?

He had clearly been dominating the entire fight. How was it possible for him to lose?!

Amidst my shock, Delilah's voice broke me out of my thoughts.

"You did it."

"Uh?"

When I looked down, her deep black eyes were already locked onto me.

"I can feel it."

Feel it...?

What was she-

Lifting her head slightly, Delilah's gaze returned to the projections. Narrowing her eyes, she quietly mumbled,

".....Fear. It's consuming him."

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 153 Exhibition [3]

Leon was feeling especially good before the exhibition match.

"Huu... Huu..."

Taking deep and steady breaths, he stretched his body in the corridor that led to the main arena grounds.

Swoosh, swoosh—

Casually swinging his sword, he could feel that he was in top-notch conditions.

His mind was clear.

'.....I've more or less recovered from the injuries that I sustained from the fight with Julien.'

Most of them had been superficial, but he had also fractured his ribs in his fight. That took a little longer to heal.

"Alright."

Leon jumped up lightly in the corridor.

By his side, he could see a small projection that showed him what was going on in the middle of the arena.

Currently, Evelyn's name was called up.

The gates on her side opened and she entered.

"....."

Taking a look at her, Leon could see the serious look on her face. They had already talked beforehand, and thus he knew just how seriously she was taking this fight.

".....Ha."

Thinking about the conversation, Leon laughed.

She had been very serious in that conversation. Something about him not going easy on her just because they knew each other and that she was going to go all out against him.

'Not like I didn't plan on that.'

Swoosh, swoosh—

Swinging his sword again and loosening his joints, he stretched his shoulders.

Then,

—On our right side, please welcome Leon Rowan Ellert!

His name was called up.

"I guess I've got to take this fight seriously too."

He had already learned his lesson before.

There was no way he was going to take it easy on Evelyn. He wasn't going to give her any breathing room.

"Wooooo—"

The roar of the crowd entered his ears the moment he passed by the tunnel and entered the arena grounds.

Having been there for the mid-terms, he was already used to such an atmosphere. Rather, he thrived in it.

Basking in the cheers of the crowd, he eventually stopped.

Evelyn stood on the opposite end. With a grim look, the mana around her body started to visibly move.

At any second, Leon felt like she could unleash a spell against him.

—Contestants, please get into positions.

The announcer's voice echoed and Leon pressed his hand against the hilt of his sword. At the same time, he got into the optimal position.

His calves tensed and silence reigned over the surroundings.

At this moment, Evelyn was the only person that was standing before him.

And then,

—Start!

The match began.

Kracka—! Kracka—!

The first one to move was Evelyn who summoned two spells in rapid succession. She was so fast that Leon didn't even have time to move.

Before he knew it, the spells were already upon him.

"...."

He didn't panic.

Drawing his sword, the lightning bolts coiled around his sword, which he then directed towards the ground.

Tzzzz~

Two scorch marks appeared on the floor.

Although they didn't look like much, Leon knew that if he had been hit by them, he wouldn't have been able to keep himself from remaining standing.

Not that it mattered since he had handled it already.

Bang!

Like a spring, Leon released all the tension within his calves and his body lunged forward.

Within seconds, he was already upon her.

"....Ehp!"

Evelyn let out a yelp of surprise.

Taking a look at the flustered look on his face, Leon cleaved down from above.

Swoosh—!

Just narrowly, she was able to avoid his attack.

Not that it mattered.

Swoosh, swoosh—!

Leon didn't plan on leaving any breathing room for Evelyn.

Kracka! Kracka!

Despite her best attempts at trying to fight back, Leon was relentless. Whenever she tried to gain some distance, he'd always shorten it and swing his sword at her.

It had to be said.

Evelyn was really good and agile.

Despite being so relentless in his attacks, she was still able to dodge most of his attacks. For a mage, she knew how to move her body well.

For the ones that she wasn't able to avoid, she'd use her hands which were covered in miniature bolts of lightning.

Tzzzz~

Each time his sword came into contact with her hand, it'd sizzle, leaving scorch marks on it.

Swoosh!

Leon didn't mind it and continued to fight.

He didn't know how much time had passed. He had long lost count.

Not that it mattered.

Currently, he only had one goal.

That was,

Defeat Evelyn.

Swoosh—!

"....Ukh!"

An opening finally revealed itself. Stumbling back, Evelyn's left side was left wide open for Leon to exploit.

He had just taken a step forward when,

His left leg suddenly felt heavy.

"....!"

It completely shattered his momentum, and Evelyn was able to gain some distance.

"....."

Leon stood in silence for a moment.

'What the hell was that...'

Gritting his teeth, Leon looked at Evelyn and pursued.

Swoosh!

His sword once again came cleaving down on her.

He had thought she'd dodge the attack, but rather, she didn't. With bolts of lightning gathering around the palm of her hand, she reached out to touch his sword.

A glow formed on Leon's sword the moment she did that.

The two sides were just about to make contact when,

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

Leon felt the beat of his heart in his head and he pressed his foot against the ground, pushing himself back in the process and distancing himself from Evelyn who cleaved at the air.

"...."

Standing on the opposite end, Leon's mouth opened but no words came out.

"Haa... Haa..."

Suddenly, he felt his breath grow heavy.

It was almost as though he was tired.

....And yet, he knew that was impossible.

How could he get tired from this much?

"What's going on?"

"Why did he move back?"

He could also hear the voices of confusion coming from the crowd. Unfortunately, he had no time to think about them.

'Something's wrong.'

There was something clearly wrong with him.

He just didn't know what it was.

Kracka! Kracka!

Two bolts of lightning shot in his direction. Leon's pupils dilated the moment he caught a glimpse of them, and just as he prepared to raise his sword to block them, he found himself unable to.

"Uh?"

His hands.

They were both shaking.

"What the—Ukh!"

The lightning hit him squarely in the chest and he skidded back several meters back.

"Ukh."

His entire body started to spasm as a result of her attack.

The pain was almost unbearable.

Fortunately, it didn't last for long and he was able to recover from it.

"Haaa... Haaa...!"

Looking up, he could see Evelyn gathering up another spell at a rapid speed, and instead of lunging at her, he distanced himself from her.

"What are you doing!?"

"What's going on!?"

"Why are you running away...!?"

The insults of the crowd started to reach him from above.

"I..."

Leon didn't know how to react.

He agreed with them.

And yet,

Currently, his body wasn't listening to him.

"W-what..."

Staring at Evelyn, he suddenly felt her image overlap with another and his entire body shuddered.

He stood tall in the middle of the arena. Where Evelyn once had been.

With two hazel eyes looking down on him, he stared at him indifferently.

Just standing before him felt suffocating.

"Huuu... huu... W-why?"

Why was he here?

He unknowingly took a step back.

Something sinister seemed to have taken control of his mind. It made it hard for him to think clearly.

Unknowingly, his eyes started to dart around the space.

Almost in desperation.

But why...?

Kracka!

Two bolts of lightning headed his way.

Leon tried his best to avoid the attacks, but his mind wasn't there. He could hardly think properly, and he pathetically jumped to the side, losing hold of the sword.

Clank, clank—

Bouncing against the ground, the sword eventually stooped.

"Ah, t-this..."

Leon tried to get to his feet, but he never had the chance.

Evelyn had appeared before him.

She had a strange look on her face. Still, reaching out with her hand, she pressed her hand against his back, and Leon screamed.

"Akh...!"

His entire body trembled and he eventually fell flat on the ground.

—Winner of the duel, Evelyn Jannet Verlyce.

The winner was announced, and the entire arena fell deathly silent.

To the shock of everyone present.

He had lost.

"Fear?"

I turned to look at Delilah. It wasn't as though I didn't understand what her words implied, it was more like I just couldn't understand how it was possible.

A couple of days had passed since we had our fight.

How was it possible that he was still influenced by it? And to the point where he'd lose?

".....Not many can see it, but I can."

Delilah started to speak while staring at Leon who was getting helped by Evelyn who looked just as confused as everyone around.

She seemed to be saying something to him.

Unfortunately, we couldn't hear exactly what the two were saying.

"At one point, he started to breathe heavier, his face turned pale, and his pupils dilated. That's a clear indication of fear. Since Evelyn is not an Emotive mage, there's only one possible explanation."

Delilah looked at me.

She didn't need to say anything else but I understood.

"This..."

I sat back down in my seat and stared at my hands.

In all honesty, I didn't know how to feel.

I didn't feel bad about Leon losing. It shouldn't really affect him too. He was clearly strong, and while he might encounter some mockery, that was all there was to it.

He also didn't really need to care about the Guilds since he was my knight.

What I was surprised about was the extent to which my emotive magic had affected him.

'...Is this the true power of Emotive Magic?'

I had always been hesitant to use such power.

The main reason for this was that I was clearly not good enough at it.

'No, it's not just that.'

I also didn't know how to properly utilize it.

My main focus had been elsewhere and I had somewhat neglected it.

The reason why Leon was in this state was because of the first leaf which was a concentration of the emotion that I had gone through.

Still, at this very moment, I finally had a better idea of the extent to which Emotive Magic could affect someone.

While I wasn't there yet, I knew that I would be able to reach a similar level to what was currently being displayed.

"It's a pity."

Delilah murmured from the side

When I turned to look at her, she had already stood up from the seat. The same was true for the other cadets. Since the match had ended there was nothing else to see.

Passing by me, Delilah quietly said,

"...I also want to be good at Emotive Magic."

Chapter 154 Exhibition [4]

".....Huu."

Laying down on a bench in the changing room, Leon let out a long breath. He felt mentally drained.

It wasn't so much from the loss but from the reason behind the loss.

"It doesn't even make sense."

A couple of days had passed.

How could it still be affecting him?

Clank--

Just then, the room's door came to an abrupt open and Evelyn came in. Leon flinched at the sight of her.

"What are you doing? This is the male changing room."

"....."

She didn't answer.

Instead, she looked at him straight. Almost as if she was trying to see right through him.

Eventually, she spoke.

"Why?"

It was a simple question.

All Evelyn wanted at the moment was an explanation.

"You're better than this. Did you lose to me on purpose? I thought you were going to take the match seriously. Did you feel pity for me or something? Or is it--"

"It's not that."

Leon cut her off while groaning.

The aftereffects of the 'Fear' spell were still lingering within him.

For some reason, whenever he looked at her, all he'd see was Julien's image. He kept overlapping with hers, and it was making it hard for him to keep his breathing stable.

"Haa..."

He had to take a deep breath to calm himself down somewhat.

'This is all an illusion.'

Though he said that, he still struggled to keep himself from believing his own words.

That was just how powerful Julien's spell had been.

"It's not that? Then what is it? Why did you lose like that?"

"...."

Lowering his head slightly, Leon closed his eyes to compose himself.

Then, opening them back up again, he answered,

".....I had a fight with Julien."

"Uh?"

Evelyn's expression froze.

"You had a fight with Julien?"

Her expression looked like that of someone who had a hard time figuring out what he had said.

"Wait, what?"

And then it hit her.

Her eyes widened and she took a step back.

"You had a fight with Julien!?"

She repeated. This time, her tone was louder, and the shock in her expression was visible for Leon to see.

Immediately, she moved closer to him.

"Who won? What happened? Why did you suddenly fight? Are you saying that the reason that you lost to me is because of the fight with Julien? Was it yesterday that you fought with him?"

Questions flowed out of her mouth one after another.

The speed at which the words left her mouth was so fast that Leon had a hard time keeping up with them.

"Which area did you get injured in? I knew that something was up. Did you get yourself checked by the Do--"

"It happened a few days ago."

Leon cut her off, trying his best to stop her before it was too late.

He was already feeling a headache.

This was a side of Evelyn that she rarely showed to the outside.

Though she projected herself as someone 'aloof' just like Aoife. Unlike her, it was merely a facade.

Her real personality was that of someone who talked too much.

'Ugh.'

Secretly groaning, Leon started to explain.

"It was on the day that he refused to fight me. I was the one who initiated the fight and the two of us fought outside where nobody could see."

"And...?"

"And..."

Leon pursed his lips before shaking his head.

".....I lost."

What else could he say?

He still felt bitter about it.

"You lost?"

Evelyn chewed over his words before sitting down next to him.

"How did he beat you? Did he use the same skill that he displayed in the mid-terms or--"

"No, not that."

Leon cut her off again.

He thought back at the fight from a couple of days ago and his body shuddered.

Then, raising his trembling arm, he met Evelyn's gaze.

"He won using Emotive Magic."

He slowly squeezed his arm.

".....As we speak, I'm still being consumed by it."

With the fight coming to an end, the cadets started to go out of the arena grounds. The same was true for me.

"Munch... Munch..."

Delilah stood by my side eating her bar.

It was a sight that I started to grow used to by now.

No, rather,

"Isn't that your fifth one? Do you like the bars that much?"

".....Hm?"

Delilah stopped to look at me.

Blinking her eyes, she alternated her gaze between me and the bar before narrowing her eyes and pulling the bar behind her back.

"It's finished."

"...."

Finished?

Clearly, there was still more than half of the bar left.

What sort of nonsense...

"Ah."

It took a moment for me to understand. When I did, I lost whatever words were about to come out. In the end, I clarified myself to her.

"I'm not after your bar."

"....Oh, you should've said so."

Her wariness disappeared and she started eating again.

Munch. Munch.

"...."

I pursed my lips.

"Why do you like them so much?"

I had always been curious about this.

Delilah seemed to have an abnormal addiction to the candy bars. It was almost as though she couldn't go without them.

'She also likes sugar, but there's something about the bars...'

I had tried 'bribing' her with other means, but the bars were the ones that she truly couldn't stop eating.

".....I just like them."

Delilah replied with a flat tone.

She wasn't the type to say a lot of words. That much I understood from the amount of time that I had spent with her.

"So you just like the bars?"

"Yeah."

"Then why can't you buy them yourself? I'm sure you have a lot of money."

"....."

Delilah didn't reply immediately.

Sporting a small frown, she looked at the bar in her hand. It was halfway eaten.

"I have restrictions because I eat too many."

".....Ah."

I did recall Kiera undergoing a similar restriction with her cigarettes.

Could it be that they had also done the same thing with her?

But that didn't really make sense.

She was the one beneath the Zenith. Who in the world could possibly control her to this point?

As if she could read my mind, Delilah spoke.

"Orson Rosenberg."

"Orson Rosember...?"

The name. I knew. Of course, I knew. He was the head of Central and one of the most powerful people within the Empire.

At the same time, he was also Delilah's father.

If it was him, then...

"Your father?"

"He's not my father."

Delilah flatly rather quickly.

Surprised, I looked down at her.

"He's not your father?"

But I was sure he was...

From all the information that I knew, he was Delilah's father.

It was hard not to know this piece of information considering that it was written in all books and the glaring last name she shared with him.

"I'm adopted."

"You're adopted?"

"Yes, when I was very young. I don't remember the age."

"I see."

Things started to become clear now.

"....I'm sorry to hear that."

"For what?"

"Your real parents. I thought they weren't here since you said that you were ado—"

"They're fine."

"....Eh?"

"Working."

I thought about saying something else, but I stopped myself. It was pretty embarrassing of me to assume that her parents had died.

'....I did hear about it before, but it seems to be the case now that I see her.'

There was a piece of information that I learned through the books that I read.

Apparently, it was normal for noble families to take in talented children and adopt them from their parents in exchange for some compensation.

That was what probably happened to Delilah.

"Here."

Delilah extended her hand in my direction.

I looked at her in confusion.

"We're about to leave. I don't want to get lost in the chaos."

"Okay."

I held her hand.

In that moment when my hand came into contact with hers, I had a sudden thought. A very dangerous thought.

So dangerous that I felt my entire body shudder and my heart beat faster.

What if...

'What if I use my second leaf ability on her?'

Would it even be possible?

In terms of power and knowledge, Delilah was in a class of her own. What would happen if I were to use the second leaf on her?

Would I be able to integrate her memories into my mind and learn from them?

'Ah, shit.'

The moment the thought entered it just wouldn't leave my mind.

Greed had started to overtake my mind again.

'...This is fucking insane.'

While I wasn't sure about it, what if she was able to detect what I was doing?

How would she react?

Would she kill me?

'No, but there's no better time than now.'

When would I ever get a chance like this again?

Regarding the consequences...

I felt like I could deal with them. If I played my cards right, I could appease her.

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

I started to hear the beat of my heart in my head.

It drummed loudly, making it hard for me to remain focused.

...It just continued to beat faster, and faster, and faster. To the point where it was all I could think of.

'Do it.'

'If you learn her memories, you'll be able to get stronger.'

'Anything for power.'

Voices started to enter my mind.

They kept whispering in my mind, tempting me at every word.

I lowered my head to look at Delilah.

"....."

My body tensed.

'Do it.'

'Stop wasting time.'

I licked my lips.

This...

My left hand moved to scratch my right hand.

Before I knew it, I had already pressed the leaf-covered beneath the bandages I used to cover the tattoo.

And then,

"...."

Nothing happened.

I pressed it again.

....Yet again, nothing happened.

'Nothing?'

I tried for one last time.

Yet again, nothing.

"Hooo."

That was when my heart started to calm down and my body stopped producing adrenaline. I unknowingly sighed in relief.

I guess I was more nervous than I thought.

'It didn't work, huh?'

It most likely had to do with our strength gap.

14:12

That was most likely the reasoning behind why the skill didn't work.

'I guess I found the first restriction of the skill.'

.....It didn't work on those that were extremely strong.

Well, at least Delilah's level.

What about those beneath the Monarch rank? Would it work on them?

It was a curious thought.

Another thing,

"...."

Looking at Delilah, and seeing her happily eat her bar as if nothing had happened, I had another question in my mind.

'Judging from her reaction, she didn't feel anything. Is it possible that they don't know?'

No, they probably know.

The only person I had used the skill on who was alive was Professor Bucklam.

He seemed to be pretty aware of the fact that I had gone through his memories. Since it failed, Delilah probably didn't know.

That was my conclusion.

'Okay, I see.'

I took mental notes of the information.

At the same time, I reminded myself to experiment more with this skill. Since I was set on learning Emotive Magic better, this skill was extremely crucial.

".....You can let go."

Delilah's voice brought me out of my thoughts.

Looking down, I finally let go of her hand.

"It wasn't a bad match."

Delilah spoke while patting her hands.

Then, glancing my way, she pinched her chin.

"You have strong Emotive intensity but you lack control."

"...Yes?"

"This semester you should have him as your Professor. I think you'll like his classes."

Yet again, I was confused.

However, before I could voice out my confusion she had already disappeared.

"What the hell..."

Staring at the area where she had previously been, I didn't know how to react.

'Lack of control? Emotive Magic has control?And who was she referring to by Professor? We going to have Emotive lessons next semester?'

There were many questions in my mind, and yet, no answer.

Still,

"...."

I stared at my hand and unwrapped the bandages slightly to see the four-leaf clover.

"As expected. It's not glowing."

The second leaf.

That meant that the skill had been used.

In that case, it really didn't work.

.....Or did it?

"Ugh."

I ruffled my hair and wrapped the bandages back.

There was no use thinking about it.

I was going to find out sooner than later. Rather, there was something else that was bothering me.

Placing my hand in my pocket, I felt something light and took it out.

"...."

I stood in silence for a moment before lowering my head.

Wrappers.

Not one, but five.

"This gremlin-looking midge—"

Chapter 155 The Order of the Silver Seraphs [1]

In Haven, a semester generally lasted for about six months.

At the end, the mid-terms would start and cadets would be assessed in three things. Theory, group work, and individual evaluations.

The first two had already been completed but due to some complications that stemmed from the group examination, the individual evaluations had been held back.

I wasn't even sure they were going to do the individual examination.

But it didn't matter.

It was safe to say that with the performances of the two examinations, I had managed to just barely clinch the top spot again.

The Progressive Analysis evaluation served to help out a lot too.

"New terms mean that you will now have new classes and new Professors."

Standing before us was Professor Bridgette.

She looked a little sad, but she didn't show it too much.

Today was the last day of her class, and at the same time, it was also the day when it would be announced which Guild we would be going to for the exchange.

Holding onto a sheet of paper, Professor Bridgette leaned her head back to get a better look at the writing.

"So, uhm."

Frowning, she paused.

"Heh, I'll be damned."

Her words aroused the curiosity of the cadets around.

Just as someone was about to ask what was going on, she placed the paper down and spoke,

"I've got a list of the Guilds that you will all be a part of. However, it doesn't seem like it will matter. You've all been called up for a rescue operation."

A rescue operation...?

I tilted my head in confusion.

"There has been an incident in the Mirror Dimension. The Guilds have lost track of a joint group from the fifteen Guilds who were sent on a mission. They're currently thinking of sending you and a few other Guild members for the rescue operation."

Her words were immediately met with the uproar of the cadets around.

"What?!"

".....In the Mirror Dimension?"

"How does this make sense? Why are we the ones doing this?"

I felt the same way as them.

Wasn't the exchange meant to get people to know the Guilds better? What was the point of sending us on a mission like this?

Raising her hand to quiet the cadets down, Professor Bridgette went on to explain,

"Please don't worry. You can also say that this is going to be a test for you. In cooperation with the Academy, you shouldn't be in any danger."

Bullshit.

I could already imagine that something was going to go wrong.

It had also been a while since I received a quest. I was almost sure I was going to receive one soon enough.

The thought was already making my head throb.

"The Guilds will send powerful people alongside you. This is more to get you used to the Mirror Dimension and Guilds operations than for the rescue mission. You won't necessarily have to do much. The only reason things are like this is because the situation came abruptly, and instead of canceling the whole exchange, they decided to have you all participate and witness how Guilds operate."

Professor Bridgette lifted the paper up and waved it.

".....Before you leave you can check this paper to see which Guild has selected you. Once we enter the Mirror Dimension, you can go to the respective Guild who will brief you on the situation."

It was hard to see what was written on the paper from where I was.

Despite that, I was able to catch a glimpse of my name since it was at the very top.

'The Order of the Silver Seraphs.'

I paused and sorted through my memories.

In the end, the name finally rang a bell.

'So it's them...'

The number one Guild within the Empire.

They were the ones that had chosen me.

"As I said, since this will be a joint operation, once you go to your respective Guilds in the Safe Zone, you'll be briefed on the situation before going on a joint mission with the other Guilds for the rescue. In the end, you will all still be together. Isn't that nice?"

Despite her best attempts at trying to lift the mood up with her words, none of the cadets really seemed to buy it.

.....There was clear nervousness in the room.

And it was understandable.

After all, this was our first true excursion within the Mirror Dimension.

*

The lesson came to an end rather fast.

With all thoughts on the upcoming mission, nobody was in the mood to talk.

On the other hand, I was excited.

Not for the mission, but for another reason.

"The two parties have agreed to do a joint reward for you."

It was finally time for me to receive my reward.

Currently, I was sitting in the middle of a room with two people. Delilah and Atlas.

Delilah was representing the Academy while Atlas was representing the Megrail family.

I was surrounded by powerhouses.

"We talked about what you wanted before, and we've relayed your request to them."

And?

"It was rejected."

"...."

Not like I didn't expect it.

Still, I was disappointed by the result.

"The Mirror Crack is extremely valuable for the Empire. You are still far too young to have any rights to it."

Listening to Atlas's explanation, I could only nod.

He was right.

I was indeed too young and too weak to have any rights to it. Probably, I was just being greedy.

".....But it's not like it's impossible for you to get the rights to one."

My hopes were quickly revitalized by his words.

"You mean...?"

"Provide more contributions to the Empire, and show more promise and there's a chance you might get selected. Currently, the Mirror Crack is being cleaned up by the members of the Empire. It will take a bit of time before it can be given away..."

He stopped there, but the meaning was clear.

'You have a few years to meet the requirements.'

And judging from the way he was looking at me, he also appeared to be on my side. It made sense.

Considering that I was a member of the Inverted Sky, owning a Mirror Crack would be good for them too.

"I understand."

Nodding, I shifted my attention towards Delilah.

Sat in her seat in her usual form, she looked at me with an absentminded look. Then, as if realizing I was looking at her, she blinked and focused her gaze on me.

"Dragon bone."

"...!"

It was just two words but it was enough to make my heart jump.

But before I could get excited, she poured cold water over me.

"I tried to get you that, but it was rejected."

This...

'She did it on purpose, didn't she?'

Seeing the corner of her lips curl up slightly, I was more or less sure of my assumption.

It was very subtle, but it was clear for me to see.

This sugar addict...

"...You're too weak to handle a bone of such strength. The Empire and the Academy feel the same on that matter."

Delilah explained.

I nodded.

"I see."

"If you had been Tier 4, then you might've had a chance at receiving it. The Dragon Bone is quite rare, and while we don't know what abilities it contains, they will be strong."

"....."

"Don't be disheartened."

Atlas interjected from the side.

"....Had you consumed the bone with your current abilities, your mind would've exploded."

"Yes?"

Mind exploded?

"The higher the rank of a bone, the greater the will inside. If you don't have strong mental resi—Huh..."

Atlas suddenly stopped speaking. His brows soon creased into a frown.

"Hold on."

He mumbled under his breath.

Delilah seemed to be doing the same thing. Blinking his eyes, he turned to look at Delilah who looked back at him.

After a while, he asked.

"What did he get for his mental examination?"

"8.23."

Delilah replied in an instant.

Almost as though she had the answer already memorized beforehand.

Atlas's expression turned grim.

"That high?"

"Yes."

His yellow pupils turned to face me.

"If that's the case then this is actually possible..."

I felt uncomfortable under his gaze.

For some strange reason, his gaze turned warmer and warmer with each time that I saw him.

".....It's not like I've never heard of such a case before. For someone to have such high mental stability compared to their real skills."

Pinching his chin, he fell into deep thought.

Delilah on the other hand kept her expression fixed on me. From the way she was looking at me, it was as though she had expected such an outcome.

"There's never been a precedent where someone as young and of your tier got their hands to a Terror rank bone. It's usually impossible, but if your mental strength is really that high, then it might actually work."

Atlas suddenly stood up from his seat and looked at me.

"Let's put this meeting on hold. We were originally planning on rewarding you with something else, but things are different now."

He turned to look at Delilah.

"You're of the same opinion, right?"

".....Yes."

"Good."

Atlas turned to look at me.

"You're still lagging compared to your top peers. If not for your Emotive Magic, you'd probably be beneath them. I originally planned on helping you get closer to them with the reward, but things are different now."

He paused to look at me with deep eyes.

"Perhaps, we might be able to get you to catch up to them."

Such were his last words before he left the room.

Clank—

Silence enshrouded the room following his departure. Focusing my attention on Delilah who leaned back on her chair, she tapped her finger over the armrest of the chair.

The meaning behind her gaze was clear.

'Are you satisfied with your reward?'

To such gaze, I could only nod.

"Yes."

The next day.

After Atlas left the room, I also left. I was told that he'd need some time to discuss if the matter was possible.

Quite frankly, the idea of possibly receiving the Dragon Bone was exciting.

However, I didn't get too excited. There was no guarantee that I would receive it. Furthermore, that was the least of my worries right now.

"Cadets, please line up."

Standing before a familiar crack, I looked toward the instructor who stood by its side.

"I'm sure you've all been informed about the situation. The moment you enter the Safe Zone, delegates from the fifteen Guilds will call your names up and you will follow them into their area where you will be briefed on the situation."

Teleporting from the Academy to another area within the Empire which was surrounded by trees, I took a look around me to see that the trees around the Mirror Crack were noticeably hollower with many not having any leaves.

The affected area was small, but it was clear enough for everyone to see.

".....Please be careful."

All of a sudden, the instructor's voice turned extremely serious.

Almost fearful.

"Unlike the area you've previously entered at the Academy, the area you will now be entering is not a joke. You must enter with firm minds, and..."

He turned to look at the crack, his eyes shaking slightly.

"....Don't let the voices get to you."

Voices?

Everyone looked at the instructor in confusion.

However, before they could voice out their questions, he nudged everyone into the portal.

"Go in. You'll understand what I mean when you enter."

Frowning, some cadets looked at him before stepping into the crack.

I stared at their fading backs before similarly stepping forward and entering the crack.

....And just as I stepped through it, the voices came.

'Kill me.'

'.....Kill me please.'

They rang loudly in my mind.

Chapter 156 The Order of the Silver Seraphs [2]

'Kill me.'

'....It hurts. Help me.'

'It came from the sky. All of me hurts.'

The voices made their way into my mind like quiet whispers, their sound reminiscent of the hiss of a snake.

There was more than one, and they talked over each other.

'It... burns.'

I felt my skin crawl at the sound.

Thankfully, it didn't affect me all too much.

After a few seconds, I was able to drown out the voices in my head.

I looked up.

The air and ground were dry, while above, a gray sky loomed, punctuated by a distant glowing white orb.

We stood near a wide rocky path, encircled by numerous guards. In the distance, the silhouette of a fortress emerged faintly into view.

It was probably the supply station.

'It's been a while since I've been here.'

The Mirror Dimension.

"My head...!"

What snapped me out of my thoughts was the sudden shout that came from behind me.

When I turned around, I was stunned by what I was seeing.

"Akh!"

"Ugh! W-what's going on?!"

"....It hurts!"

Holding onto their heads, some of the cadets knelt on the ground while others directly stumbled forward. When I looked, I could see that even Leon, Kiera, Aoife, Evelyn, and all the top-ranking cadets were facing similar issues.

'What's going on exactly...?'

I was somewhat confused.

While the voices were indeed annoying, that was all there was to it.

I closed my eyes for a moment and allowed the voices to enter my mind once more.

'Save me...!'

'It hurts. I'm burning.'

The moment I let my guard down, the voices crawled into my mind like the gentle whispers of a snap, ringing loudly within my mind. I tried to focus on what the voices were saying, but I wasn't able to make much of it.

'It looks like they're in pain...?'

My brows creased, and just faintly, I felt a slight sense of discomfort.

But that was all.

The discomfort was just that.

A discomfort.

It wasn't like with the other cadets who all appeared to be in deep pain.

"Welcome to the Mirror Dimension."

A rough voice suddenly echoed. I pivoted to find a burly man, sporting a mustache and black hair, stationed just a few meters ahead. Clad in lightweight armor, his furrowed brows and intense brown gaze fixed squarely upon us.

"This right here is nothing like the area that you've encountered. We're now in the deeper parts of the Mirror Dimension. The Yellow Region."

He paused to let his words in.

The cadets were still struggling, so many were struggling to understand him.

But I understood his words.

'The Yellow Region, huh?'

The zones within the Mirror Dimension ranged from black, yellow, orange, and red with red being the most dangerous area.

The Yellow Zone was the second easiest zone.

Looking around, there was not much of a difference compared to the Black zone besides the voices.

Would things be even more different in the higher zones?

"The voices you hear in your head. We call them Mirror Tones. In certain areas, they become louder and more prevalent. They don't harm you physically, but..."

The burly looked around before pointing his finger to his temple.

"They can fuck with your mind."

His lips pulled into a smirk before he started to laugh.

"There are two ways to mitigate the voices. One, you get used to them. Two..."

Rummaging through his pocket, he pulled out a small necklace.

".....You wear this."

Dangling it before him, his gaze swept around before finally focusing on me. His expression changed slightly.

"Hm? You seem to be doing fine."

"...It's a little annoying, but yes."

"Huh..."

Nodding slightly, his eyes narrowed.

"If you can resist this much, then you must have strong mental resilience."

He looked and sounded impressed.

".....Wait, now that I'm taking a closer look, you do look familiar."

Inching closer, he pinched his chin before his eyes widened in realization.

"Ah, I know who you are."

A smirk gradually pulled on his face.

He then proceeded to toss me the necklace.

"You might find this interesting, Black Star."

I grabbed the necklace and took a look at it.

What was this guy on about?

Looking down, the necklace didn't look like anything special. Made out of metal, it had a simple black gem in the middle with bland borders. That was all.

No fancy carvings or any of that sort of stuff.

There was nothing impressive about this.

It also didn't weigh much. It felt rather light in my hand.

"This is...?"

"A relic that we use to deal with the voices."

The man replied as he gently touched his mustache.

"Oh."

Looking at the expression he was making, I could guess that there was more to it.

".....It's also the best counter for—"

"Emotive Mages."

I finished the sentence for him.

His face immediately twitched as I did so. He looked constipated. He probably expected me to act all surprised and stuff.

It wasn't so much that his expression gave it away, but it was more like it was easy to figure out.

"Since you previously said it deals with the voices, which are correlated to mental stability, it's safe to assume that it works to counter Emotive Magic, right?"

It really did look like he was constipated now.

"....."

Ignoring him, I put on the necklace and the moment I did, I felt a wave of relief wash over my body.

The voices that were lingering at the back of my mind vanished just like that.

'Not bad.'

.....But also not good.

In a way, the necklace suggested that there were devices that could be used to counter Emotive Magic. I needed to be careful of those.

'I wonder how effective they are.'

They were probably effective to some extent.

However, considering how people still feared Emotive Mages, it could be said that they couldn't stop their emotions from being influenced fully.

"Tsk."

The man clicked his tongue before moving back.

He seemed to have lost all interest in me. He then looked around before he started to help the other cadets by handing them the necklace.

"Wear this. If you wear this, you'll be able to stop the voices."

Some of the stronger cadets were able to walk up to him to receive the necklace while others struggled to do so.

In the end, it took over ten minutes to get everyone to wear the necklaces.

By the time it was all said and done, we were lined up before the man.

"Good, it looks like everyone is okay."

Massaging his hands, his gaze fell on us.

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Micheal Morland. Supply-Station A876's Overseer. I'm here to give you a brief rundown of the situation before sending you off toward the supply station where you'll find the clans in charge of taking care of you>"

He went on to ramble for the next hour or so.

...He was talking so much that halfway through his speech I had started to get bored.

In general, his words could be summarized as;

"Don't venture outside of the supply station. Terror-ranked monsters run rampant outside of the station walls."

That seemed obvious.

"The necklaces have to be swapped every day."

Interesting.

So there were drawbacks.

"There are shops within the supply station. When there's time, we can check them out. And that's if we have permission from the Guilds we are in."

Fuck that, I'm poor.

"The rescue mission will start in two days."

That was all, I think.

There was a little more but it wasn't anything important. Something about the bathrooms, and so on.

"That's enough from me, then."

Micheal nodded his head in satisfaction. Then, taking one last look at us, he turned his body and led us into the supply station.

"Follow me."

I was just about to follow when someone tugged at my clothes.

Turning around, two ruby-red eyes appeared a few inches away from my face. Behind her were a few figures I recognized. Namely, Josephine, Luxon, and Anders.

My previous group.

I glanced at them for a moment before turning my attention back to Kiera who called for me.

"Oy, you."

".....I have a name."

"I know."

"....."

"What? Why do you look so pissy about it? Uh, no, never mind. That's how you usually look."

"Uh? What are you talking about?"

Josephine interrupted all of a sudden.

All eyes fell on her.

"This bitch, what are you talking about?"

Blinking her eyes, Josephine looked around.

".....What do you mean what am I talking about? What are you talking about?"

"Uh? Make sense for once."

"Ah...?"

Josephine turned to look at Anders and Luxon before pointing at my face.

"You two, tell me something. Does this face look like that of someone who is pissed?"

"No."

".....No."

The two shook their head in confusion.

At that, Josephine turned to face Kiera.

"See?"

".....See what?"

Kiera frowned.

Then, turning to face me, she cocked her head.

"It's obvious he's pissy about it. Whenever he's pissed his left brow twitched, and his nose wrinkles. It's fucking obvious."

"Eh?"

".....What? You guys didn't notice?"

"No, why wou—"

"Whenever he's happy, it's also obvious. First, he isn't as blunt as he usually is. Secondly, his brows are usually raised a little higher than normal."

"What...?"

"You seriously didn't notice that?"

Kiera asked, looking at the others as though they were stupid.

The only problem was,

'I do that...?'

Even I didn't know.

'...And here I thought I was doing a good job at keeping myself from showing any expressions.'

Clearly, I wasn't doing as good of a job as I thought I was doing.

"Anyways."

Kiera focused her attention back on me.

"Did you not hear the guy?"

I snapped out of it.

"...About?"

"After we're done with the briefing from our Guilds, he said that if we want to travel the supply station we need to do so in groups of at least four. Since I don't..."

Kiera's lip twitched. She looked to be struggling to finish her own sentence.

"So, like... Heeh."

I could more or less guess what she was trying to say.

"I don't... Um, I don—"

"Have any friends?"

"Uhk!"

Kiera's expression crumbled.

"I think we've already en—"

"Fine."

I cut her off before she could go on a rant.

Perhaps taken aback by my agreement, Kiera didn't know how to react. I looked at the others before feeling the ends of my lips curl.

"I don't mind spending some time with my sidekicks."

"...."

"...."

The expressions of everyone present changed.

"H-ho."

Especially Kiera who took a deep breath and smiled at me.

It was a sweet smile.

"...You're funny."

So she said.

But for some reason, her eyes seemed fixed on my neck.

I unconsciously brought my hand up to massage it.

Her gaze...

It felt uncomfortable.

I nodded before turning away.

"Thank you."

For some reason, I didn't feel safe.

Chapter 157 The Order of the Silver Seraphs [3]

157 The Order of the Silver Seraphs [3]

There were slight resemblances between Ellnor and the Supply Station. Enclosed by large walls, the city lay hidden behind it.

....If it could even be considered a city.

Unlike Ellnor, there was no real freedom to go out. There was also no greenery, and the general atmosphere felt gloomy.

"It's hot."

It also felt rather stuffy.

The air was dry, making it hard to breathe properly. It was also hot, and while it wasn't scorching hot, it was the type of 'hot' that would make one feel extremely uncomfortable.

It felt rather suffocating.

Especially since each breath was accompanied by a slight pain at the back of the throat.

I suddenly started to feel nauseous.

That feeling...

It reminded me of something that I despised.

"....."

I was just barely able to suppress myself by taking a deep breath.

"Huuu."

At the entrance of the supply station, there was no gate to be seen. Instead, the walls seemed to be constructed from a dense black material.

Taking a closer look, I was able to discern deep claw marks and scratches etched across the surface. They covered the entire surface with some scratches being deeper than others.

"Holy..."

"Are those from the monsters?"

The cadets were naturally curious.

I was also curious.

Stopping by the entrance of the supply station which was just a door, the burly man turned around and tapped onto the hard material of the walls.

Tak!

"The walls over here are made out of Kalmium. If you know what it is, then you must also know just how tough and dense it is."

Kalmium.

I had an idea of what it was.

It was a type of 'concrete' used in this world that was extremely durable and was even tougher than diamond due to the fact that it could absorb mana and use it to reinforce itself.

From what I had learned, it wasn't an easy material to create.

It was also very expensive.

'...So you're telling me they're using such precious materials for the walls of a supply station?'

And yet, it also looked like it could just barely keep up with the monsters lurking around.

It made me wonder just what type of materials were used for the bigger supply stations.

Clank—

Unlocking the door that led to the supply station, two guards greeted us. They wore light armor and did a small check on every cadet that passed before we were led to a dark and narrow corridor which took us several minutes to cross.

The fact that the corridor took several minutes showed just how thick the walls were.

It also made me realize just how much money had been poured out just to build one supply station.

The burly man eventually came to a stop in front of another door.

"We're here."

He turned to face us.

With his eyes scanning every cadet present, he made sure to give us one final rundown of the situation.

"There are three zones within the supply station. The Sorrowvale Sector. That's the area that you need to go to and where the Guild stations are located."

"The Decaycore Sector. That's where the leisure area is located. You'll find restaurants, and shops there."

"And lastly, the Ruinreach Zone. That's where the armory and supplies are located."

Pressing his hand against the door, he looked at us once again before finally opening the door, granting light to enter our eyes again.

"Come in."

My eyes squinted slightly.

The sudden surge of light felt somewhat uncomfortable.

"Ugh."

To the point where I started to feel lightheaded. The sides of my cheeks started to tingle, and so did my ankles.

The sensation didn't last for long.

It was very brief.

"Huu."

'This environment...'

Passing through the door, the sight that greeted me was one that I wasn't quite sure how to describe.

'It's definitely different compared to the supply station located near the Academy.'

...Unlike the supply station at Haven, the supply station here looked like a proper town. However, what I was most surprised about was the infrastructure.

It looked,

"Gothic."

Like a Victorian Era Britain.

Worn cobblestone streets lined up the paths, with gas lamps casting flickering shadows on cobblestone paths. Wooden benches lined up alongside the path, while the infrastructure stood tall with their spirals pointing towards the gray sky.

The streets were far from empty with people wearing warn-

out armors walking around and stopping to take a look at us.

'....It looks similar to the Victorian Era, but not quite.'

There were subtle differences, but they were a lot less subtle compared to the similarities.

"This is where our paths will diverge."

Micheal, the burly man, spoke. Staring at us before shifting his attention towards his pocketwatch, he went on to say,

"You should already know what to do from this point forward. The Sorrowvale Sector is located at the heart of the supply station. Follow the path, and you'll be able to find where you need to go. You won't be able to miss the Guild posts even if you want to."

That was the last thing he said before finally parting ways with us.

The moment he left, the area around me became rowdy as the cadets started to talk with one another.

I stood on the spot for a few seconds before turning my head and meeting Kiera's gaze. I could more or less tell what she wanted and I nodded my head.

"You find me after you're done."

"Why do I have to find you?"

"Weren't you the one who wanted to roam? I can also rest."

"...Tsk, fine."

She clicked back before leaving.

The same was true for the other cadets who all eventually left.

By the end, I was the only one left. No, not quite.

There was still someone else.

"What are you waiting for?"

"You."

There was still Leon.

He was looking at me with a complicated look.

".....You know why I lost, right?"

"I do."

It was Delilah who had made it clear to me.

"....."

Leon didn't speak at first. But then, he pulled out the necklace from beneath his shirt.

"This is supposed to help with Emotive Mages."

".....That's what we've been told."

"Yeah, so..."

Leon clenched the gem in his hand as his hand started to tremble.

"It's not working."

He looked at me with a bitter look.

"I'm still struggling to think straight. Every second I see shadows in the corner of my eyes, and I haven't had a proper sleep since my fight with Evelyn. I thought things would get better, but they haven't. What have you done to me?"

"....."

I didn't really know how to respond to that.

It wasn't like I could tell him that what he was experiencing was merely a fraction of the fear I had experienced in the illusion where he had killed me over and over again.

.....Just like him, I was also still affected by it.

However, I was able to handle it a lot better than him because of my mental resistance which didn't just come from me, but the many entities within me.

All their experiences.

Traumas...

I had relieved many of them.

For that reason, my mental strength was a lot stronger than it was before.

"It'll eventually get better."

Those were the only words that I could tell him.

I didn't know how to remove the effects, and so he could only live with the fear. At least, for now.

".....Take it as a form of training."

I was sure things were going to get better in the future.

Leon stared at me before shaking his head.

"What Guild selected you?"

Leon asked, trying to shift the topic. He probably was trying to distract his mind from the fear.

"The Order of the Silver Seraphs."

"....."

Leon frowned at the answer.

Surprised by his reaction, I was just about to ask him what was going on when he beat me to it and spoke before me.

"They're not a bad Guild. They've ranked first last year."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"They're a Guild that values skill over anything else. I've also heard that they don't tolerate any mistakes. You might be a cadet, but there's a chance they might kick you out of the squad if you do something that ticks them off. Your best bet is to follow their orders appropriately."

That sounded like a really strict Guild.

But I was curious about something.

"How do you know?"

"Well..."

Leon scratched the back of his head and made a difficult face.

".....I thought I was going to be selected by them so I did a lot of research."

"Ah."

I was starting to feel a little sorry.

But as if he could read his mind, Leon waved his hand in front of me.

"Don't feel sorry for me."

"Why?"

"...I'm not on good terms with one of their senior members."

"Eh?"

This was the first time that I heard of this.

"I had a small conflict with one of their sons."

"No..."

I started to get a bad feeling about this.

Especially when I noticed a subtle smile creeping up on Leon's face.

".....I ended up breaking a couple of their bones. It's been a few months since it happened."

He placed his hand over my shoulder and looked me straight in the eyes.

I looked at him too.

But for some reason, I felt that my face was about to crumble. Especially since it looked like he was enjoying this.

"I'm sorry."

He whispered slowly.

".....Since I'm your knight and all. You might get implicated."

He didn't look sorry at all.

"I'm truly sorry for that."

"I see."

I covered my mouth as my eyes wandered to his neck.

All of a sudden, I finally realized it.

The reason for Kiera's gaze.

'Ah, so this is why she was looking at my neck.'

Indeed.

It looked very strangleable.

*

My mood was at rock bottom.

How could I be in a good mood after I heard Leon's words?

"This fucker..."

He had purposely not told me until the end.

It was out of spite.

It had to be.

"Stop!"

A loud voice stopped me in my tracks.

Looking up, a young man with golden hair stood a few meters away from me. Behind him was a large towering silver building with intricate design which was unfitting of the gothic vibe surrounding the supply station.

"....Are you one of the cadets that is supposed to join the operation?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any identification?"

"I do."

I handed him a small piece of paper that I had received beforehand.

Taking it, the guard checked it before stepping to the side and granting me entrance. I glanced at him for a few seconds before finally stepping into the building.

Coming into the building, I stopped for a second.

It was,

Neat.

Extremely neat.

In a predominantly white setting, my eyes were met by a red carpet stretching toward a marble desk. Flanking the area were planters, while the pillars in the hall displayed engravings of a large shield with two swords clashing.

Looking around, my gaze eventually fell on a few familiar figures.

In particular, Luxon and Evelyn.

'As expected, she's here.'

It made sense considering that she had beaten Leon.

They were currently talking to a young man wearing a similar silver armor to the guard station outside.

As if noticing my presence, everyone turned to look at me.

"Ah, you must be the final participant."

The man greeted me with a warm smile.

Short black hair, deep green eyes, and a well-toned body... He looked amiable at a glance. And I thought so too.

However, just as I was about to greet him, the world around me froze.

'Uh?'

.....So did my voice and my body.

Before I could understand what was going on, everything turned dark.

And that was when I finally understood.

I was experiencing a vision.

Chapter 158 Tree of Ebonthorn [1]

The silence was absolute.

"....."

I heard nothing, not even a whisper of wind.

The world was dark.

I couldn't see a thing.

The world was silent and dark.

No, I did hear something.

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

It was the very sound of my heartbeat.

.....It echoed in my ears, louder than ever.

So did the sound of my breath.

"Haa... Haa..."

Each breath felt amplified, almost intrusive.

The stillness wrapped around me like a heavy blanket.

I felt disconnected from everything.

'What's going on...?'

My senses strained, seeking any hint of sound.

The silence pressed down, making me hyper-aware of my own existence.

From the beat of my heart to my very own thoughts.

It felt incredibly eerie.

"Haaa... Haa..."

My breath continued to echo in the darkness.

I couldn't move my body at all.

....I was simply stuck in the darkness.

But the darkness didn't last for long.

Gradually, I realized.

It was dark because my eyelids were closed.

Light immediately entered my eyes the moment my eyelids came to an open. It had all been done without my consent.

Currently, I was in no control of my body.

I was merely a spectator.

"Haa... Haa..."

I still felt everything that my body felt.

Like the burning pain that came from the opening of the eyes, it took a moment for it to adjust. When it did, I felt my expression freeze.

"H-haa.. Haaa.. Haa...."

My breath grew heavier and faster.

So did the beat of my heart.

"Haaa...!"

My body thrashed around, but it refused to move.

It was stuck.

....Paralyzed.

"Hueeeekk!"

And so was my voice.

It just refused to leave. All that came out were suffocating sounds.

But it wasn't like it mattered.

'This...'

Staring at the scene that was ahead of me, I didn't know how to react.

It was as if the very air had been sucked out of me.

I could see the town.

.....It was beneath me.

Beneath me.

Glancing around, blood-red leaves appeared to surround the entire town.

'This...'

That was when I came to a realization.

I was in a tree.

A massive tree that seemed to cover the entire town.

'When did it...?'

"Huek!"

I was glued to it in a 'T' shape.

.....I wasn't the only one stuck to it. Looking around, I could see thousands of different people attached to the bark of the tree.

However, unlike me, they seemed to have fused with it.

Their bodies had long turned into the same ebony shade of the tree with their hands outstretched in desperation.

Their legs were no longer visible, swallowed entirely by the sturdy trunk, while their torso emerged from the wood, contorted and twisted.

I could see the look of terror and desperation on their mummified faces.

One, two, three...

There were too many to count.

And...

"Hueek!"

The reasoning behind my situation became clear.

"Hueeek!"

I too was undergoing the same situation as them.

"Hueeek!"

My body violently thrashed.

But it refused to move.

"Hueeek!"

It screamed.

But no voice came out.

"Haaa...! Haa...! Hueek!"

The desperation was clear for me to feel.

My body continued to fight in desperation. This went on for the next few minutes until it eventually ran out of energy.

"Ukh...!"

My head dropped, and a weird squelching sound echoed in my ears.

Squench~

A weird tickling sensation ran past every corner of my body, creeping up all the way to my cheeks.

I felt my skin crawl at the sensation.

It was as if a spider was walking over my face.

"Hue..."

I let out a low cry, but it was no use.

Squech, squech—

The sound continued, and my body started to grow stiff to the point where it was impossible to move anymore.

I was helpless.

"H-hu."

Desperation crept up from the deepest parts of me.

The tickling sensation reached my ears, tingling the insides of them.

From the corner of my eyes, I was able to catch a glimpse of several wooden tentacles that were making their way up my cheeks.

Squech, squech.

It tickled.

.....And my body grew tense.

Squech, squech.

"....!"

Wrapping around my face, they clung to my mouth and eyes, pulling them back.

It started to hurt.

"Hueek!"

To the point where I found my voice again.

At that point, I lost all control of my body.

With widened eyes, the last thing that I caught a glimpse of was the town beneath and the thousands of people stuck in the massive tree.

"Hueeemmm!!!"

The world turned dark shortly after that.

"Cadet?"

When I came to, I was greeted by the sight of multiple gazes directed at me.

I shuddered at the sight of them.

"Haa... Haa..."

Unknowingly, my breath had grown heavy and my back was drenched.

I could hardly feel my legs.

It was as if they were made out of jelly.

Looking around, the world didn't seem real.

The noise was toned down, and everything appeared to be blurred.

"Cadet!"

It was a loud voice that broke me out of it.

".....Is there something up with you?"

Blinking, I saw the man from before standing before me.

He was probably the man in charge of our group.

"I'm fine."

I tried to play it cool, but I could hardly focus at all.

I was still shuddering from the experience and a fear I had only felt from the time I had met the faceless man seemed to take hold of my body.

"You're fine? You don't look fine."

"It's okay."

".....Hm."

The man looked at me with his green eyes and I looked up to match his gaze.

We stood like that for several seconds before he eventually relented.

"Alright."

He was the first one to give in.

Turning around, he faced the other cadets who were all looking at me. Especially Evelyn. Her gaze seemed a little intense.

I met her gaze for a moment before something flashed before my eyes.

A familiar window that I hadn't seen in a while.

[◆ Main Quest Activated: Tree Of Ebonthorn.]

: Character Progression + 401%

: Game Progression + 13%

Failure

: Calamity 1 + 23%

: Calamity 2 + 17%

: Calamity 3 + 19%

"H-haa, this..."

The quest had finally come.

Staring at the numbers, I swallowed.

'Character Progression 401%.'

I was currently level 26.

....If I were to complete this quest, I'd be able to finally reach Tier 3.

The idea felt exciting.

But at the same time, recalling the vision, that excitement vanished. All I felt was a deep sense of helplessness.

'How am I even supposed to stop that...?'

The only thing I knew about the situation was that a tree was going to sprout in the middle of the town, entrapping everyone within its bark.

From the vision, it also looked like it was going to be my fate.

"H-ho."

Letting out a breath to calm myself down, my chest trembled.

The lingering remnants of the emotions I felt in my vision started to disappear and clarity started to return to my body.

But even as that happened, the sense of despair never left me.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I looked at the quest window again.

'Tree Of Ebonthorn'

That right there was my clue.

.....I needed to figure out what the tree was.

But before that,

"Please follow me. I will give you a rundown of the Guild."

I needed to complete this first.

"Your role within the rescue mission is just to carry the supplies. You are yet strong enough to actually be of help to any of us. The reason why we've chosen to bring you with us is so that you can get a firsthand look at how Guilds operate."

Leon quietly stood while listening to the Guild delegate speak.

'Mystic Veil Order'

Ranked top 8 in the Guilds, Leon was chosen by them.

Because of his poor performance, his stock had fallen all the way down to the rank 8 Guild. It didn't make much of a difference to him.

He had never been planning on joining a Guild in the first place.

.....After all, he was already a knight who was serving under the Evenus household.

There was no need for him to join a Guild.

In fact, if he were to join a Guild, then it'd be a Guild that Julien joined.

"For the next couple of days or so, I will be in charge of training you for the rescue mission. There are a lot of things that cadets need to learn before coming out of the supply zone. The Mirror Dimension is a far crueler world than you think."

Walking around, the delegate eventually led them towards a large room.

Within the room were over a hundred skin-tight suits with a small opening in the middle.

"You are safe now because we're in the Supply Station and all the radiation has been taken care of in the nearby area. However..."

The delegate looked around with a serious expression.

".....The same can't be said for the other areas within the Mirror Dimension where the radiation is incredibly high. These suits right here are to help you protect against radiation. Before we go out on the rescue mission, you will all have to wear these."

Squinting slightly, Leon looked at the suits.

Extending his hand, he touched one of the suits. It was smooth to the touch, and the fabric looked extremely thin.

'It doesn't look comfortable.'

Rather, it looked extremely tight.

He was just about to let go when his entire body tingled.

"Hm?"

It was a sensation that he had grown all too familiar with.

His instincts.

They were acting up.

....And.

"Haa."

The hair at the back of his neck stood.

His expression crumbled as he lowered his head to look at his hand.

Yet again, it was trembling.

'This again.'

How long was it going to take for the fear to finally disappear?

It had been almost a week since the fight with Julien, and yet, he was still suffering from the side effects of his Emotive skills.

It left him helpless.

Gripping onto the necklace he was wearing, he sighed.

'....Looks like I need to get a better version of this.'

If only he knew where to get it.

"Hm?"

The back of his mind tingled again.

Frowning, Leon noticed that his hands wouldn't stop shaking.

"What in the..."

For a moment, it looked as though the side effects of Julien's skill had started to worsen.

But it was also at this moment that Leon noticed something.

The fear...

It wasn't coming from Julien's Emotive skill.

....There was something else triggering it.

But what exactly?

What exactly could be triggering his instincts like this?

"....."

Leon's head flicked around the room.

Ignoring the delegate who was still talking, his gaze settled over a certain area of the room.

The tingling at the back of his head intensified.

'There, it's coming from here.'

Making sure to be subtle about it, Leon walked toward the area where he felt the sensation. At a glance, it was just a wardrobe filled with suits. However, walking closer to it, Leon came to a stop.

"....."

In silence, he lowered his head before pushing the suits to the side.

It was then that he saw it.

A root.

....A black root sprouting up from beneath the ground.

Chapter 159 Tree of Ebonthorn [2]

For the next hour or so, the delegate guided us around the Guild station. The insides of the building were rather impressive.

With well-polished floors and neatly arranged furniture, it looked somewhat modern.

Somewhat.

It was mainly due to the minimalistic design that dominated the surroundings.

Stopping inside a large white room, filled with countless wardrobes that were filled with the same-looking suits, the delegate turned to face us while pointing at them.

"The suits right here are what you will be using for when you go out of the supply station. The radiation..."

He went on to explain about them.

From their usage, and the necessary steps that needed to be taken to wear them.

Unfortunately, I was not able to focus on anything that he was saying, nor my surroundings.

'Tree of Ebonthorn.'

Three words continuously rang in my mind.

Over and over again.

For some strange reason, I couldn't stop thinking about them.

"I believe I've said everything. If there are any questions that you have, you can ask me now."

".....I have a question."

To the point where I found myself raising my hand at the end of the tour.

"Oh? You've been rather quiet since the start. If you have anything to ask me, please feel free to do so."

I swallowed before nodding.

"...Is there a library by any chance?"

"A library?"

The delegate looked at me confused.

I went on to explain,

"I would like to do some research about the surrounding monsters, and my surroundings. It's so that I can be more prepared for the rescue mission."

"Ah."

Realization finally dawned on the delegate who nodded his head.

"Yes, there's a library."

Just as I was about to get my hopes up, he poured cold water over me.

".....But it's only accessible to Guild Members. While you are technically with us, you're not considered a Guild Member. There's a lot of sensitive information that we can't share or have leaked."

Though subtle about it, the meaning behind his words was clear.

'We don't want to leak some of the information to the other Guilds.'

"I see."

It wasn't as though I was disappointed.

I somewhat expected it. Especially from the little things that I had managed to catch a glimpse of regarding the Guild.

They were extremely uptight.

"There's no need to worry, though. All the information that you are seeking will be taught to you in the coming days. From monsters to the surrounding areas. We will teach you everything."

The man looked at me.

"But if you're looking for independent search, then there's a library not far from here. You won't find the most optimal information, but it's still a very big library with a lot of information."

"I understand. Thank you."

I could only thank him and leave things there.

Since there was no way for me to enter the library of the Guild, I could only opt to go to the public library.

"Well, then..."

Clapping, the man smiled.

"It was a very nice tour. I hope that you all have learned a lot."

It appeared as though it was time for the orientation to end.

Good, it served well for me.

"The raid trip is scheduled to be in a few days so in the meantime we will train you to be prepared for what is to come. The schedule will be handed to you later, and oh, right."

Rummaging through his pocket, he took out several keys.

"These are your residence keys. The rooms are already equipped with the necessary tools for an enjoyable stay."

He smiled.

"Enjoy your time off. T-T-his will be the last day of freedom before tra-ining b-egins."

For some reason, his speech slurred by the end, but considering the environment we were in, I attributed it to it.

There were a couple of times when I found it hard to focus in the past hour.

It was as if my mind blanked all of a sudden. It was only for quick and short bursts, but it was there.

'This damn environment...'

"Alright, have fun. I'll be seeing you tomorrow morning. Make sure to be there on time. We highly value discipline in our Guild."

With those words, he left.

Standing in the suitroom, the cadets all exchanged looks. I too looked around, meeting eyes with Evelyn who opened her mouth but closed it shortly after.

From her mannerisms, it looked like she wanted to strike up a conversation with me.

She really did seem to be trying.

However,

"See you."

That was all she could muster up before leaving.

Staring at her departing back, or more precisely, her waving purple hair, I didn't know how to feel.

I had been given a brief rundown of the situation from Leon.

It wasn't much, but it was enough.

And in the end, I knew that she had lingering feelings about the previous Julien. She seemed pained every time she looked at me.

Her gaze.

It was somewhat burdensome.

"Haa."

Sighing slightly, I walked up to Luxon who appeared to be waiting for me at the entrance of the room.

He greeted me with a nod before speaking,

"Our orientation took quite a while. The others should already be at the reception."

"Yeah."

We had made an appointment beforehand.

From what we had been told by the Professors, we needed to navigate in groups of four around the supply station.

As expected, coming down to the reception room, they were all seated on the waiting room sofas.

Of the three people who sat on the sofa, Kiera naturally stood out.

With her long flowing silver hair and red eyes, it was hard to miss her. Sat with her arms crossed, she finally took note of our appearance and clicked her tongue.

"Took you guys long enough."

".....Sorry, we've been held up by our delegate. He was very thorough with his explanations."

So Luxon said.

Unfortunately, I hadn't paid much attention to know.

"Well, fine."

Kiera and the others stood up from their seats.

"Let's go. We don't have much time."

Stretching her body, she looked back at me and Luxon before leaving for the entrance.

"Hey, wait up! You're going too fast."

Josephine followed her from behind, and so did Anders. Luxon followed shortly after, leaving me standing in the reception for a little while.

My mind felt blank.

"What was it again...?"

I blinked before shaking my head.

"Ah, right."

I looked up towards the entrance. The others were there. Massaging my forehead, I picked up my pace and strode out of the building.

While the supply station wasn't big, it didn't necessarily feel small. Walking around the cobblestone streets, people stepped out of our way.

There was a jovial mood surrounding the city streets. It burst with life as music played in the background, only disrupted by the loud laughter of drunken old men who shared a few drinks in the open bars.

Looking around, everything looked good.

....And yet, every time my gaze would cross over the surroundings, my stomach would churn.

I'd be constantly reminded of the vision.

It felt vivid in my mind.

So vivid.

Squench, squench—

To the point where I could hear the familiar sound.

It tickled my ears, sending shivers down my spine.

"Julien."

Every hair on my body stood on end.

It felt as if something was crawling over my face, and I suddenly struggled to breathe.

"Julien!"

I only snapped out of it when I heard Kiera's voice.

"....."

Looking up, I saw that her face was merely a few inches away from mine.

Before I could do anything, she pressed her hand against my head.

"Wh—"

"It's burning."

Burning?

Taking her hand away, she took a small handkerchief to wipe her hand.

Looking around to meet the other's gazes, she was about to say something when I stopped her.

"I'm fine."

"What?"

"Haa.. Haa.."

Pinching my forehead, I tried to calm my uneven breath.

The sensations started to disappear from my mind and clarity returned to my mind.

"I'm fine."

I repeated again, wiping away at my forehead which had grown sweaty for some reason.

"You don't look fine."

".....I didn't sleep much. I trained until morning."

That excuse seemed to work.

The moment I looked up, the expressions of everyone present changed.

The way they looked at me...

It was one of disgust.

Josephine was the first one to speak.

"You know, I'd normally not believe someone if they said that, but coming from you, I can see it."

The others nodded alongside her.

"Goosebumps."

Holding onto her arms, she rubbed them up and down.

"I still feel goosebumps thinking about the time before the mid-terms."

I frowned.

"...It wasn't that bad."

"Oh, yeah. This explains it."

As if my words seemed to have convinced her, Josephine continued to nod.

"Yup, yup. He's definitely just overworked."

"...?"

"No sane person would think what he made us go through as 'not bad'.."

She glared at me.

"No one!"

"I..."

I didn't know how to answer that.

Looking around, my gaze eventually fell on Kiera who appeared abnormally quiet. Staring into her crimson-red eyes, my face twitched again.

A red leaf floated in my vision.

It blanketed the land beneath.

....I lost my breath for a moment.

This time, however, I was quick to regain it.

"Huu."

"You should rest."

Kiera said after a while.

Looking back, she ruffled her hair and yawned.

"I guess I'm also tired. We might as well cancel the trip."

"Uh? Wha—"

Kiera covered Josephine's mouth just as she was about to speak.

"Shut up."

"Nmmm!"

"Quiet."

"Nmmm...! Nm!"

".....Fuck! Are you licking me?"

"Huea! Huk! So salty."

"Shit! I'll kill you."

"Akh!"

In the end, the situation ended like it usually did with the two of them.

The plans were canceled, and we all decided to take a rest.

...Or at least, that was how it was supposed to be, but even as the others left, I could only recall and think of the vision.

For some strange reason, it continued to haunt me.

Taking a look around me and seeing the jovial mood in the air, I felt a strange sense of despair crawling from the deepest parts of the station.

It was there, but I couldn't see it.

?| Lvl 2. [Fear] EXP + 0.07%

But why...?

"I have to go."

While the rules explicitly said that cadets had to travel in groups of four, it didn't mean that going alone was impossible.

It wasn't allowed, but not impossible.

Looking around, I decided to walk into the crowd, carefully blending in with them. Squinting my eyes, I navigated the cobblestone streets.

I walked for about five minutes before coming to a stop in front of a tall building. The windows allowed one to see the numerous books displayed within, and that was when I knew I had reached my destination.

"....."

Taking a deep breath, I reached out for the door when another hand reached out for it.

I stopped and so did the hand.

Turning around, two gray eyes stared back at me.

"...."

"...."

The two of us stood staring at each other for a few seconds before Leon finally spoke, his voice unusually high.

"By any chance..."

He clung to the necklace on his neck.

".....Did you use your spell on me again?"

Chapter 160 Tree of Ebonthorn [3]

"What is this...?"

The moment Leon found the root, he felt a weird sensation. He wasn't sure how to explain it, but his body started to tremble for a brief moment.

'What...'

Holding onto his trembling arm, he took a step back.

"Cadet?"

His actions may have startled those around him as the delegate from the Guild called for him.

"Is there something wrong...?"

Leon flinched, and he looked back.

The delegate was staring at him with a confused expression.

"Is everything okay? And why are you here?"

"Ah, it's..."

Just as Leon turned his head to point at the root, his heart dropped.

That was because,

'Where is it?'

The root.

.....It was gone.

His body started to tingle all over. The back of his hair stood on end, and his breathing stopped.

His instincts screamed.

"Cadet?"

Coming out of it, the delegate was now standing in front of him.

He looked annoyed.

"Are you perhaps getting bored of my explanations?"

"No, I..."

"You sure do look bored."

"....."

Leon held his words back.

"I'm sorry."

In the end, the situation calmed down after he got a warning from the Guild delegate. From that point on, the delegate kept an eye on him, but Leon didn't act rashly from that point and listened to all the explanations carefully.

From time to time, however, he would fall back into his own thoughts, thinking about the root.

'.....Was I just imagining things?'

There was something unsettling about it that he couldn't quite explain.

It made his heart quicken slightly.

But at the same time, it also appeared to have been a hallucination.

Clinging to the necklace on his neck, Leon clenched his teeth.

'Am I still being consumed by fear...?'

Every time he felt like he was able to rid himself of its influence, it would come back stronger than before.

Now being the perfect example.

"Haa."

Taking a deep breath, Leon forced himself to calm down.

'I need to calm down.'

There was something clearly wrong with him.

.....Unlike before, it felt sinister.

The only clue he had was the root.

While he wasn't sure whether it had been a hallucination or not, it was the only clue he could go on with.

It was black, with tiny red threads within the bark.

The image was imprinted in his mind, and the moment the delegate finished his orientation, Leon slipped out and headed for the library.

While going alone wasn't allowed, Leon couldn't care for such rules.

"Haa... Haa.."

With each step he took, he felt his breath grow heavier and heavier.

When he did reach the library, the back of his shirt was soaked in sweat. Reaching out for the door, another hand met his and he stopped to look at the hand's owner.

"Ah."

A pair of hazel eyes met his gaze then, and Leon swallowed.

Staring at him, who looked as indifferent as he always did, Leon licked his parched lips before speaking.

"By any chance..."

Please.

"....Did you use your spell on me again?"

Tell me yes.

Listening to Leon's question, I frowned.

Use my spell on him again?

Why would he...

I stopped and took a closer look at him.

Pale face, sweat from the side of his face, dilated pupils, and though he tried to hide it, his breath appeared heavy.

My brows raised at the sight.

"No, I didn't."

"Ah, I see."

He looked disappointed by my answer and reached to enter the door, but I stopped him.

"What?"

"....By any chance."

I squinted my eyes.

"Did you notice anything abnormal?"

"...What do you mean?"

"You look like you've seen a ghost. Be honest with me."

".....Yes."

Leon nodded after a few seconds of contemplation.

I stared into his eyes before opening the doors and entering the library.

"Let's go inside for now."

"Okay."

The library was silent. It was how they typically were, but coupled with the flickering of the lights that dimly lit the surroundings, it cast a rather gloomy aura around it.

There was also hardly anyone in the library.

Besides Leon and I, there were only a few other people.

Finding my seat on one of the tables, I looked at the candle station on our table. It was on its last leg with most of the wax already consumed.

Looking around, the same was true for the candles on the other tables.

I shrugged and focused my attention back on Leon.

"You start first. What did you notice?"

".....A root."

Leon talked, forcing himself to calm his breath.

"It was dark, with fine miniature red threads embedded within it. I'm not sure, but the moment I saw it, I felt a strange sensation all over my body."

"....."

"I only managed to catch a glimpse of it for a short moment before it disappeared. It was almost as if it had never been there in the first place. That's why I was wondering if you had cast your spell on me again."

"....."

"But since you said that you didn't do anything, I guess I'm just going crazy."

Listening to Leon's words, I eventually closed my eyes. He looked shaken. That was the first time I had ever seen him like this.

Not that I could blame him.

"You're not crazy."

Opening my eyes, I looked straight into his eyes.

"I also saw something similar."

"....!"

"Tree of Ebonthorn."

I muttered the only clue that I had.

"...Do you know anything about it?"

"Tree of Ebonthorn?"

Leon frowned feeling into thought before shaking his head.

"No, I don't."

"I believe that's the source of the root."

The quest at least hinted at it.

"Is this why you are also in the library?"

"Yes."

I nodded and looked around.

"Since it looks like we're looking for the same thing, why don't we look for clues together?"

"....Okay."

Leon similarly looked around.

The library was vast. There were over a thousand different books. It was going to take a long time for us to get the information that we wanted.

But at least we had a clue.

And we weren't working alone. Two brains were better than one.

"Tree of Ebonthorn..."

Leon muttered to himself before standing up.

"It should be in the botanical section."

"...Most likely."

"Should we look there?"

"You do that."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

I turned my head to look in a different direction.

[Monster classification]

"I'll check that area out."

".....Monster classification?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It might also be a monster. You never know."

"That's true. Okay, let's do that."

As such, we came to an agreement. I searched the monster classification area while he searched the botanical area.

Just as he left, I was also about to stand when I realized I couldn't.

"Hm?"

I felt a weird sensation creeping up on my legs.

It kept me rooted on the spot.

"What th—"

The words stopped at my throat the moment that I looked down.

Tangling my ankles from beneath the ground were two black roots. Just as Leon had described them, red lines appeared beneath the bark, almost as if they were pulsing, and my body suddenly grew weak.

Opening my mouth, no words escaped from it.

My entire body felt paralyzed, and the utter sense of helplessness that I had felt in the vision enshrouded my body.

"Uah!"

I screamed.

Before I knew it, I was standing.

Looking around, everyone was staring at me.

Seeing their gazes, I felt the hair at the back of my neck stand. For some reason, they felt a little off, but in the next moment, that feeling disappeared.

Looking down, the roots were gone, and a tall lady with circular glasses appeared before me.

"Sir."

Her stern voice rained down on me.

".....This is a library. Please do not scream."

"Ah."

Realizing what had happened, I lowered my head.

"I apologize."

"This is your last warning."

Tak, Tak—

Her heels clicked against the wooden floor as she left the area. Silence yet again returned, and I weakly sat down on the chair.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

Yet again, my breath was heavy.

Holding onto my head, I leaned forward.

'I'm losing it.'

Ever since the vision, I felt like I was starting to lose it.

My sanity.

Just what in the world was going on...?

"Hey."

Hearing the familiar voice, I looked up. It was Leon. He was looking at me with a frown.

"Are you alright?"

".....I'm not."

I answered truthfully.

"The roots."

Leon's eyes widened.

"...I just saw them."

The next day.

It was early in the morning.

"Huam."

Coming down to the training area of the Guild, I yawned. It had been quite late since I returned back to my apartment.

Leon and I spent countless hours looking through the books at the library in order to look for any clues, but regardless of how hard we tried, we couldn't find a thing.

In the end, we could only go back to our designated rooms.

We had decided to do the same thing today after training was over today.

"Welcome, cadets."

Waiting for us at the training area, an expansive indoor white room with hardly any decorations, was a man with long blond hair and blue eyes. His features were striking, with a well chiseled jawline, and a smile that could turn the heads of anyone that looked at it.

Holding onto a white and golden shield, alongside a sword, he stared at us with a kind smile.

"My name is Ryan, and I will prepare you for the upcoming expedition."

Even his voice was pleasing to the ears.

"Yesterday you were given a brief rundown of the Guild's infrastructure and how we operate. Today, things will be different."

He looked at all of us.

".....Today, we will be getting you ready to withstand the environment of the Mirror Dimension."

Placing down his shield, he went on to move toward a corner of the room.

"You may have not noticed it yet since you haven't been to the deeper areas of the Mirror Dimension, but the environment can be quite harsh. From the intense radiation found in some areas, the scorching heat of the sun, the poisonous miasma's located in other areas, to the freezing temperatures of some other areas."

Extending his hand and placing it against the side of the wall, he smiled.

"What better way to get used to the environments than experiencing them for yourself?"

The area around his palm lit up as intricate purple circuits spread throughout the room. All of a sudden, the scenery around us started to change, alongside the white room.

By the time it took for me to blink, I was no longer in the white room.

No, I was standing in the middle of a scorched plain, with jagged mountain areas around. Most glaring, however, was the white ball that hung in the colorless sky.

I suddenly felt my body grow sluggish.

"Your first test."

In the background, the instructor's voice echoed.

".....Survive the heat."

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