

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 161 Crimson Shade [1] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 161 Crimson Shade [1] **Chapter 161 Crimson Shade [1]**

The white orb in the sky glared at us from above.

I stared at it for a few seconds before lowering my head to see that my surroundings had turned a subtle shade of red.

"When did this...?"

"Hooo."

Each breath started to hurt.

Accompanying it was a tingling pain at the back of my throat.

Looking around me, the other cadets were facing similar struggles. With eyes widened in panic, and their hands clawed at their throats.

"The Yellow region is a dangerous region not only due to the Terror ranked beasts that are present throughout, but also because of the dangerous environment. This right here is just a taste of the scorching heat of the Crimson Shade."

In the background, the instructor's voice rang.

"There's no specific location or time to the Crimson Shade. It'll just happen randomly, scorching everything its veil falls upon."

The heat intensified and the pain at the back of my throat intensified.

An uncomfortable heat started to rise within my nostrils with each breath I took. Enough to make me think I was inhaling smoke.

".....Your mind starts to blur due to the heat."

Indeed, looking around, the world started to tilt.

I tried to take a step forward, but my body refused to move.

Drip..! Drip!

Sweat started to drip down from every corner of my body.

".....Your body starts to lose water. Thirst will eventually build up."

"Huep."

I swallowed my saliva, only to find that my mouth had grown completely dry.

'W-water.'

It had only been a minute or so since the environment had changed, and yet, it felt as though I had been here for hours.

To make matters worse, it only took that much time for me to be completely thirsty.

"Each second that passes feels more and more agonizing. Water. Water. Water. That's all you'll start thinking about."

The instructor's words seemed to directly match the symptoms that I was undergoing.

The thirst was starting to dig at my mind.

'Water.'

It made me only think of one thing.

'Water... I need water.'

"You seek water, but you have no water."

How long has passed?

Each second that I spent here felt agonizing.

The little water within me continued to dwindle by the second, and my mouth was fully dry by this point.

'W-water...'

"There's a reason this is called the Crimson Shade. Casting a crimson glow over the surroundings, everything beneath it turns dry."

I could almost hear the amusement in the instructor's voice coming from the background.

Looking around, I spotted a familiar set of hair in the distance. It was Evelyn. She was sitting on the ground with her legs crossed.

I looked at her expression, and as if she felt my gaze, she opened her eyes to look at me.

Our eyes met for a brief moment before she closed her eyes again.

I thought she'd leave things there, but shortly after, her voice echoed,

"Channel your mana."

That was all she said.

I was confused at first, but I listened to her words and channeled the mana inside of my body.

"Ah."

A cool sensation washed over me.

The heat that had been stinging at my skin disappeared.

In that moment, I felt a massive wave of relief wash over me.

Tzzz~

Steam started to rise from out of my body, and the sweat that had accumulated over me disappeared.

"Haa...."

Though I was still thirsty, things weren't as bad anymore.

"Looks like some of you have found the trick to counter the Crimson Shade."

The instructor's voice continued to echo in the background. The amusement was still ever so present.

"...By channeling your mana you can start cooling your body. Preventing the shade from drying up your body."

It was as he said. The moment I channeled my mana, my body started to cool and I no longer struggled under the shade.

Or so I thought,

"But for how long can you maintain your mana for? Can you keep up with it to last several days?Or can you sustain it until you manage to find a way out of the shade?"

Hearing his words, my thoughts paused.

I closed my eyes to determine the amount of mana that I had in my body and that was being consumed, and my expression turned grim shortly after.

'Not good.'

At this rate, I wasn't going to last more than an hour.

Would that be enough?

"Well, that's enough."

The surrounding scenery changed, and we were now back in the white room. I stopped using my mana and I was able to take a deep breath.

"Water."

Still, I was thirsty.

Thankfully, the instructor was prepared and handed us several metal flasks.

"Take these and hydrate yourself."

Grabbing mine, I uncapped mine and started drinking from it. While it was odd that they were using flasks to store water, I didn't care.

The only thought in my mind was the water.

Looking around, I wasn't the only one that was drinking the water heavily. The same was true for the others with the exception of Evelyn who started to sniff the flask. The moment she did, I started to have a bad feeling.

.....And I was right.

"The water right there comes from Lake Osmos. Located not far from where we are, and where the rescue mission is at. It's not exactly poisonous, but you'll end up feeling sick soon enough. The only way to get rid of the effects is by circulating your mana."

Just as his words fell, the world started to spin.

Holding onto the flask, I felt like throwing it at the instructor who kept smiling the entire way.

Gulp—

In the end, taking the last sips of it, I sat down on the ground and channeled my mana.

"You may resent me for doing this to you, but it's necessary. While the water within the Lake is not good for you, by drinking it, you'll gain a certain immunity to it. Later on, when we enter the waters, if you accidentally swallow the water, you won't have to go through the pains like you are now."

His words certainly made sense.

Not that I had enough time to focus on them.

"Uekh...!"

My stomach started to churn, and I started to feel incredibly nauseous. I could feel something rise up from my stomach, and I tried my best to keep it down.

It was hard, but it wasn't impossible.

This process went on for the next half an hour, until finally, the side-effects started to vanish.

"Good, it looks like most of you are done."

Leaning against the wall, the instructor looked at us.

"....It wasn't so difficult, right?"

For some reason, the more time I spent with him, the more unlikable he felt.

'The cadet that Leon warned me about, it's not him, right....?'

Wasn't that difficult my ass.

Forget about the headaches and the nausea, for the past half an hour or so, I had to hold back my stomach cramps, while also stopping myself from puking.

He was just messing with us at this point.

"Don't give me those looks. While you may hate me now, you won't hate me later when we carry on with the rescue mission. With that being said..."

He paused, his eyes scanning all of us.

There were a total of ten cadets in the room. The only ones that I was familiar with were Evelyn and Luxon. On the other hand, the other cadets belonged to different classes.

Eventually, the instructor showed a satisfied smile.

"...You all were good. As expected of Haven cadets. Alright, let's start with the next phase of the trials."

Pressing his hand against the wall, purple circuits once again enshrouded the white space. Shortly after, the environment started to change, and I shuddered.

"T-this..."

It was suddenly freezing cold.

The training continued for the better part of the day. The temperatures continued to shift, changing from extreme heat to extreme cold. There were also illusions of other environments that put the cadets under extreme pressure.

By the time it was all over, everyone was down on the ground soaking in sweat.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

The heavy sound of their breaths echoed within the white room.

Laying down on the ground, Evelyn blankly stared at the ceiling. She could hardly think at the moment, and just breathing was painful for her.

Each breath seemed to gawp at her lungs.

"I'm saddened to say that this was the last of the simulations. You've experienced all that you needed to experience before coming out of the supply station."

For a moment, Evelyn could hear the strings of curses coming from the other cadets.

They were all directed towards the instructor who played it as if he hadn't heard anything. Weakly turning her head, her eyes paused on a certain figure.

He was similarly lying on the ground with his head facing the ceiling.

Just like the other cadets, he also appeared to be muttering something. Squinting her eyes, she tried to read his lips.

'Motherfuck—'

"Oh my."

Evelyn blinked several times.

Surely, she had heard wrongly.

Squinting her eyes again, she tried to read his lips again.

'Fatherless ba—'

Oh, no.

Evelyn didn't know how to react.

It threw her off.

In the midst of her daze, his head turned and their gazes met. Evelyn felt her entire body turn rigid the moment their gazes met.

She wanted to turn her head immediately, but thinking about it, that would've been awkward.

Swallowing her saliva, she looked at him for a few seconds before turning her head away from him.

The entire time, she played it in a manner that made her seem aloof.

'...That was smooth, right?'

At least, she thought so.

However, a shadow soon cast over the area she was in and her heart squeezed.

Looking up, the same two eyes that she had met moments prior were looking at her from above.

"Yes...?"

"...."

He didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he looked at her for a brief moment before finally opening his mouth.

"About before..."

Evelyn's heart squeezed further.

'What's he going to say? Is he going to talk about that time? What do I do? How do I answer? Leon said that he's a different person, but there's no way I can see him differently just like that. What if he is going to tell me to never talk about it? Wha

—'

"Thanks."

".....Uh?"

Evelyn's mind blanked.

She didn't know for how long, but before she knew it, he had already left. Turning her head, she stared at his departing back.

Her thoughts started to run wild.

'Did he just thank me? Him...?'

Why?

And then, Evelyn recalled her interaction with him at the start of the training when she had told him to channel his mana.

"Ah."

That had just been a spur-of-the-moment answer from her. Having met his gaze, she felt too awkward to say nothing and said such words.

Who would've thought he'd thank her for that?

It was so different from the Julien she knew.

Pursing her lips, Evelyn stared at him again. A thought crossed her mind.

'Did he really change...?'

Chapter 162 Crimson Shade [2]

I was tired. Rubbing my eyes, I looked around. I was standing in front of the library again.

Every part of my body ached. The side effects from the 'water' had yet to be completely alleviated.

Furthermore, the sudden shifts in temperatures put heavy stress on my body.

'.....This is even worse than regular training.'

I'd usually be tired after training, which was extremely intense, but this was something else.

"You're here early."

Coming from the other side was Leon. With glaring black circles beneath his eyes, he walked over with a hunched back.

'Looks like he didn't have it good.'

In fact, he looked to have had it worse than me which was surprising.

"How are you feeling?"

".....Not good."

Leon replied while leaning his hand against the wall of the library building.

"I-Uekh!"

I stepped back.

He looked like he was about to puke.

Raising his finger at me, Leon's face scrunched up. He was struggling to keep himself from puking.

Staring at him, for a moment, a dangerous thought crossed my mind.

My hands started to tingle and my face twitched.

'Just one wouldn't hurt, right? It's only to see if he can puke...'

I bit my lips and shook my head. No, this-

Opening my eyes, I noticed that Leon was staring at me. His eyes were bloodshot and his expression looked grim. It was almost as though he could read my thoughts.

He shook his head.

"Spare me."

"..."

I licked my lips.

My body started to tremble again.

Leon's eyes turned more bloodshot.

"What do you ca—"

"Bleeeergh!"

He puked.

The words that were about to leave my mouth stopped and I looked at him in confusion. Leon continued to puke for the next couple of seconds before he went on to wipe the corner of his mouth.

"D-done."

At the same time, he glared at me.

".....I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"But I didn't."

"Because I beat you to it."

"Tsk."

I clicked my tongue.

What a pity.

Either way, looking around, I saw that we had created a bit of a commotion. Without hesitation, the two of us entered the building.

There weren't many people inside just like last time.

The surroundings were dimly lit, and the librarian stood behind a wooden desk with a book in her hand. Taking note of our appearance, her brows creased a little. It looked like she remembered us. In the end, she didn't say anything else and I sighed in relief.

Thankfully, what I did last time wasn't enough for her to completely ban us.

Taking a seat, I looked at Leon.

"Let's continue where we left off."

".....Yes."

Still glaring at me, Leon turned his back and headed for the botanical area. On the other hand, dropping my stuff on the table, I headed for the Monster Classification area.

There were over a thousand different books in front of me.

Thankfully, a major part of them had illustrations which made it a lot easier for me to skim through.

'It's too bad the librarian doesn't know much.'

I had asked her yesterday if she knew anything about the Tree of Ebonthorn, but she shook her head. It was for that reason that we had no choice but to look for the information for ourselves.

The Guilds didn't grant us access to their library, and I doubt anyone would bother helping us with the information given how busy they were.

In the end, this was the only way.

Flip—

Casually flipping through pages, I looked for any clues.

What surprised me the most as I looked through the pages was the amount of monsters that were logged into them.

The numbers were ridiculous.

"Huam."

Leaning my back against one of the shelves, I continued to flip the pages over. The more I flipped, the sleeper I became.

There were so many books, and yet, not a single one had the thing that I needed.

"Not this one as well."

I had just placed another book on the shelf when I paused.

"....."

Looking at the other side, two yellow eyes met my gaze. Standing on the opposite side was Aoife who looked at me with a strange look.

"....."

"....."

The two of us stood face to face for a brief moment before I broke the silence.

"What?"

"...You like the library a lot, don't you?"

"Do I...?"

Thinking about it, I did spend a lot of time in the library back in the Academy.

"I guess I do."

Aoife nodded and the conversation ended there. Or so I thought. Just as I had turned to look at another book, her voice echoed once again.

"Are you looking for anything specific?"

"...I am."

"Oh."

Once again she nodded, and silence returned over the surroundings. It was awkward, but it was mainly because we both sucked at making conversation. I once again shifted my attention to the book when I stopped and looked up.

Aoife was still staring at me.

What in the world...

"Do you need help?"

".....Why?"

"Uh, just..."

Aoife scratched the back of her head.

"....You looked very serious. I thought you might need help."

I squinted my eyes.

"What's the real reason?"

"What?"

Aoife's voice slightly rose.

It was subtle, but it was enough for me to pick up. Closing the book in my hand, I sighed and placed the book back.

I then looked at Aoife straight in the eyes. She met my gaze back, but eventually, her eyes lowered and she similarly sighed.

"Alright, fine."

She pinched the middle of her brows.

Looking back slightly, her gaze fell on a certain person in the distance. With shoulder-length black hair and a long nose, he sat by one of the seats while reading a book.

There seemed to be no irregularities with him at first glance.

Glancing at Aoife in confusion, she subtly whispered.

"He's the relative of one of the missing people."

".....Oh?"

My interest had finally piqued and I turned to take a better look at him.

We hadn't been completely briefed about the situation since it was still training time for us, but from what I knew, the team that had gone missing comprised more than thirty people. They were a mix of all fifteen guilds.

"Are you stalking him?"

"Uh?"

Aoife's head flicked back to me.

"Stalking? What are you talking about? I'd never do that. Why are you accusing me of doing that?"

"....."

I cocked my head at her.

She spoke unusually fast. It was almost as if she was trying hard to justify herself.

"...Because that's what you're currently doing."

"No, this is just me getting ahead of the situation. All I did was follow him from his residence to here."

"Yeah, no. It's stalking."

"....."

Aoife glared at me.

Subtly looking back, she brought her face closer and whispered.

"It's not stalking. And let's say it is... What's wrong with that?"

".....Uh?"

As if realizing what she had said, Aoife covered her mouth.

Taking a deep breath, she moved her hands away.

"I feel like there's something wrong with the situation."

"....."

"No, rather than the situation, it's more like the supply station. I've had a weird feeling since coming here. I thought that by checking with the victim's relatives, I'd be able to find something."

"How is that going for you?"

"....I've yet to find something."

Shaking her head, she picked one of the books.

"That's why I'm here."

Opening it, she started to read through it.

I stared at her for a good couple of seconds before taking a book of my own and opening it.

'.....It looks like she also felt that something was wrong.'

Not just Leon, but Aoife too. However, unlike Leon, I wasn't sure if Aoife's 'feelings' had anything to do with the tree.

Looking up, I briefly glanced at the man that Aoife was targeting.

He looked normal at a glance, with no noticeable signs of anything being out of order.

'She said something about being one of the relatives of the missing victims...'

Was there something wrong with the victims?

I thought about her words for a close minute before eventually shaking my head. For now, I needed to focus on finding more clues about the tree.

That was my main priority right now.

Leaning against the bookshelf while flipping the pages of the book in my hand, I spoke,

"Tree of Ebonthorn."

"Hm?"

Aoife glanced at me.

I kept my gaze on the book.

"You asked me if I needed help. I need information on that."

"....."

Taking note of Aoife's silence, I looked back to meet her eyes. With a subtle frown over her features, she looked to be in deep thought. Then, as if sensing my gaze, she focused her attention back on me.

"Why are you looking into that?"

".....Are you going to help me or not?"

"No, it's..."

Aoife closed the book in her hand.

"....If you need the information desperately, I know of a way."

"Oh?"

I closed my book.

"How?"

"Did you forget who I am?"

"Ah."

"I can just go to the Guilds and have them tell me anything that they know about it. If you give me an hour, I'll be able to get all the information."

"That quickly?"

"Yes."

Wow.

....I didn't know how to feel. Staring at Aoife, I suddenly realized something.

'Princesses are really useful.'

"Are you thinking about something rude?"

"No."

I kept my face from changing. However, inside, I was shocked.

How in the world did she know?

I was just about to say something else when all of a sudden, the color around me started to change, turning a shade of red.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. In one moment, the world was normal, and in the next second, everything had turned red.

"Uh?"

All heads flicked towards the windows.

There I could see the people outside looking up at the sky with pale faces. Some even pointed at the sky while others started to run back.

I stared at the scene for a few seconds before Leon appeared a few meters ahead.

He looked to be on high alert.

Looking at us, his gaze fell on Aoife for a brief moment before he looked back at me. With just a glance, we all knew what was going on.

How could we not when we had gone under training for it just today?

That was when Leon slowly muttered.

"Crimson Shade."

WOOOM~

An ominous pulse swept the station.

"Ukh..!"

"Kh!"

A scorching heat suddenly enveloped the surroundings.

It came so fast and so suddenly that hardly anyone had any time to react. Thankfully, we were quick to react due to our training.

Without hesitation, I channeled my mana and the heat dissipated.

A cool sensation wrapped over my body.

Still, my expression was grim.

I knew that I wouldn't last more than an hour like this.

"Akh!!"

"H-help!"

The screams of the people outside rang. While a major part of the people here were superhumans who were stronger than me, there were some weak civilians who were natural citizens of the place.

They were unable to protect themselves from the sudden heat wave.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

With a rough breath, I looked at the crimson world around me.

I had just turned to look at Leon when I suddenly realized that I couldn't move.

Lowering my head, I stared at my feet and my entire body shuddered. Covering my ankles, and reaching for my knees were a familiar set of roots.

Unlike before when they only covered my ankles, they had now reached for my knees.

Tangling my legs, they kept me from moving.

"Ukh!"

I tried to move, but my body remained fixed on the spot.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

My heartbeat started to quicken, and notifications flashed before my very eyes.

?| Lvl 2. [Fear] EXP + 0.05%

?| Lvl 2. [Fear] EXP + 0.02%

Before I knew it, fear had started to root deep within my mind.

One that grew worse with the red that covered the world.

The Crimson Shade had fallen.

Chapter 163 Crimson Shade [3]

The Crimson Shade.

A phenomenon that spread across the Mirror Dimension, leaving no clear information about its origin, only that it scorched everything it laid its touch upon.

Looking around me, the world had turned completely red.

Tzzz~

Steam started to rise out of my body as I channeled my mana.

But that wasn't my main concern. Looking down, and staring at the roots that were entangling my feet, I felt suffocated.

?| Lvl 2. [Fear] EXP + 0.03%

?| Lvl 2. [Fear] EXP + 0.01%

Notifications continued to flash across my vision.

I felt the sound of my own heartbeat drum in my mind.

A certain dread took hold of me, and a weird tingling sensation traced over my face.

'Just what is...'

By the time it took me to blink, the roots, alongside the sensation were gone.

"Haaa.. Haaa..."

So was the fear.

With heavy breaths, I leaned against the bookshelf and recomposed myself.

Yet again, I saw the roots.

This time, they were longer than before, reaching all the way up to my knees.

An idea crossed my mind.

'Is this perhaps a time limit...?'

Would the tree sprout once the roots completely took over my mind?

"H-Ha."

My chest trembled.

'I really need to stop dragging my feet.'

If possible, I wanted to have the Guilds directly investigate the situation. I didn't want to drag things to where they were now. But how was I supposed to convince them to help me?

It wasn't as if I could tell them I envisioned the entire city getting enshrouded by a tree.

I had no evidence to back up my statement.

'Right, if only I had evidence.'

No, it's fine.

I now had someone who could help.

Aoife.

'Right, with her inf—'

"Hiaaaaakk!"

A shrill scream that sent shivers down my spine shook me out of my thoughts. Hastily turning my head to face the windows of the library, I saw a middle-aged woman on the other end holding onto her head.

Staring at the sky, she screamed her heart out.

"Hieeaaak!"

The scream seemed to come from deep within the depths of her soul.

She became the center of my attention, and before I knew it, I had moved towards the window.

I felt strangely tense coming out of the building.

To the point where I flinched at the sound of Leon's footsteps behind me

I looked at the sky. It had turned completely red, the crimson shade hanging oppressively overhead, turning all that was beneath a blood-red color.

The buildings and infrastructures, though varied in shades, all carried a similar tone. The once jovial mood had long vanished, replaced by a sense of panic. The cobblestone streets were now largely deserted, with only a few remaining—mostly the weaker citizens who were unable to flee.

The only things left behind were the open stalls, half-filled jugs of alcohol, and shredded paper, littered across the empty streets.

It was an eerie scene.

"Hieeaaak!"

Deathly screams continued to echo throughout, each more distant than the other.

"Where is everyone...?"

Aoife was the first one to speak as she looked around grimly. Similarly looking, my gaze eventually fell on Leon who was checking over the woman.

She had stopped screaming already.

"Is something wrong?"

Because his body was covering her, I couldn't see her properly. Only when I stepped to the side to get a better look was I able to understand why she had stopped screaming.

My expression turned grim.

".....She's dead."

It was hard to describe what remained of her. As if all the water had been sucked out of her, she looked like a mummified version of herself.

She wasn't the only one.

Looking around, the citizens from before were now in a similar state to hers.

In the blink of an eye, they had all turned into mummies.

My heart grew tense.

"....."

Leon stood up in silence and looked back at me. I felt Aoife's gaze on me as well.

"What do we do?"

"Uh?"

I blinked.

"....Why are you asking me?"

How in the world was I supposed to know?

"You're right."

Leon frowned while mumbling to himself.

"I don't even know why I asked you. I just did."

The hell?

"How about figuring out where everyone else went?"

At Aoife's suggestion, I looked around. I could more or less tell where everyone went.

"They probably ran to the Guild stations or some sort of safe place."

While most of the people present were superhumans just like us, the Crimson Shade spared no one. Unless one had enough mana reserve, they'd eventually fall under its influence.

In fact, we didn't have much time either.

"We should get out of here."

With each second that passed, our mana was dwindling. We needed to hurry to the Guilds in order to find a solution to this problem.

'Perhaps, they have rooms that stop the shade from affecting us.'

I wasn't sure, but it was our only hope.

Red continued to cover every inch of the city. Empty buildings could be seen, as well as mummified remains resting by the sides. A stifling silence enveloped the surroundings. What had once been a crowded sight was now desolate.

The Decaycore Sector had fallen.

Tak, tak, tak—

The only sound that echoed was the sound of our rushed footsteps as we headed for the Guild offices.

Entering a narrow alley, the heat around us intensified and my mana dwindled further.

It was dark, and I could hardly see.

"Faster."

I picked up the pace.

Coming out of the alley, the light returned, or the red returned... We had crossed to the Sorrowvale Sector. Unlike the Decaycore Sector, the buildings were slightly different. In terms of style, they were a lot more extravagant.

It made sense since they belonged to the guilds.

However, they were all currently empty.

All that was left behind was the red from the shade.

"Let's go deeper."

We ran further into the Sorrowvale Sector. There were two districts within the Sector. The inner district, and the outer district which was located at the very center of the station. That was our goal.

"This way should be faster."

Aoife suddenly suggested, pointing in a certain direction. I nodded and rushed in that direction.

Each second mattered and we couldn't afford to waste it.

Holding onto my stamina, I ran and ran and ran. I didn't know for how long I had run, but soon enough I was able to hear voices in the distance.

"Ah!"

Leon and Aoife too as they picked up the pace.

I followed behind them, turning over one of the buildings before finally coming to a stop in what appeared to be a large plaza.

"Haaa... Haa..."

Immediately, we were able to see a huge crowd ahead of us.

They all seemed to be crowding a certain area.

"Let me in!"

"....Move! You're in the way!"

"Where are you pushing?!"

Panic could be seen on their faces as a faint white glow covered their bodies.

'As expected, they've all run towards here.'

Unlike us, most people had been trained to rush here.

I was a little worried for the other cadets, but the situation wasn't bad to the point where they would have trouble finding this place.

In fact, most were probably okay.

It had to be said that Aoife, Leon, and I had sneaked out...

'Crap.'

Realizing this, my face twitched.

I didn't have a good feeling about what was to come.

"Everyone, please calm down! Please calm down! We will allow you all in the bunker shortly. Please calm down! There's no need to rush!"

A voice bellowed from within the crowd.

I couldn't see who it belonged to, but the moment it spoke, the crowd calmed down. Raising my toes to get a better look, the only thing that I managed to get a glimpse of was a large dome-like structure.

"We are in the process of opening the bunker. There's no need to panic. Once you get in, please find a spot and rest until the Crimson Shade has passed."

The panic that had settled over the crowd started to finally calm down.

"Haa..."

Breathing in relief, I looked to my sides where Leon and Aoife were. Both their faces were red, but in general, they looked okay.

".....The Academy should seriously reconsider sending us anywhere."

Aoife was the first to speak.

Looking at her, she looked back at me with a tired look.

"It's not just me right? For some reason, every time we go somewhere, something happens. I'm done. I just want to stay at the Academy."

"Ha."

I laughed slightly.

It was subtle, but it was enough to make both Leon and Aoife flick their heads my way.

Aoife spoke,

"What?"

"....No"

I brushed my sweat.

"It's just that it doesn't matter if we're at the Academy or not. Something will happen regardless."

"Wh—Huh..."

Aoife pinched her chin while lowering her head. Scratching the side of her head, she soon tilted it to the side before looking back at me.

"I guess you're right. What's the reason?"

"I'm not sure."

I looked at Leon who looked back at me with a weird expression. He almost seemed to be wincing in disgust.

It was as if he was saying, 'It's because of you.'

Ah?

'What's this guy on about?'

Well, sure. I did participate in a lot, if not all of those annoying scenarios. However, in my defense, I was just doing events that were supposed to belong to him.

If anything, he was the culprit.

As if noticing my thoughts, Leon's face changed again.

This time, it seemed to say, '....You're delusional.'

This guy...

"What are you guys doing?"

Alternating her gaze between the two of us, Aoife looked at us strangely.

".....Did you guys lose it because of the heat?"

"No."

I looked at Aoife strangely.

So did Leon who looked at her briefly before looking at me with an expression that seemed to say, 'She's being weird, isn't she?'

I nodded slightly, 'Yeah.'

Not only a stalker but a weirdo too.

Aoife blinked several times as she looked at us speechlessly.

"What are you—"

Rumble! Rumble!

Her words were cut short by a distant rumbling and my body tensed.

Looking ahead, the bunker had started to tremble. Though I couldn't see, I could more or less deduce that the gates were opening.

The rumbling continued for the next few minutes before finally stopping.

Immediately, the crowd started to get restless.

"We want order!"

Once again, the voice echoed.

"Entering the bunker, we would like for everyone to remain calm and not make any trouble. If we see that you're causing trouble, we will have no problem throwing you out!"

Following his words, the crowd yet again calmed down.

"Good! Let's begin!"

And from that point on, everyone calmly proceeded to enter the bunker. I followed the crowd in silence.

On occasion, I'd use the sleeve of my shirt to wipe the sweat that accumulated.

While the mana inside of my body was cooling me, it was far from enough for me to not feel the heat.

"Hooo."

Even breathing was a little difficult.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for us to enter the bunker. By the time ten minutes had passed, it was our turn to cross the small metallic door that led towards the insides.

A small corridor greeted us the moment we entered. One that led towards a small white room.

Two people in white stood by the sides.

"Please step into the chamber."

It took about twenty people to completely fill the room, and once it was filled, one of the people in white closed the metallic door.

Claka, claka—

Turning the wheel at the center of the door, the person in white made sure to properly secure it before raising their thumb in signal.

"Commence temperature assimilation."

Swoosh—

The room temperature dropped rapidly, only stopping at what seemed to be normal temperature. There was no thermometer so I didn't know how much.

"You can stop channeling your mana."

Doing as instructed, I stopped channeling my mana and was able to finally take a deep breath.

So did the others who leaned against the sides of the wall, their heads dripping with sweat.

Claka, claka—

By the time it took for us to adjust back to normal, the doors opened yet again.

However, unlike last time, what appeared on the other side of the doors was a massive hall filled with hundreds of people.

"Please make yourselves comfortable."

The one in white spoke,

".....Welcome to the Last Hold."

Chapter 164 The scream [1]

The insides of the bunker were large.

Despite there being hundreds of people, it didn't seem like that at all. Clearly, it was designed to fit at least a few thousand people. Looking around, I was able to spot the other cadets alongside the Guild delegates. They were currently doing a head count.

At the very end of the bunker, windows lined up on the walls. From there, I could see the outside world and the faint outlines of the buildings which were still covered in a Crimson Shade.

I stopped in my tracks and looked at Aoife.

Feeling my gaze, she turned back and I spoke,

"Can you find it...?"

"Find? Are you talking about the information that you requested me?"

"Yeah."

"I would've been able to before, but..."

She looked around.

"....I don't think it's that simple anymore. There might be a library here, but I doubt it'll be any better than the Guild library."

Frowning, I pondered for a moment.

We couldn't afford to waste any time. Every second felt like my last, and despite the momentary sense of peace that had enshrouded us, I still didn't feel safe.

In fact, it only added to the tension.

It felt as though a dangerous veil was cast upon me, slowly driving me to the corner in the process.

'No, it's fine. I can figure this out.'

Clenching my teeth slightly, I took a deep breath and asked,

"Can you ask someone?"

"....As in?"

"Some of the higher members of the Guilds? Is there a way you can have them talk?"

"....."

Aoife stood still for a moment, carefully observing my face. Eventually, seeing how serious I was, she nodded her head slightly.

"I can."

"Do that."

The information was vital.

"I'll also try."

Leon added from the side. I looked at him before nodding my head.

"....It doesn't matter if what you find is worthless. Just try to look for anything related to it. It's very important."

"Understood."

"Good."

Taking a deep breath, I looked towards the 'The Order of the Silver Seraphs' area which was easily distinguished due to the flag that was hanging by the center of the area. Seeing my group in the distance, I closed my eyes for a moment before making up my decision.

"Let's split up for now."

I could already envision myself getting a good scolding from them, but I knew the situation would get troublesome if they were to think that I was still missing.

The same was true for the other two.

Especially Aoife who had a rather important status.

"If you find anything, just tell me."

I looked around.

".....It's not like we have anything to do here, either way."

We split off from there.

Staring at their backs for a short moment, I finally picked up my pace and headed for the Guild area.

"There's several missing members!"

"....Are there any results?"

"No. We are also missing a few cadets."

"What? How is that possible? They should've just come off training. Did they sneak out?"

Overhearing the conversations that were going up ahead, I tried my best to keep my face composed before heading in.

Immediately, the eyes of many of the members fell on me.

"You."

And I was stopped by one of them.

He wasn't tall. In fact, he was rather short. With soft brown hair and green eyes, he looked at me with a frown.

"Who are you? State your identification."

".....I am one of those cadets that have gone missing."

"Uh?"

Stunned, the man blinked several times. Before he could say anything else, a hand pressed against his shoulder, and a familiar face appeared before me.

With a soft smile on his face, his blue eyes paused on me.

"I've been looking for you all over. Where have you been?"

"The library."

I answered truthfully. I didn't see the need to lie. In fact, it would only make me look more suspicious.

"The library?"

"Yes. I wanted to learn more about the monsters. Since I didn't have access to the Guild library, I had no choice but to sneak out to read for myself."

"...Couldn't you have gone with a group?"

"A group?"

I looked at him.

"...Would there be any group that wants to go to the library?"

"I guess you're right."

With a small laugh, the instructor patted the short man on the shoulder.

"Andrea, you can let him pass. He's with me."

"Okay. If you say so."

"Thank you."

Nudging me with his finger, the instructor led me towards where the other cadets were.

Following him from behind, he started to talk.

"It's a good thing that you're back. I would've been in trouble had you not shown up in the next hour or so."

"...I apologize."

This was indeed my fault.

But there were important reasons for my actions.

In fact,

"Can I ask a question?"

The instructor looked back while he continued to walk ahead.

"Sure."

"Do you know anything about the Tree of Ebonthorn?"

"Tree of Ebonthorn?"

The instructor paused before falling into thought. Following a slight twitch of his head, he shook his head.

"No, it doesn't ring a bell."

"...Is there someone that you think might know?"

"Umm. Is it some sort of monster?"

"I believe it is."

"Then, you might want to ask the Post Leader. There's a chance he might know."

The Post Leader?

'Right, as if I can meet him.'

From what I knew, they were the strongest representative from the Guild stationed in the supply station. Their strength ranged from Tier 6 to Tier 7. I wasn't fully sure. However, I was certain that they were very strong.

Though I was the black star, I knew that I couldn't meet him just because of that status.

Especially not in circumstances such as these.

I could only scrap that thought for now.

'.....I'll still try if I find him'

It wouldn't hurt.

Or if anything, I could also get Aoife to do that.

"Take a seat wherever you want."

Before I knew it, we had arrived at the area where the other cadets were and all eyes fell on me. Sat in a circle, they all wore grim expressions.

I could tell that they were nervous.

Looking around, I found a spot and sat down.

"Where did you go?"

I thought I'd be left alone from that point, but much to my surprise, a quiet voice reached my ears from the side. When I turned to look, I saw Evelyn staring at me.

I was stunned for a second.

"Is it supposed to be a secret?"

".....The library."

But I was quick to recompose myself.

"I was there for some research."

"Research?"

"Just in general. Have you heard of the Tree of Ebonthorn?"

"Tree of what?"

That told me everything that I needed to know.

Still, I was most surprised by the fact that Evelyn had struck up a conversation with me. Usually, she'd totally avoid me, and yet, here she was trying her best to speak to me. I was a bit taken aback.

"Is it important?"

Important?

"Very."

"....."

Sporting a frown, Evelyn seemed to fall into her own thoughts. Eventually, however, she let out a long sigh before looking back into my eyes.

"Do you want me to help?"

'I did it. I asked him. It's whatever. You can't say I am not actively trying. Since he's changed, I should change too, right? Or maybe I don't? Who knows. Maybe I'm curious. Whatever.'

Numerous thoughts swam across Evelyn's mind as she kept her gaze fixed on Julien who was staring back at her.

His deep hazel eyes felt intense, and Evelyn found herself swallowing nervously.

'He's going to reject me, isn't he?'

She was a bit of an overthinker. It hadn't been the first time that she questioned herself numerous times in the past.

But still, she really did want to help.

This relationship of theirs. While she knew that it couldn't go back to how it once was, realizing that he had changed, perhaps, it was time for her to also start taking Leon's words more seriously.

It was for that reason that she wanted to help.

In a way, it was also for her.

"You're willing to help?"

Eventually, Julien's voice fell and Evelyn pursed her lips.

"If you'll let me."

Though Evelyn wasn't sure why he wanted such information, she could see how serious his expression had been when he had asked her.

And it wasn't as though she had anything else to do.

"....Okay."

In the end, Julien nodded his head.

The way he looked at her also changed a little. Though subtle, his face grew a little softer. It was a very subtle change that Evelyn picked up and she bit her lips.

"Thank you."

He really...

"Phew! Phew! Phew!"

Leaning back against the hard ground of the bunker, Kiera blew the bangs away from her face.

"Phew! Phew...!"

She went on like this for the next few minutes.

"Phew!"

Her boredom had reached peak levels. To make matters worse, she didn't even have any cigarettes with her. It wasn't as though she had smoked much over the last few weeks, but it certainly would've helped her alleviate her boredom.

"....I'm bored."

Even saying she was bored was boring.

Everything was boring.

"Haa..."

Turning to the side, she continued to blow on her hair.

"Phew. Phew...!"

As she did, she started to think of a certain someone and the corner of her lips curled slightly.

"He'd get annoyed if I did this, wouldn't he?"

Thinking about the face he'd make, Kiera cracked up a little.

"Kakaka."

Her strange laugh aroused the eyes of those around her. She didn't let that bother her and continued to blow on her hair.

"I'm bored~"

She was now singing.

It was out of tune, and the people near her looked at her with even stranger gazes.

Not that it bothered Kiera much.

"Hyooo~"

In fact, it only ignited her will to sing further.

"The world is red~"

To her, it sounded good, but to those around her, each and every one of her notes sounded like broken glass being cleaned up. Many of those around her distanced themselves, some even glaring at her in the process.

That only made her want to sing more.

"All is red~"

Her song was also original.

'Fuck, I'm good.'

She felt less bored after seeing their faces.

"Smoke tree—"

"Hiaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak—!"

Her song was abruptly cut by a sudden scream coming from near her. Immediately, Kiera's eyes flung up and she sat up straight.

"What? Stop exaggerating. My singing isn't that ba—"

Kiera stopped speaking halfway through her sentence.

Her gaze fell on Johanna, a cadet she only knew the name of due to the fact that they had been in the same Guild orientation group.

With short black hair and a small stature, it was hard to not remember her.

Currently, she was holding onto her hair while looking up at the ceiling.

"Hiaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak—!"

Her scream reverberated throughout the bunker, swallowing all the noise alongside it.

It was a scream that seemed to come from the depths of her soul, and Kiera felt her hand tingle.

The screams continued.

It pierced through the bunker.

"Ah! Haaaaaaaaa!"

It was as if she had lungs made out of steel. But that wasn't the part that gathered Kiera's attention. As of this moment, Kiera's gaze was fixed on Johanna's eyes.

They were completely white.

Her pupils had disappeared.

"Ha."

Kiera moved back.

At that moment, her entire body shuddered.

Chills ran down her spine as Johanna's scream continued to reverberate throughout. It lasted for a few more seconds before eventually,

Thump!

She fell face flat on the ground.

A dreadful silence enveloped the surroundings.

One that felt entirely suffocating.

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Chapter 165 The scream [2]

It was a scream that raised the hair on my hand.

Immediately, my head flicked in the direction of where the sound came from, and I was able to spot a figure holding onto their heads while screaming their hearts out.

Judging from the clothes she was wearing, she seemed to be a cadet.

Not far from her, I could also see Kiera standing still with a petrified expression. It was a rare expression from her.

"Hiiiaaaaak—"

The scream seemed heartwrenching, and in that instant, all eyes turned in the direction of where it came from.

By the time someone has reacted,

Thump!

The one responsible had already fallen face-first on the ground.

"Quick!"

"Someone! We need help immediately!"

"What's going on...!?"

Chaos immediately erupted within the confines of the bunker. Thankfully, a major part of the people within the bunker were people who had been trained and thus the chaos didn't last for very long before order returned.

Several figures with intimidating auras walked toward where the cadet was.

"What's going on?"

"Everyone, move out of the way!"

Behind them were several other figures carrying a stretcher, and first aid kits. Crowding the cadet in question, they cast spells over her body before feeding her some things.

She seemed to calm down from there.

But because they had crowded the area around her, I wasn't able to see what was going on.

However, I didn't need to.

"She's alive. I can still feel her pulse."

"Her eyes are white. They are out of focus."

"She's out of danger, but I don't sense any cognitive response from her."

"Hey, hey! Can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

The situation didn't look promising.

While it was true that she was alive, judging from the way the doctors were speaking, she was unresponsive.

Most likely, she was in a coma.

'Just what happened...?'

It all happened so suddenly and abruptly that I had a hard time figuring out what had happened. Taking a look outside, where the windows were, I felt the situation become extremely eerie.

"Quick!"

My thoughts were broken by a shout.

"Apply new medication! Someone hold her down for me! She's convulsing!"

The doctor's voice allowed me to understand everything that was going on and my expression turned grim.

'This is messed up.'

From the very moment that I stepped into this place, all I felt was dread.

Was this the true reality of the Mirror Dimension?

"Johanna Pearlson."

Aoife's voice reached my ears.

Unknowingly, Leon was standing beside me. So were Evelyn, and Aoife.

Staring towards where the doctors were, Aoife went on to speak,

"Ranked 192. She's a mage with the [Elemental] attribute of water. I've talked to her a few times before."

Hearing her words, I turned to look at her surprised.

'She knows quite a lot.'

I wasn't the only one that was looking at her like that. Leon and Evelyn were also looking at her with similar expressions.

For a brief moment, my gaze met with Leon's.

'She's a stalker.'

'Right?'

"Stop."

Pinching the middle of her brows, Aoife glared at the two of us.

"I don't know what you two are saying, but for some reason, I'm getting annoyed."

'Crazy.'

'....Totally lost it.'

It was weird, but Leon and I were oddly in sync today.

"What is this...?"

Alternating her gaze between the two of us, Evelyn's head cocked. It was almost as if I could see question marks on top of her head.

Then, turning her head, she looked at Aoife.

"I don't get it."

"You don't need to get it."

Aoife massaged her head again.

"....The two are being weird. It doesn't even make sense, but it looks like they can talk with each other by just looking."

"What?"

Evelyn's eyes widened and she looked at Leon who gave her the side-eye.

"No."

That no seemed more like a yes to Evelyn who glanced at me.

I ignored her look and proceeded to look back toward Aoife.

"How do you know so much about her?"

"I've made an effort to memorize the rankings and general talent level of every single cadet after Ellnor.

Aoife answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"We only have three years at the Academy. It's good to memorize the names of everyone that's in the same year as you."

"I see."

Her words certainly had some merits to them.

In fact, I probably needed to do the same thing as her. While it was going to be extra effort, it was certainly going to be useful in the future.

'Who knows, if in the future I gain the rights to create my own Guild, then it wouldn't hurt to hire some people from the Academy.'

But that was all a distant idea of mine.

Still, it was one that I had to do. Simply put, it became awfully clear to me that I couldn't deal with the faceless man by myself.

....He was coming for me.

That much I understood.

Thinking about the numerous organizations that were under his name, he didn't need to show up to destroy me. He could just have the organizations do that for him.

It was for that reason that, besides making a Guild, I also had to infiltrate the Inverted Sky and make it mine.

Only that way would I be able to have a fighting chance.

"Stop!

In the background, the voices of the doctors continued to echo.

"That's enough. Her vitals are stable."

"She's safe for now. However, we won't know if the situation will get worse. It's best if we put under watch."

"Carry her out of this place."

"Understood."

In the blink of an eye, Johanna was carried away in a stretcher. Carefully following her were the medics and the high-ranking members of the Guilds who were closely examining her body.

A few of the cadets were questioned shortly after that, but there wasn't much to ask.

Everyone had been there when it had happened.

It was an abrupt episode that nobody could've expected.

"Everyone, please calm down. We are still unsure of what happened, but we suspect that it's due to the Crimson Shade."

A slightly overweight man with receding hair addressed the people in the bunker. Looking at him, he appeared to be a secretary for one of the Post Leaders.

I wanted to go at this very moment to speak to them with regard to the tree, but I wasn't the only one.

Many others had the same thoughts.

"The victim in question is a cadet that comes from Haven, and therefore, their strength may not necessarily be strong enough to counteract the effects of the shade fully. Please do not worry."

Such was the explanation offered by the members of the Guilds.

It made sense in a way. However, it wasn't as though she was the weakest person within the bunker. There were several civilians present.

Perhaps a more fitting explanation was, 'She didn't have enough training regarding the Crimson Shade like the others.'

It would make sense if that was the case.

In any case, my eyes focused on a certain person in the distance. Blankly staring at the spot where Johanna had been taken away, Kiera appeared to be frowning.

Unknowingly, I made my way towards her.

There was something about the situation that felt unsettling.

I wanted to get a clearer picture of what had happened.

Just as I neared her alongside the others, I was able to overhear her mutterings.

"...I was singing, and shit. My singing is not that bad. Not to the point where one would act like that. Yeah, it wasn't me."

Unconsciously, I found myself looking towards Aoife.

"What?"

She looked offended.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No, nothing."

I scratched my ear.

Right, I guess it was hard to be a good singer in this world.

Not only Kiera, but Aoife too.

"Kiera."

I called out for the platinum-haired girl.

"Uh...?"

Hearing my voice, she turned her head and our gazes met. Kiera blinked her eyes for a moment before clarity returned to her gaze.

Then, just as she was about to speak, her gaze paused on Aoife and her expression crumbled slightly.

"What are you doing here?"

Feeling the evident displeasure in Kiera's gaze, Aoife frowned. Suddenly, tensions rose, but before they could further escalate, I cut in.

"Do you have any idea of what happened?"

The tension did decrease when I spoke.

Though Kiera was still giving Aoife the stink eye, things only stopped there. Staring at me, her displeasure alleviated somewhat.

"It's nothing."

Kiera scratched the side of her neck.

"I was just minding my own business and singing to myself when that happened. That's all I know. I did see her eyes go white though."

Holding onto her arms, Kiera muttered,

"Fucking chills."

"Is that really it?"

Aoife asked.

"Uh, yeah."

Kiera's response was much colder when she addressed her.

It didn't seem like Aoife minded as she looked around,

"Could it really be because of the Crimson Shade? It's true that we only learned of it today, but it's not like someone like Johanna would have trouble understanding the simple concept of using her own mana to shield herself from the Shade. It doesn't add up."

"It's highly likely they're doing this because they want panic to spread."

Evelyn interjected from the side.

To that, I agreed.

This was clearly the real reason why such an excuse was used to justify the sudden situation.

"It could also be that she's sick."

Aoife said, casting a glance around.

".....Though I doubt that's the case too."

I also doubted it.

Swoosh—

Just as I was about to say something else, I felt the hair at the back of my neck stand on end as my head flicked back.

As if noticing my behaviors, the others also looked back.

"Uh? What's..."

In the distance, a face I couldn't recognize appeared.

He was standing alone.

With white eyes, he stared in my direction. I felt my entire body shudder under his gaze as I felt goosebumps.

For the next few seconds, he proceeded to stare at me.

His behavior was so out of order that several others noticed him. Before long, everyone was looking at him.

And then,

"Hiaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak—!"

He too screamed.

Just like last time, the noise pierced through the insides of the bunker.

It was loud and scraped at my ears.

?| Lvl 2. [Fear] EXP + 0.02%

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

Notifications flashed across my vision, and my stomach churned.

I felt the very air get squeezed out of my lungs. Especially, when his white eyes were so focused on me.

I just stood still to stare at him.

"Hiaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak—!"

Veins started to protrude from the side of his neck as he screamed.

Gradually, his face turned red, and then,

Thump!

By the time he did, the entire bunker was quiet.

Not a single noise was heard.

That was because, at that moment, all eyes were on me.

Not a single one was looking at the cadet who had fallen.

No, they were all looking at me.

My throat squeezed shut at the sight.

"Ah, this..."

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Chapter 166 The scream [3]

"....I don't know. That's all I can tell you." Following the scream, I was brought to a separate room within the bunker. They told me I wasn't being 'detained' but seeing how I was inside of a small room with three pairs of eyes locked on me, it was more or less the same. I was being detained. "If you ask me why he was staring at me, I don't know." The fact that the one who had screamed had been looking at me looked suspicious to everyone present. It wasn't like I didn't get it. But it was also true that I was just as clueless as to why and that I was innocent. In fact, he probably only looked at me by chance. Or at least, that was what I told myself. However, recalling the scene from before, I had an inkling that he had indeed been staring at me. "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time—" "I get it, you can stop." A deep voice halted my words. It belonged to a burly man with long brown hair and hazel eyes. Just his presence alone was suffocating. And yet, there were two other such people in the room. A woman who looked in her twenties, with long flowing black hair and blue eyes sat with her arms crossed, while next to her was a lanky man with a long nose, short black hair, and hazel eyes. I didn't know who was who exactly, but I could tell from the pressure that their bodies were emitting that they were Post Leaders. Strangely, I didn't feel nervous. Perhaps it was because I had grown used to talking with big shots, but their presence didn't feel all that intimidating to me. Atlas and Delilah were far scarier than they were. "There is a likelihood that you are indeed an unlucky fellow who happened to be in view of the victim. There's no doubt about that." "Then?" "However, it is also true that they were indeed looking at you. Given the sensitive nature of the situation, we can't just let you walk free. It's also a matter of safety for you." What bullshit. Clearly, they just wanted to keep me locked up in this room. "In any case, we still have to keep you in here. At least, until something else happens and we're sure that you're innocent." "...." I didn't answer to that. What else could I say? I could just tell from the expressions that they were making that they had made up their minds. Just as I was about to sigh at my circumstances, I had a sudden idea. "Hmm." Frowning, the three Post Leaders looked at me. "Are you perhaps unsatisfied with the arrangement?" The burly man asked with a frown. Looking up at him, I glanced towards the other two before shaking my head. "No, I'm fine with the arrangements. It's just that, I'm still thinking about the person who screamed at me." "Oh? Do you know something?" The woman asked. Her voice was crisp and sounded pleasing to the ear. "....If you know something you can share it with us. We might be able to protect you in case the case is really related to you." "No, that's not it." I shook my head. "I just thought that the symptoms sounded similar to something I have read in the past." "...." The room turned quiet after that. Their gazes felt a lot more pressuring. Still pretending to be in deep thought, I pinched my forehead. "What was it again...?" I tried my best to look like I was having a hard time remembering. Acting wasn't hard for me.

In fact, I was an award winner. "Ah." And then, just when they were about to grow impatient, I smacked my palm with my fist. Smack! "Right, I know now!" All attention was on me. "...Tree of Ebonthorn. That's what it is!" "Tree of Ebonthorn?" Repeating my words, the three frowned. Swallowing, I looked at them with slight anticipation. 'Do they know something?' Surely, they'd know something considering their strength and positions. But, "That doesn't ring a bell. Does it ring a bell to you Penelope?" "No, it also doesn't ring a bell to me." "I've also never heard of it before." It was much to my disappointment and shock to find that neither three of them knew a thing.How was this possible? I had almost been certain that they'd know something about the tree, but they didn't. Was the tree something extremely rare? "How certain are you that the symptoms you've mentioned belong to this tree that you've mentioned?" The woman, whom I learned was called Penelope, asked. Looking at her, I nodded seriously. "I'm almost certain." She squinted her eyes, and my body suddenly grew stiff. I found myself unable to move, and breathing also started to become rough. Thankfully, the sensation didn't last for very long. It left as fast as it came and Penelope soon stood up. "Alright, I will go and look into this." She then proceeded to look at the other two. "What about you guys?" "I will look into it as well." "Same." The two similarly stood up. Glancing at me, the burly man placed his hand on the table. "....For now, you will be staying here. Meals and water will be provided to you on a regular basis. You must understand why we're doing this." "Yes." The fact that I looked more suspicious in their eyes after I revealed to them about the tree was something that I took account of. However, it was a worth-it tradeoff considering that they were probably not going to let me out regardless. At the very least, things were going to proceed at a faster rate now. There was only one problem that I could think of. 'If any one of them is responsible for planting the tree, then I put myself in a dangerous position.' It was highly likely that the tree was something that had been artificially placed. The same was true for the incidents that were currently happening. If that was the case, then I was putting myself in danger. However, it wasn't as though I wasn't prepared for such a scenario. Rather, I looked forward to it. "We will update you if we find anything." The three proceeded to leave the room from that point on. Staring at their departing backs, the room soon fell silent. "...." For the next few minutes, I remained seated in my seat before letting out a long breath. "Haa..." Looking behind me, I stared at the window of the small room. Though the room was meant to confine me, there was still a window that granted me a view of what was happening outside. The world was red, and in the distance, I could see the walls of the city. They were tall, and they stretched all around the city. ".....I hope that worked." If there was anyone that could get the information on the tree it was the three of them. If they couldn't, then there was no hope left. I could only hope they'd find something. It didn't matter if I looked suspicious to them. I was ready to deal with the consequences. The only thing in my mind was the tree. The damn tree. Looking down, I stared at my legs. They were completely entangled by the black roots, reaching all the way up to my pelvis. "Haaa... Haa..." I didn't have much time left. *** At the same time, in the bunker. "What in the world is happening? Where did they bring Julien?" "They brought him to questioning." "The hell?" Though Kiera and Aoife didn't see eye to eye, at this moment, they were having a normal conversation. At the very least, the two didn't seem to want to tear each other's throats. "....Why would they do that?" "Isn't it obvious why?" "Johanna wasn't looking at him when it happened to her. Why would they think he had

any involvement in this?" "I don't know. They're just trying to be safe." "Safe my ass." Leon stood by the side listening to the conversation with a blank look. Evelyn was sitting down next to him. "Hey." Hearing her voice, Leon turned his head to look at her. ".....Do you think he had any involvement in this matter?" Though she said that, Leon could tell that she herself didn't believe this. So he just shook his head. "No." He also knew that Julien had nothing to do with the situation. 'Tree of Ebonthorn.' Could this be the doing of the tree Julien had mentioned? Leon thought for a moment before shaking his head. That was unlikely. There was still no tree. The most likely scenario was that someone was trying to plant the tree, and was purposely creating chaos.

For what reason? Leon wasn't sure. However, if he had to guess, then it was to create a distraction. That seemed to be the most plausible answer. He knew that they didn't have much time left. Clank—

All of a sudden, the doors of the inner room of the bunker opened and three figures walked out. Leon straightened his back then, and so did the others. "They're back." However, upon seeing that Julien wasn't behind then, they all were able to guess what had happened. "He's being detained." "Yes." Leon's eyes squinted. 'Not good.'

With Julien out, the situation was a little bit harder for him. Turning his head, Leon looked at Aoife. As if she could read his intentions, she nodded his head.

"Yes, I'll try to ask them about the tree." She had just taken a single step when all of a sudden she stopped. Her head flicked to the left, and so did everyone else's. "Hiiaaaaak—" A scream pierced through. Leon's body froze on the spot. His gaze fell on another person. With white eyes, they screamed at the top of their lungs. But if that wasn't bad enough. "Hiiaaaaak—" Another scream echoed from another area of the bunker. One that was followed by another. "Hiiaaaaak—" And then another. "Hiiaaaaak—" Before long, several screams reverberated within the confines of the bunker. Witnessing the scene, Leon felt his heart chill. But if that wasn't enough, with their white eyes, they all seemed to be looking in the same direction. Leon swallowed his saliva. 'Oh, no.' The inner area of the bunker. Right where Julien had been brought. Thump! The screams didn't last for long. Having learned the lessons from before, the Guild delegates didn't allow them to scream for long, knocking them out rather quickly. However, the damage had been done. At this very moment, all gazes were directed towards the inner area. Leon similarly stared in that direction. Drip...! Drip. But his thoughts were broken by a strange dripping sound. Lowering his head, Leon looked at the ground and then wiped his nose. That was when he noticed his finger was stained in blood. 'Blood...?' All of a sudden, the world started to blur. Turning his head slowly, he felt everyone's gazes on him. Evelyn in particular looked concerned. She appeared to be saying something, but he couldn't quite hear what she was saying. 'What are you saying? I can't hear?'

Leon was confused. Why was he suddenly like this? Blinking his eyes, his mind started to grow blank. He was starting to lose sight of himself. And then, "Hiiaaaaak—" He too screamed.

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Chapter 167 Trauma bonding [1]

It all happened so fast that the girls were unable to react on time. Drip! Drip...! Just when their attention was focused on the ones who were screaming, a subtle dripping sound echoed from beside them. Surprised, the girls turned to stare in the direction of where the noise came from and their gazes fell on Leon who looked out of sorts. "Leon...?" Evelyn was the first one to approach him. The nearer she got, the more apparent it became to her and the others that something was wrong "Leon!" She called his name several times, but he didn't respond. He looked conscious, at least, he appeared to be aware of the fact that they were trying to talk to him. And yet, he didn't seem to know how to react. It was as if his cognitive abilities had shut down. Drip. The blood continued to drip down from his mouth as he blankly looked at them.

Cocking his head, he blankly stared at them. There was something particularly eerie about the state Leon was in. To the point where Kiera felt the need to step back slightly. Aoife felt the same way. Something about his current state made her chest constrict.

Evelyn was the only one that approached him. "Leon? Can you hear me? Leon!" Because of the screams around, their commotion went unnoticed. At least, until Leon's eyes eventually turned white and his body started to sway. "....!" The girls flinched at the sight. Evelyn looked especially worried. "Leon!" But it was too late. "Hieeeeeeeek—" He too started to scream. His scream, just like the others, pierced through the surroundings. The worst part of it all was that he was also looking into the inner area of the bunker.Just like the other people were. "Hieeeeeeeek—" Leon's abrupt change caught the girls off-guard, and none of them knew how to react. It took one of the members of the Guild to knock Leon down for them to snap out of it. "Leon...!" Evelyn rushed to see Leon, but she was abruptly pushed back by the Guild members. "Stay back! The situation is sensitive. He's going into epileptic shock. We need to calm him down first." Indeed, just as the words left the Guild member's mouth, Leon's body started to convulse on the ground. Foam appeared by his mouth as his body twitched in all areas. Having learned from the previous experiences, the Guild members knew what to do and were able to quickly calm him down. The same was true for the other people within the bunker. "Quick! Get him out of here!" "Hurry up!" He was then put on a stretch before getting carried out of the area. The entire time, Evelyn and the others could do nothing but watch. "W-hat the fuck." Kiera was the first one to break the silence, her voice trembling slightly. She was clearly shaken by the ordeal. ".....I get the others, but Leon of all people? How does this make sense? Isn't he like the best after Julien?" The two girls didn't respond to her words. However, it was clear that they felt the same way as her. "This doesn't make sense." Aoife finally spoke. Pinching her chin, a habit she developed over the years, she looked towards the inner bunker area and bit her lips. "....Why is everyone staring in that direction? Could there really be something wrong with Julien?" "Ah." Evelyn unconsciously let out a sound at that. Immediately, the two other girls looked at her, but she waved her hand. "No, it's nothing."It was just that

she had been reminded of a past she wanted to forget. 'No, he's changed. He's changed.'

Though she had her doubts, she trusted Leon's judgment. '....And yet, he was the closest person to him.' Evelyn bit her lips. From the way everyone was looking in his direction, to how Leon had also been affected. All evidence pointed out at Julien. The fact that she had also seen how Julien truly was in the past further added to her suspicion. However, she didn't jump to conclusions. 'Julien is not stupid.' Julien may have changed, but be it past or present, he wasn't stupid. There'd be no way he'd do something that would give away his identity like that. He was most likely being framed. "Julien is being framed." Aoife seemed to think so as well. "Uh? Framed?" Kiera looked confused.

"About what?" Glancing at her, Aoife didn't bother arguing with her and elaborated. "Did you notice how the moment a person screams, they all turn to look in Julien's direction?" "Oh, yeah." "I'm saying that he's being framed. If he was really responsible, he wouldn't do something that would jeopardize his identity like that. He's either being framed, or targeted." "....Oh, right. Sure I guess."

Kiera scratched her nose. "But why would they target him?" "How should I know?" Aoife rolled her eyes and Kiera frowned. Pinching her fingers together in her pocket, Kiera leaned her head closer to Aoife. "What?" "....It's nothing." "It's clearly something. What's with that face?" "It's just how I normally look." "Bullshit! You were clearly thinking some shit." "Why are you so crude with your words?" "And? How about you suck my balls?" "....?" Aoife was at first confused, but when Kiera's words sank in, she made a disgusted look. "That's disgusting." "Like I—" "Stop." Evelyn suddenly interjected. Alternating her gaze between the two, she frowned. "What the hell is wrong with you two?" Both Aoife and Kiera turned to look at her. Just before they were about to speak, Evelyn raised her hand to stop them. "No, I don't want to hear it. This isn't the time for that." There was clearly something sinister within the bunker. It was hard to explain, but Evelyn clearly felt it. That their time was running short.

Whatever was happening, it was slowly creeping its way into them.

In fact, since Leon had also fallen prey to whatever sinister situation was going on, there was no guarantee that they were safe. Looking around, and seeing the evident panic on the people's faces, she forced herself to calm down. "At this rate, we're going to be in trouble. What was it again? Tree of thorns?" "Ebonthorn." Aoife corrected, and Kiera frowned. "Tree of what?" "I just said it." "Yeah, I heard it. But what the fuck is that?" Hearing Kiera curse, Aoife's face squinted slightly, but she was able to keep herself from lashing out and started to explain. "It's something Leon and Julien were looking into before all of this happened." "Uh? Really?" "Yes." Aoife took a deep breath and was prepared to continue when Kiera suddenly interrupted. "If that's the case, do you think that the reason they are in this situation is because of that? You said they were framed, right? What if the ones behind them realized that those two were snooping?" At the start, Aoife was prepared to dismiss Kiera's claims. However, when she thought about

it, she found that she was unable to do so at all. In fact, her words made sense. Raising her head, she looked at Evelyn who appeared to have a similar look of realization on her face. ".....Shiat." A curse slipped Aoife's mouth. "Ah!" By the time she realized, it was too late. Covering her mouth, she glanced at Kiera who was looking at her with a frown. Biting her lips, Aoife prepared herself for the inevitable 'hypocrite' call, but unexpectedly, Kiera didn't do that. Rather, "That's not how you say it." She seemed more bothered by the fact that she didn't say it properly. "It's shit. Not shiat. The hell is wrong with you?" *** "Hooo." Taking a deep breath, the roots that had been tangling my body vanished just like usual. I didn't feel relieved by that fact. Rather, I felt an even greater sense of urgency. I was running out of time. "....What do I do?" Looking around the room, there was nothing that I could do. Given my current abilities, I couldn't force my way out of the room. Not only that but even if I were to get out, what would happen then? There were so many people who were stronger than me. "Haa." I felt a sense of helplessness. Clank—

Breaking me out of my thoughts, the door to the room opened and several figures walked in. Confused, I looked at them. Wearing black uniforms, they stared at with serious expressions.

I didn't like where this was going... "There's been an incident in the outer sector." A tall man with combed black hair, squared-framed glasses, and sharp eyes spoke. As he spoke, he slowly put on a pair of black leather gloves. "Do you know anything about that?" An incident in the outer sector? 'Did something happen again?' Before I even had the chance to ask what it was, several of the men dressed in black lined up behind me.

"Uh?" I looked around in confusion. "What—Uk." I felt my hair pull from the back as the leading man stared at me straight in the eyes. "A similar incident from before occurred. Guess where they were looking at." "...." It was at this moment that I finally understood what was going on. 'Things just don't seem to be going my way.' "I'll ask you kindly now. What do you know about the situation? Speak now while I'm being kind. I understand that you're an important figure, but we can't afford to treat you like the person that you are given the current circumstances. I'm sure Haven will understand the reasoning behind our actions." "...." I remained quiet. Regardless of whether I was going to answer or not, the situation was going to be the same. If I said I didn't know, they'd say 'bullshit'. In that case, I just remained silent and kept my gaze firmly locked on him. "Not speaking...?" Bang—

I felt my head smash against the metal table in front of me. Immediately, the world blurred and my mind became dizzy. Despite that, I didn't let out a sound. "Speaking now?" "...." I continued to remain quiet. Bang—

And the process repeated. My head yet again came smashing against the table. "I don't want to do this. If you speak now, I won't have to do this." "...." Bang—

"Going to speak now?" "...." Bang—

"Still not speaking?" "...." Bang—

I had lost count of the amounts of times my head had been bashed against the table. The pain was there, but I could manage it. The problem came from the fact that I was slowly starting to lose consciousness. My eyesight was blurry, and I felt a wet sensation trailing down my nose. Thankfully, the 'interrogation' didn't last for very long. "....Sir, the cadet is unresponsive." "I can see that." Finally letting go of my head, I felt myself slump back on the chair. Though I was conscious, I could hardly move. My body refused to listen to me. Within my blurred sight, I could make out the outline of the man from before. "We'll take a break now. I'll be coming to visit you again. When you feel like talking, all of this will stop." He then proceeded to leave alongside the others, leaving me in the room alone. Clank—

A stifling silence covered the room as I blankly stared at the ceiling. One that I broke myself. "....He didn't notice." Turning my head slightly, I managed to catch a glimpse of my right arm. Words flowed out of my mouth as I squeezed my hand shut. "Javier McDaniels. A single father of two. Wife died in an accident last year." Closing my eyes, several other memories flashed within my mind. "Haaa.." Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes again. 'I need a bit more time.'

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Chapter 168 Trauma bonding [2]

"Did you manage to find anything?"

A stern man with greasy hair and a round belly greeted Javier by the end of the main hall of the inner area of the bunker. He was the main secretary of one of the Post Leaders stationed at the bunker.

To be precise, he was the secretary of the Black Hound Guild.

"No, nothing yet."

Javier answered while taking off his gloves. Turning back to stare at the door that led to the room where the cadet was currently detained, he pursed his lips.

"....I tried using a little bit of force, but he didn't budge once."

"Then clearly, you haven't used enough force."

"I don't know about that."

Recalling what he had done, Javier pursed his lips. To him, he had certainly used a lot of force.

Despite that, the cadet didn't react.

Perhaps the method he had used was the wrong one.

"Do we have any information on the cadet? Something that I can use perhaps?"

"Information?"

The secretary thought for a moment before answering.

"We do, but they are not in the bunker. As far as I know, he comes from the Evenus Barony. A rather small up-and-coming Barony, and that he's the current Black Star."

"Anything about his family?"

"No, again. That information isn't with us. If we were outside, I'd be able to get you what you want."

"I understand."

"Javier."

The secretary grasped both sides of his shoulders, bringing his face closer to him.

"...You need to understand how important the information is. People are currently suffering. We need to get to the bottom of the situation. You don't know who will be the next one to fall. It could be me, you, or your children."

At the moment his children were mentioned, Javier's expression turned sharp.

"You're right."

"I know I am."

Finally letting go of his shoulders, the secretary looked around.

"Don't worry about the methods that you use. Just try your best to get information out of him. Time is of the essence. I need you to hurry up the process."

"Understood."

Just as Javier was about to leave, he recalled something and turned back.

"You said that I don't have to worry about my methods, right?"

"Yes, don't worry."

"...From what I know, he's a rather important person from Haven. Do you think they'll let it slide if we do something to him?"

"Ah."

The secretary smiled.

"Don't worry. We'll handle the consequences. They're merely an Academy. Their power amounts to nothing when compared to the Guilds."

"Understood."

The interaction ended there. Turning around, Javier looked to his assistants and put his gloves back on.

"Bring me my tools."

"Yes!"

Following that, he went back into the room.

Clank—

"It's me again."

Sat behind the desk, the cadet slowly raised his head to meet his gaze. He looked somewhat lethargic, but his expression looked just as calm as it had been before.

Staring at his expression, Javier's face scrunched up.

'Let's see if you'll be able to remain like that after I'm done with you.'

Clank—

The door behind him opened and several tools were brought in from sharp knives to hammers.

Javier made sure to display each tool on the table.

He wanted to see if the cadet would falter, but instead, throwing a glance at the tools, the corner of the cadet's lips lifted up.

Though he didn't say a word, it became clear to Javier that he wasn't scared.

Javier further clenched his teeth before turning around to address his assistants.

"Tie him up."

"Understood."

Coming down behind the cadet who showed no resistance, his assistants quickly tied him down to the chair.

The process took no longer than a few minutes.

"We're done."

"Leave the room, now."

Javier dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

He needed to be alone for this next part.

"Pardon...?"

"I said leave!"

Irritated, Javier shouted, startling the assistants.

"Understood."

Though confused, the assistants quickly dispersed, leaving the room alone.

Clank—

Before long, it was just the two of them. Grabbing one of the knives, Javier traced his finger over its body.

".....I really don't want to do this to you. If possible, I'd like to keep this exchange a painless one. Tell me what you know about the situation, and I'll let you go. How does that sound?"

"You'll let me go?"

Finally, the cadet spoke.

Staring into his hazel eyes, Javier nodded.

"Yes, I will try my best to get you out."

"....Really?"

"I promise you."

Javier tried his best to put on the most heartfelt expression he could make. In reality, it wasn't up to him. But he wasn't lying when he said he would try his best.

"....."

The cadet remained silent for a moment before he shook his head.

"You're lying."

His expression changed as well, raising his head to glare at Javier.

"I can tell when someone is lying from just a glance. You're definitely going to try your best to help me, but ultimately that decision won't be up to you, will it?"

"....."

Javier's expression frosted over and his grip over the knife tightened.

He was just about to start his session when the cadet's expression turned fierce.

"You think you can do shit to me with that little thing? Heh."

Laughing, he brought his face forward.

"....I've lost my mother when I was young."

Spit flew out of his mouth as he spoke.

"My father, who is the leader of a large barony hardly ever had time to take care of me. I've only had to rely on myself to take care of myself, and my brother. This little pain is nothing compared to what you're about to subject me too!"

Javier's hand, which was about to move, suddenly stopped after hearing his words.

His expression stiffened, and he felt a certain pain in his chest. It dug into his heart, making it hard for him to remain calm.

Those circumstances,

They sounded an awful lot like that of his children.

"H-ho."

His chest trembled at the thought.

'No, this isn't the same.'

However, he still needed to do a job.

Putting the knife down, he made sure the glove fit him perfectly before bringing his fist down to the cadet's face.

Bang—!

As he punched, he heard a scrunching sound. It came from the cadet's nose, and blood flowed down from it. Not minding it, he brought his fist back and punched again.

Bang—!

The entire time, he made sure to keep his face straight.

However, that proved to be difficult.

"Hahahaha."

Laughing with each punch, the cadet showed no signs of being affected by his punches at all. In fact, he seemed to be thriving in them.

"Do it! Punch me harder!"

But that wasn't the worst part.

For some reason,

Bang!

"This is nothing compared to the pain I suffered when my mother died!"

Each and every word,

Bang!

"This is nothing compared to the neglect I've suffered under my father!"

Hurt more than the punches he threw at the cadet.

Bang!

"He is the one who killed my mother! That bastard...!"

Javier flinched, and his fist paused.

With bloodshot eyes, the cadet screamed.

"If only he did his damn fucking job as a husband and father! Coward! He's a coward!
Cow—"

"Haaaaaa!"

BANG—!

The last punch didn't strike the cadet. No, it was directed towards the metal desk.

Silence took over the room shortly after that.

"Haaa.... Haaa... Haaa..."

Javier took heavy breaths.

Raising his head, he looked at the cadet. With his head lowered, he looked unresponsive.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

Breathing heavily, Javier removed the glove and stepped back.

"I... It wasn't."

Massaging his head, he ruffled his hair into a mess before clenching his teeth. Taking a look at the cadet, he took a deep breath and proceeded to go out of the room.

He needed to take a breather.

Clank—

The room plunged into silence the moment he left.

That was when the cadet's body finally moved as he slowly raised his head.

The madness from before was long gone.

Drip! Drip...!

With blood dripping down from his nose, he coldly stared at the door.

Squench, squench.

Gradually, roots sprouted from the ground, covering his legs and finally stopping at his torso.

"Soon."

Julien murmured,

"...Soon."

—At the same time.

Outer Area of the Bunker.

'I need to find out more about the tree.'

Aoife headed towards where the Post Leaders were. Because of her status, the guards stationed didn't stop her along the way and allowed her to enter the Inner area of the bunker.

"Princess?"

The moment she entered, all gazes fell on her.

Aoife could feel tremendous pressure coming from each and every one of the individuals present, but she didn't let that affect her.

Compared to what she had experienced before, they were simply small fries.

No, they were small fries.

"How is the situation?"

Looking around, she found a seat at the edge of the room. There weren't many decorations, with only one table in the middle and a lamp.

In the middle of the table were several files.

"This... We still aren't sure yet."

A young woman Aoife recognized answered.

'Post Leader of the Thorn Rose Guild. Penelope Injark.'

"...From what we understand, this isn't a disease. However, we also don't know what it is. It doesn't seem to be poison or a curse. We've run a lot of tests, and we've yet to find anything to explain the situation."

"Is that so?"

Aoife frowned.

The situation was turning out to be a lot more complicated than she thought.

"But it's not like we don't have any leads."

She went on to say, catching Aoife's attention.

The others looked at her, but none stopped her.

"Tree of Ebonthorn."

"...!"

Aoife had a hard time keeping her expression from changing.

"Tree of Ebonthorn? What is that?"

".....We don't know. It's strange. None of us know."

Penelope answered with a frown.

Looking around, her gaze stopped on a tall man with long brown hair, well-shaped brows, and red eyes.

'Karl Jashmire. Post Leader of the Black Hound Guild.'

Aoife knew him too.

She didn't have good feelings about him.

The Black Hound Guild wasn't a Guild with a good reputation. They were known for their ruthlessness, and if not for the fact that they provided results, the royal family would've already done something about them.

Opening his mouth, he spoke.

"This is usually my area of expertise, but I've also never heard of such a creature before. I suspect this is a lie from the cadet, trying to make us waste time on some nonsensical information."

His words were met with a wave of agreement.

"We're wasting time looking for something that is not there."

"I also think this is a lie to make us waste time."

"It's fine."

Karl raised his hand to quiet down the room.

"....I've already got a few people to properly investigate the cadet. We'll know soon enough if he's lying or not."

"Properly investigate?"

Aoife asked with a frown. For some reason, she started to have a bad feeling.

And as expected, she wasn't wrong.

"Don't worry Princess. He should spill everything soon. I also made sure to tell them to not break him in the process. You can trust us."

Chapter 169 Trauma bonding [3]

"....Do you still have nothing?"

The secretary asked outside of the detention room. From the tone of his voice, he appeared rather flustered and rushed.

Javier shook his head.

"Nothing yet. I've tried multiple methods, but he doesn't budge."

"This is problematic."

Pacing around, the secretary mumbled to himself,

"Post Leader will be disappointed if we don't have anything soon. The information is also vital, and the cadet is our only source of information. It's obvious that he has something to do with the situation. We need to find something."

His head flicked to face Javier.

Licking his lips, he said,

"Try again."

"But--"

"I don't care what methods you use by try again! We need him to speak! If we don't get results soon, then the situation will be bad for both of us. Think about your children! Get this done!"

"....Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes. I said it before, I'll handle the consequences. You do your thing."

"Understood."

Watching the secretary leave, Javier stood still for several minutes. His mind ran with complex thoughts, but as he recalled his children, he clenched his teeth and turned around to face the room.

"...."

Facing the door, Javier stood with his hand on the handle.

For some reason, his hand just refused to turn the knob. It was as if his mind refused to let hi open the door.

Thinking about the words the cadet said, and the fact that he was now the same age as his children, Javier started to feel hesitant.

It was strange.

However, his circumstances coincided a lot with that of his children.

....He kept getting reminded of them because of that.

'No, I have to do it.'

But clenching his teeth, Javier forced himself to throw those thoughts away.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door.

Clank--

It was silent upon entering the room.

Drip...! Drip.

Besides the dripping sound of the blood that flowed down the cadet's face, there was no other sound present.

"B... as..."

At least, that was until Javier picked something up.

It was faint, but he could hear it.

The sound.

...It was coming from the cadet's mouth.

He appeared to be saying something.

"B... a... sho... l.."

Frowning, Javier leaned in closer to hear better. Before he knew it, his ear was next to the cadet.

"B... a... sho... l... kil... m.."

But that was still not enough.

He couldn't quite hear what he was saying.

"What are you saying? Speak louder?"

The cadet didn't respond.

"B... a... sho... l... kil... m.."

Instead, he continued to mumble to himself.

Frowning, Javier stepped back.

Grabbing the cadet's hair, he pulled his head back to see his face. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and it was then that the cadet's eyes shot wide open as he screamed.

"B-astard...! you should've killed me like you killed my m-other. I wouldn't have had to suffer so much if not for you!"

Instinctively, Javier let go of his hair.

Clank! Clank...!

Trashing on the chair, the cadet glared at him with bloodshot eyes as blood spilled out of his mouth.

"You...! It's all your fault! She died because you couldn't do the one job you were supposed to do!"

His scream pierced the room.

"You! Why!? Why did you let it happen...!?"

The cadet's eyes were hollow.

It was clear that he wasn't fully conscious. That he wasn't addressing him.

.....And yet.

"You ruined my life!"

For some strange reason.

"You should've died with her!!"

Every word that came out of the cadet's mouth seemed to pierce directly at his heart.

"You're the reason I don't have a mother!"

"Haaa.... Haaa..."

Unknowingly, Javier felt his breathing starting to become rough.

"S-stop."

He tried to stop the cadet, but he felt sapped of energy.

It tied him down to the spot.

"Died! Died! Died! Died! I hate you!!!"

The screams continued.

They gripped the room entirely.

"All because of you!"

Alongside the screams, the pain in Javier's chest intensified.

"N-no, that's not..."

He started to grab onto his head.

"It... wasn't my fault."

It was a distant past of his. A total accident. Yes, a total accident. His wife and his two children were merely on a walk when a monster appeared.

In order to save them, he stayed behind to help them.

...Or at least tried.

In the end, his wife ended up dying due to his negligence.

Years had passed since the incident.

It was an incident that haunted him to this day.

"T-that's. It wasn't my fault..."

Excuses started to flow out of his mouth.

"I tried. I really tried."

"Did you really?"

"Ah, yes... O-f course."

"The monster you were facing wasn't a strong one. It was a monster that someone of your strength should've easily been able to defeat. You wanted to showboat, didn't you?"

"N-no, that's not it."

"Is it not?"

"I, it was--Uh?"

Javier's head flicked up.

His heart chilled the moment he looked up. Seated in his seat with an indifferent expression was the cadet.

He was looking at him expressionlessly.

.....The hair on Javier's body stood on end the moment he met his gaze.

"Wa-it."

He then recalled the conversation they were having.

Ba... Thump!

He felt the beat of his own heart.

'How did he know...?'

The way the cadet spoke made it seem as though he had been there. But that was impossible.

Impossible!!

Despite knowing that, under that gaze, his muscles turned stiff.

"You, how did you know...? It's im--"

"...You wanted to let your children and wife see just how strong you were, right?"

"What...!"

"The monster was weaker than you, and you were on vacation. You were clearly not tired like you told the others."

"I..."

Javier's eyes started to line with anxiety.

Memories of the past resurfaced in his mind. They were in the woods outside of his estate. The day was clear, and the monster was standing right before him.

It was a two-fanged bear.

A rather weak creature that was known for being nimble and ferocious.

'Haha, watch how I kill it! I'll show you just how strong I am.'

'Go dad! Go...!'

'Kill it!!'

'Haha!'

'Honey, please be careful!'

'Don't worry! I'll tak—'

It was just a momentary lapse of attention.

'Akh...!;

'Ahhhhh!'

That was all it took for everything to go wrong.

He could still vividly recall the screams of terror coming from his wife and children.

"She died because of your carelessness."

"Haa... Haa..."

".....Am I wrong?"

Javier wanted to refute, but he found the words unable to escape his lips.

His chest felt heavy, and the hidden pain he kept hidden started to surface from within him. But that wasn't the worst part.

No, it was those eyes.

His eyes.

"Let me ask again, am I wrong?"

"No...!"

Javier shouted.

"That's exactly what happened!"

Anger started to build from deep within him. It was an anger that was built upon the guilt he kept hidden.

"She died because of me...! Are you happy?!"

His scream reverberated throughout the room.

By the time he was done, the room plunged into silence again. But the only focus of Javier's attention were those two cold and indifferent hazel eyes.

Javier seemed to be able to see his reflection within them.

"....So why are you still here?"

The cadet repeated, his voice layering slightly.

Javier felt his breath caught at his throat.

"H-haa..."

"How can you live knowing that you're such a weak man? All that strength and power. And for what?"

The cadet's voice layered again.

Javier felt his chest squeeze.

'Something is wrong.'

He clearly understood that there was something wrong with the situation. From how the cadet knew all the information, to the subtle layering in his voice.

He knew, and yet...

"H-ha."

He could do nothing about it.

...It was too late for him.

As if two hands had grasped his mind, he found himself unable to move at all. He was stuck in his spot, continuously thinking about the past.

"If you can't even protect your own wife, what makes you think you can protect your own children? "

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

".....If you can't even protect your own children, what right do you have to still be here?"

"Haa. Ha. Ha."

His breathing grew faster and faster.

"Ha. Ha. Haa. Ha."

He had started to hyperventilate.

'Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop.'

Javier continuously begged for all of this to stop.

Clenching onto his chest, he begged and begged and begged.

And yet,

"Your children know of your sin. They just act like they don't."

The voice never stopped.

It grew louder and louder in his mind, completely overtaking it.

The hands squeezed at his mind.

Stop.

Sto.

St.

s.

And then,

"...."

The room fell into silence.

In the silence, the only sound that was heard was the rapid breaths coming from Javier which slowly started to calm down as his head drooped.

That was until Julien's voice broke the silence.

"Look at me."

"...."

Javier looked up.

His eyes were hollow, devoid of any light.

Staring into those eyes, Julien brought his cuffed hands forward.

"Release me."

"...."

Javier stared at the cuffs with a hollow gaze.

"...You know I'm innocent."

Julien's voice reached his ears again.

"Don't let your sins pile up. What would your children think of you? You let your wife die, and then, you torture an innocent cadet?"

His voice, though quiet, seemed to resonate loudly within Javier's mind as he finally began to move, taking out a small key from his pocket.

"Unlock it."

Javier moved forward, bringing the key towards the keyhole of the cuffs.

Clink, clank—

With the turn of the keys, the cuffs opened.

Removing his hands from the cuffs, Julien massaged his wrists before looking at Javier. He looked like a complete husk of the person that had tortured him.

"You've done well."

Julien spoke, moving the cuffs away.

Tak.

Taking a step forward, he looked at Javier in the eyes.

"It wasn't your fault."

".....?"

Julien's words seemed to have brought some clarity back into Javier's eyes.

But such clarity only lasted for a few seconds before he added,

"This is the first time I've tried this. I'm not quite adept at it just yet. You were clearly aware that I was manipulating you, and yet, your guilt seemed to have overridden that fact."

Extending his hand forward, Julien placed the tip of his finger against Javier's forehead.

".....There's still so much I have to work on."

Xiu!

Javier's world turned blank shortly after.

Thump!

His body fell back, and blood slowly started to pool from behind his head where a small, almost imperceptible, hole appeared.

Staring at his body, Julien closed his eyes.

Then, opening them up again, he started to get undressed.

This was merely the start.

Chapter 170 Escape [1]

'...I killed him.'

Staring at the officer's body, I massaged my wrists. They were hurting slightly.

In all honesty, I didn't have to kill him. Simply knocking him out would have done the trick, but I didn't want to risk it.

In the chance that he woke up earlier than I anticipated, he'd ruin my plans.

Well, at least, if he wasn't still broken then.

But I doubted he was. While I had indeed managed to manipulate him using his past, and Emotive Magic, it wasn't to the point where I completely ruined him.

...I was still not there yet.

But I was following the right path. Of that, I was sure.

I was confident in being able to break someone with just words in the future. I just needed to grow more familiar with these strange powers of mine.

"Haa."

Looking around, I took a deep breath and removed my clothes, replacing mine with his.

I was quick with it and in a few minutes, I was wearing the same clothes he had been. Taking his hat, I placed it over my head and lowered it.

"Not really a good way to hide my face, but it'll do."

The current situation was eerie.

For some reason, it felt as though I was being targeted.

No, I probably was.

But who? Who was targeting me...?

That was the problem. Besides Leon and the others, I couldn't really trust anyone else. Especially not the Post Leaders.

What if they were in cahoots?

The fact that I was tortured right after mentioning the Tree of Ebonthorn was suspicious in itself.

"I need to get out of here."

That was the only option I had left.

The bunker was not safe.

Escaping would've been problematic before, but I now had Javier's memories.

I more or less understood the inner structure of the bunker.

There were two exits to the bunker. One was at the very entrance where I had come from, and the other was in the inner area. It became fully clear to me that I could no longer stay here. I needed to get out of the bunker.

Turning around, I stared at the reddened world outside of the window.

".....This is going to be difficult."

The Crimson Shade was still gripping the outside world. The moment I exited the building, I'd have at best a few hours before running out of mana.

However, I needed to go out.

'I need to reach the library of the Guilds.'

I knew that the information that I needed was going to be there.

It was vital information that I needed. Since whoever was responsible for this was trying to stop me from finding anything about the tree, I figured I'd be able to solve the

situation if I understood the reasoning why I was being stopped from finding out about the tree.

The only problem was figuring out who to give the information to.

"Huuu."

I took a deep breath.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to think about that for now.

Perhaps later when I found the information.

Right now, I needed to deal with something else.

To Tok—

Someone knocked on the door.

"Javier? Javier? Did you find anything?"

It was a greasy tone.

Whoever it was, they didn't strike me as pleasant. In fact, I already had an idea of the identity of the one behind the voice.

I had seen it in the memories.

"Javier?"

Seeing him call for the captain again, I cleared my throat before murmuring.

"Come."

It was just one word.

However, it was all that I could afford to say in the given moment.

My voice and Javier's voice were too different. It'd be easy for anyone to recognize it if they paid close attention.

"....."

I stood there in silence, my heart gripping at my chest.

Did he figure it out? ...Is he going to call backup?

The silence felt eternal, and my body tensed.

Clank—

The door soon opened, and his voice echoed quietly from behind.

"Judging from the silence, it looks like you're done."

A round man with receding hair entered the room. Having already moved Javier's body, he didn't notice anything amiss as I stood by the end of the door.

"That's good. Post Leader will certainly be hap—"

I pressed my finger against the back of his head, and he froze on the spot.

He tried to scream, but I placed my hand over his mouth.

"Mhh! Mhm!"

Clank—

I then kicked the door shut.

"Mhh! Mhm!"

The man's face was white as he looked at me. He was clearly stricken with panic. It was a completely different sight from the ones in my memories.

.....It was good that he was also not very strong.

About the same Tier as me.

Clenching my hand, threads emerged from everywhere, grasping onto his arms, and legs.

"Mh!"

Hanging suspended mid-air, I looked at him wordlessly.

He was still screaming and shouting, but he could hardly make any noise with his mouth covered.

Tak.

Calmly walking, I reached out for his pockets and took whatever he had in them.

From keys to money, and anything in general.

Then, placing my hand over his head, I activated the second clover ability.

"Huuuu."

Absorbing his memories, I leaned my head back.

From him, I got an even better idea of how the inner system of the bunker worked. But not only that.

"Black Hound Guild."

.....So they were the ones that were responsible for this.

Finally, I had gotten a lead and a destination.

I had previously been planning on going to the library of the Order of the Silver Seraphs. However, things were now different.

"I shouldn't waste any more time."

Looking around, I met the eyes of the secretary. He looked to be pleading with me. From the way he was moving, and the tears streaming down the corner of his eyes, he looked scared.

Staring at him, I eventually nodded.

"Sure."

And clenched my hand.

Pfft!

He died in an instant.

It was unfortunate, but I couldn't afford to keep him alive.

Especially not him.

"Huu."

Taking a deep breath, I lowered the hat to hide my face properly and opened the door.

Clank—

What greeted me upon exiting was a long and narrow corridor that separated from left to right side. The corridors were dimly lit with a few doors on the sides, and in the distance, I could hear the faint sound of footsteps.

Knowing where I needed to go, I headed for the left side.

Clank—

Of course, I made sure to close the door behind me.

"Ten minutes."

I quietly murmured to myself while walking along the corridor.

That was how much time I had at my disposal before they would find the corpses.

The corridors were further divided into many separate ones the deeper I went. If I had not read the memories of the secretary and Javier, I would've thought of this place as a maze.

It was good that I did read them.

"How long do we have to stay here?"

"...I'm not sure. Until the Crimson Shade lasts. Last I heard, it usually lasts a few days to a week. We'll be here for a week."

"Ugh, that's long."

"What can you do about it?"

In the distance, I could hear the faint sound of a conversation. My heart clenched, and my steps paused.

It was coming from another corridor, and they were headed my way.

I looked around me.

There were several doors in front of me. Hastily reaching out for my pocket, I took out a set of keys that contained over thirty keys and hastily made a move for one of the doors.

"Oh, yeah. What are we having for dinner?"

"From what I know, it's nothing special. Meatloaf, and some potatoes."

"That's not bad."

The voices grew nearer and nearer.

In the meantime, I slotted each one of the keys into the sockets.

'No, not this one.'

'Not this one too.'

'.....This one isn't it either.'

A tingling dread crept through my body as I slotted one key after another.

I couldn't afford to be caught.

...The moment I was caught, my plans would fall entirely and the Post Leaders would move. I couldn't afford to let that happen.

'No, not this one.'

I continued to try each key.

"Still, I'd rather cook for myself. My wife makes some amazing dishes. Once we get out of here, I'll make sure to invite you."

"For someone who brags a lot about his wife, I'm starting to grow really curious about her cooking."

"Hehehe."

The voices drew nearer.

It was only a matter of time before they spotted me.

I felt my breath caught in my throat as my chest tingled, and my hand felt light. I slotted each key into the hole, sometimes slipping due to the rush of the situation.

'Fuck.'

My hands trembled slightly.

It made it even harder for me to slot the keys, but I had no choice.

I didn't know how strong the guards were, but they were certainly stronger than the secretary. There was a chance I might be able to fight them, but how long was that going to take?

By the time I defeated them, I'd be caught again.

...And if before I seemed suspicious, I'd now look like the culprit.

"Haa... Haa..."

Unknowingly, my breath grew heavy.

Anxiety started to gnaw at me.

'Not this one either...'

'This one... No.'

'Again.'

I'd look back from time to time. A deep sense of urgency rested in my chest as sweat accumulated on the side of my face.

'This...'

"Oh, right. Did you hear about what happened with Jacob last night?"

"No, what happened?"

The voices were now extremely close.

My pulse raced, and my insides tightened.

I took a hot, and impatient breath.

"Haa... Haaa..."

I continued to insert one key after another.

The keys rattled with each attempt, and the voices drew near. My toes started to tingle, and I was no longer breathing.

I felt suffocated.

"You don't know? Everyone was talking about it."

"Is that so?"

I could now hear the sound of their footsteps.

'Oh, no.'

Just when I thought I was going to fail, one of the keys finally entered and I turned the key.

Click—

My eyes lit up at the sight.

"...Yes."

Hastily opening the door, I was about to get in when I suddenly stopped.

Squench. Squench.

"No,no,no,no,no,no,no..."

Hearing the familiar sound, fear prickled the base of my spine. Looking down, roots covered the entirety of my body, stopping all the way up to my chest, squeezing me tightly.

"No, why now... no, no...!"

My face shook.

And then,

"Who's there!?"

"Who is that!?"

The guards spotted me.

Turning my head, I was suddenly overcome with despair.