

## **Advent of the Three Calamities**

### **#Chapter 181 Silence [5] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 181 Silence [5]**

#### **Chapter 181 Silence [5]**

I stood frozen in silence as I felt the gazes of the eaters in front of me.

My chest clenched with anxiety at the sight before me, but upon realizing that I had yet to be attacked, I understood that they had only reacted slightly to the door opening.

'I'm still safe.'

At least, for now.

Staring at the eaters in front of me, I fiddled with my pocket. I still had two mana bombs with me.

They would certainly be useful in this type of situation, however, I chose against using them this time.

I looked at the long and narrow alleyway in front of me.

'.....I'll only screw myself over if I use them.'

While it was true that the mana bomb would attract the eaters away from me, it would also attract the eaters behind me.

That would make escaping impossible for me.

With eaters on both sides, I'd be completely helpless.

'Now what...?'

I had two options.

Go back inside, or move past the eaters in front of me.

The choice was rather simple after I thought about it.

'I'll go this way.'

The number of eaters in front of me was quite high. However, when compared to the entrance, it was probably much lower.

For that reason, this was the best option for me.

'It's not like I have to use the mana bomb.'

On another note, it was also true that I didn't have to use a mana bomb. Perhaps it was because of the situation that I was in, but I was starting to overthink a lot.

Was I the type to overthink...?

Perhaps, but for some reason, it felt as though my mind was slowly losing clarity the more I stayed here. I had noticed something similar happening back at the bunker when I started killing without regard.

Was it a coincidence?

I didn't think so, and all of a sudden, I was reminded of the words I read back at the library.

'....It can't be.'

Was the tree already affecting me?

But how was that possible...? I wanted to refuse the possibility with all my heart, and yet, the more I thought about it, the more likely this possibility was true.

'This might also explain the roots that have been haunting me.'

I felt a pang of anxiety when I thought about it. Recalling the fact that roots had now reached my face, I knew I didn't have much time left.

"....."

I lowered my head to stare at my shoes.

While it was indeed a bit of a pity, I had no choice. There were no rocks around, and the alleyway appeared to be spotless.

The shoe was my only option.

'....If only I could open my bag.'

There were many things that I could use instead of my shoes, but opening the bag would create too much noise.

This was unfortunately the safest method.

Thus, taking off my shoes, I wrapped one of them with the threads.

The alleyway was quite long. I could see the exit from where I was, but it was quite far. Thankfully, it wasn't a distance I couldn't cover with my throw.

Therefore, tensing my body further, I threw the shoe as far away as I possibly could.

Thud!

In the silence that took over the surroundings, a subtle 'thud' resonated, and the eaters all raised their heads to face the same direction of where the noise came from.

"Hieeek—!"

Shortly after, they screamed and ran towards where the shoe was.

Their speed was quite fast, and in seconds, they were already quite far.

I followed right behind them.

I wasn't worried about the sound of my steps as I walked without my shoes. It helped reduce a lot of the noise that I made.

"Hieeek—!"

Just as the eaters were about to reach the shoe, I pulled it back with my thread and caught it with my hand.

I was still not out of the alley.

Catching onto the shoe, I tensed my arm and threw the shoe again.

Thud!

The eaters once again screamed and followed the noise.

'It's working.'

I continued to run behind them.

My pace was rather slow, but in no time, I was finally able to reach the exit of the alleyway.

"Hieeek—!"

The monsters were still chasing my shoe, but just before they could eat it, I'd always retrieve it back and throw it in another direction.

Only when I got far away did I finally retrieve my shoe back for good.

'Well, maybe...'

Staring at the dangling shoe in front of me, I didn't know how to feel.

It was torn apart with multiple scratches and gashes all over. It wasn't an expensive shoe, but I still felt pained seeing the state it was in.

.....In this world, I wasn't rich.

Every little Rend mattered to me.

'I'll get the academy to reimburse me if it's the last thing I'll do.'

This was a pledge.

'Now, then...'

I looked around me.

I was back standing in one of the streets that led to the main plaza.

The streets were deserted, and absolute silence gripped the surroundings. It was hard to describe the situation, but it felt incredibly unsettling.

Cr Crack—

The silence was broken by a faint cracking sound coming in the distance.

Raising my head, I stared at the hand that was gripped against the station walls. Bit by bit, it was starting to destroy the walls, creating more and more cracks.

More eaters started to emerge from the other side, entering the station in hordes.

I stared at the hand in thought.

'.....I can't really see how strong it is.'

From the book, 'silent eaters' were Terror Ranked creatures. It was for this reason that I never bothered fighting them.

However, staring at the massive hand in the distance, I wasn't so sure that creature was Terror Rank.

I had a feeling it was higher ranked.

If that was the case, the only people that could deal with it were the Post-Leaders.

'Right, the Post-Leaders.'

A sudden thought entered my mind at that moment.

It was a crazy thought.

One that might land me in a whole world of trouble, but at the same time, it was also the only way for me to have a chance at gaining the missing page.

'Yes, I'll do it.'

But now was not the right time yet.

The first thing I needed to do was get back near the bunker.

Taking a small and shallow breath, I quietly moved around the cobblestone streets to head for where the bunker was.

The location wasn't quite far, and I knew exactly where I needed to go.

Along the way, I'd noticed eaters around, but none of them noticed my presence. In fact, they all seemed to be rushing towards where I had previously been.

"....."

Walking past one of the eaters, I glanced at one of the mummified corpses that was lying down on the streets.

There were many of them, and under the heat, they almost became unrecognizable.

.....I had just turned to look away from the corpse when all of a sudden, I heard a faint rustling noise coming from it.

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned my head.

Two white eyes.

They were staring back at me.

I felt my heart freeze.

Before I could even react to the situation, I watched with numb horror as the corpse's mouth opened, and,

"Hiaaaak!"

A hoarse scream escaped its mouth.

It was a raw, grating cry. It was as if the vocal cords were shredded with each desperate exhalation, producing a chilling, almost inhuman wail that echoed throughout.

"....."

In a matter of seconds, I heard a series of sounds coming from all sides.

Realizing my situation, I prepared to run away, but,

Tak—

The corpse moved yet again, its skinny and mummified arm clamping against my ankle.

"Kh...!"

I tried to release myself from its grip by moving my leg, but the corpse refused to let go as its white eyes continued to stare at me.

Yet again, its mouth opened.

This time, it didn't scream. Instead, it started to speak, as yet again, its hoarse voice echoed out.

".... Stop... Resisting..."

It was only two words, but they were enough to send chills down my spine.

And then,

"Hieeek—!"

The eaters arrived, surrounding the area from all sides.

I looked around me with bathed breath and stopped resisting. The corpse next to me continued to speak.

"Become... One... With... The... Tree..."

My pulse raced, and I fiddled with the mana bomb in my pocket.

There was little time at my disposal. With the corpse still gripping onto my ankle, and the eaters staring in my direction, I knew that the situation was dire.

Extending my hand in the corpse's direction, threads flowed out from my arm, wrapping around the arm that was entangling my ankle.

Clenching my hand, the hand severed in two.

In spite of my actions, the corpse continued to stare at me with its white eyes.

It no longer seemed to be able to speak, but its gaze was enough to send shivers down my entire body.

....Unfortunately, I had no time to stare back into its eyes for too long.

Taking out the mana bomb, I threw it in the air where it exploded.

BOOOM—

The surroundings shook, and the eaters lunged in the air.

"Hieek! Hieeeeeek!"

I turned around and dipped.

"Haa... Haa..."

Despite my best attempts, I couldn't stop my breath as I ran. I was starting to get tired again, and the mana inside of my body depleted further.

'This is bad.'

I now only had one mana bomb left to spare, and eaters appeared from all sides, rushing in the direction of where the bomb sounded.

However, there were quite a few that were headed right at me due to the noise that I made, and gritting my teeth, I could only increase my pace and run across the cobblestone street.

....I wasn't running blindly this time.

Despite not going in the direction of the bunker, there was one place that I was currently headed to.

The control station.

Located at the very heart of the station, it was where the emergency station was located.

While I didn't know much about it, looking up and staring at the speakers located on some of the poles that were stationed around the streets, I knew this was my best bet in getting rid of the eaters.

While the eaters thrived in silence, it was also their biggest weakness.

Once the horns started, the eaters were going to be in a state of utter confusion, unable to know where to go.

That was my best bet at escaping.

"Huu."

Thus, taking a deep breath, I picked my pace further.

## **Chapter 182 Silence [6]**

The emergency station wasn't far from where I was. I could practically see it from where I stood.

It was within a tall, black spiral that twisted towards the sky, starkly contrasting with the surrounding buildings. The structure's dark, glossy surface reflected the dim red light coming from the Crimson Shade, making it look like a shard of obsidian jutting into the sky.

It was hard to not take notice of such a building.

Rushing with all my might, I looked behind me to see several eaters glancing my way. I pursed my lips and continued to sprint.

Bang--!

"....!"

The building next to me shattered and a hand crept in my direction.

I felt my heart jump out of my chest at the sight of the hand. It was fast, and I just barely managed to avoid it by ducking down.

"Hiieeek--!"



Emerging from the building was an eater who twisted its head in the air to feel for any noise.

At the same time, I felt the sound of multiple rushed steps heading in my direction. It was likely that the eaters had been attracted by the noise.

I bit my lips and fiddled with my pocket. I only had one mana bomb left.

I couldn't just carelessly throw it.

....I needed to make good use of it. After a little bit of thought, I put my hand away from my pocket and moved back while keeping my gaze on the eater who continuously tilted its head for any sound.

The wails of the other eaters grew near, but I kept my lips pursed and my heart steady.

"...."

In the silence, I continued to move back.

Every part of my body felt tense.

Licking my lips, I continued to move back. Silence completely took over my surroundings. Holding onto my shoe, I coiled the threads around it before eventually tossing it towards the distance.

Thud.

Without looking back, I rushed towards the emergency station.

I was just about to retrieve the thread when I felt a certain pain in my chest.

Something leaked from my nose. Wiping it, I could see that it was blood, and it was then that I realized that my thread had been snapped.

....Just like that, my shoe was gone.

'I'll really ask for reimbursement after this!'

I quite liked my shoes.

Turning the corner of the street, I finally managed to spot the entrance of the spiral.

But soon, my steps came to a halt.

"....."

I stood silently while catching my breath.

'.....This is troublesome.'

Standing right before the entrance of the spiral were over a dozen eaters, all looking around with their heads twitching.

I fiddled with the mana bomb in my pocket.

'Good thing I didn't waste it.'

Things would've been a lot more troublesome otherwise. Gathering my mana into the bomb, I turned around to throw it when I stopped.

"....!"

A face appeared right before me and I shuddered. With its eyes staring directly at me, its grotesque smile widened.

"Haaaaa..."

My feet numbed, and its hot breath fell on me.

....I tried my best to keep my heart steady.

But it was hard.

Really hard.

Especially when its mouth opened, revealing a long, serpentine tongue that slithered out like a grotesque tendril. It extended impossibly far, snaking through the air slowly and steadily, heading directly towards where I stood.

"....."

Swallowing my saliva, I tossed the mana bomb in the eater's mouth and jumped back.

Thud.

Over a dozen gazes fell on me at that moment, but I didn't care. I turned towards where they were and directly rushed at them.

Tak. Tak.

I could hear the sound of my steps echo within the silence, and I felt my throat clamp up.

The eaters in front of me opened their mouths to scream, but just before they could, the sound of an explosion resounded.

Bang--!

Their heads twitched, and they rushed forward at incredible speeds.

I didn't stop.

I continued to run forward, while they ran directly at me.

I could feel their gaze on me as they rushed, and my heart pounded out of my chest.

I didn't let that affect me and continued.

Three meters...

Two meters...

One meters...

We were now just a meter away from each other. Their mouth opened to reveal their sharpened teeth, and I ducked down.

"Hieeek--!"

The eaters chomped at the air before rushing forward, completely dismissing me.

Without looking back, I helped myself from the ground and rushed towards the emergency station.

The door was broken, and so I didn't need any keys to enter.

"...."

Slowing my steps down, I took a small orb from my back and tapped on it. Light immediately appeared, illuminating my surroundings.

Holding it in front of me, I was able to see the insides of the building.

"...."

Everything was a mess. Shards of shattered glass littered the floor, glinting ominously in the dim red light, while torn-out papers lay strewn about, fluttering slightly due to the heat.

Walking towards the stairs, I held onto the handrails and took my first step up.

Creak...!

But the moment I did, I almost felt my heart jump out of my chest.

I immediately looked back and sighed in relief upon seeing that no eater had noticed anything.

'How annoying.'

Looking down at the wooden stairs, I tried to think of a way to move up without making any sound.

Putting pressure over the handrails, I made sure that they didn't break at my weight, and held onto them more tightly.

'....Okay, this might work.'

With the aid of the handrail, I took a slow and careful step up. Unlike the first time, no sound came out this time.

I nodded in relief and took another step.

The location of where I needed to go was the last floor. Because of the method that I was using to go up the stairs, it took me several minutes to get up there, but once I did, I pressed my foot against the ground and relaxed upon seeing that no sound came out.

I immediately rushed forward after that.

The last floor was rather small. It was about the size of a classroom, with a door on each side.

I looked to my right and then to my left before deciding to go on the right side.

Opening the door quickly, I went in and looked around. The room was quite small with little decoration. Nothing about the room popped out besides the large windows that allowed one to get a look at the entire city from above and the wooden desk before it.

I looked outside and felt my expression stiffen slightly at the number of eaters that were present outside.

'This is not good.'

There were more and more entering by the second. It wouldn't be long before the entire station would be flooded by them. Not only that but looking up, I could also see that the large creature behind was getting closer and closer to tearing the walls down.

Cr Crack...!

The sound of the walls cracking continued to echo in the air.

Such thoughts brought urgency to my mind as I picked up the pace.

'Ah...'

I soon found what I wanted and moved towards it.

'This is it.'

It was a small device that looked like a remote. It was quite small and was easy to miss since it rested on top of a chair.

I didn't hesitate to channel my mana into the device before pressing on it.

WHIII—!

Immediately, the blaring sound of the sirens echoed throughout the entire station.

WHIII—!

They were loud, and the noise was hard to dismiss.

Immediately the eaters looked up and their heads twitched.

"Hiekk—!"

Their screams and wails echoed throughout as they appeared utterly confused by the situation.

I had been worried they'd attack the sirens, but they didn't since they were so evenly spread, making it hard to pinpoint.

Latching onto their hair, the eaters pulled them out while they wailed in the air.

"This is good."

I could finally relax. Holding onto the remote, I grabbed anything that looked useful before heading back down.

This time, I didn't need to use the help of the handrails and was easily able to get down to the first floor where I rushed out.

"Hiseek—!"

As expected, none of the eaters took notice of my presence the moment I came out. With the sirens blaring loudly, they didn't have time to pay attention to me.

I finally was able to calm down.

'....That's one situation resolved.'

Then, staring in a certain direction, I pursed my lips before rushing forward,

It was now time for me to handle the other situation.

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Bunker, Outer Area.

Panic was already blooming within the bunker. Such panic only intensified at the presence of the eaters. Everyone was naturally scared, but the people who were protesting were no longer protesting as none of them wanted to leave anymore.

It was for that reason that the situation calmed down.

"Tsk."

Clicking her tongue, Kiera sat down with a sullen expression.

With what was happening outside, it was hard for her to stir up some shit.

She felt a little disappointed at that fact.

Staring at the window outside, she suddenly heard a loudly blaring sound.

WHIIII—

It appeared to come from the entire city, and the eaters outside the bunker appeared to go berserk.

She was surprised by the situation, and before she could even question what happened, a voice echoed from beside her.

".....It's probably Julien's doing."

Recognizing the voice, Kiera frowned. However, she pushed her feelings down and turned to look at Aoife.

Her expression changed a little when she saw the state of Aoife was in.

She looked rather haggard.

As if she hadn't slept for a few days.

"He's escaped."

That was all she said, and Kiera's focus shifted away from her well-being. Well, it didn't matter to her anyway.

".....That guy escaped?"

"Yes."

Aoife nodded.

"He's created quite a mess. All the post leaders are discussing sending a potential team out to get him back, but the situation turned like that so it has been postponed."

"Oh."

Kiera understood what she meant.

She could tell that there was chaos in the inner parts. She didn't really know why, but now she knew.

"So you think he's the one responsible for the sirens?"

"....Yes, most likely."

Aoife sat down next to her. She looked even more tired now, and Kiera tilted her head.

The scene looked a little familiar.

'Don't tell me...'

Slap—

"....!"

Aoife turned to look at her with wide eyes.

"What was that fo—"

Slap—!

Kiera slapped Aoife again while looking at her with an extremely serious expression. It almost looked like she was trying to help.

"You're showing the same symptoms as the others. You're about to turn into a screaming bitch. Let me fix you before it's too late."

"What...? Wait!"

Aoife raised her hand to block Kiera's slap.

She then glared at her.

"I'm not turning! I'm tired because I've been questioned by all the post-leaders due to what Julien did! I helped him out a little!"

"Ah."

Only then did Kiera understand as she awkwardly scratched the back of her head.

"....You should've said so sooner."

Aoife didn't respond to that.

She didn't know how to respond to that. How could she have known Kiera was going to slap her like that?

Clenching her teeth, she turned her head to look outside.

'I don't have the energy to fight her.'

It was all red, and quiet.

"Hmm?"

Looking in the distance, she spotted a faint silhouette approaching their direction.

It appeared to move nearer to them. Frowning, Aoife squinted her eyes to get a better look, and when she did, her eyes widened.

"What the..."

"Uh, what?"



Kiera similarly looked in the direction she was looking.

Her expression also changed.

"Uh...?"

It looked like Kiera also recognized the figure.

Aoife pursed her lips.

.....Why was he back?

And why did it seem like he was looking directly at her and Kiera?

### **Chapter 183 Silence [7]**

WHIIII—

The sirens continued to blare throughout the entire station. Walking past the buildings, I headed towards a familiar location.

'.....If my guesses are right, then the missing page will be what allows me to understand what's going on properly.'

While I didn't check the other guilds, I was sure they also had no information regarding the tree.

The fact that none of the post-leaders knew about it was also concerning. It was as though all information about it had been completely wiped from the world.

It didn't make sense.

No, it did make sense. But that would mean that...

'That's impossible.'

I bit my lips while staring at my hand. There was another possibility I was entertaining to explain the situation.

It was a possibility that I wanted to refute with all my heart, and yet, thinking about everything that had happened, it seemed to become more and more likely to be true.

"Hoo."

I took a deep breath and slapped both sides of my cheeks.

'Let's not think about it. I'll first get over this part.'

Cra Crack—

Accompanying the blaring sound of the sirens, a wild wail echoed throughout the air. It pierced through it, almost drowning out the noise from the sirens.

At the same time, more cracks started to appear on the walls of the city as the station started to become flooded with even more eaters.

Quite obviously, the sirens had startled the beast outside.

It was now putting even more effort into trying to get in.

".....I better hurry."

Quickening my pace, I turned a corner where a flickering lamp cast a dim glow under the red-tinted sky. In the distance, a familiar dome-shaped building came into view.

From where I stood, I could see the windows of the bunker and I headed directly for it.

'....I see a familiar face.'

It looked like Aoife, and as if noticing my presence, her head turned to face me. Immediately, her eyes widened and shortly after, Kiera's face also appeared.

Her eyes widened in a similar fashion and she slapped Aoife...?

'Uh...?'

She slapped her?

It really did seem like it as Aoife glared at her and the two started to argue.

But it wasn't just the two of them that noticed my presence. The others situated by the windows also spotted me, and a crowd soon started to gather as they all pointed at me.

'Good.'

This was what I wanted as I headed closer to them.

I couldn't hear anything that was going on on the inside, but it didn't matter. Soon, the crowd split, and a few faces appeared. I could tell from just a glance that they were powerful.

I also knew exactly who they were.

The post-leaders. They were all looking at me with different expressions, but I didn't care as my gaze fell on a certain person.

What stood out the most to me were his glaring red eyes as they looked at me. It felt as though I was being stared at by a hound, ready to pounce at me at any second.

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

I felt the corner of my lips twist slightly at the sight of him.

'This may be the first time I've met you in real life, but it isn't as though I'm not familiar with you. '

I had plenty of memories to work with.

"...You've got the page, don't you?"

As I spoke, I made sure to do so extremely slowly so that he would understand my message.

.....And I was sure he did as his expression changed slightly. It wasn't much, but it was enough for me.

I fully smiled then.

"I'd like it please."

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The outer area of the bunker was in chaos. Julien's appearance appeared to shock many of those who were inside.

"What's going on...?"

"Is there someone outside? What is he doing outside? Should we let him in?"

"What's the situation? He seems to be saying something."

All eyes were on Julien who was standing outside of the bunker while staring directly at Karl who was staring back with a serious expression.

He appeared to be saying something, but because of the soundproofing, nobody was able to hear a thing.

But of course, they didn't need to as they could read his lips.

"You've got the page, don't you? Page...? What is he talking about?"

Having noticed Julien saying something to Karl, Lennon turned his head to stare at him and asked,

"Karl, was he speaking to you? He said something about you having something, what is he in about?"

"...."

Karl didn't answer. He appeared oddly calm as his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Hey!"

It was a slight nudge to his shoulder that woke him up from his state as he looked around. All eyes were on him, and he cocked his head.

"What's going on...?"

"What do you mean what's going on?"

Lennon frowned, his deep voice resounding throughout.

"That should be our question. Wasn't the cadet talking to you?"

"...Oh, right."

Karl massaged his shoulders slightly.

"I'm also not sure about what he said. But if there's one thing I know is that he has a grudge against me. I was the one who did order for his torture after all."

The others didn't say anything.

They were there. Of course, they knew what had happened.

"Then...?"

Penelope turned to look outside where the cadet was with furrowed brows.

"What do you plan on doing?"

"The obvious."

Scratching his cheeks, Karl headed for the main entrance of the bunker.

"Not only has he killed multiple guards, but it's also very obvious now that he has some involvement in the situation. I'll go catch him myself. We need to get to the bottom of this to better understand the situation."

He paused for a second, turning his head to stare at the others.

"I don't need any help. I'll be enough."

He proceeded to leave shortly after that. Staring at his departing back, the post-leaders looked at each other before frowning.

Lennon was the first one to speak, his white eyes scanning Karl's back.

"I feel like there's something that we are missing about the situation. I want to get to the bottom of this, but..."

He looked around.

"...There needs to be someone to stay here and watch over the situation."

"I agree. I'll stay behind."

Penelope offered.

Following her words, a few other post-leaders stated their stances.

"I'll stay too."

"I'll go help."

Like that, the groups split.

Although there was no need to send out so many post leaders, they couldn't be sure of the situation given how the cadet had managed to escape. Furthermore, they were all extremely curious about the things he said.

There was something that they clearly weren't aware of now.

"Let's go."

With Lennon at the helm, the group headed for the main entrance where a small chamber awaited them. Within the chamber, Karl was nowhere in sight. It was likely that he had already left.

Turning to look behind him, Lennon didn't say much and closed the door behind them.

Swoosh—!

Immediately, the heat began to seep in from every corner of the room. They channeled their mana to block the heat, and for them, this process was rather easy. In no time, they adjusted to the rising temperature.

Following this, Lennon spun the wheel of the door and the door opened.

Trrrrr—

Immediately, the colors around them began to fade, and the world transformed into shades of red.

A familiar scene appeared before their eyes. Looking around, Lennon stepped out of the space and the others followed from behind.

"Let's go. I want to see exactly what's going on."

He proceeded to head to where the cadet had been.

At the same time they moved, Karl had already arrived before the cadet who was sitting on top of a rock with a tired look on his face.

"....It took you a while to get here."

Karl stopped and looked around. He didn't jump into catching the cadet just yet. He was afraid he had something planned.

It was laughable.

He was a lot stronger than him, and yet he was wary...

How could he not be since he knew about the page? Nobody was supposed to know that it was in his possession. The thought made him warier.

"Where is the page?"

Breaking him out of his thoughts was the cadet's voice.

Meeting his gaze, Karl's red eyes flickered as he coolly spoke,

"....I don't know what about any page that you're talking about. I'm only here to take you in for the crimes that you've committed."

"Oh?"

The cadet smiled, almost mockingly.

"I've committed crimes...? Can you list them?"

"I've got no time to play with you."

Clenching his teeth, Karl was just about to make a move when he heard the collective sound of steps moving behind him. Turning his head, he saw the other post-leaders had appeared.

".....What are you doing here? I said I could handle this alone."

"We know."

Lennon spoke, turning his gaze to stare at the cadet with narrowed eyes.

"I just wanted to see him for myself. In case he plays any tricks, we'll be here to stop him."

".....I see."

Karl thanked them with a nod.

Just as he was about to make a move, the cadet leaned back slightly, tossing something in his hand.

All eyes fell on the device.

It looked somewhat familiar, but Karl wasn't sure where he had seen it. It wasn't big, and rectangular.

"Ah."

It was Lennon's surprised yelp that alerted Karl. Turning his head, he saw Lennon stare at the object with a somber expression.

"That's the device that controls the sirens."

"....Ah, I recognize it too."

"Is that what it is...?"

The other post-leaders appeared surprised by the revelation besides a few. Karl was also surprised, but he soon sighed in relief.

Was that his trump card...?

'It's not a bad plan. However, it's a reckless plan.'

The cadet's plan was easy to understand. With the controller, he could turn off the sirens at will. When that happened, all the silent eaters would head their way if he shouted. He was threatening them with that.

.....However, this much was nothing.

By the time, the eaters would come, he'd have him already incapacitated and brought back into the bunker.

Not only that, the eaters were nothing for him and the other post-leaders. It was an empty threat.

Karl was just about to relax when the cadet spoke again.

"Want to see something weird?"

This time, he didn't seem to address him. Rather, he appeared to be addressing the other post-leaders.

"Something weird...?"

"Oh, yeah."

Julien fiddled with the device in his hand before turning his head to stare at Lennon.

".....How much do you bet that once I turn this off the monsters will come and attack all of us with the exception of a single person."

Before the others could say anything, Lennon raised his hand to block them from speaking.

"What are you saying?"

"Don't listen to him. He's trying to waste time."

Karl suddenly spoke, appearing to head in Julien's direction.

However, before he could even get close, Lennon appeared before him.

"What are you doing?"

"Wait...? Why are you even listening to him?"

"It's because they're curious."



Tossing the device in the air, the cadet caught it before turning to meet Karl's gaze. Staring into his blood-red eyes, his smile faded.

".....About the words that I said."

He went on to press on the remote, and the sirens immediately stopped.

Immediately, the entire station plunged into silence which was shattered by the cadet who shouted in the air.

"Oy!!!!"

His voice was so loud that it reverberated throughout the entire station. Immediately, wails echoed in the distance and thousands of figures appeared before them.

"Hieeeeeek—"

Staring at them with their grotesque eyes, they surrounded them from all sides.

The only reason they hadn't attacked yet was because of the small translucent shield that had formed around them.

Crossing his arms, Julien looked around before turning to look at Karl.

"How much do you bet none of the monsters will attack him even if he steps outside of the barrier and screams?"

## **Chapter 184 The Page [1]**

"What...?"

I could feel the doubt in everyone's voice as I said my piece. Massaging my face, I looked at the post-leader of the Black Hound Guild. His red eyes coldly stared in my direction as he stood motionless on the spot.

There was something unsettling about his gaze.

I couldn't quite place it into words.

However, for some reason, I felt my chest grow heavy.

'He doesn't look at all worried.'

.....Was it just a bluff, or was it perhaps that I had guessed wrong?

In hindsight, I wasn't entirely confident about my hypothesis. There were clues here and there, and if he truly was the possessor of the missing page, then there was also a chance that the monsters might not attack him.

Why...?

'Because the tree is the one controlling the monsters.'

Or at least, that was what I assumed to be the case.

The timing was all too perfect.

From the Crimson Shade to the 'Silent Eaters' that suddenly made their way into the town. None of it made sense unless it was pre-planned beforehand.

Such was the only possible explanation that I could think of... And if the Black-Hound post-leader was truly the one who held the page, then there was a high chance that the eaters wouldn't attack him.

Still feeling the same red eyes on me, I turned towards the post-leader beside me. Unlike Karl, his eyes were white, and his skin tone was black.

'His name is Lennon, right...?'

Just staying a few feet away from him felt pressuring.

"What are you trying to say?"

His deep voice reached my ears.

Pursing my lips slightly, I raised both of my hands in a sign of submission.

"Before you say anything, I'm surrendering. You can do whatever you want to do with me, but..."

I turned my head to meet those intense blood-red eyes.

Yet again, I felt my chest grow heavy at the sight of them.

Why...?

"...before you take me in, you won't mind testing whether my words are true or not, right? It won't cost you much anyways."

"....."

Lennon remained quiet while his white eyes remained fixed on me. I had a hard time understanding what he was thinking.

He then turned his head to look towards the other post-leaders.

There were three of them.

.....I could recognize two of them.

With shoulder-length red hair, a mole beneath her chin, and eyes that matched the fiery hue of her hair, stood Alyssa Karline, the post-leader of the Fire-Phoenix Guild.

Beside her stood a taller man with a skinnier build. His head was balding, and his eyes were narrowed into slits.

He was the post-leader of the Dark Raven Guild, Jack Whitlock.

They were the only two that I was able to recognize due to the memories I had extracted.

Regarding the last one, I really didn't know.

But it didn't matter.

...The content of their conversation was what I was more interested in.

"Should we listen to him?"

"It wouldn't hurt. There's nothing to lose from the deal. He seems to know something."

They didn't even bother to keep their voices down as they spoke.

"Karl might not like this."

"Why wouldn't he like this? This is nothing for him. When all is said and done, he'll just take the cadet with him."

"That's true."

"What do you think, Karl?"

The post-leaders turned to look at Karl who remained motionless on the spot, his expression hard to read. I stared at him from where I was, trying my best to carefully gauge his expression, but the more I looked, the less I saw.

.....It was extremely eerie.

To the point where I felt the hair on my arm rise.

And the fact that he didn't even bother to address them but just stared at me added to that feeling.

"As expected, you need to be removed."

His voice was cold and low, layering slightly. Immediately, everyone turned to look at him. The way he was acting... it had clearly shocked them.

Ba... Thump!

My heart jumped.

A strange sensation gripped my chest.

I closed my eyes then.

"...."

I lowered my head to stare at my hand.

It was again shaking.

Not out of nervousness, but at a certain realization.

A realization that made me shudder.

"Hoo."

I took a deep breath.

"Karl, are you alright? What's going on...?"

The other post-leaders were staring at Karl warily. Glancing at them, Karl didn't answer and continued to fix his gaze on me.

"It was right."

By 'it', he probably meant the tree.

".....They're not the problem, you are."

"Karl?"

"What are you saying...?"

I remained quiet while staring back into those red eyes.

Squench. Squench.

Familiar roots started to appear beneath the ground as they entangled my feet and crawled up to my body before reaching my eyes and mouth where they started to pull them apart.

My vision flashed.

....And the world turned quiet.

I heard nothing, not even a whisper of wind.

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

The only thing I could hear was the faint sound of my very own heartbeat.

It was growing weaker and weaker by the second.

"Hmm! Hmmm!"

"Umm!"

Such silence was shattered by faint moaning sounds coming from afar.

They were enough to startle my eyes open.

"H-Haaa..."

My chest squeezed at the sight that bore before my very eyes.

And the air sucked out of my lungs.

'.....So it's like this.'

Blood-red leaves scattered across my vision, covering the town that hid beneath.

"Hmmm...! Hmm!"

Hands outstretched from the ebony bark of the tree as moans echoed throughout.

Squench. Squench.

A familiar sound tickled my ears.

My guts churned at the sound as roots slithered up from the corners of my cheeks, slowly dragging my eyes and ears backward.

"...."

I was paralyzed.

Frozen within the tree as my heart grew numb.

"Hmmm...!"

I spoke, but no words came out.

I thrashed, but my body refused to move.

Squench. Squench.

I soon gave up, and I closed my eyes.

"...."

Everything around me turned silent.

It was just me and my thoughts.

'When...?'

My mind was blank.

Since when.... had the tree possessed me?

"H-haa."

The weight over my chest increased.

....I had entertained the possibility. I wanted to refute it, and yet it came true in the end.

All of it.

'From the very start...' All of it had been an illusion.

"Haa.. Haa..."

As if a boulder was resting on my chest, I struggled to breathe.

The clues were there.

The timing of the Crimson Shade, and the monsters. The fact that all information about the tree was missing.

....And the roots weird that continuously popped up here and then.

The tree... It had already taken hold of me and was merely letting me, and everyone else it had absorbed quietly live within an illusion it had created so that it could absorb the life force of those within.

None of us knew.

The illusion was perfect.

....Almost perfect.

But at the same time, the clues were hidden in plain sight.

My memories of the time before I had been absorbed by the tree were gone, but when I thought about it, the very first moment I stepped into the station, I recalled feeling something.

A strange tickle at my cheeks and ankles.

'Right, that must be it.'

....That was the starting point of where my memories had been overwritten.

Then...?

The vision I had experienced from the quest... it was in fact the second time that I had seen it. Only that, whatever happened before, I had failed.

"Haa... Haa..."

I felt my body grow cold at the realization.

'Horrifying.'

This tree...

It was horrifying.

"H-ha."

What now...?

I swallowed my saliva.

With each passing second, I felt my mind growing number and number. The tree was slowly eating me away.

.....I knew I didn't have much time left.

And yet, the sense of helplessness I was feeling seemed to increase.

There were still many questions I didn't know the answer to.

Was the tree targeting me because I was the only one looking for clues about it, or was there some other reason...?

I thought back to Karl's words.

'It was right.'

'.....They're not the problem, you are.'

I felt my mouth grow dry.

'What am I supposed—'

My thoughts were cut short.

Before I knew it, the darkness surrounding me had disappeared.

The world around me was a familiar shade of red.

"..."

Karl stood on the opposite end with his gaze wholly focused on me, his red-eyes complimenting the backdrop of the world.

I shuddered under his gaze.

It was as if he knew that I knew.

"Haa... Haa..."

And my breathing quickened.

Sweat started to trickle down the side of my face.

"This..."



And then,

Bang—

"Hieeeeeek—"

The distant wall exploded, and a loud wail echoed through the entire station. An enormous hand pulled apart the shattered pieces, revealing a tall, gaunt figure reminiscent of the 'Silent Eaters,' but far taller and more grotesque.

Its flesh appeared to be pulling down from its face, and its smile was even thicker.

Rumble! Rumble!

The world started to quake then.

Thump!

As the creature's foot pressed against the ground, its large eyes scanned the surroundings before locking in our general direction.

"Hieeeeeeeek—"

That was when it let out a loud shriek and the defensive barrier that was surrounding us trembled.

"Ukh....!"

"What the hell is that!?"

The post-leaders were naturally shaken by the situation.

Looking up at the monster, I felt numb.

I could hardly think.

'What do I do...?'

....I was starting to lose sight of my rationality.

'No, I need to calm down.'

Though I said that, I had a hard time doing so.

Partially because of the effect of the tree on my mind, and partially because of the fear that had gripped over me.

Thump! Thump!

Distant thumps echoed.

With each thump, the ground shook.

It was growing closer and closer to us.

However, I had no time to pay any attention to it. My thoughts were clouded by the situation.

'What do I do? What do I do? What do I....'

I stopped at a certain point and looked up.

Two red eyes stared at me.

"Ah."

And that was when I realized.

"Right..."

The entire time, the tree had been hiding information about itself. Whenever I tried something, it'd shift the illusion to make it harder for me to find out. It was almost as if it was buying time to fully 'digest' me.

Then...

'There must be rules it has to follow.'

And,

'....It must also have a weakness.'

I looked straight in Karl's direction.

That weakness wasn't hard to guess.

"The page..."

I opened my mouth to speak, finally calming down somewhat.

"....I need it."

Such was it's weakness.

## Chapter 185 The Page [2]

—A few moments prior

Outer Bunker Area.

"What's going on...? Can you hear anything?"

"No, it's soundproof."

Aoife answered while massaging her right cheek. It was still hurting, and just thinking about Kiera who had slapped her just a few moments prior, she glared at her.

"What?"

"...You know what you did."

"What did I do...?"

"Hah."

Aoife took a deep and heavy breath to calm herself down. She was really having a hard time. The more she looked at Kiera, the more her hand twitched.

'I'm better than this.'

That's right, she couldn't stoop down to her level.

Rumble! Rumble!

"Uh...?!"

A distant rumbling disrupted Aoife's thoughts. She could feel it through the vibration of the floor. Turning her head, her expression changed.

It wasn't just hers.

Everyone in the outer area wore expressions of shock as they stared into the distance. A grotesque figure emerged, breaking through the walls that crumbled under its enormous hand.

The surroundings turned quiet for a brief moment as the very air was sucked out of the room.

And then,

"What the hell is that...!!"

"Ahhhh!!"

Panic started to spread within the crowd.

Despite many of the people present being powerful people, the pressure that the creature in the distance elicited feelings of despair.

"Calm down! Everyone calm down!"

Thankfully, the post-leaders were present to calm the situation down.

"Remain calm."

At the lead was Penelope. Her voice, which was crisp and pleasant to the ears, gently traveled through the air.

There was a strange calming effect in her voice, calming many of those who were panicking.

It even worked for Aoife who had been relatively calm from the very start.

'I've experienced too many shocks lately.'

This hadn't been the first time she had been put in a terrible situation.

In hindsight, she was starting to get used to such situations.

Not sure if this was a good thing or not.

Thump!

The bunker trembled subtly. When Aoife turned to look at the windows, her breath caught at her throat.

...The monster had entered the station and was headed straight for their location.

"Please remain calm. There's nothing to worry about. You are safe here. Remember, there are several of us here that can deal with the creature. In fact, we already have several post-leaders outside ready to deal with it. There's no reason to panic."

Penelope's words brought silence to the room.

It was a tense silence that felt extremely stifling.

Thump!

Especially with the thumping sound that was coming out.

Thump!

Strangely...

Thump!

Each step,

Thump!

Seemed to resonate with the sound of their heartbeats.

Thump! Thump!

\*\*\*

Thump! Thump!

The ground shook, the thumping growing progressively closer by the second.

.....I felt the hair at the back of my head stand at the thought, and yet, I couldn't tear away my eyes from those two red eyes that were staring back at me.

They were intense, and it felt as though my head would fly off if I were to look away.

My legs buckled slightly.

But I didn't show it. I remained calm while trying to think of a way to solve the situation.

'I need to get my hands on the page, but how am I going to do that...?'

In fact, did he even have the page with him? What if he had hidden the page elsewhere? How was I going to get that information from him?

.....Fighting him one on one was simply impossible.

He was far stronger than me.

Not only that but with the monster drawing nearer, I knew that it was also impossible for me to rely on the post-leaders to take him out.

"....Shit."

Shit indeed.

My situation was terrible, and I could hardly see a way for me to get to the page.

The best I could do at the moment was not die.

As all sorts of ideas ran through my mind, I stopped at a certain one.

'What if I use the first leaf...?'

Would that even work?

I thought about it for a few seconds before shaking my head.

The effects would be minimal for someone of his strength.

If they could affect someone of his level, Leon would've undoubtedly gone insane by now.

'My guess is that my current limit with the first leaf is people with mental fortitude of around 5 or just a little below.'

So around Tier 4-5.

Well, mentality-wise.

I didn't think that the red-eyes man before me had a mental resilience that was below his tier, which appeared to be 6.

Then what...?

What exactly could I do?

Thump!

Another step echoed, and the surroundings shook. I pursed my lips and looked around me.

It was close.

Extremely close.

The entire time, Karl didn't move. I wasn't sure why, but Lennon and the other post-leaders were questioning him.

"Karl? What's going on?"

"....Are you the one behind this?"

From the way they were speaking, they seemed both surprised and shocked.

"....."

But despite their questions, Karl didn't answer. Instead, the eaters around us started to twitch.

The thumping was clearly affecting their perception of the surroundings, and yet, they still remained where they were.

Clearly, whatever noise that creature was making, wasn't making them move.

....Judging from how the creature looked like a taller, more gruesome version of them, I could more or less guess why.

'It's commanding them.'

"Hey!"

All of a sudden, I felt something tug at my shoulder and I was pulled back. Before I knew it, Lennon's face was right before my very eyes.

"Do you have any idea of what's going on?"

He immediately started to question me.

"The two of you have been talking strangely. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me exactly what is going on here."

"Ah."

I opened my mouth but felt unsure of how to respond.

Would he believe me if I told him that all of this was an illusion?

That we were all victims of some demonic tree that was slowly sapping away our life force...?

Perhaps, or perhaps not. Convincing him would end up wasting too much time. So after a little thought, I decided to answer differently as I pointed at Karl.

"He... He has something important. With it, we'll be able to stop all of this."

"We'll be able to stop eeverything?"

"Yes."

I nodded.

"Everything."

I looked around me.

From the Crimson Shade to the rapidly drawing monster.

"...Everything that you see is artificial. None of it was natural. He's the one behind it."

All eyes turned towards Karl who smiled all of a sudden.

It was a creepy smile.

A smile that made my entire body grow tense.

"You're very creative with the way you speak."

For the first time in a while, he spoke. His was different from the last time, sounding deeper and more ancient.

"For someone of your age to be able to have such high mental resilience. It's truly praiseworthy. The tree has been paying a lot of attention to you because of that. Otherwise, everything would've flowed much more smoothly, and I..."

He stopped then.

I was curious about what he had been planning on saying, but what he had said was already plentiful for me to understand a few important things about the situation.

'High mental resilience'

'Paying a lot of attention to you'

Could it be that the tree had a harder time targeting those with high mental resilience...? If that was the case, it explained a few things.

Like the screaming people.

....When thinking about it, none of those who had been affected were high-ranking people. However, with each passing moment within the illusion, they'd slowly be targeted.

The tree... It was slowly eroding a person's mind.



'Right, it makes sense...'

I had noticed this on a few occasions. From the time when I felt absolutely no remorse when killing, to the unnatural fear and emotions that I felt on certain occasions.

There were plenty of times that I felt fear, but there were a few that just felt unnatural to me.

This explained it all...

'Wait, but what about Leon?'

As far as I knew, his mental score was rather high. Why would he—

"Ah."

...And then I realized.

'It's my fault.'

I wanted to facepalm there and then.

All of a sudden, I started regretting a few of the words that I previously said about him.

In the end, the reason why Leon had been affected so early was because his mental fortitude had been severely weakened due to my emotive magic.

'...It's not like he doesn't have plot armor, it's just that I'm the one who killed that plot armor.'

If that was even a thing.

"...."

I felt the sudden urge to scratch the side of my nose.

'Wasn't intentional...'

Not like I could've predicted any of this to happen.

On a good note, he probably wasn't dead. Yet...? My best guess was that the tree's first action was to erode a person's mental resilience before sapping away at their life force. It was highly likely that everyone was still alive.

From the people that had died in the Crimson Shade, to the people that I had killed.

'Well, at least that's a good thing.'

It was going to save me from a lot of headaches.

BANG—

Startling out of my thoughts was the sound of metal clashing against metal. Raising my head in haste, I saw a huge axe come into contact with multiple tree vines that had emerged from the ground.

Standing behind them was a calm and collected Karl.

"You..."

Lowering his axe, Lennon stared at Karl.

".....This is the first time that I've seen you use such power. You, don't tell me everything that he said was true. You're the one behind all of this."

Rather than answering, Karl smiled.

That was silent confirmation, and Lennon's gaze turned fierce.

He was just about to engage again when,

BANG—

A shadow cast over the area above us, smacking against the barrier that was protecting us.

Cra Crack! Crack...!

Immediately, cracks appeared all over before the shield started to shatter.

"Pfft!"

Lennon and a few others threw up blood as they took several steps back.

On the other hand, I fell on my back.

"Ukh."

Before I even had the chance to move, a shadow cast over the area I was in, and two red eyes looked down on me from above. The monsters around also stopped moving, and I felt the entire world stare at me.

"Give up."

Karl's voice reached my ears.

".....You'll never get the page."

He seemed sure of it.

"It's not with me. Even if you kill me, you'll never know where it is or what is written in it. Your best course of action is to give up."

"....."

Squench. Squench.

Roots emerged from the ground beneath, slowly wrapping over my ankles and my chest. I lay paralyzed, unable to move with the exception of my hands which I slowly raised before lowering again.

In the process, I managed to grab onto his ankle.

"...."

With his head lowered, he looked at me.

"What are you doing...?"

He asked, his expression appearing relatively calm.

I looked up at him and met his gaze.

So what if you didn't have the page with you?

So what if you were stronger than me?

In the end, I didn't need the page to be with me for me to see it.

All I needed to do was,

"See your world."

### **Chapter 186 The Page [3]**

A familiar feeling washed over me.

It embraced my body, giving rise to a familiar feeling.

The world around me changed, and I suddenly felt detached from reality.

'Where am I...?'

I looked around me. I appeared to be inside a small office. Resting on the desk was a familiar figure.

'Karl.'

The Post-Leader of the Black Hound Guild.

He was much younger than when I met him.

Scratch~ Scratch~

He was currently filling out papers.

"...."

In the silence that took over the small space, the only sound that could be heard was the scribbling sound of his pen as it traced over the dozen of papers resting by his desk.

Such action continued until it was exactly 5 p.m.

That was when he stopped.

"...."

Turning to look at the clock, he went on to grab the leather coat resting on the chair before leaving.

Clank—

The scene shifted.

It was a small apartment. A fairly decorated apartment with a few pieces of furniture and pictures.

Tzzz~

The hot pan sizzled as Karl started to cook.

I stood quietly, waiting for something to happen.

Anything.

And yet,

'Nothing.'

Nothing happened.

For the entire day, nothing happened.

Triiiiing—

At exactly, 7 a.m, he woke up, changed, and went to work.

'What exactly is going on...?'

I couldn't understand.

Staring at the unfolding life before me, I didn't understand what was going on.

'Where is the tree?'

What was this boring life?

I thought I'd eventually see something, but nothing.

The cycle repeated.

Wake up, eat breakfast, go to work, come back, cook, read a book, repeat.

A never-ending cycle started to gnaw at my mind the more I saw it.

Such life...

It was boring.

....And it wasn't just me that felt that way.

Karl also appeared to feel the same.

He was starting to age.

The cycle never ceased from waking up early, to going to work and filling paper works, to coming back home and reading books.

Until his looks started to match the ones that I was familiar with, his life was monotonous and predictable.

...and it remained to be like that.

Even as he was promoted, he continued to lead a similar life.

But it didn't make sense.

'There's no way this is the life of a post-leader.'

Especially his looks.

From the way he carried himself, and the look in his eyes.

He.... Just seemed to be living for the sake of living.

It became more glaring with time.

He was just... living through the motions.

Waking up, working, eating...

It was just...

just...

Life.

There was no purpose behind such action.

It was just how his life was.

It went on like this until I noticed something.

My eyes briefly paused on one of the papers he was filling before my body froze entirely.

'Ah.'

I hadn't paid much attention to what he had been filling the paperwork with, but the moment I laid my eyes on it, I knew that something was wrong.

'I want to die. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die...'

Scribbled over and over again were the same three words.

'I want to die.'

I felt strange chills creep up the deepest parts of my mind, crawling and digging their way into my brain.

Bzzt—

The vision grew static.

'What's going on!?'

My head flicked up to look around.

This was the first time that something like this had happened before.

Btzzz—

The world continued to buzz, and I looked around me startled.

It almost felt like I was staring at the static of an old television.

That was how the world felt.

Btzzz—

The buzzing grew more pronounced.

The vision started to darken, and then,

'....!'

It repeated.

I felt my throat clamp up.

Staring at the young man sitting in his seat, monotonously filling the papers in front of him, I suddenly started to understand what was going on.

'These memories...'

They were fake.

They were the memories that the tree had implanted into Karl.

Squelch. Squelch.

The fact that I could see roots dig their way into the room, from all sorts of areas served to further validate my point.

'This...'

Now what...?

I looked around me. The cycle repeated just like last time. Karl continued to fill out his papers and live his mundane life.

The only difference was that this time, roots were present in his life.

They grew more and more apparent with time, crawling from every corner of his office room, and house.

'This is...'

I closed my eyes and fell deeply into my thoughts.

'.....The tree is capable of altering memories. What I'm currently seeing is the fake memories that it had implanted within Karl.'

Most likely, the real memories of Karl had been sealed by the tree.

I wasn't sure when it had done that, but it probably explained why Karl was helping it.

'It's likely that the tree has already turned him into a puppet.'

.....And I was seeing exactly how it was happening.

I opened my eyes and looked around me.

Karl was sitting on the chair, monotonously completing the paperwork that was piled up before him.

Taking a step towards him, I brought my hand forward and tried to touch him.

Unfortunately, my hand passed right through him.

Not like I didn't expect it.

'I want to die. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die...'

I watched as he continuously wrote the same words over and over again. It didn't seem like he was aware of what he was writing as the moment the clock hit 5 p.m., he'd stop and proceed with his other routine.

Btzzz—



The world buzzed once more.

The cycle repeated.

Roots appeared yet again, and much to my surprise, the entire place had been covered in roots.

I had been conscious while it was happening, but absorbed in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed the massive change around me.

I stood quietly, observing the roots as they stretched throughout.

Bending down, I could touch them, but as I tried to exert force against them, they didn't budge from the spot.

'What am I supposed to do...?'

This was the very first time that something like this had happened to me, and I wasn't exactly sure on how to react.

The only thing I could do was watch as the cycle repeated.

Btzz—

The buzz.

Squelch. Squelch.

The roots.

Repeat.

.

.

Btzz—

The buzz.

Squelch. Squelch.

The roots.

Repeat.

.

.

Btzz—

The buzz.

Squelch. Squelch.

The roots.

Repeat.

.

.

Btzz—

The buzz.

Squelch. Squelch.

The roots.

Repeat.

.

Gradually, I too started to fall into a state of monousity. The more I stood to observe, the more lethargic and out of touch I started to feel.

That was when I understood.

My feelings...

Emotions.

They were starting to match that of Karl who continuously repeated the same pattern.

Btzz—

Btzz—

Repeat.

It was hell.

That was the only way I could describe the current situation. I wasn't sure how much time had passed.

It could've been seconds, or it could've been years.

I wasn't sure.

I wasn't...

I...

Squelch. Squelch.

Before I knew it, the office space was covered in roots.

Karl was still seated in his seat, scribbling on the papers.

Scratch~ Scratch~

I stood behind him, observing him.

My thoughts were empty.

I didn't think.

I just looked.

....I was just living through the motions.

Just as he was.

'What am I even doing...?'

I was questioning my goals, and yet, found myself unable to find an answer for it.

Despite knowing that something was wrong, I continued to sink in this feeling.

It pulled me down, not letting me get back up.

Just...

Tak—

Karl stopped, and the pen in his hand dropped on the wooden table.

For the first time since entering the vision, a chance occurred as he turned around, his piercing red eyes staring straight into me.

Behind him, the entire room was covered in roots.

"...."

He didn't say anything and just started at me.

It took a moment for me to understand what was going on before regaining some clarity and staring back at him properly.

'....'

"...."

It was silent.

Neither two of us were speaking.

...At the same time, despite seeing him stare at me, I wasn't sure if he could see me.

The entire situation was out of the norm for me to properly understand.

He was the one to break the silence for me.

"Who am I...?"

It was a simple question.

A question that was so simple that I struggled to understand the reasoning behind it.

Shouldn't he know?

He continued,

"What do I live for...?"

'....'

I stood in silence, trying to understand the reasoning behind his questions.

"And why do I not feel a thing?"

That appeared to be his last question as he looked at me deeply.

I opened my mouth, and for the first time since the start of the vision, I found myself able to speak again.

"You're name is Karl."

"Karl...?"

"Yes."

I nodded slightly before elaborating.

"You're the post-leader of a very large guild. The Black Hound Guild."

"The Black Hound Guild? Post-Leader? Uh..."

He nodded in understanding.

Despite that, his gaze continued to remain hollow.

".....What do I live for?"

He asked quietly.

It was the second question.

I pursed my lips before shaking my head.

"That's not up for me to know."

That wasn't something that I was supposed to answer.

To that, he tilted his head.

"I'm trying to remember the things that make me feel something. But slowly, my brain began to erase every little thing that made me feel something. I know that my life shouldn't be like this, that there's something wrong, and yet... I can't stop it from getting worse. My life... Has it always been like this?"

I shook my head.

"No, that's not the case."

His life.

I was sure it was different.

All of this was an illusion created by the tree in order to weaken his mind.

"Is it not?"

Karl asked, his head tilted slightly.

"Why is it not the case?"

"Because—"

"And how do you know?"

He cut me off directly, his piercing red eyes staring directly into me.

"How do you know that my life has never been like this...?"

"....."

I pursed my lips and stayed quiet then. I... didn't know. Looking around, all these memories were fake. The entire scenario was fake, and yet...

How much of it was truly fake?

I opened my mouth to say something when he cut me off again.

".....Am I even real?"

## **Chapter 187 The Page [4]**

"What is it about life that is not fake...?"

He sat on his chair with his gaze directed at me. Roots slowly crept from the ground, entangling both his feet and arms.

The lighting surrounding the office space grew dim, casting an eerie and gloomy aura around that.

Despite the changes, his expression didn't show any signs of panic or change.

He continued to maintain his gaze on me.

"Am I here? Are you here...? Is anything in general here?"

He was speaking to me.

Something that had happened once before with the second leaf.

For what reason was it possible for him to speak to me...? It hadn't been the first time I had used the second leaf, and yet, this was only the second time I could interact with someone in their memories.

How...?

"I wake up, I eat breakfast, go to work, come back home, eat dinner, and repeat. I'm finding my entire days blending to create a suffocating and never-ending loop that is sapping away at my life."

I wanted to speak to him.

Ask him questions.

But,

For some strange reason, I found myself unable to. I had been able to speak just a few moments ago. Why couldn't I speak again?

Was it because of what he was saying?

....What about his words strangely resonated with me?

I bit my lips.

Indeed, what he was feeling.

I had once felt it too.

"How much do you truly remember about your life? I wake up each day forgetting what I had done the previous day. Even if I do remember, by the time two days pass, I'll have forgotten about it. Can you truly say you've lived if you end up forgetting everything?"

"....."

I matched his gaze.

He looked back.

"What is the point?"

I pursed my lips before I tried to explain to him that what he was seeing was more likely an illusion created by the tree.

"That's..."

"It's all an illusion?"

But he beat me to it.

As if he could read my thoughts, he continued to speak.

"But what about it is an illusion? How can you tell that the life beyond the illusion isn't just another illusion? What if that is also an illusion? What does that make my life...?"

In the blink of an eye, his entire body was completely enveloped by roots. The only thing that wasn't covered by the roots was his face as his blood-red eyes continued to stare back at me.

"I'm just like you."

It was from his words that I realized something.

"I'm just endlessly drifting. Watching as I continue to do the same things over and over again with no way to fix it."

'He's gone.'

".....What about me is real?"

The tree had won.

Endlessly subjecting him to illusions, the tree had broken him.

His perception of reality and his self was gone. Right now... He was just like his memories. A drifting soul with no goal, only moving for the sake of the tree.

It made me wonder.

'How close am I to becoming that...?'

At this very moment, how close was the tree from turning me into what he had become?

No, it doesn't matter.'

Close or not close, I wasn't going to be like him.

I wasn't going to let myself be like him.

Tak—

Breaking the silence, I took a step forward.



"...."

By now, his entire body was covered in roots, with only his eyes being the part of his body that I could still see.

He could no longer talk.

Tied up to the chair, he could only watch as I took a step towards him and reached forward with my hand.

I grabbed one of the roots.

.....Strangely, they were the only things that I could touch within this illusionary world.

And,

Riiiiip—

I tore the root apart.

"Hieeek—"

A muffled scream reverberated through the surroundings.

Btzz—

The surroundings grew more static.

I looked around me before gripping another root.

Riiiiip—

Like the previous one, I tore it away from his body.

"Hieeek—"

Another shriek.

Btzz—

Yet again, the surroundings grew static.

Looking around me, I could feel the world showing signs of crumbling.

'I see.'

I looked at the root.

'.....I've found the root of the problem.'

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

"...."

Sometimes...

I really wished Leon was with me.

Riiip—

I yet again ripped another root.

The world grew more and more static with each root that I ripped apart, and Karl's face became more visible.

He remained motionless, staring back at me with hollow eyes.

"It's useless."

He began to speak, his voice sounding rather flat.

".....Stop fighting it."

But I ignored him.

Riiip, riip—

"Haa... Haaa..."

I felt my breath grow heavy with each root that I ripped away from his body.

It felt strangely tiring.

As if each set of actions was adding more and more weight to my arms.

"Haa..."

To the point where my chest started to burn.

Why...

"Hieek—"

In the background, strange and muffled shrieks continued to resonate.

I drowned out the noise for as much as I potentially could, but before I knew it, my arms started to feel more and more heavy.

Gripping onto another root, I tried to rip it out like the rest, but...

"Kh...!"

I found myself unable to move my arm.

"Wh-a... Haaa... t's, go...?"

Looking down, I felt my heart drop.

'When...?'

Tangling over my right arm were the same roots I had been ripping.

Like chains, coming from beneath the ground, they gripped over my right arm from several different areas.

"Kh...!"

I felt my face grow red as I tried to rip another root, but I eventually had to stop.

My right arm...

I could no longer move it.

I tried to rip it with my left hand, but that proved to be an impossible task. The grip was far stronger than that of the vines that were covering Karl's body.

"Haa... Haaa..."

Grabbing my chest with my left arm, I felt my mind grow light. It was starting to become harder to think, and despite this being a memory, I could feel sweat trickling down the side of my face.

'How weird.'

For a moment, I stopped doing what I was doing.

'.....In the first place, what am I even doing?'

For the briefest of moments, my mind grew numb.

Everything about me and what I was seemed to disappear.

It was as if I was starting to lose sight of myself.

"Ah...!"

That feeling came and went extremely fast.

I was quick to snap out of it.

When I did, I felt my entire back drenched in sweat.

Squelch. Squelch.

Looking down, roots appeared to entangle my ankles. Though not extremely fast, they were starting to move up.

"Kh!"

I felt adrenaline rush into my body.

Since I could no longer use my right hand, I used my left hand.

Riiip, Riiip—

I ripped one root after another.

With each root that I ripped, the world around me grew static.

'Ah.'

After a certain point, just for the briefest of moments, I saw a world beyond the world that I was currently seeing.

'I'm getting closer.'

To the real memories.

This fake world... It was slowly breaking down.

The trees' influence diminished with each root that I removed. Realizing this, I grew even more impatient and ripped the roots with more ferocity.

Riiip—!

Even as my muscles burned, and my chest felt like it was on fire, I didn't cease my movements.

'Close, I'm getting closer...'

My chest tingled with anxiety.

I could see it.

The world before me was starting to fade.

Beyond this, I could see a brighter, and less gloomy office.

"Almos—"

I was never able to finish my words.

All of a sudden, I found myself unable to move my left hand.

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

I looked to my left.

Dread started to gnaw at my insides.

Just like my right arm, roots had appeared, entangling my arm in different places, chaining my hand to the ground.

"Kh!"

I felt the veins on my neck protrude as I tried my best to move my arm.

"Khhh!!!!"

And yet,

Despite my best efforts, it all ended up being futile.

Regardless of what I did, my arms refused to budge a single inch.

Squelch. Squelch.

At the same time, the roots had already crept all the way up to my chest. My chest squeezed at the pressure, and I struggled to breathe.

"Hueap."

It was as if I was being dragged deeper and deeper into the depths of a bottomless ocean, with the pressure increasing the deeper I went.

It felt suffocating.

"Huep...!"

'No, more...! I'm close.'

Anxiety started to creep into my mind.

I could tell that I was just a few more roots away from getting rid of the tree's influence.

Just a little...

A little...

A...

Squelch. Squelch.

'...'

Suddenly, my mind grew blank.

My movements stopped.

The back of my neck tingled as I felt something crawl up from behind. I wasn't sure what it was. Nor did I care.

I couldn't think.

'...'

The tickling sensation appeared all over my body.

It was now nearing my face.

I looked at the man before me.

He was staring at me.

'Who is he...?'

I blinked my eyes.

He felt familiar.

And yet, I couldn't remember.

How odd.

Squelch. Squelch.

The sound also appeared to be familiar.

Where exactly did I hear it from?

I really tried to think.

I really did.

But,

'I don't know.'

I just felt empty.

So empty.

That too...

Felt familiar.

Too familiar in fact.

My mind shook and I regained myself.

".....!"

Squelch. Squelch.

Looking down, the roots had entangled every part of my body besides my face. But they were getting there, slowly crawling towards my face.

I was stuck, hardly able to move.

The situation seemed desperate.

To the point where one'd give up at this point, but,

"Kh...!!"

Clenching my teeth, I brought my face forward and bit into one of the roots before me.

Sinking my teeth onto the root, it almost felt as though I was biting into hard metal. I felt my teeth crack a little, but I didn't let that sensation get to me.

R... Riiip—

Tearing the root with my teeth, the world grew static once more.

It flashed for a brief moment, allowing me to glance at a world that was without roots.

"Akh...!"

I sunk my teeth into another root.

I felt my teeth crack.

But I didn't care.

This was all an illusion anyway. And even if it was, this pain was meaningless to me.

R... Riiip—

Yet again, I ripped another root.

The world changed again. For a brief moment, the world was without roots and seemed a lot more vibrant.

Squelch. Squelch.

At the same time, the roots that were entangling my body appeared to grow more desperate.

They squeezed my body, knocking the wind out of my chest.

"Huep!"

I couldn't breathe.

....But I didn't need to breathe.

"Akh!"

I bit onto another root.

"Hieeeeek—"



I heard a shriek as I did so. The root beneath my teeth wiggled, trying to free itself from my bite. I clung to it desperately.

"Hieeek—"

The roots around me started to wiggle as well.

....The entire room shook. And yet, I paid no attention to it.

I just looked at the two red eyes that were staring at me.

Our gazes met.

And,

Ri... Riip—

I ripped the root.

.

.

.

The world grew silent.

I could hardly hear a thing.

It was just me and my thoughts.

That was until the weight over my chest eased.

I felt liberated.

Suddenly, I could move again.

By the time it took for me to blink, the surroundings appeared to change.

I was now in the same office as before.

However, compared to before, the roots were gone.

Despite being the same, the entire office seemed to be different.

Scratch~ Scratch~

But that wasn't what grabbed my attention.

Hearing the familiar scratching sound, I looked towards the wooden desk.

There, I could see a figure scribbling something.

With his back towards me, I couldn't see his face. However, I knew exactly who he was. I took a step forward, and my eyes paused on the paper in front of him.

"Ah."

I smiled then.

?| Lvl 1. [Joy] EXP + 2%

At last,

I had found what I wanted.

The Page.

## **Chapter 188 Veil of Deception [1]**

The world turned bright once more.

Scratch~ Scratch~

Hearing the familiar scratching sound, I looked toward the figure that sat on the wooden desk with their backs turned toward me. Just like before, he was seemingly busy writing something.

But compared to that time, the atmosphere wasn't so gloomy.

There was no longer an air of desperation.

But that wasn't what I was focused on.

No.

My attention was focused on the single page before him.

'Finally.'

The page that would lead to me finding the tree's weakness.

At long last, I was going to be free from this nightmare.

Tak--

I took a step forward to get a better look at the page, but just as I took the step, the scribbling sound stopped.

Turning around, two red eyes stared back at me.

"...."

I stopped and looked back at them.

I stood in silence for a short moment before he opened his mouth and broke the silence.

".....My life was no different after all."

From the way he was talking, he seemed to remember everything that had happened between us in the world where the roots had completely taken over.

"I wake up every morning, make breakfast, go to work, come back, make dinner, and go to sleep. It's really not that different."

I frowned listening to his words.

He looked happy to me. A stark contrast to how he was back in the previous illusion.

And yet,

There was something about his words and tone that didn't quite sit well with me.

Why was that...?

"Strangely, I don't hate it."

So he said it.

".....There's nothing wrong with the mundane life that I live with. I would argue there's a beauty to it. Every day may be the same, but there's something about the simplicity that feels strangely peaceful. I--"

That was when I realized, and cut him off.

"You can stop."

I took a step back while gravely staring at the man who stood before me.

"What's wrong?"

He appeared confused by my sudden stance.

"Is there something that I said that you disagree with?"

"....."

I licked my lips.

They were incredibly dry.

No, it wasn't just my lips.

My mouth was also dry.

At the same time, I felt my hands tingle as I tried to keep myself calm and collected.

"There's no need to pretend. You're not him."

"Uh?"

He tilted his head.

He seemed even more confused.

But I knew,

I knew that the man who stood before me wasn't Karl.

Typically, when using the second leaf, I'd be able to feel the emotions of those that I was subjecting my skill.

But at this very moment,

The man that stood before me.

He felt nothing.

He had no emotions.

He was just an empty shell that was pretending to smile right before my very eyes.

Karl...

The man who stood before me wasn't him.

"You're the tree, aren't you?"

The one I was currently speaking to was the tree.

Karl.

He was already dead.

The tree had already taken over him.

"....."

The smile on Karl's face gradually faded, and his red eyes flickered with a certain coldness that sent chills down the back of my spine.

I swallowed my saliva.

"....How could you tell?"

Even his tone changed, suddenly sounding a lot more gravelly. Like a broom scraping broken glass.

"You shouldn't be able to tell. How can you tell?"

I looked around in search of the roots, but nothing appeared.

In fact, 'Karl' didn't seem to make any attempts at attacking me at all.

In fact, it seemed genuinely curious about me.

The way it was looking at me suggested so.

".....You're a peculiar human. From the start, your mental resilience was far greater than those of your age."

As its voice reached my ears, its piercing red eyes continued to stare at me. Feeling its gaze, it felt as though it was looking at the deepest parts of my soul.

I felt naked.

....It was at this moment that I truly felt the massive disparity in our strengths.

And yet, I didn't necessarily feel in any danger.

"It's much easier to turn those that have low mental resilience. You, who is weak, have such high mental resilience. It's intriguing."

"....."

"I knew it from the start. You are the most fearsome. To me, strength is meaningless. I can kill the strongest if they have weak minds."

It pointed at its head.

"....See?"

Pressing its finger against its tempt.

"Strong, but weak."

Then, pointing at me, it said,

"Weak but strong."

I stood quietly while listening to everything that it was saying.

The tree didn't seem to be capable of fully articulating itself.

I had to wrack my brain to properly understand what it was trying to say.

'My mental resilience is what he fears.'

That much I already knew.

Given how Leon had fallen so easily, mental resilience was important. It determined how easily the tree could absorb someone.

The higher the mental resistance, the harder it was for it to reign its influence.

Perhaps, the reason why I could see the roots and others couldn't was because of my high mental resilience.

Then again, Leon also saw a root from what I remembered, so not so sure it was valid.

"....What exactly is your goal? Are you trying to absorb everyone here to grow stronger?"

Such were the words that came out of my mouth when I spoke.

I was merely trying to buy time at this point.

....I needed to figure something out.

For some reason, the tree wasn't attacking me, but I wasn't sure for how long that'd be true.

At least, such were my thoughts before the tree spoke again.

"You're partially right. I want to grow stronger. Observe humans."

"Hm...?"

Observe humans?

The tree looked at me.

"I have observed so many humans. I learned to speak your language after observing for such a long time. You're very peculiar. You all react differently to the same stimulus."

"Like the illusion you showed me?"

The one I had experienced just a few moments prior regarding Karl and his despair.

"Ah, yes, yes."

The tree nodded.

"Isn't it peculiar how certain humans can be so depressed when facing monotonicity while others are happy? Why is it that you're so different despite being the same race? We aren't like that. We are all the same. We want to grow."

By 'we', it was probably talking about the other monsters.

I think I was slowly starting to get a better idea of what was going on.

".....Are you trying to become human?"

"Trying to become human?"

The tree cocked its head.

Then, after a certain while, it shook its head.

"No, you humans are too complicated to understand. I don't want to be human."

"Then...?"

"...."

The tree didn't answer.

Lowering its head, it stared at its hand.

".....I want to learn what it means to think for oneself. Learn for what reason certain stimuli arouse different reactions and for strength. To transcend, I must learn to separate myself from the others."

It raised its head to look at me.

"Such is my reason."

"....."

I stood by the side without saying a word.

'I've read many books, but none of them mention how monsters evolve to the next rank. This is either new information that isn't yet known, or most likely isn't in my current curriculum.'

This was as far as I could assume.

From my assumption, it seemed like a monster needed to be able to think for itself and develop a consciousness to reach the next rank.

The Destroyer rank.

.....It was for that reason that the tree was absorbing people and casting them in an illusion.

It wasn't just to weaken them so that it could directly swallow their consciousness with time.

No, it was observing them.

Learning from them.

By putting them into different stimuli, the tree was developing its very own consciousness.

"Is that the reason that you've disguised yourself as him?"

I pointed at his face and appearance.

".....So that you could be closer to everyone to understand their thought process?"

"That's correct."

The tree nodded its head.



But as it did, its gaze lowered.

"But it's not enough."

It raised its head.

"I can't understand."

Suddenly, the tree smiled.

"I am happy."

Then, it frowned.

"I am angry."

Then, it cried.

"I am sad."

Then, it winced.

"I am disgusted."

With Karl's face, the tree began to show me all sorts of emotions. It was almost as if it was asking me to judge it.

"....."

The tree's actions were weird.

And yet, I couldn't take my eyes away from it.

His expressions...

They were impeccable.

From where I stood, I could see exactly what he was feeling.

But there was something about it that was missing.

Eventually, it stopped and looked at me.

"I have observed humans very carefully. I can mimic their every action, and think like them. When humans are happy, the muscles on their cheeks tense, and their lips move up. Their eyes squint, and dopamine rushes into the brain. I do exactly that, and yet—"

"You can't feel it."

I cut the tree directly.

Blinking its eyes, it cocked its head.

"Yes. I don't understand. Why...?"

"Emotions."

One word.

One troublesome word.

"...They are not easy to understand. I myself struggle to understand them."

Despite having experienced so much, I had yet to fully understand them.

They were extremely troublesome.

Could it be that in order for monsters to evolve into the next rank, they had to learn about emotions?

If so,

"Ha."

I laughed a little.

As if that was easy.

"Yes...?"

"You're going to be stuck where you're at for a very long time."

Again, the tree blinked.

"Why?"

".....Because emotions aren't things that you can just mimic through what you see. You need to directly experience them in order to get a better understanding of them."

Perhaps, the tree only needed a rudimentary understanding of emotions to reach the next level.

But that 'rudimentary' understanding was probably not something that the tree could understand through observation.

It needed to feel them in order to learn about them properly.

"Experience...? How?"

I could tell from its gaze that it was genuinely curious.

I was just about to answer when I stopped.

"...."

I pursed my lips and looked at the tree in front of me. Its gaze was intense, and I could feel my throat clamp up under its gaze.

And yet, despite such pressure, I didn't feel scared.

Rather,

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

I felt excited.

Licking my lips, I opened my mouth to speak.

"....I can show you."

I held out my hand.

"I wouldn't mind showing you if you joined me."

## **Chapter 189 Veil of Deception [2]**

"Join you...?"

The tree looked at me with a confused expression. Blinking its red eyes, it stared intently at me.

Under such gaze, I felt my chest tighten.

It was a bit of a gamble on my end, but it was something that I was willing to risk my life for. To be able to align myself with a being this powerful... It would certainly make my life a lot easier in the future.

There were also Delilah and Atlas, who I could consider allies and were powerful.

'Another twisted relationship...'

....Every second that I spent with them was a second where I had to be extra careful with my words and actions.

One slip-up and I was done for.

It was for that reason that I couldn't necessarily consider them true allies.

But it wasn't like I minded this twisted relationship. So long as it benefitted me, who was I to care? The same was true for the tree.

One slip-up and I was done. And yet, I couldn't help myself.

'Whatever it takes, I need to do it.'

"....."

I briefly glanced at the page on the table.

I swallowed my saliva as I did so.

Despite the page being so close, it felt so far. I didn't feel any confidence in getting it for myself and looking at it.

Rather, it felt more like a trap.

A tempting trap that the tree had left just for me to take.

"Yes, join me."

Thus,

Staring at 'Karl', I elaborated.

"You wish to learn about emotions, is that correct?"

".....Correct."

The tree replied, its scraping voice echoing quietly across the room.

I nodded and continued.

"You haven't had much success despite observing so many humans. Why do you think that is?"

With his brows furrowing slightly in thought, 'Karl' tilted his head. Eventually, his gaze settled on me, and he shook his head.

".....I do not know."

"I figured."

I took a step forward and drew nearer to him.

He didn't move and kept his gaze firmly on me. In fact, he didn't seem at all wary of the fact that I was drawing nearer to him.

But it made sense considering my strength.

Tak—

I stopped just a few meters away from him.

Then, extending my finger, I pressed it against his chest.

Yet again, he didn't react.

He just stared at me.

"....."

"....."

I stared back at him as I took a silent breath.

'I hope this works.'

The silence carried on for a few seconds before I silently murmured in my mind.

'Fear'

All of a sudden, his pupils dilated and his body started to shake. It wasn't overly dramatic, and it passed as quickly as it came, but it was unmistakable.

"That..."

'Karl' looked at me with widened eyes.

He didn't seem to have understood what had happened. It took several seconds for him to come back to it.

Then, lowering his eyes, he stared at his trembling hands.

"What a peculiar sensation. My heart keeps pounding for a strange reason, and I can't stop this weird shaking that is taking over my hand. But that isn't the most peculiar part... Hmmm."

He frowned.

"...It is weird. I feel a strange discomfort I can't explain."

He looked back at me.

"Why is that? What could it be?"

"That's fear."

"Fear...?"

"Yes."

I went on to explain.

"What you've experienced was fear. The pounding of your heart, and shaking of your arms is an after-effect of your body experiencing fear. I'm sure you're already aware of how someone under fear reacts...."

This, I didn't doubt.

Especially since the tree thrived on the fear of those on whom it cast its illusion.

"Yes, I am aware."

The tree answered with a frown.

"...But this sensation. I didn't think it would feel like this. I've tried many times to mimic exactly what I've observed, yet I always failed to comprehend. Now, I understand better... much better."

I felt the corner of my lips curl slightly.

"To understand emotions, you need to experience them."

This was something that became more and more apparent to me the more I stayed in this world and learned about emotions.

"There's a huge difference between copying, and knowing. You will never be able to understand the emotions if you just copy those who experience them. You need to experience them yourself in order to learn them. Which is why..."

Once more, I extended my hand.

"I can help you."

I stared straight into those piercing red eyes.

They stared back at me with a certain intensity that made it seem as though they wanted to swallow me whole.

For a moment, I thought they were.

But just before it could happen, he looked away.

That's when I pushed.

".....No, I am the only person that can help you."

This was false.

There were many other people that could help it.

But it didn't matter. I needed to make it think that I was indispensable for its growth.

Only that way would it join me.

"If you join me, I'll make sure that you get what you want. That, I can promise. Of course..."

I pulled my hand back.

".....That will only depend on your desire to become stronger. Do you want to remain stuck with your current strength, or do you want to truly become stronger and reach the next rank?"

I tried to tug at the tree's desire, highlighting it several times while also making it seem like I was a fundamental piece integral to its growth.

"You need me."

I emphasized while bringing my face closer to look into its blood-red eyes. This time, I didn't feel any fear staring into those eyes.

Rather, I felt uncertainty within them.

The tree.

.....It was faltering.

I didn't push any further.

Rather, I took a step back.

"How about this."

Instead, I started to negotiate with it.

"Follow me for a little while."

I was done instilling my importance to it.

Pushing further was only going to backfire.

"Observe me while you're with me. In the meantime, I'll help you achieve your goals. If you feel like you aren't learning anything, you can just leave. I won't stop you. I can't stop you."

As if I could stop it.

".....You can even kill me if you want. You won't really have m—"

"Stop."

Suddenly, I felt my mouth shut.

Squelch. Squelch.

A familiar sound reached my ears, a low, sinister rustling. Looking around, I felt my heart drop. Emerging from beneath the ground were the familiar roots, writhing like serpents.

They clamped around my ankles, tightening with an unnatural strength, rendering me immobile.

"....."

The tree loomed before me, its figure slowly changing, turning from 'Karl', to its true form. A black tree, its dark bark twisted and gnarled with a single large red pupil in the middle that stared unblinkingly at me.



The overwhelming sense of helplessness I had felt before surged back, paralyzing me.

I tried to speak, to scream, but no words came out.

I was trapped.

"Hmm...!"

The roots...

They had clamped my mouth, stopping me from saying a single thing.

"I may not feel emotions, but I am not stupid."

The tree began to speak, its voice scraping eerily at my ears.

"I have seen and observed countless humans in my life. I have learned all your tricks. I know what you're trying to do."

"...."

"Hmm!"

My guts twisted while the world around me started to grow faint.

I was paralyzed.

Frozen on the spot.

"You say that I need you, and you're not wrong, but that doesn't mean that I have to join you. Just as I have done with this body, I can do with yours. Once I take over your mind, I can do what you did to me and I can experience those emotions."

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

I felt my heart pound off my chest, I could hardly breathe, and the darkness in my vision became more and more apparent.

My chest tingled, and so did my toes.

At this very moment, I felt like I was losing sight of myself.

'No, no, no...!'

I wanted to scream.

Shout.

But my efforts were futile. I couldn't do a thing. The only thing I could do was stare at that piercing blood-red eye that continued to stare at me.

"....."

That was the last sight I saw before my consciousness slipped away.

From that moment, I couldn't hear or see a thing.

Nor could I feel my body.

It was just me, and my thoughts.

A dreadful silence enveloped the space.

It felt stifling.

Almost suffocating.

To the point where I felt myself going mad.

No, I was going mad.

I wanted it to stop.

I couldn't stand this,

I couldn't...

"Huaaaap!"

My eyes flared open and light entered my sight.

"Haaa... haaa... haa..."

My chest heaved up and down as I struggled to catch my breath. Sweat dripped from every corner of my body, soaking my clothes. As I reached to grab my shirt, I stopped.

"....."

My thoughts froze as I slowly raised my head.

"....!"

Looking around, I felt my entire body seize up as my mind went blank. I couldn't comprehend what had happened.

'Why...'

"Why am I here...?"

I was lying in the middle of a familiar cobblestone street. All around me, dozens of people lay with their eyes closed.

The world wasn't red, and there was no tree in sight.

It was as if everything had been a dream.

A terrible dream.

But how could it be...?

"Could this be another illusion—"

"This is the real world."

A voice cut me off.

Feeling something against my shoulder, I nearly shivered on the spot. Turning my head, I was met by two blood-red eyes, and I felt my blood freeze.

But it was only momentary as I suddenly found myself blinking.

That was because,

"Are you surprised by my form?"

Resting on my shoulder was an owl.

With black feathers and blood-red eyes, it was a strange owl, but an owl nonetheless.

How...? When...?

I was about to speak when it turned its head to stare into the distance.

"They're coming."

"Coming...? Who?!"

The owl didn't answer.

Flapping its wings, it lifted off my shoulder.

Tracing its path, my eyes widened as it dove right into my chest, disappearing within.

"Umpf!"

I groaned as it happened, the impact feeling like I had been hit by a car.

Before I could figure out what was going on, something flashed before my eyes.

"Ah..."

And yet again, I froze.

— ●[Julien D. Evenus]● —

Level : 28 [Tier 2 Magician]

Exp : [0%—[19%]—————100%]

Profession : Magician

└ Type : Elemental [Curse]

└ Type : Mind [Emotive]

Spells :

└ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Anger

└ Intermediate type spell [Emotive] : Sadness

└ Intermediate type spell [Emotive] : Fear

└ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Happiness

└ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Disgust

└ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Surprise

└ Beginner type spell [Curse] : Chains of Alakantria

↳ Intermediate type spell [Curse] : Grip of Pestilence

Skills :

[Innate] - Foresight

[Innate] - Etherweave

[Innate] - Veil of Deception

— ●[Julien D. Evenus]● —

"It... looks like, something unexpected occurred."

### **Chapter 190 Veil of Deception [3]**

the"Veil of Deceit...?"

I stared at my status window and laid my eyes on the new skill that had appeared out of nowhere. The words shimmered with an eerie luminescence that seemed strangely tempting.

"How?"

How was it possible?

'No, I think I know.'

I thought back to the owl that had rested on my shoulder a few moments prior and let out a long breath, my breath misting in the cool air.

It was strangely cold.

"....Looks like it agreed to join me after all."

I wasn't sure why, but that seemed to be the case.

The skill was the best evidence for it.

That being said, I still didn't understand why it did what it did at the end, and how I had managed to get the skill.

'As far as I know, someone can only get an innate skill from birth, or through a bon—'

"Ah."

That's when it finally clicked and my eyes opened wide.

"...It can't be."

I tapped my body all over, feeling the solid muscles and bones beneath my skin, but there was no telltale sign of change.

I knew that what I was doing was meaningless, considering that I wouldn't be able to tell unless I checked using a special device, but it didn't matter.

The fact that I had gained a new innate skill was the best proof of the matter.

The tree...

It had transplanted its bone in me.

'Does that even make sense?'

Trees having bones and stuff? It sounded odd.

Regardless, I was more interested in why it had done what it did.

Why...?

Just why did it give me its bone?

And with the bone now transplaneted in me, what would happen to the tree?

"Ugh."

So many questions.

Questions that I could only throw to the back of my mind as I suddenly heard the collective sound of footsteps in the distance.

Eventually, turning my head, I spotted a group of people rushing our way. Wearing all sorts of different clothes, suggesting that they were from different groups, I spotted a few familiar people.

Their faces were a mix of concern and relief as they sprinted toward us.

"Hah."

I almost wanted to laugh.

"...About time."

Pomf—

I laid back on the ground and blankly stared at the gray sky that shrouded the surroundings.

The clouds drifted eerily, the occasional patch of white peeking through the overcast gloom.

Staring at the sky, I was reminded of the Crimson Shade. Its red color seemed to seep into my vision, making the gray clouds appear less dreary.

All of a sudden, the sky no longer looked so gloomy.

For now...

At least, I could finally relax.

\*\*\*

The reports that something had happened in the Mirror Dimension made their way to Haven rather quickly.

Delilah, who was sitting in her office, was the first to know of the news, and the moment she did, she let out a pained groan. The sterile white walls of her office felt like they were closing in on her.

".....Why is it always them?"

How many incidents had there been since the start of the year...? Delilah was starting to lose count at this point.

Her fingers annoyingly drummed on her polished wooden desk.

That wasn't the main problem. The main problem was that all the incidents were only related to the first years.

There were no problems with the second or third years.

In fact, everything was proceeding smoothly with them. Their progress reports were flawless, with each problem solved rather quickly by the staff.

Any attempts for them were quickly stopped by the Academy, and the situation ended on that note.

Sadly, the same couldn't be said for the first years.

.....It was painfully obvious that they were being targeted.

"It has to be them."

There was only one organization that was capable of causing them trouble over and over again.

And it was because she knew who the organization was that Delilah felt helpless.

Unless she was with them 24/7 there was no stopping them.

Be it in the Academy or outside of the Academy.

"Haa."

Taking a deep breath, Delilah reached for her drawer and took out whatever she could find. Her hand brushed against the cold, metallic handle of her drawer before closing around the area where she kept her bars.

She closed her hand to grab whatever she could.

And,

"....."

.....Wrappers.

They were all wrappers.

Clenching her hand, her eyes turned gloomy.

But it wasn't as though she could waste time.

Closing her eyes, the world around her started to shift, and by the time she opened her eyes again, she was now standing in front of a Mirror Crack.

Several people were already waiting at the entrance, their faces anxious under the pale light filtering through the Mirror Crack.

In particular, Delilah's gaze fell over a certain man with short blonde hair and blue eyes. He was someone she knew.

'Patrick Kemile.'

Central's Chief Officer of Oversight.



"What's the situation?"

Delilah approached them with her usual impassive tone.

The air around her crackled with a tense energy.

Having already determined her presence, Patrick turned his head to stare at her. A small smile graced his lips as their eyes met.

".....We've already sent several officers inside. The situation happened rather quickly. I would say a minute or two. We lost total contact with everyone within the Mirror Dimension. We tried sending officers in, but they weren't able to enter. It's all good now."

"All good...?"

Delilah tilted her head, her eyes narrowing.

Wasn't this supposed to be an emergency? How could it be good?

"Yes."

Patrick nodded, his smile fading slightly.

"The incident.... It appears to have been resolved."

"Ah?"

\*\*\*

"Ukh...!"

Leon woke up with his head feeling like it had been struck over and over again with a hammer. The throbbing pain was so intense that he had to hold his head with both hands for several seconds, his fingers digging into his scalp.

'What in the world happened...?'

When the pain finally subsided, he was able to see the sky again. It was gloomy and reminded him of where he was.

'Right, I'm in the Mirror Dimension.'

They were here on a Guild experience trip.

Or something like that. He was having a hard time thinking properly. His thoughts were a jumbled mess, like pieces of a puzzle that refused to fit together.

"Hmm...!"

"Ah."

Suddenly, certain noises attracted his attention and he turned his head.

His eyes immediately widened at the sight that lay before him.

"Ah."

Over a dozen people were lying down on the cobblestone street. They too appeared to be in a similar state to his, all holding onto their heads while groaning.

"What in the..."

Seeing what he was seeing, Leon was able to sober up rather quickly. Lifting himself weakly off the ground, he looked around him.

Wherever he looked, all he saw were people lying on the ground. Many of them were still unconscious, but a small number were slowly starting to wake up.

Leon felt his heart twitch at the sight, and he quickly tried to remember what had happened.

But,

"Uh...?"

His mind was blank.

Despite his best attempts at trying to recall what had happened, his mind continued to remain blank.

That was when he realized.

'Gone...'

His memories of the entire incident.

They were gone.

"What—"

He stopped mid-speech as his eyes caught sight of a certain blood-red leaf floating before his eyes. Its vibrant hue was a sharp contrast to the dull surroundings.

Extending his hand, the leaf fell on his palm.

Staring at the leaf, he felt his entire body shudder.

He felt an innate, almost primal fear while staring at the leaf. And before he knew it, several people appeared behind him.

They were all wearing uniforms, their expressions stern as they looked around before settling their gazes on him.

"Cadet, are you alright?"

"...."

Staring back, Leon didn't answer immediately.

He was still struggling to understand what had happened.

"Cadet...?"

"Uh, ah."

Snapping out of it, Leon looked back at them before frowning.

"Yeah... I think I am."

\*\*\*

The situation passed like that. With the staff from Haven and Central assisting, everything was resolved rather quickly.

.....Or more like, there was nothing to resolve in the first place.

Everyone was still alive, with just a few still struggling to wake up.

I was one of the first to wake up and was escorted back to my room.

I was still struggling to recall what had happened before the tree had taken over, but there were other thoughts that were currently taking over my mind.

Like the new skill that I learned...

"Cadet, we will be leaving you here for now. If there are any problems with your health, please let us know so that we can assist you. Later, you might be questioned, please be ready for that."

The guards who escorted me back to my room gave me a brief rundown of the situation before leaving.

Clank—

I now stood alone in my room. Looking around, the room looked exactly as it did in my memories, and as I traced my finger over the wooden desk, I still had trouble understanding if this was all still an illusion or not.

The grain of the wood was familiar, and so was the texture.

But so did in the illusion.

Could it be that...?

"...It's not an illusion."

Suddenly, a voice reached my ears from behind me, and yet again, my eyes laid on two blood-red eyes.

They were staring at me with a strange intensity.

But that wasn't what I paid attention to.

It was the form it was in.

...It was still an owl.

"How...?"

I felt my heart squeeze briefly.

Despite its appearance, I knew... I knew that it was the tree.

But why?

Why was it in the form of an owl?

"My form?"

Flapping its wings, the owl rested over the wooden desk, its feathers ruffling slightly.

"This is not my real form. My main body is also not here."

"Your main body isn't...?"

"Correct."

"Then?"

"I'm a corporeal manifestation of the will that I left in your body."

"Uh?"

It took a moment for me to process its words.

Corporeal manifestation? What did that even mean...?

"Will that you left in my body? Are you talking about the bone?"

"Bone...? Hmm, I presume you can call it that way. Yes, bone."

The owl nodded and I found myself swallowing my saliva.

'So it was true...'

The tree had truly given me the bone, and the skill that I had was a direct result of my transfusion with it.

But,

"Why? Why did you give me your bone? Will you not di—"

"I will not."

The owl cut me off before I could continue.

"It will take many years, but my body can regrow it without a problem."

"That's possible?"

How come I have never heard of it before?

Actually, when I thought about it, most, if not all bones were taken from dead monsters.

There had hardly ever been a case when a monster willingly gave their bone away.

While I didn't think this was the first time it had happened, the information was probably extremely secret.

"I see... the fact that I can see you is also a result of you transferring the bone directly to me?"

"That's correct. My main body is currently hidden. I will be following you for as long as I am able to reach my goal. When the time comes, I will leave. In exchange, you will be able to keep the bone. But..."

The owl stopped, its gaze turning suffocating.

"...If you fail to help me, I'll retrieve the bone from your body. Death will be the best thing you'll wish for."

That's when I felt it.

An undescrivable pain at the top of my skull that took my breath away.

"Ukh...!"

The pain was so intense that I couldn't hold me from groaning.

Looking up, the owl stared back at me.

"Do not dissappoint me, human."