

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 191 Veil of Deception [4] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 191 Veil of Deception [4]

Chapter 191 Veil of Deception [4]

Despite knowing that it wasn't real and that its real body was far away, under its gaze, I felt utterly powerless. The top of my head ached, and my vision blurred slightly.

Thankfully, the sensation didn't last for very long and I was able to come back to myself shortly after.

"Haa... haaa..."

Unknowingly, my breath was heavy, and my lips were dry.

Licking my lips, I looked back at the owl that was resting calmly on the table while looking at me. Its eyes glowed with a serene, almost dispassionate curiosity.

It didn't say anything, but it had already said all that it needed to say.

'As expected, another twisted relationship.'

Leon, Delilah, Atlas, and now the tree... I really had a knack for this type of stuff.

I bitterly laughed to myself while taking a seat.

"I get it. You don't need to remind me."

From the very start, I knew of the risk of proposing something like this. After a certain point, I thought that the tree had rejected my proposal and that I was going to die, but in the end, it did accept my proposal.

But there were still a few things that I wanted to know.

"I won't ask you about where your main body is, but what about your current form? Will others be able to see you like this?"

"...Yes, they will."

"Then..."

"I can hide inside of your body without a problem. And it shouldn't be a problem even if they see me. I am just a harmless animal."

"That's true..."

But an owl? That would be rather odd to see. It would certainly attract a lot of gazes.

Then again, that wouldn't change a thing from how things were right now, so it didn't really matter all that much.

On another note,

"What should I call you? Since you're an owl, calling you a tree doesn't sound quite right. I can't also call you an owl. It's more fitting if I give you a name."

"A name...?"

The owl tilted its head, seemingly in deep thought. Eventually, it shook its head.

"Do as you wish. I do not mind."

"That would be for the best."

It was my turn to fall into thought.

I thought about it for quite a while, to be honest. Not because I thought the task was hard, but because I was just generally bad with names.

'Dog'

'Cat'

'Mouse'

There were a lot of names that would probably get me weird and disgusted looks from people.

...Well, at least I knew that my naming sense was quite bad.

"Uh."

I rubbed my head.

"Ah...!"

That's when it finally hit me. Squeezing all my wisdom and experience, I was able to come up with a great name.

"That's it, I got it."

I smacked my hand against the table and looked at the owl.

"Owl-Mighty!"

I started laughing to myself.

Not only did it sound great, but it also was hilarious.

"Hahahah."

Since there was no one, it didn't matter if I laughed. I was sure they'd be shocked if they saw me like this, but well... I was also sure they would understand if they learned of the owl's name.

"....."

Strangely, Owl-Mighty didn't say a thing while it stared at me.

I couldn't guess what it was thinking, but seeing that it didn't know about emotions, I wasn't worried about it being angry.

".....Do as you wish."

In the end, I got the stamp of approval and I secretly rejoiced.

But the excitement was quick to die down. I was soon reminded of my current situation and cleared my throat.

"What about those that were in the illusion? Won't things be complicated? Since a lot know of—"

"Besides you, no one will remember."

Owl-Mighty replied in a flat tone. Strangely, its tone was flatter than usual.

So strange...

It couldn't be that it was unsatisfied with its name, right...?

'No, no way. It has only a rudimentary knowledge of emotions. It's probably just me.'

It was also a great name.

But that was beside the point.

"Are you saying that you've erased the memories of all those that were within the vision...?"

"Correct."

Owl-Mighty replied.

"....There will be a few traces of me left around the city, but it will take some time for you humans to figure out. You can use the time to go back to where you belong without arousing any suspicion."

"Oh."

That made sense, and I dropped the topic there.

But there was something else that aroused my curiosity.

"There's something else that I'm curious about if you don't mind me asking."

"What...?"

"How were you able to get everyone under an illusion? And what about the memories that you've wiped from me?"

It wasn't just that.

From what I could tell, the tree was weaker than the post-leaders. Or more like, it was on equal terms with them.

Although the tree thrived on mental weakness, the post-leaders weren't just nobodies.

How could it deeply affect them, and at the same time, the entire supply station so quickly?

Surely, there was no way that people who were strong would not be able to detect if there was something wrong.

In that case, how was it possible...?

"Ten years."

The owl replied, its gaze deeply boring into me.

"It took me ten years to erode their minds to the point where I could bring them into the illusionary world. Slowly, bit by bit, I eroded their minds, crawling into them while waiting for the right time to cast the illusion. Bringing one isn't hard, but bringing many is

difficult. Your arrival came at the exact time when their minds were at their weakest. You were an unforeseen variable. I had to expend quite a lot of power just to trap you into the illusion."

"I see..."

That made sense, but it was still not exactly the answer that I was looking for.

I thought that'd be it when its voice reached my ears.

".....But I didn't do this alone. I had help."

"Uh...?"

That's when my head snapped up and I looked intently at it.

"You had help?"

"Correct."

Its approval wasn't that surprising to me.

I had expected Owl-Mighty to have received some help. While it was true that it had waited quite a long time, it still didn't make sense for it to have been so successful. There were certainly outside factors that played a part in this whole scenario.

'Given that I received a quest, it might have to do with them...'

The Inverted Sky.

...Or at least, that was what I thought at first.

Then, I recalled.

Atlas.

Surely, he would've told me if something was going on.

'Could it be that it's not related to them...?'

The thought made me shudder.

I did not need to deal with another organization.

"Do you know how they look? What they gave you, or anything like that?"

"No."

Owl-Mighty shook its head.

".....They communicated with me through telepathy and never showed their faces to me. Since their goals aligned with mine, I didn't care to look for their faces."

"Is that so..."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

That made sense.

Well, sort of. Not all of it made sense.

"When did they decide to help you?"

"Last year."

"Did they give you anything, or...?"

"They did not give me anything. They only helped weaken the minds of those living within here. The same is true for your group. If not for them, I wouldn't have been able to do so."

"Uh...?"

I was stunned on the spot.

Blinking my eyes slowly to make sure that I heard correctly, I carefully asked,

"Including my group?"

What did that mean...? Could it be suggesting that the culprit had been in the station and subjected us to some sort of weakening ritual, or... I swallowed my saliva.

Could there be someone from the Inverted Sky, or whatever organization was responsible, hiding within the first years?

The thought chilled my heart for a brief moment.

'This shouldn't surprise me.'

There had been an incident in the past where I was called out by another member of the organization. It had been back in the cave during one of the first runs in the Mirror Dimension.

The fact that there were more shouldn't come as a surprise to me.

But the only problem that I had was, how...? How were they capable of doing this to all the first years?

...And if it was truly the case, how could I expose their identity?

Given that they even involved me in this incident, if they were truly from the Inverted Sky, then there was no need for them to remain here.

I needed to get rid of them.

"Alright."

I relaxed my mind.

There was no use thinking about it now. I was going to figure it out one way or another. At the very least, I now knew that there was potentially someone who was hiding within the first years.

I didn't know who, but I had time to figure it out.

There was a more exciting thing that I wanted to figure out.

My new skill.

I licked my lips at the thought.

'Veil of Deceit... I wonder how that works.'

There were no instructions for the skill, but that didn't particularly matter as I turned to look at Owl-Mighty.

"Last question. What can you tell me about the skill that you imparted to me? Veil of Deceit. How do I use it?"

"It's not difficult."

Turning to face the bed, Owl-Mighty raised its wing to point at it.

I was confused about its actions, but before I could even say a thing, my eyes widened as the bed suddenly changed, turning into a large wooden table.

"Ah...?"

I blinked several times to make sure that I wasn't seeing wrong.

Then, once I was sure I was seeing correctly, I stood up and reached for the table. I wanted to check if it was real, but the moment my hand reached for the desk, it passed right through it.

That's when Owl-Mighty spoke.

"....What you see is fake. Veil of Deceit is a skill that enables you to cast illusions. So long as you focus your attention on what you want to change, you will be able to alter the reality that is before your eyes."

Waving its wings again, the room suddenly started to change.

All of a sudden, roots started to appear from all sides, tangling over every little piece of furniture in the room. They crawled up the walls, twining around the light fixtures and creeping across the floor like living vines.

Staring at the scene before me, I found myself breathing harder.

Not because of fear, but because of excitement.

It all... felt so real.

To the point where I found myself shuddering slightly.

'What if I couple this skill with my emotive magic?'

What would happen then?

"Ah."

This skill...

It was perfect.

Chapter 192 Quest Completion [1]

?In a certain room within the supply station.

Several people sat around a large oval table. Heavy tension lingered in the room as everyone turned to look at Delilah, who was quietly sitting in her seat while briefly pausing her gaze on every individual in the room.

Wherever her gaze would pause, the individual under her gaze would slightly flinch.

Such was the terrifying nature of her gaze.

"Should we get started?"

Standing behind her was Patrick, who held a faint smile on his face.

"....."

Delilah didn't answer.

Her attention was currently focused on a certain individual in the room.

"Is it true that you don't recall anything?"

".....I apologize."

Lennon lowered his head in apology. He too didn't understand what had happened.

His memories were wiped, and all he remembered was waking up in the middle of the street with others around.

He knew that he had fallen for some sort of mental spell, but he didn't know what it was or when it happened.

"Is the same thing true for all of you?"

Delilah asked the others in the room, who tacitly nodded their heads.

"I see."

Delilah pursed her lips.

Then, looking around, her eyes fell on an empty seat.

She turned to look behind her where Patrick was standing.

"What about him? Why is he not here?"

"Ah, about that..."

Patrick lowered his head and whispered something in her ear. Delilah's face didn't change, and she soon closed her eyes.

'Memories have been wiped, and someone is in a state of coma with hardly any brain activity. Time elapsed since the incident occurred is several minutes.'

The situation was weird.

Not only that, but when she looked around and saw the strength that the people in the room possessed, Delilah found the situation even odder.

"Did you find any clues about the situation?"

"No."

Patrick shook his head.

"The only thing we found was this."

He brought his palm forward to reveal a blood-red leaf.

".....There weren't many scattered around, but there should be no trees around here that produce such colored leaves. I'm having the observation squad carefully analyze the leaf for any clues."

"....."

Delilah sat quietly, observing the leaf.

It may not necessarily be a great clue, but it was certainly something. It was enough to give her an idea of what sort of 'monster,' if it was even responsible, to look for.

"Blood-colored leaf. Have you had anyone look for any information about a possible monster related to it? If we filter all the data, it shouldn't be difficult to find the information."

"We're already on it."

"No answer yet?"

"I have received several."

"Hm?"

".....I'm just looking through them to sort out which is the most likely candidate for the situation. I've narrowed it down to three possible monsters."

Patrick carefully laid out three papers on the table.

"The first monster, the Redwheel."

Delilah looked at the picture displayed on the paper.

It depicted a large, grotesque red sack with a leaf at the top. The sack was bulbous and veiny, pulsating with a sickly, rhythmic glow.

The leaf, blood-red and serrated, was strikingly similar to the one they had found scattered around the station.

Carefully examining the leaf, she noted its striking resemblance to the one in her hands, down to the intricate vein patterns and crimson hue.

"It's a carnivorous plant that releases a mist from its body."

Patrick explained while pointing towards the description where he started to read.

"The mist induces vivid hallucinations in all those who inhale it, distorting their sense of reality. Once they are ensnared in the hallucination, the plant releases several long, sinewy tendrils. These tendrils are covered in tiny barbs that latch onto the victims, drawing them inexorably toward the plant's maw. The Redwheel then engulfs them, digesting its prey slowly within its pulsating, crimson body."

Listening to the description, Delilah frowned. The more she listened, the more she found this creature to be the most likely culprit.

But there were still several things that didn't make sense.

"How is it that nobody has noticed the plant...?"

She cast her gaze over the post-leaders.

"For people of your strength, detecting something like this shouldn't be difficult. In fact, the reason why you've been selected as post-leaders is because of your strength. For something like this to occur..."

Delilah didn't need to finish her words there.

Her face said it all.

In reality, she wasn't that mad. She understood that most likely an outsider organization had tampered with them, resulting in this mess.

She knew this type of feeling all too well.

It was for that reason that she was being unreasonably harsh.

'I'll make sure to squeeze the Guilds for as much as I possibly can.'

Since they were responsible for the cadets, they were the ones at fault for what happened. That was enough reason for her to demand compensation and provide it to the cadets.

At the end of the day, things couldn't continue like this.

She needed to get them strong, fast.

Taking a long sigh, Delilah turned to Patrick, who gave her a rundown of the second monster.

"Crimson Hand."

Similar to the Redwheel, the monster had a distinctive red leaf that was similar to the one in her hand. Its effects were also similar, with it brainwashing those within its range.

Unlike the Redwheel, it resided underneath the ground, and the reason why it was called 'Crimson Hand' was because it was a gigantic red open palm.

But for it to take over the entire station...

Delilah looked beneath the ground.

.....It would without question be of a size unlike anything she had ever seen before.

"Lastly, the Ebonthorn Tree."

Delilah's ears perked up.

"This is the one with the least amount of information that we have. It's a rather slippery creature that knows how to hide well and slowly consumes the minds of those it targets. The reason why we don't have much information on this creature is because all those that have been subjected to it either die or forget everything."

Frowning, Delilah looked at Patrick.

"But it's not like there haven't been cases where it has been defeated. Take a look here."

Patrick pointed towards the document in front of Delilah.

"There's a verbal recount of what happened in one of the past records that I managed to dig out."

Shifting down, Delilah managed to catch a glimpse of what he was talking about.

There she could see a quote.

[I never noticed it until the end. I only noticed it when I started losing sight of myself. I started to grow moodier, my emotions dulled, and I was starting to change... Change into a completely different person. That's when I knew something was wrong and fought my way out of the world. When I woke up again, those around me forgot everything. I didn't. And the craziest part of it all...? Only a few minutes had passed in the real world.]

Delilah re-read the lines over and over again. Staring at the illustration which depicted the leaf, and then the one that sat on the table, she seemed to fall into deep thought.

With everyone around staring at her, Delilah tapped her finger on the desk before shifting the paper slightly forward.

"...This is the one."

She was sure.

"The Tree of Ebonthorn."

'This is harder than I thought.'

Such was my thought as I stared at the statue before me. It wasn't anything detailed. It was supposed to be an angel statue, but it came out more like a stickman with wings.

"....."

The more I looked at it, the worse it became in my eyes.

To the point where I suddenly felt like throwing it away. The only reason I didn't was because the very statue was Owl-

Mighty.

".....You need to imagine it properly. It needs a lot of concentration."

"Yes, I can tell."

My head was still throbbing from my previous attempt.

It all more or less depended on my creativity and imagination. I could recreate things that I had previously seen, but it all depended on my memory of them. The fainter the memory, the fainter the image.

Not only that, but if I were to re-create a completely new piece that I had never seen before, then it would take a lot of mana and concentration.

This was my current limit.

If that wasn't all, I could also not change the entire room at will like Owl-Mighty did.

I needed more practice to get to its level.

"Hoo."

Taking a deep breath, I wiped away the sweat that had accumulated on my forehead.

"This might take me a long time to learn."

Well, that was mostly dependent on how much I planned on training it.

Since the skill was essential, I planned on focusing a lot of my time on it.

"When are you going to teach me about emotions...?"

Suddenly, Owl-Mighty spoke.

Listening to its voice, I turned my head.

"It's not easy to learn about emotions. It will take a bit of time."

"Do you know of a way to make it faster...?"

".....Hmm."

There was a way.

Of course, there was a way. The first leaf. So long as I used that, I would have no problem injecting all the pent-up emotions into Owl-Mighty. In fact, it could also be a good thing since if I didn't let all my emotions out, I'd find myself in a dangerous situation.

There was only one problem.

"You can't handle it."

".....I can't handle it?"

"Yes, you can't."

I didn't doubt that the mental resistance of Owl-Mighty was high, but for someone who knew nothing about emotions, to be suddenly injected with such raw, intense emotions... they might implode.

Or at least, this was what I thought.

It could very well be the opposite, but it didn't matter to me.

I wanted this relationship to last for a while. If the first leaf was to work, then there wouldn't be any need for him to stay with me for long.

That would go against my ambitions.

"It might be fine since your real body is not here, but it is dangerous. The best course of action is for you to slowly learn a bit about emotions before I apply the skill on you."

"...."

Owl-Mighty didn't reply, but it didn't seem like it was against what I said.

I sighed in relief then.

"Since you've agr—"

I stopped halfway through my sentence.

That was because,

[Tree of Ebonthorn: You were able to overcome the event]

A notification flashed before my eyes.

Chapter 193 Quest Completion [2]

[The incident has been resolved with no lasting effect on anyone who has been involved. The future is changing.]

I stared at the notification with my breath caught in my throat.

So far, reading the first part, everything appeared to be flowing smoothly.

'The quest... did I fail it, or not?'

I was still waiting for the next notification to pop up. Who knew whether I had failed or not? Until I saw confirmation, I didn't dare hope.

In the meantime, I pulled the main quest window by my side.

[◆ Main Quest Activated: Tree Of Ebonthorn.]

: Character Progression + 401%

: Game Progression + 13%

Failure

: Calamity 1 + 23%

: Calamity 2 + 17%

: Calamity 3 + 19%

In particular, my eyes fell on the lower end of the quest window.

'I hope I didn't fail.'

While I still wasn't sure exactly what the percentage rise for the failure brought, the percentages were quite high. Whatever it did, it was certainly not good. For that reason, I needed to be extra careful.

"Hoo."

Time seemed to stretch all of a sudden.

I stood frozen while staring at the notification window.

'There's nothing that said I can't align myself with the tree, and since it says that the future has changed, it means that there should be no problem, right?'

Typically, whenever it said the future had changed, then it would say that I had passed.

That was how it usually went.

But I couldn't be sure.

The quests were unreliable, and the criteria were unknown.

The only thing I could do was pray.

Pray that I had passed.

And,

Soon, the notifications that I had been waiting for, arrived.

◆| Game Progression EXP + 13%

Game Progression : [0%——-[31%]—————100%]

Seeing the experience bar fill before my very eyes, I felt every part of my body starting to relax.

It was a sight that I had been eager to see.

Despite not knowing exactly what the game progression bar did, seeing that I had reached 31%, I felt an indescribable emotion.

'Soon, soon...'

Then came the best part.

"Ah."

◆| Character Progression EXP + 401%

Exp : [0%—[20%]—————100%]

A familiar wave of energy surged through my body, reaching its deepest parts and reinvigorating me. My muscles began to tense, my eyesight sharpened, and my hearing, along with all my other senses, heightened.

It was a euphoric and addicting feeling that I didn't want to stop.

But all good things eventually came to an end.

Sure enough, after a few minutes like this, the feeling stopped and a new notification popped up before my very eyes.

[◆ Active Main Quest: Prevent the Calamities from awakening or dying.]

Aoife K. Megrail : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Kiera Mylne : Slumber

: Progress - 9%

Evelyn J. Verlice : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

It was there to remind me of my current mission.

So far, staring at the numbers, I felt relaxed.

They weren't high, and nothing to worry about.

Then again, staring at the quest window again and seeing the high numbers, I knew that there would eventually come a quest that would make it extremely hard for me—

"Uh...?"

My thoughts suddenly froze.

All of a sudden, the progress bar for each one of the calamities started to rise.

Evelyn K. Megrail : Slumber

: Progress - 0% —> 7%

Kiera Mylne : Slumber

: Progress - 9% —> 13%

Evelyn J. Verlice : Slumber

: Progress - 0% —> 9%

I stood frozen, staring at the numbers.

'Why...?'

While it was true that the increase wasn't as substantial as it would've been had I failed the mission, I still didn't understand the increase.

Why...? What could possib—

"Ah."

That was when something struck me and I turned to look at Owl-Mighty.

"...Is there a way you can return the memories of those that you have entrapped in the illusion?"

"....."

Owl-Mighty didn't answer me and instead looked at me with a peculiar look.

That was when it suddenly hit me.

"Ah..."

It had been in the room the entire time.

...It had seen exactly what had happened to me, and the sudden increase in my strength. I was just about to say something when its gaze fell on the quest notification.

"That's an interesting skill you have, human."

"....!"

Yet again, I was shocked.

It could see it?

How...? I thought that I was the only one that could see the notifications. How could it—wait?

A new thought suddenly struck me.

'That's right, it isn't its real body.'

While I wasn't sure how it worked, the current tree was part of me in the form of a bone. The fact that it could see the notification window was logical.

I pursed my lips.

'In that case, there's a chance that it might find most of my secrets.'

I wasn't sure how to feel about this.

It wasn't as though I could hide the notifications from it. Now that it was part of my body, it was only a matter of time before it found out about it.

"Does it come from one of your innate skills, or is it something else entirely?"

Owl-Mighty curious asked as its gaze fell on me and I swallowed my saliva.

I didn't know how to answer that. How could I when I myself didn't know...?

In the end, taking a deep breath, I sat down on the chair.

"I'd also like to know."

This was true.

.....I didn't know the reason why I had the notification window.

"Game Progression? Character Progression? Quest...?"

It started to read the window, and its gaze turned even weirder.

"Why is my name being mentioned? Hmm, things are starting to make more sense now. The reason why you were so keen on finding out more about it. I finally know the reason."

Owl-Mighty's gaze turned even more peculiar.

It seemed like it wanted to ask more, but I was quick to cut it off.

"We can talk about it later. For now, I'd like to ask you about the memories. Is it possible to return them back?"

"Yes, there is."

"There is?!"

".....Yes, just tell me who, and I can restore their memories."

"Hoo, okay."

There was one possibility that I had not taken into account when the quest was done.

While it was true that I had completed it all, and the future had changed, from what I could tell, the change needed to be a positive one.

Yes, I had been able to prevent a disaster from happening, but what about the character's growth?

With everything wiped out from their memories, whatever they learned, or whatever improvement in their relationships was gone.

If that was the case, then this entire event had been useless for them.

In that regard, I think I was starting to get a better understanding of the quests.

'I have to prevent them from suffering the trauma that they experienced in the game, while at the same time ensuring that they progress for the future.'

"Fuck."

I swore at the thought.

It was certainly an annoying situation, but at the same time, I felt like I was starting to get a clearer picture of the path that I needed to take in the future.

I rubbed my forehead.

'I hope that the sudden increase in percentage didn't do a lot of damage.'

Considering that Kiera looked completely unbothered after she rose to 9%, I didn't feel that worried.

"Hoo."

Taking a deep breath to calm my mind down, I looked outside the window.

It was dark now, and the previous excitement that I felt when reaching the next rank cooled down.

Level : 32 [Tier 3 Magician]

Exp : [0%—[19%]—————100%]

Staring at the notification in front of me, I waved my hand and scattered it away.

I no longer felt that excited about reaching Tier 3.

"There is still... a lot of work to do."

To Tok—

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door.

I hastily turned my head to look at Owl-Mighty who flapped its wings and directly entered my body. I knew that I was still curious about my situation, but our relationship was one of mutual exchange.

I didn't plan on revealing any of my secrets to it.

I couldn't afford to do so.

"Cadet? Are you sleeping?"

A rough voice echoed from the other side of the door.

Fixing my clothes, and wiping my sweat, I headed for the door where a large man donning a uniform greeted me.

"Yes...?"

Frowning, I looked at him up and down.

He was well-built, and his eyebrows were rather thick. Hiding his hair was a small cap, but taking a closer look, it didn't seem like he had much hair to begin with.

"I apologize for suddenly disturbing you."

He started off with an apology and I relaxed. It didn't seem like he was here to start any trouble.

"There's no problem."

"That's good. I do apologize for calling you so late into the night, but I need you to follow me for now."

I blinked my eyes.

I needed to follow him?

For what?

"Is this an order?"

The man deeply looked at me.

I stood on the spot while staring back into his hazel eyes. Eventually, he broke off the stare and cleared his throat.

"No, this is not an order. We would just like to interrogate you with regard to what happened. You must understand that this is all because we're trying to investigate what happened. You don't have to come, but it might get troublesome for you if you don't come."

At first, I thought he was threatening me.

However, when I thought about it, he was right.

Were I to reject this offer, then I would start to look suspicious to them. Perhaps not by much since there were probably others who planned on rejecting the request, but I didn't doubt for one second that it was going to become troublesome further down the line.

It was for that reason that I nodded.

"Okay, I can do that."

Either way, there was no way for them to pin-point Owl-Mighty who was inside of my body.

Not only that but from what he told me, everyone's memories had been wiped.

All I had to do was act like I had also lost my memories.

The only thing I would lose from this would be time. However, when considering that it would probably lead to me losing more time in the future, I gladly accepted the offer.

"Please lead the way, I'll follow you from behind."

"Thank you. Please follow me."

And thus, I followed the officer into the interrogation room.

'It's a bit of a pity that everyone's memories have been wiped.'

I'd have been able to milk something from the Guild executives had that been the case.

Truly, a pity.

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Chapter 194 Quest Completion [3]

"...."

Aoife blankly stared at the white ceiling of her room. Her mind was still a jumbled mess, and she could hardly think at all.

The only thing she recalled was waking up in the middle of the street with other people.

They too seemed dazed and confused about the situation.

She tried asking the people who had come to rescue her, but all they responded with was, 'We'll let you know after the investigation.'

"....What does that even mean?"

Aoife was frustrated.

Not just with them, but with herself too.

Something had clearly happened, and given that she couldn't remember a thing, she had been dangerously close to dying.

All of that without her being able to do a thing.

That feeling... Aoife squeezed her hand.

She hated that feeling.

"Haaa."

Aoife closed her eyes and sunk herself deep into her own thoughts.

"Dum~ Dam!"

She quietly hummed to herself as she did so.

It was a habit of hers whenever she had something deep to think about.

At the same time, she recalled a certain face and her brows scrunched up in annoyance.

For some reason, whenever she sang, she'd be reminded of the time in the library when he criticized her singing.

She had still not been able to move on from then.

'As if my singing is that bad...'

Raising her hand to cover the light coming from above her, Aoife opened her eyes to see her open palm in front of her.

"What now...?"

She had only been told to stay in the room for now.

She had no clear instructions.

Aoife felt like training, but she knew that going out was probably not a wise option.

In the end, all she could do was stare at her hand.

Or at least...

That was until it happened.

Her world suddenly darkened and she felt a sharp pain in her mind.

Immediately, she sat up while holding her head.

"Akh...!"

Holding onto her head, Aoife groaned and clenched her teeth.

It was a pain that she struggled to describe, and if not for the fact that it only lasted for a brief moment, she would've screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Haaa... haa..."

Her breath was heavy and her forehead was covered in sweat.

Despite the state that she was in, she didn't so much as bother wiping the sweat away from her body.

"H-how...?"

Rather, her eyes were wide open and her pupils were dilated.

Memories that she had completely forgotten resurfaced in her mind.

'Crimson Shade, Tree of Ebonthorn, Julien, Leon...'

Aoife felt as though she had suddenly lost her breath.

"It... this..."

She was having a hard time understanding what was going on.

'The last thing I remember is Julien almost getting attacked by the monster... what happened afterward...?'

Aoife was so curious that she felt like she could die.

However, if there was one thing she was certain about, it was that Julien may have had a hand in this.

In the last moments, he was the one who had interacted with the post-leader of the Black Hound Guild and had gone out of the bunker.

If...

If there was someone who might have an idea of what had happened, he was the one.

But outside of that, there was something else that Aoife remembered.

"Kiera."

She quietly mumbled her name and subconsciously massaged her face.

Even now, she could recall what she did in those last moments. Her expression twisted at the thought and her fingers twitched.

"....If it's the last thing I do."

*

Aoife wasn't the only one that came up with that conclusion.

Kiera and Evelyn both experienced the same thing as they recalled what had happened.

"Fuck, shit."

Swearing up and down, Kiera ruffled her hair into a mess, only to fix it shortly after.

Couldn't have it like that.

Too messy.

"What the hell happened...?"

It was only after she was done fixing her hair that the reality of the situation hit her.

The memories that had been wiped started to return, and just like Aoife, she recalled all the details of the event that had transpired before she woke up.

And just like Aoife, she had an inkling that Julien may have had a hand in the situation.

'Could it be that he defeated the wathever tree?'

It was the only plausible explanation to her.

The only one that wasn't so lucky was Evelyn who, despite recalling what happened, didn't exactly know what was going on.

After all, mid-way through the situation, she blacked out.

"What am I supposed to do with this...?"

Staring at her own reflection in the bathroom mirror, Evelyn frowned.

Her memories were cloudy, and all she could remember was Kiera slapping her.

"Ah, right..."

Kiera slapping her...

Thinking about those last moments, her expression changed and her hand twitched.

"Kiera."

She mumbled to herself.

".....If it's the last thing I do."

"So you do not recall anything?"

"Yes, I apologize for that."

I stood in a small and confined room, sitting behind a metal desk with a guard sitting on the opposite end. The room wasn't like the one in the bunker, but it gave off similar vibes. It was for that reason that my legs were shaking slightly and my eyes occasionally darted around.

'I think I've got PTSD.'

I couldn't count the amount of times I started thinking about the best route to escape from this place.

"Well, your story is in line with that of the others."

Putting his clipboard down, the guard removed his glasses and pinched his eyebrows.

".....I'll say it like I said it to everyone else that we've brought. We apologize for our negligence. You will be properly compensated for what you've undergone. Your Academy should inform you more about it later."

"I see."

Compensation...

That was more like it.

I was certainly not going to refuse it.

"Okay, everything is in check. You may leave."

"Thank you."

I stood up from my seat and headed out of the room. The entire time my mind would drift on ways that I could escape the place, and it only stopped when I finally came out of the building and was able to take a breath of the fresh air of the Mirror Dimension.

As expected, the sky was still gloomy and there was hardly anyone out.

Bidding farewell to the guards, I walked on the cobblestone streets. Looking around, I was reminded of the moments within the illusion where I had been by myself.

....It was quiet, with hardly anyone outside.

The only difference was the fact that the Crimson Shade was no longer present.

Just as I arrived back into the dorm building, a familiar figure appeared outside. He seemed to be waiting for someone.

Looking at him for a brief moment, I nodded my head slightly and prepared to pass him when he extended his hand to stop me.

His gray eyes locked onto me as he spoke,

"What are you doing...?"

"Uh?"

I tilted my head.

"I'm going back to my dorm."

"I can tell."

"Oh, good, so..."

I tried to push my way in but he stopped.

"I was waiting for you."

"Oh."

I still pushed my way through.

"Can you stop for a second?"

"Fine."

Giving up, I stopped trying to push my way through and lowered my head to look at him. He stared back at me, but when he opened his mouth, his words appeared to refuse to leave them.

It went on like that for a few seconds before I eventually cut in.

"You want to know what happened, correct?"

"....."

He didn't answer, but his face said it all.

"What makes you think that I know?"

"..."

Yet again, he didn't say a thing, and yet again, I was able to read his expression.

"Alright, fine."

It was strangely creepy how I was able to converse with him without him saying a single word.

I shuddered for a brief moment.

"I can get you your memories back."

".....!"

His head flicked up.

'You can?'

"Yes-ah."

I was doing it again.

"Can you speak? This is getting ridiculous."

"Oh, right."

Leon scratched the side of his face. It seemed like it finally dawned on him that he hadn't spoken a word the entire time.

That head of his...

Why did it suddenly feel so smackable?

Slap—

"Uh!?"

'Oh, shit!'

I actually ended up smacking his head.

While I thought about it, I didn't think I'd actually go through with it. Seeing his shocked expression, for a brief moment, I didn't know how to reply, but I soon cleared my throat and seriously replied.

"Like I said, I can get your memories back."

His eyes narrowed.

"Do you want them or not?"

".....Yes."

Despite his face looking like that of someone who would kill me if given the chance, he swallowed everything and nodded his head.

"I'd like my memories back."

".....I got you."

Raising my hand, Leon flinched slightly.

"...."

"...."

I raised it again, and he flinched again.

Suddenly, the corner of my lips pulled up and Leon's expression twisted.

"Get it over with."

"Alright, fine."

I turned serious then and called out.

"Owl-Mighty."

The moment my voice fell, I felt something on my shoulder and when I turned to look, two red eyes looked back at me.

"What?"

Leon looked stunned by Owl-Mighty's appearance.

Looking at him, I thought about explaining but decided otherwise.

"It's a long story."

It would probably take a long time for me to explain.

"Anyways—"

"W-what did you say it's name was?"

Cutting me off, Leon looked at Owl-Mighty with a trembling gaze. I tilted my head before answering.

"Owl-Mighty."

"....Ah."

In silence, Leon covered his mouth before leaning back on the staircase. His face was pale, and his expression was something I couldn't find words to describe.

In essence, he looked like someone undergoing a mid-life crisis.

I let it be and turned to look at Owl-Mighty.

"Can you do it?"

"Yes."

Raising its wing in Leon's direction, roots manifested around Leon, trapping his ankles.

"....!?"

Instantly, Leon's eyes widened in shock. I was also a bit surprised and looked around me. I hadn't expected the roots to appear.

"Ukh...!"

Leon groaned for a brief moment and he soon grasped his head. His struggle went on for a few seconds before his face blanked.

"It's done. It will take a couple of minutes for him to recover."

"That's fine."

Glancing at him, I looked around. Everything had happened rather quickly, and I had only given a brief look at my surroundings.

'I'm sure Owl-Mighty checked around before using the skill.'

Otherwise, things would become rather troublesome.

Rubbing my forehead, I had just crossed the door of the accommodation when I felt a sudden heat coming from my right arm.

Sizzle~

It was a familiar sizzle that brought forth certain memories of mine, and my eyes widened.

"It can't be...!"

I hastily looked around before rushing to my room.

Clank!

Closing the door behind me, I unwrapped the bandages on my arm before looking at the tattoo.

"Ah...!"

As expected. The third leaf...

Chapter 195 Third Leaf [1]

?I stared at my arm with widened eyes.

The stinging sensation had disappeared, and what replaced it was a strange warmth that seemed to seep through every part of my body.

Staring at the glowing leaf, I didn't know how to react.

It was an unexpected situation.

How was I even supposed to react to this...?

In the first place, what sort of criteria was there for me to suddenly unlock the third leaf?

'Could it be because I suddenly reached Tier 3?'

Was that the criteria?

I thought about it for a while before shaking my head. Surely it wasn't that simple. There was definitely more to it than my thoughts allowed.

But in the end, I knew that thinking about it right now was pointless.

Looking around me, I quickly bandaged up my arm and sat down on the bed.

"Hooo."

Laying down on the bed, I blankly stared at the ceiling.

I was tempted to try the new effect of the leaf but decided that now wasn't a good time. I needed to be in a safer environment to do that.

'I'll check it out when I'm back in my dorms in Haven.'

Who knew what sort of side-effect the new ability had?

"Are you relaxing?"

"....!"

I hurriedly looked up front where the voice came from.

She was sitting down on the wooden chair by the desk of the room, and her inky black eyes were locked onto me.

Licking my lips, I took a couple of breaths to calm myself down before facing Delilah's gaze.

'When did she get here?'

No, rather...

"Do I not get any privacy?"

"Privacy?"

"Yes..."

I looked around the room pointedly. I was trying to hint at her the fact that this was my own room and so forth.

"....?"

But seeing that she still didn't seem to understand the message, I gave up.

"It's been a while."

I greeted her first.

"Been a while...?"

Delilah tilted her head as her eyes sharpened. At that moment, I wanted to slap myself in the face for the sudden slip-up.

....Only a couple of minutes should've passed since something happened to us. In the meantime, it had only been about a day since we left the Academy.

It was a fact that she understood all too well.

"It's just a figurative speech."

I tried to play it off, but that didn't work.

Her eyes didn't allow me to.

"Do you have any memories of the incident?"

"....."

I didn't answer.

I thought about lying but staring into those deep, piercing eyes of hers, I suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of dread.

It was as if her gaze could see straight through me, peeling back every layer of deception. The weight of her stare made me feel like sinking into the deepest parts of the ground, swallowed up by the earth itself.

That was when I gave up on the thought.

"Well...?"

"I do."

In the end, I ended up telling her the truth.

'It shouldn't hurt me anyways.'

She was on my side.

At least, for now.

....And at the same time, I could use her to find the true culprit behind this.

For that reason, I started to recount everything that happened in the illusion until the very end.

For obvious reasons, I omitted the part about 'Owl-Mighty' and just revealed to her that I had found the page and was able to clear the entire illusion, freeing everyone from the grasp of Owl-Mighty.

"That's about it."

Once I was done recounting my story, Delilah looked at me for a brief moment. She seemed to be trying to gauge whether I was lying or not.

But I wasn't worried.

My story was in line with all the available information about the Ebonthorn tree.

As expected, after a long and agonizing couple of seconds, she turned her gaze away from me and nodded.

"You might be able to receive a lot of rewards if you reveal what happened. Are you sure you don't want to do that? If you want, I can try to get you an adequate reward."

"....It's alright."

I had already received an adequate reward in the tree bone.

Furthermore, things were certainly going to become extremely troublesome in the future if the truth were to be revealed.

"I won't force you."

Delilah stood up from the wooden chair. I thought she was going to leave the room directly when she turned to face me directly.

Her deep black eyes pierced right through me as she spoke.

"You need to hide your strength properly."

"Hm? Wh—"

"In just a day, you were able to improve your strength so much. Many will find this suspicious."

"..."

The realization dawned on me like a truck.

I knew exactly what she was talking about, and I had thought about it beforehand, but her sudden appearance, had made it hard for me to prepare properly.

But, yes.

My sudden increase in strength was certainly suspicious.

I had been trying to rack my brain over the matter, but I had been too busy to give it a proper thought.

Her warning came to me as a wake-up call.

"You should be glad not everyone can see through your strength like me, but most post-leaders can. Be careful of that."

"....."

What could I even say?

In the end, I could only nod to her words.

"Come find me when we reach the Academy. There's something that I would like to speak with you about."

She disappeared shortly after that.

My mind continued to linger over her last words.

'Something she'd like to speak to me about...?'

I felt my eyes widen slightly as realization dawned on me.

'It can't be about that, right?'

A strange sense of excitement surged within me at the thought.

The rewards I had asked about before...

Did they agree?

"....."

Leon blankly stared at the city ahead of him.

It was empty, and there was hardly anyone on the streets. Despite that, the current image overlapped with the one in her memories. But in contrast to his memories, the world was entirely red.

In the end...

'I died.'

It may have been an illusion, but it was undeniable.

He had 'died' in vain.

.....Despite understanding the reason why he had failed, he didn't once blame Julien for it. While it was true that the reason why he had 'died' was because of the side-effects of Julien's Emotive Magic, at the end of the day, it all came down to his lack of skills.

"What should I do...?"

The feeling he was currently having felt terrible.

It was hard to describe.

.....But it was as if hands were dragging him down some quicksand, not letting him go until he was completely suffocated.

It was a feeling that Leon hated.

'This sense of helplessness...'

He silently clenched his fist and took a deep breath.

Leaning back to stare at the sky, he closed his eyes for a brief moment before finally standing up and dusting off his clothes.

"Right."

There was no use crying over spilled milk.

He just had to be better.

Turning his head to look towards the entrance of the accommodation, Leon's lips curled up slightly.

He really was...

An amazing guy.

"...."

That thought however only lasted for a brief moment.

Massaging the back of his head, he was reminded of a certain scene and he frowned.

Nevermind.

Fuck that guy.

Two days.

That was how long it took for all those involved to be interrogated and cleared of all suspicions.

In the end, the decision was to let everyone return back to where they came from with the supply station being temporarily shut down in hopes of finding the culprit behind the incident.

That was how far I knew concerning the entire situation.

"Everyone, please line up carefully. Please line up carefully! We need proper order or we will not be able to escort you out!"

I was currently standing in line to head out of the Mirror Dimension. At long last, this exhausting exchange came to an end.

'Never again.'

At least for a good while, I wasn't planning on going out of the Academy.

I had gone out about three times, and each time, I'd face some sort of problem. That was it. For at least a month or two, I didn't plan on leaving the Academy.

Hopefully...

I knew that my reality was a lot sadder than this.

There was bound to be an event that was going to force me out of the Academy.

It wasn't even a flag, but just a fact.

A sad fact that reflected the current state of my life.

'I want a vacation.'

Or at least, some alone time for myself where I could just focus on training.

"Hm?"

Feeling a couple of gazes, I turned my head and was surprised to see Aoife and Kiera staring at me. Our gazes met briefly, but they quickly looked away.

Their behavior took me aback.

Why in the...

"I wonder what the outside world looks like."

"....!"

Startled, I looked to my shoulder.

There, Owl-Mighty stood proudly while staring ahead.

'Ah.'

It finally dawned on me.

The reason why I was getting the stares.

"What are you doing? Why are you out...?"

I quietly whispered in order to make sure that no one heard.

The fact that an owl was on my shoulder was already weird. If they learned that it could talk...?

"You should know best that you shouldn't be out."

"Why not?"

"That's..."

"There's no need to worry, human. I am not my main body. Nobody will ever find out. Not even that scary woman you met before. They will just assume I'm a regular spirit owl."

Scary woman?

Was he talking about Delilah...?

'Hmm.'

Thinking about it, she was scary, but at the same time, I couldn't really take her seriously.

Perhaps it was because I had seen her in her smaller form, but she never really came off as scary to me.

To Owl-Mighty she looked scary, and probably the same was true for those who didn't know her well, but she really was the furthest thing from scary.

Either way, I didn't have time to dwell on it.

"Please come this way."

It was my time to head out of the Crack.

Arriving before it, I looked at the guard and waited for his signal. The guard stared at Owl-Mighty for a brief moment 16:46

before taking his eyes away and giving me the go-ahead.

Nodding slightly, I stepped into the portal.

At long last.

...It was finally over.

Chapter 196 Third Leaf [2]

The return to the academy marked the end of the Guild exchange. Quite frankly, I was mentally tired and exhausted from the entire ordeal.

'Delilah said that she wanted to talk to me about something, but she didn't specify when exactly. I'll do so after taking a bit of rest.'

I wanted to feel excited, but I couldn't.

I was simply too tired.

With that being said, I already had an idea of what she wanted to talk about.

'Dragon Bone.'

Or at least, an update on the situation.

The thought of receiving the Dragon Bone made me excited, but at the same time, made me a little apprehensive.

Surely there wouldn't be any conditions attached to the bone, right?

"Haha."

As if.

I laughed a little to myself.

There was no way the Empire would simply give me something so precious without any conditions.

Either way, I was prepared to listen to them before deciding.

Cli Clank—

Opening the door to my room, I felt a wave of nostalgia.

Only a day may have passed, but to me, it had probably been over a week. Time flowed differently in the illusions.

Hopping off my shoulder, Owl-Mighty looked around curiously. It carefully observed every nook and cranny of the palace.

It had been like this since the moment we came out of the Mirror Dimension.

From the sky to the trees, to the bushes... It was interested in everything.

I would've let it be if not for the fact that there was another portal waiting for us after coming out of the Mirror Crack.

"Huam."

Yawning, I felt my eyelids grow a little heavier.

Pomf—

I dropped back on the bed and stared at the familiar white ceiling.

'I really was... back.'

Who would've thought?

I really was tired.

Thankfully, Owl-Mighty was busy looking around, so it didn't need my attention.

"Don't go out without my permission."

But I still felt the need to warn it about going out.

I didn't necessarily think it would be in any danger, but it would still be problematic.

Glancing at it for a few seconds, I finally sunk into my consciousness and the world turned black.

*

The next morning.

I woke up feeling refreshed.

"Looks like it might rain."

Coming out of my room, I noticed the gray clouds hanging in the sky. It wouldn't be long before before it was going to rain.

Knowing that, I hurried my steps and headed for Delilah's office.

Now that my mind was clearer, I could finally feel the excitement of potentially receiving the Dragon Bone.

Of course, I made sure to not get my hopes too high.

I couldn't be too disappointed in case I didn't receive it.

To Tok—

Arriving at the familiar office, I knocked.

"Come in."

Delilah's voice echoed shortly after and I opened the door and entered.

Clank—

Already familiar with the place I didn't stand in ceremony and prepared to take a seat when I paused.

"....."

There were many things that I wanted to say, but couldn't.

Lifting my head up, I met Delilah's gaze.

She looked back at me without so much as a change in expression.

I continued to stare at her.

She stared back.

...And then,

She looked away.

"There were a lot of events that I needed to attend, and with what happened recently, I had trouble cleaning up."

Excuses started to flow out of her mouth.

'Are you watching Owl-Mighty? This is the woman you regarded as scary.'

"Oh."

I looked at all the wrappers and papers that were scattered across the room. I could hardly believe her at all.

I had been gone for... two days.

Two days.

That was how long it took for the office to turn into the mess that it was now.

"...."

I closed my eyes for a short moment before taking a seat.

'It's whatever.'

Wasn't going to clean it up anyways.

Seemingly taking note of my attitude, Delilah's expression turned sharp as she changed the topic.

"You must already have an idea as to why I called you here."

"...I do."

I answered while trying my best to keep my heart from trembling. I didn't want to openly display the excitement that I was feeling.

I was so excited that a few notifications flashed before my very eyes. They were rather annoying, but it wasn't as though I could remove them.

"Regarding your reward, I have an update for you."

Delilah spoke in the slowest tone possible.

I felt my face twitch at the fact.

It felt as though she was doing this on purpose.

I had to take a deep breath to calm myself down while waiting for her to finish.

"Atlas reported back to me not too long ago. In the end, the Empire has decided to agree to the request."

"...!"

"But—!"

I was just about to jump up from the excitement when Delilah poured cold water on me.

'There it is...'

The catch that I had been waiting for. It wasn't as though I didn't expect it, but it certainly dampened my excitement a little bit.

"There's no need to look that disappointed. Let me hear the condition first.'

"....."

I raised my head to meet her gaze without saying a word.

So long as it wasn't bad, then I didn't mind fulfilling the condition. At the end of the day, the Dragon Bone was too big of a reward for what I had accomplished.

At least, that was what the Empire probably thought.

"In the coming months, there will be a summit between the four Empires."

A summit between the four Empires...?

My ears perked.

"At the summit, Haven will send a few representatives. As the first-year Black Star, the Empire wants you to show your dominance against the talents of the other Empires. You won't be the only one attending. The first years have shown a lot of promise. For that, the Empire plans on providing you with resources to help you grow stronger."

My mind stopped halfway through her words.

It wasn't so much that I was shocked about the announcement since I had heard about the summit in the past, but it was more about...

"Another trip?"

"....Eh?"

Delilah stopped to look at me.

I stared back at her with a bitter look.

"That... Can we not? Can we host the summit here?"

"No."

Delilah cut me off rather quickly.

So much so that I was a bit taken aback.

I thought she'd ramble on about how it wasn't a decision that was up to her and it was something decided by the four empires, but her answer was completely different from what I expected.

"You bring trouble wherever you go. Be it in the Academy, or outside of the Academy. I'm already facing a lot of headaches over the recent incidents. I'm not hosting any event I'm Haven."

"...."

To her words, I could only remain speechless.

I wanted to refute what she said, but I found myself unable to.

In the end, she was right.

Regardless of whether it was outside of the Academy, or in the Academy, I'd face some sort of trouble.

"....Tsk."

Unknowingly, I found myself clicking my tongue.

The truth hurt.

'....And there's also the fact that the quests are present.'

I could probably ignore them since there was no direct consequence to me, but the power-ups were certainly nice, and I wasn't too keen on finding out what would happen once the 'calamities' reached 100%.

In the end, the only thing I could do was sigh in defeat.

"....When can I expect to receive the Bone?"

"When Atlas comes back."

Delilah replied with her usual flat tone.

"And when would that be?"

"In a couple of days to a week. He's currently in Bremmer."

Bremmer...?

I thought for a moment before recalling.

It was the capital city of the Empire, and where the royal estate was located. He was probably there to collect the bone personally.

Looking at her, I nodded my head and prepared to stand up.

I was just about to when she stopped me.

"Wait."

"....Yes?"

I looked at her in confusion.

Was there something else that she needed to say to me?

"There's something I'm curious about. Sit down for now."

I did as she told me and sat down. Before I could ask her what was going on, she extended her arm in my direction.

"Try again."

"Come again?"

I blinked my eyes, unable to understand what she was trying to imply. From the way she had her arm extended, it almost looked like she wanted me to hold it.

But that was crazy.

Why would—

"Touch it."

"....?"

I felt my mind grow blank.

I was really struggling to understand her intentions, and when I was about to say something, she finally elaborated.

"Back when Leon fought against Evelyn, you tried something on me when we were holding hands. I want you to try again."

"....!!!"

My body tensed at her words.

I wanted to say something but found my mouth sealed shut.

Thankfully, I was able to keep my face from changing too much and kept my shock to myself.

"...."

It took a few moments for me to finally calm down, and when I did, Delilah spoke again.

"I felt a weird sensation back then. It was somewhat faint, and I couldn't really tell what it was. It seemed to want to crawl into my mind, but I was able to block it just in time. It's been on my mind for quite some time. I want you to try again. I'm not mad."

"...."

I swallowed my saliva before bitterly smiling.

'So she did notice in the end...'

It was a good thing that it was Delilah of all people that had detected it.

But at the same time, it made me aware of something.

'The second ability... it can be blocked.'

Most likely, someone had to have higher mental resilience than me for it to happen.

....Which was hard considering that my mental resilience was already quite high.

It also meant that Delilah's mental resilience was higher than mine.

"So...?"

Startling me out of my thoughts was Delilah, and when I looked at her, I could see her looking at me with her deep black eyes.

They seemed to be ready to swallow me at any moment.

"Alright."

Pursing my lips, I soon reached out with my hand and grasped her wrist.

"...."

I held her wrist for a few seconds, and just before activating the second ability, I stopped.

Lifting my head to stare at her again, I had a sudden thought.

My heart raced.

And then,

I pressed the third and new leaf.

Chapter 197 Third Leaf [3]

Heavy.

Every step felt heavy as I moved down the Academy market aisle.

Rows upon rows of goods were presented before my very eyes as I just randomly picked up whatever bar I could find.

At the front, I could feel the staff's sharp gaze on me.

I knew that I was close to reaching the daily limit of bars that I could purchase.

But it couldn't be helped, this was for Delilah.

"Haa."

Recalling what had happened a few moments ago, I could only sigh.

Nothing.

Pressing the third leaf, nothing happened.

Delilah looked a bit disappointed by that, saying something along the lines of, 'I didn't feel anything. Did you try something?'

I was helpless.

The third ability was still new to me.

At least, I now knew that it couldn't be activated so easily.

"There's fifteen minutes left, I better hurry."

Checking my watch, I hurried to the counter.

Classes were going to start in a bit. I needed to get this delivered before class started.

"Thank you for your purchase. Have a good day."

"Thank you."

Drip. Drip.

It was drizzling outside.

The sky donned a somber gray, casting a moody ambiance all around. It perfectly reflected my inner feelings.

"Haa... I should've brought an umbrella. My cloth—Hm?"

My feet came to a sudden stop as I felt a slight tug of my coat. Unknowingly, the rain that had been pouring down from the sky just moments prior had disappeared.

"How may I help you...?"

I lowered my gaze, and two deep black eyes blinked back at me. Before me, an expressionless little girl stood, her clothing appearing quite tattered. She also seemed on the skinnier side as her clothing seemed rather loose.

"Hm? Where did you come from?"

She didn't look like someone who belonged to the Academy.

I was confused and looked around me.

"...!?"

But the moment I did, I was stunned to see that I was no longer on the Academy grounds. I was somewhere else entirely.

They looked like... slums.

"H-how?"

Before I could panic, something tugged my coat again and I looked at the skinny little girl.

Without answering, her gaze wandered over the bag in my hand.

"Are you hungry?"

Nod. Nod.

Thinking for a moment, I opened the bag and took out the first thing I could grab.

"Ah."

But that thing turned out to be the one thing I couldn't exactly give away.

Delilah's bar.

"Hmm, I can't give you this, how ab..."

I stopped myself from speaking. Staring at the pack, the little girl was already salivating. Alternating her gaze between me and the chocolate bar, she rubbed the corner of her mouth.

"Take it."

'Whatever, it's Delilah's money anyway.'

She could afford this little loss.

With visible sparkles in her eyes, the little girl took the chocolate bar from my hand.

"Let me help."

Seeing her struggle to open the pack, I offered her a hand.

"Here."

Num. Num.

She dove right into the bar and for some reason, her image overlapped with Delilah's. Of course, she was obviously not her. She was skinnier than her, and her clothing was also a lot more tattered. Not only that, but her hair was also a mess.

However, the twinkle that appeared in her otherwise lost eyes and the way she was devouring the chocolate bars so eagerly made me think of her.

"Tha...nk you."

She spoke for the first time.

Her voice was brittle.

"Does it taste good?"

"Mhm."

"Here, clean your hands with this."

"...?"

"It's not good if you eat with your hands dirty."

Before I knew it, I was cleaning her hands with a tissue. A habit I'd developed back when taking care of my brother.

I raised my head and looked around.

"... Where are your parents?"

The street was empty with just the two of us standing. The surrounding buildings were broken and tattered, with newspapers scattered across the ground.

I wanted to meet her parents so that I could get a better idea of where I was.

This entire situation was strange.

"Parents?"

"Yes, mom and dad. Where are they?"

"H... home."

The young girl replied in a hushed tone. As if she suddenly remembered something, her hand, which was digging the chocolate bar suddenly stopped.

"I go."

"You're leaving?"

"Um."

"Wait."

I grabbed her hand before she could leave.

Looking around me and checking my watch, I spoke,

"Let me come with you."

The area looked unsafe. For an eight to nine-year-old girl to roam around like this all alone didn't sit well with me. But besides that. There was something about the little girl that bugged me.

I wasn't exactly sure what it was, but a part of me refused to leave her alone.

She reminded me too much of a certain someone.

So I decided to accompany her on the way back.

"Oh, right."

I looked at the little girl who was tightly holding onto the chocolate bar as if it were her most prized treasure.

"What's your name?"

"..."

The girl blinked her eyes and raised her head. Her face, which seemed expressionless, showed a slight change as if she had rediscovered a hint of feeling.

Her response came shortly after.

"Delilah.. My name is Delilah."

His face was scary, but he was kind.

He gave Delilah chocolate, so he must be a good man.

A strange but kind man.

Creaaaak—!

Her little hands pushed the familiar door leading up to her house. The door opened like it was welcoming her with open arms.

"Oh, you're back Delilah?"

A warm and gentle voice greeted her at the entrance of her house.

The room was bright. It was flooded with brightness as the sun's rays poured in through the large windows, making it difficult to see ahead.

It was so bright she could hardly make out her mother's features.

"Mom."

A familiar warmth embraced her as she felt her mother's hug.

"Have you had fun playing around? Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Mhm."

Delilah brought forth the chocolate bar she received from the strange but kind man.

"Oh, what's this?"

"Food."

Her small hand squeezed the chocolate bar.

So delicious.

"...And who gave you this?"

"Him."

Delilah pointed at the strange but kind man. He was still standing by the door.

"Oh, my."

As if realizing that someone was standing at the door, her mother made a surprised look.

"How rude of me. Please come on in. Come in."

"..."

But the man didn't move and just stood where he was. His expression was scary.

He only snapped out of it when Delilah tugged his clothes.

"Mama said to come in."

"Oh."

The floor creaked under his step.

"Please, come and sit here. We don't have much, but I hope you find yourself comfortable, and thank you very much for helping Delilah."

"Sit there."

Delilah pointed toward the living room table.

With a nod, the strange but kind man sat on one of the chairs around the table.

"One for you, and one for you."

Delilah snapped the bar into multiple pieces.

One for the strange but kind man and the other for her. The rest was for her mother and father. Satisfied, she patted her hands which were mixed with melted chocolate.

"Mommy, when will Dad come out?"

Delilah's gaze wandered over a certain door.

It was the door that led to her father's room.

Her dad was there, but she wasn't allowed to enter.

'No matter what, you mustn't enter the room,' he said to her.

"Your dad will join us later. Eat your food for now." "Um."

When the topic of food came up once more, her gaze shifted away from the door, returning to focus on the chocolate bar.

"Eat. Eat."

She devoured the chocolate bar.

So sweet. So tasty.

But that was when she noticed something.

"Why you... no, eat?"

"I... I've already eaten enough."

The man pushed his chocolate toward her.

"You eat it."

Blink.

Delilah blinked her eyes.

She could eat it?

Staring at the man to make sure he wasn't lying to her, only after seeing him nod did Delilah happily eat the chocolate bar.

What bliss.

Creaaak—!

Hearing a familiar creaking sound, Delilah turned her head to see a tall figure walk in.

"Daddy!"

She spent no time running to the man.

"Ho, ho. There's my little princess."

"Hehehe."

Giggling, Delilah hugged her father tightly.

"What have you been up to, Delilah?"

"Eating."

"Oh? What are you eating?"

"Chocolate. Very delicious. I gave it to Mom too."

"Mhhh."

Her dad suddenly went quiet.

"Dad?"

"...Delilah."

In the gentlest voice he could muster, he spoke to her.

"Your mom..."

"Yes?"

She was in the living room.

"She's... in a faraway place. It's been a year now. I need you to realize this."

Blink.

The brightness that was engulfing the room started to dim.

Slowly, the surroundings started to turn dark.

"I know you miss your mom. I miss her too. More than you can imagine, but..."

Rotten walls. Broken windows. Mold. The house's true appearance started to reveal itself.

"...you need to move on. You will eventually see her. It's just that... the time isn't right yet. There will be a time when you will see her again. It's a promise."

Delilah cocked her head as she stared at her father.

Despite the light dimming, it was still difficult for her to see his features.

"But dad..."

Blink.

The brightness dimmed once more, and her gaze wandered over a certain room.

"...Will I also see you again? You still haven't left your room."

Blink.

The brightness disappeared completely.

What remained was an eerie silence as the girl stood alone in the darkness.

Just her.

And herself.

.

.

.

.

'Just what is this...?'

Rather than being shocked... I just didn't know how to react. How was I supposed to react to this?

The dilapidated walls, the pervasive mold, the cracks zigzagging across the walls, and the lingering scent of decay filling the space...

I clenched my teeth.

'Just what is this?'

How could anyone live in such conditions?

And...

"...Will I also see you again? You still haven't left your room."

I got up from my seat and walked up to Delilah.

My gaze fell on the door she was looking at.

"Is that where your father is?"

"Um. He's busy working."

"How long has he been working?"

"Hmm."

Placing her finger near her mouth, she pondered.

"A long time?"

"Do you know how long exactly?"

"No."

She shook her head.

"When mom left, he said that he suddenly had a lot of work to do."

"Ah."

My heart clenched.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes."

She nodded immediately.

But the more she was like that the more my heart squeezed.

"So... why aren't you smiling?"

Delilah raised her head. I thought that she had always been expressionless, but now that I got a closer look at her. She seemed more like an empty shell than just expressionless.

A lot of things started to make sense.

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

'I'm adopted.'

'They're fine.'

'Working.'

Each word she said struck me deeply into my chest.

"Smile?"

"Like this."

I tugged the corners of my lips up with the aid of my fingers.

"Eh...?"

Imitating me, she tugged the corners of her mouth.

"Like this?"

"Like that."

I held out my hand to her.

"Do you want me to bring you somewhere nice?"

"But..."

Her gaze wandered over to a certain room. Trying my best to keep myself calm, I opened my palm.

"Let's not disturb your dad for now. Maybe, when you return, he'll be out of the room."

"Really?"

"Really."

My heart gripped even more tightly. I wasn't sure if this was an illusion or not. In fact, I was still struggling to understand what was going on.

But that didn't matter to me. At the moment I only had one thought.

I needed to bring her back with me.

She couldn't stay here any longer.

"Mister."

I felt something grasp my hand as my head lowered. Delilah was looking up at me, her large black eyes blinking.

"Yes?"

"...Thank you."

And it suddenly got bright.

"Thank you for being kind to me."

All of a sudden my hand felt empty as the world turned bright.

I stood by myself in an endless light.

"..."

Just me.

And myself.

?| Lvl 2. [Sadness] EXP + 15%

Chapter 198 Third Leaf [4]

?Color flashed before my eyes.

"Hey! What are you doing!? Get out of the way!"

I stood there, dazed and confused, unable to process what was happening. My mind was overwhelmed by the whirlpool of colorful dots ahead.

"...!"

I only regained my senses when someone tapped me on the shoulder, and that's when I realized I was standing in front of the Academy store.

Despite the confusion, I moved away from the store and leaned against its wall.

"Just what in the..."

There was so much I needed to process.

Wasn't I in a house just moments ago? How did I suddenly appear here?

"This..."

Taking a look at the time, I realized that not even a few seconds had passed since I had entered the store.

So...

Realization suddenly struck me.

"It can't be, right?"

No, it wasn't possible. I refused to believe it—yet, the more I thought about it, the more I came to understand what had happened.

"That was really, Delilah..."

My heart felt heavy at the thought. I had already had a hunch but refused to acknowledge it. Even now, I struggled to accept what I had seen.

Recalling what I'd witnessed back then made my heart ache even more.

I felt uncomfortable like something was trying to crawl up my body.

What exactly happened? Did I travel back in time, or was I recreating a personal memory of hers?

Thinking back, I did recall her saying something about her parents working.

Even now, she...

I pursed my lips.

My head throbbed.

I was more inclined to think that I had relived a personal trauma of hers. Was this what the third leaf did? Allowed me to interact with her personal trauma?

"What if..."

An idea sprang to mind. My hand rummaged through my bag, and I took something out.

It was a small chocolate bar.

One that I had grown accustomed to buying over the recent months.

'...Is what I saw the reason why she loves this candy so much? But how is it possible...?'

Was it really true that I didn't travel back in time...?

'No, there's no way.'

I didn't want to acknowledge it.

My heart was heavy, but considering the present circumstances, I understood that it wasn't the moment for me to dwell in gloom.

Whether what I saw was really the past or not, the present was different.

The current Delilah was someone who stood at the top of the world. Putting the bar back into the bag, I was just about to leave when I realized something.

"...Hm?"

Opening the bag and counting the goods, it suddenly struck me.

"..."

What the...

No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find them.

I had bought three packs. Yet, there was only one left.

Then it finally dawned on me.

"...Heh."

A weird sound came out of my mouth.

I didn't understand the sudden surge of emotion, but it felt like something inside me had finally burst. My body trembled and for the first time in a very long while...

"Hahaha."

I laughed in public.

Be it past, present, illusion, or future.

She really was a gremlin-looking midget.

Curtain Call Collective.

Ever since the play [Enigma of the Midnight Manor] was released, Olga, the writer of the script, had been incredibly busy.

The demands on her time were relentless, a whirlwind of meetings, rehearsals, and promotional events.

The Jovinc Award was going to happen soon, and she needed to do a lot of things in preparation for that.

The prestigious award was the pinnacle of recognition in the arts community, and she was determined to make the most of this opportunity.

It was an important day for her, considering that she'd receive the official rating for her play.

There were many people who stated she had received the fifth star for it, but it had yet to be official.

The rumors had some basis to them, but she needed concrete affirmation.

It was only at the award ceremony that she'd receive the official rating, officially making her play one of the few within the Empire to receive such critical acclaim.

The recognition would cement her status as one of the leading playwrights of her generation.

To Tok—

The door to the room suddenly knocked, and Olga looked towards the door where a man waited for her.

He was dressed neatly, with his hair combed to the right and sporting a well-trimmed mustache.

His appearance was meticulous and well-groomed.

"How may I help you?"

He wasn't someone she was familiar with.

Nonetheless, staring at him and the letter in his hand, Olga felt her back straighten. The letter bore an ornate seal, and her eyes paused on the seal.

It looked familiar...

But where had she seen it before?

"Please don't be nervous, writer. I'm simply a delegate from the Megrail family."

"...!"

Olga's eyes widened, and she hastily stood up.

The Megrail family was one of the most influential in the Empire, how could she not be shocked?

"To have such esteemed—"

"Please, like I said, there's no need for such a greeting. I'm just here to hand over this letter. We've received many reports about your play, so I'm sure you will like what is in the contents."

"Yes, yes..."

Olga hastily reached out for the letter and carefully and politely received it.

Then, under the messenger's gaze, she carefully opened the letter and looked through the contents. Immediately, her eyes widened.

"This...!"

"It's as you can see."

The butler spoke in a graceful tone, his voice calm.

"There will soon be a summit between the four Empires, and we've accepted your play for the opening show."

"...!"

Olga didn't know how to reply.

She was at a total loss for words.

The summit was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, a stage that only the finest could hope to grace.

Besides being able to receive a five-star rating, this was one of the greatest honors she could receive as a scriptwriter.

Her work would be showcased before the leaders of the four Empires, an honor that not many could receive.

Especially since the Four Empire Summit was an extremely prestigious event that only happened every five years.

The fact that they were willing to have her play be the main event, Olga could feel herself trembling in excitement.

It felt like her efforts were being validated.

"Well, then..."

The messenger bowed politely, his mannerisms still impeccable.

With a graceful nod, he quietly left the room.

"The Emperor has high expectations for the play."

Such were the last words he spoke before leaving, plunging the room into silence.

The weight of his statement lingered in the air, adding a certain pressure to Olga who suddenly found herself growing quiet.

"...."

But that quietness was only brief as she hastily slapped the wooden table in excitement.

"I can't believe this is happening!"

For her to receive such an honor...!

The enormity of it all was overwhelming.

She was over the moon.

Olga was just about to reach her communication device to tell her group the news when she stopped.

A thought struck her, tempering her enthusiasm.

"...."

Suddenly she frowned.

There was a significant challenge that lay ahead.

"That's..."

Her excitement was quickly dampened, and she sat back down on her chair. The reality of the situation settled in, and she knew there was a crucial piece missing.

Thinking about it, while her script and play were certainly well-

acclaimed, a major reason for its success was because of the actor who played Azarias. The role had become iconic, largely due to his exceptional performance.

Julien Dacre Evenus.

Even now, Olga could recall his name. The young actor had a talent that was rare and extraordinary.

How could she not when he had put on such a performance?

His portrayal of Azarias had captivated audiences, bringing the character to life in a way that was unforgettable.

"What do I do?"

It wasn't impossible to have the play without the performance of the student. It had already happened several times.

Different actors had taken on the role of Azarias, bringing their own interpretations of the character.

But Olga felt like something was missing whenever he wasn't there.

Azarias...

He wasn't someone that just anyone could play.

The character demanded a depth and intensity that only Julien could deliver.

His portrayal had set a new standard, making it difficult for any other actor to measure up.

It was something that had been finely tuned and tailor-made to fit the monster actor the student was. His understanding of the character, his ability to convey complex emotions, and his stage presence were unmatched.

It was for that reason that she always felt like something was missing whenever she would watch the play.

Without him, Azarias felt incomplete, a shadow of the character he was meant to be.

"I have to get him."

The decision was clear.

Knowing just how important the event was, Olga had no choice but to get him.

The Four Empire Summit demanded the best, and she knew Julien was the best.

The only problem was how...?

How exactly was she going to talk him into performing?

"That's right...!"

That was when she suddenly recalled something.

The Jovinc Award.

He was going to participate.

How could he not when he was the most likely candidate to win the best supporting actor role?

The award was prestigious, and Julien's talent made him a prime contender.

'I'll get him then...!'

The opportunity was perfect.

At such a thought, Olga quickly grabbed her communication device and started making her preparations.

In the end, I went back to the market to purchase a few more bars before going back to Delilah's office and handing them to her.

It was funny.

For the first time in a very long time, I had seen a drastic change in her expression.

Seeing the bag filled with bars, it almost looked like her eyes could pop out at any second.

If only I could've taken a photo of her face...

'What a pity.'

It truly was.

Regardless, as I looked at her face, I was reminded of what I had seen and started my life faded. All of a sudden, the reason why she liked chocolate bars made a lot more sense.

Perhaps...

It wasn't that she was addicted to them.

But it was more like something that brought her back to her childhood when she had nothing.

I still didn't understand the third leaf, whether I had gone back in time or I was simply replaying her trauma and interacting with an illusion, but...

In the end, it didn't really change what I had seen.

"Haa..."

Taking a deep breath, I looked at the sky.

It was cloudless, and the rain had stopped falling.

Staring at it for a few good moments, I looked at the time and headed for class.

Today's class... I could look forward to it somewhat.

It was, after all, a class about Emotive Magic.

How could I not be a little excited?

Chapter 199 The Five Phases of Emotive Magic [1]

The moment I entered the classroom, I noticed a strange atmosphere.

All eyes were on me.

I was weirded out at first, but then I realized that they were probably staring at me because of my specialty.

Emotive Magic.

Given that this class was tailor-made for me, it was understandable that everyone was looking at me.

...Well, most people.

I could feel two different gazes on me. They seemed to be especially intense today, and as I frowned to meet their gazes, my heart twitched.

'What's going on?'

This had been going on since our return from the Mirror Dimension.

At first, I had thought it was because of Owl-Mighty, but that no longer seemed to be the case.

'Is this possibly related to the quest failure...?'

The thought made my heart race.

I wasn't exactly sure what it was, but judging from their gazes, it didn't seem like something good.

'Should I confront them later?'

Perhaps, I'd be able to find the reasoning behind their looks, and the penalty for their increase in experience.

With that being said, there was something peculiar about the situation.

Turning my head, my eyes fell on a familiar set of purple hair.

She...

'Why is she acting normal?'

As opposed to Aoife and Kiera, she looked completely unbothered about what happened. At the very least, she didn't seem to have a bone to pick with me.

'It makes sense when taking into consideration that Kiera was the same during her first time, but...'

What about Aoife?

Was the increase in % going to bring a different effect to each of them?

I pursed my lips at the thought.

"It looks like almost everyone is here."

My attention was immediately grabbed by a quiet voice. Turning my head, my eyes fell on a short woman with pigtails. Her hair was orange, and freckles marred her face.

She wasn't exactly the prettiest of women, at the very least, compared to most of the cadets in the class, her looks weren't anything special, but...

I wasn't sure how to describe it. There was a certain something in her voice that felt extremely intoxicating.

Bang—

That feeling lasted for a brief moment before it was shattered by the sound of her dropping her bag on the podium.

It looked rather heavy.

Looking around me, I could see the startled and confused looks of the cadets.

'Seems like I'm not the only one that felt that way.'

Everyone's attention was now on her.

"Keum... Keum..."

Clearing her throat, her eyes scanned the classroom as dimples appeared on her cheeks.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Fay Evenhart. You may call me Professor Havenhart. As you may know, I'll be the one in charge of teaching you Emotive Magic."

No magic was restricted.

Everyone could learn whatever magic they wanted. That was Emotive Magic included.

The same was true for me and other types of magic, but talent was important.

It would dictate how hard the learning path was.

Everyone could learn Emotive Magic, but progress depended on who was talented enough to understand emotions. "As you know, Emotive Magic isn't exactly the easiest of subjects. Emotions can be very hard to understand, and it can take over a decade for someone to even reach the next tier. There's a reason why there's so few of us."

Her gaze suddenly paused on me.

So did a few others.

I remained calm and stared back at her as her smile widened slightly.

"But like some say, the harder one path, the more rewarding it is down the line."

She happily drummed her finger against the wooden podium before calling out for me.

"Julien, is that correct?"

".....Yes."

I answered as my eyes narrowed slightly.

"Would you mind coming up here for a second, I would just like to test your skills. Don't be alarmed. I won't bite you."

Though she said that, her gaze said otherwise. She currently looked like a shark that was ready to pounce on her prey at any second.

I still decided to agree to her request.

I was genuinely curious about what this class would entail.

How much was it going to benefit my emotive magic?

Getting up from my seat, I walked down the flight of stairs and arrived by the podium.

"Thank you."

As her eyes traced my body, she smiled more brightly.

"I've heard a lot about you. You're rather famous. From acting to your performance in the mid-terms... a wonderful talent."

"....Thank you."

Where was she going with this?

"But you see, none of that really interests me. What I'm really interested in, is your Emotive magic. I've heard a lot about it. How about you show me?"

I raised my brow.

"As in...?"

Professor Havenhart extended her arms.

"Apply it on me. Do your worst."

I opened my mouth, unsure of how to reply.

It wasn't that the request shocked me, but it was the eagerness in her tone and voice that took me aback.

However, I was quick to snap out of it and complied.

"....Okay."

This was going to benefit me, so I didn't see the need to be reserved.

Extending my hand, I pressed my finger against her forehead.

She blinked a couple of times at the spot where I chose to touch her, but I didn't pay any attention to her face and heavily focused on my internal feelings.

I recalled the memories and emotions that I had undergone in the illusion back in the Mirror Dimension.

From the Silent Eaters to Crimson Shade.

I recalled the raw and innate fear that I felt during those times and poured it all into my mind.

Once I had accumulated enough, I silently mumbled to myself,

'Fear.'

I poured everything that I had into my finger, and the moment I did, I turned to look at the Professor.

"....."

The lack of reaction came as a shock to me as her big eyes continued to stare at me.

We stood like that for several seconds before she took a step back.

"Hmm, not bad not bad... the intensity was quite nice, but you don't particularly have great control over your emotions. All I felt was an endless torrent of fear pouring down my mind. Very tense, but that's about it."

Her words didn't come as a surprise to me.

I had previously heard Delilah mention the same thing to me.

I wasn't disheartened.

This was after all still a learning process.

"Alright, I more or less know where you're at with your skills."

Professor Havenhart clapped her hands in satisfaction.

"You're around the second level of Emotice Magic. Not bad. An insane achievement if we take into consideration your age."

".....Thank you."

I could only accept the compliment.

Just before I turned back to head to my seat, she spoke again.

"It's now my turn to show you something."

Suddenly, her expression changed. Her previously lively eyes turned hollow, and she lost all semblance of emotion from her face.

I stood frozen on the spot while staring into her eyes which seemed to want to suck me whole.

Before I could even get a word out, she began to speak.

"As you know, there are five phases to Emotive Magic or any magic. The first phase..."

She brought her hand forward and pressed it against my shoulder.

"It's touch."

My mind blanked.

Drip...! Drip!

When I came to, tears were falling down the side of my cheeks.

'What- what's going on...'

A familiar pain engulfed me at the same time.

But the worst part was her eyes. Staring at them, I could see my very own reflection in them.

I found myself unable to move.

"The next phase..."

She continued,

"Voice."

Her voice layered and the tears dripped with even more ferocity.

Drip...! Drip!

The pain in my chest also increased, and I struggled to keep my mind collected.

"The next phase, you can affect someone with your voice."

I wiped the corner of my eyes and took a few breaths to ease the pain. Thankfully, she was going easy on me.

I could tell...

And it was because I could tell that I felt chills run down my body.

"Then comes the third phase..."

Her eyes turned even more hollow.

Chillingly so, and for a moment I forgot to breathe.

"Collective effect."

Her voice layered again. This time, as if everyone was in sync, tears started to stream down the faces of everyone in the room.

"Once you reach this phase, you will be able to affect not just one person with your voice, but more than one simultaneously. It's a phase that takes a lot of concentration and control."

Her words seemed to be directed towards me as I took a mental note of what she was saying, despite the intense pain that I was feeling.

"Then, there's to fourth phase."

As if the very air had been sucked out of the room, everyone turned their attention towards the Professor who turned her gaze to me.

I felt my heart pause the moment our gazes met, and before I could do anything, she touched me.

"....!"

I somewhat expected to feel something at her touch, but much to my surprise and shock, nothing happened.

"Uh?"

I wasn't the only one surprised by the situation as everyone looked confused.

That was until the professor's voice echoed again.

"The fourth phase. Emotive tag."

'Emotive tag..?.'

Before I could understand what was going on, she raised her right hand and snapped her fingers.

Snap—

The snap echoed loudly within the classroom, and my mind immediately blanked before an overwhelming pain entered my chest and tears started to pour down uncontrollably.

"Once you reach this point, an emotive mage will be able to place a secret tag on a person and activate it whenever they wish. So long as they are in range, and the tag is active, it will activate at the person's will."

Following her words, she blinked her eyes, and clarity started to return to them. Then, shortly after, a smile graced her lips as dimples appeared on her cheeks.

"And that's it for the demonstration."

She clapped her hands, all semblance of the person she previously was disappearing like that.

"There is also a fifth phase, but I'm nowhere near that phase and there's hardly anyone who has ever reached that level. It is said that once you reach that phase you'll be able to read someone's emotions."

Turning her head to look at me, she patted me on the shoulder.

"Thank you for coming up for the display. I apologize for making you the victim of my demonstration, but you see.."

Her smile widened as she turned to look at the entire class.

"Everyone else would've broken down had they been in your position."

Next chapter will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!