

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 31: Progression Analysis [2] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 31: Progression Analysis [2]

Chapter 31: Progression Analysis [2]

I didn't say anything and followed along with his words. I couldn't care less about whether he was targeting me or not.

.....All I cared about at the moment was my current progress and strength.

Where did I currently stand?

"We will gauge your score from a scale of zero to ten. The number will represent your approximate range within the Tiers."

I didn't quite understand but I maintained my composure and walked forward, stopping right in front of the orb.

Hundreds of students stood behind me.

Their gazes pierced my back. They felt pressuring.

But...

'I couldn't care less.'

I wasn't going to do well.

I knew that much.

Even so... I still was planning on doing my best.

The stares meant nothing to me. What I cared about was myself, and myself only.

"You may start. Start with the first orb, the mana quantity measuring orb."

"...."

I nodded and placed my hand on the orb.

The moment I did, the assistant professor's rough voice echoed from behind.

"Channel your mana into the orb."

I did as I was told.

Focusing my attention on my abdominal area, a familiar sensation coursed through my body, gathering toward my hand where it released and entered the orb.

A white light unfolded before my very eyes as my mana started to drain from my body.

I didn't resist it and let it flow out of my body.

'It's quite simple.'

All I did was channel my mana and direct it toward the orb.

The rest was straightforward.

This persisted for a few seconds before the light finally died down and the assistant professor's voice echoed from behind.

"Score value; 1.716. Average."

Score value 1.716...? For some reason, the values felt familiar.

Recovering my breath, I thought closely to where I had seen those numbers before, when...

Ah—

Something struck me.

'Status'

A screen floated in front of me. My eyes immediately darted toward the top spot where I finally saw it.

Level :17 [Tier 1 Magician]

Exp : [0%—[16%]—————100%]

'Level 17 and 16%. Is that what it means by 1.716?'

My thoughts were interrupted by the rough voice of the Assistant Professor.

"You're only 0.284 from reaching Tier 2."

He then went on to point toward the other orb.

"You can start the mana purity test."

But I didn't move immediately.

I was busy musing over his words.

'Only 0.284 from reaching Tier 2... Does that mean that I'll reach Tier 2 at Level 20?'

If that were the case, would Tier 3 be level 30? Every ten levels a Tier?

Although I already had an idea about this, it was becoming clearer to me that it was probably true.

That said...

I was still not 100% sure.

I needed more time to observe the situation.

"Cadet?"

Hearing the Assistant Professor's not-so-pleased voice, I quietly nodded and moved toward the second orb.

"...."

It looked the same as the first one and without needing anyone to tell me what to do, I placed my hand over the orb.

Yet again, the orb shone and mana drained from my body.

This lasted for several seconds before stopping.

"...."

A silence enveloped my surroundings before I finally turned my head to see the Assistant Professor staring at me with a frown.

I raised my brow.

'....Something wrong?'

"Mana Purity; Tainted."

Tainted...?

What sort of score was this? I took a look around me and saw the expressions of the cadets around me. Some were whispering amongst each other while looking at me. I couldn't tell if they were making fun of me or not.

It very well could be given my position and score.

I accepted such criticism without flinching.

The Professor went on to explain.

"Pristine, Pure, Refined, Standard, Tainted, Corrupted, and Void-touched."

He looked at the other cadets while he explained this.

"Mana purity is judged based on one's ability to use mana. From speed, density, and elemental affinity. What we expect from you at the bare minimum is the Standard assessment."

As his voice grew deep, the Assistant Professor finally turned to look at me.

"While not rare, tainted do occasionally show up. Our institute does our best to help such cadets out, but..."

Finally, he displayed his disdain toward me for the first time.

"I'm disappointed by the fact that our top cadet is one such cadet. Proceed toward the next orb."

The disdain was evident from his tone.

'.....What's this guy's problem?'

But even though he seemed to dislike me, he remained professional. Which was why I also remained quiet.

That and because fighting him wouldn't wield any positives for me.

"...Was that really his score?"

"You heard it, right?"

The whispers of the other cadets became even more prevalent but I ignored them and focused my attention on his words.

'So my mana is tainted... That makes sense.'

I had only been introduced to the concept of mana about two weeks ago.

Such a score made sense.

'I am no genius.'

My talent was average. That much became clear to me after learning the first spell. I wouldn't have struggled so much had I been talented.

But that didn't deter me from continuing my path.

I already knew it was a hard path.

One that might not yield any result.

But...

I needed to cling to something. Regardless of how improbable it was, to retain my sanity, I needed to cling to my goal.

Otherwise...

'I'll lose sight of myself.'

I went on to move toward the next orb.

"This test will be a little different. Once you channel your mana inside of the orb, your goal is to control the mana threads and disperse them. The speed at which you're capable of doing this will determine your score."

"...."

Without looking back, I placed my hand on the orb. Unlike the previous times, the world around me turned dark.

'What's this?'

I was confused at first, but soon enough thousands of white threads appeared in the space in front of me.

I reached forward with my hand and grasped one of the threads, gently moving it to the side.

'Ah.'

That was when I recalled the Assistant Professor's words and understood.

'...I'm supposed to untangle this?'

I stared at the jungled-up mess in front of me.

Well, shit...

"How long has it been...?"

"Why is he still there?"

"Did something go wrong?"

Murmurs and whispers spread as all attention was focused on Julien who held his hand over the orb with his eyes closed. His back was straight, and his expression was calm.

His poise retained its usual dignity even under the intense scrutiny of those around him.

Eventually, his eyes came open to reveal his hazel pupils and he removed his hand from the orb.

"The overall score is 0.4. You fail."

The Assistant Professor's voice ruthlessly came down as he announced the score. Almost instantly, the voices of the cadets became louder.

"Failed?"

"0.4? Isn't that really low?"

"Is he doing this on purpose, or is he actually so weak?"

"Do you think I can beat him if I challenge him now?"

Overhearing the discussion amongst the cadets, Kiera, shook her head and muttered,

"...Idiots."

There weren't actually that many that were surprised by Julien's evaluation. It had been pretty obvious from the start that he wasn't very adept at using mana given his weak mana trace.

That said...

Those who knew didn't fault him for it.

'He's an Emotive Mage.'

One who wielded emotions. His proficiency over it was to a scary degree. Even now, Kiera could recall Julien's expression during the first lesson when he was called out by one of the cadets.

Who it was she didn't know.

Nor did she care.

But it didn't matter... She could still vividly recall what had happened afterward. The way he approached him, and how a single word from him made her skin crawl.

In her mind, he was no human.

'A crazy bastard.'

To study emotions to such an extent at such an age...

He could only be a crazy bastard.

She was therefore aware that whatever result he received today wouldn't reflect his true strength.

Many of those present were also aware of this with only a few thinking otherwise.

Arrogance, or stupidity?

'Maybe both.'

Either way, Kiera wasn't planning on defending him.

'Fucking asshole.'

Her impression of him was of the lowest. The scene at the library kept replaying in her mind as her expression crumbled.

'Just like that bitch... They're all the fucking same.'

Aoife K. Megrail.

Just the mention of her name made her face heat up as her teeth silently clenched together. One day... One day... She repeated to herself while staring ahead.

And then,

"Kiera Mylne."

Her name was called up.

She didn't hesitate to move forward. In her view, a certain person appeared. He was just coming back from his examination.

Under the whispers and murmurs of the cadets around, he seemed unfazed.

'Even though I know this isn't your strength...'

Kiera kept walking, her gaze never leaving Julien's.

'Even though I know this isn't your focus...'

The distance between the two of them shrank.

'Even though I know this probably won't faze you...'

Until she eventually passed him, catching a whiff of his scent in the process.

'I want you to know...'

Her hand came pressing against the orb where a familiar scene started to replay, and a rough voice announced,

"Score value; 2.504. Top rank."

'...I really do hold my grudges well.'

The physical exam was next.

"This test will be used to measure your general physical fitness. I don't expect mages to perform outstandingly, but I do expect a certain standard from you all. Training your physical body is just as important as training your mana. Just like the Professor said, your stamina is important for when you enter the Mirror Dimension."

We were in a large field, a complete difference compared to the other examination. Our outfits were also different—shirts and shorts.

Our test was to...

"Run."

The Assistant Professor began to jog.

"Don't fall behind."

His actions were so abrupt that everyone stared at his back with dumbfounded looks. Then, as if realizing what was going on, everyone started to follow along behind him.

"Fuck, he should've warned us beforehand."

"I'm still not warmed up yet."

Even though the cadets complained, none of them showed any signs of exhaustion as we ran for five consecutive laps.

Immediately, the top cadets began to distinguish themselves with a girl with platinum long hair and red eyes taking the lead.

Even in the mana test, she was first...

What monster.

"...."

I too was running with them.

But...

'Fuck, I'm going to die.'

I was secretly dying on the inside.

This body...

Although fit, it had some serious stamina problems.

My lungs were on fire, my legs were twitching, and my breathing was starting to become rough.

It felt as though I was being sucked out of all my energy, and by the time it was the seventh lap, I had no choice but to stop.

"Hue..."

I forced myself to take slow breaths.

Though tired, I still remained standing and kept my expression firm. I had a certain image that I had to maintain.

It wasn't something I could give up on.

At least, according to Leon.

Therefore...

Even as my lungs burned, and I was desperate for air...

"Hue..."

I took small and shallow breaths.

My head felt light because of it, but I threw away all such feelings and focused on my recovery.

"Hue..."

Once I felt my breath return, I once again started running.

The distance between me and the other cadets had become quite large. There were a few that were close to me, but the vast majority were far ahead.

I paid them no mind and focused on myself.

'My pace... My pace...'

I wasn't like them, I knew that.

My starting point was the lowest and it would probably take a long time to catch up to the top cadets... But even so...

'I'll do it.'

I knew I would.

Which was why I continued to go at my pace.

Because this was my limit. And the slowest I'll ever be.

"Huuu..."

There were no clouds in the sky. It was blue, and the sun basked me in a pleasant warmth.

And in such an environment, I ran at my pace.

Chapter 32: Progression Analysis [3]

"What do you think...? How are the results for this year?"

Professor Kelson's voice echoed as she stood by the end of the training ground with her three other assistant professors.

The day was almost over, and so far each group had taken two of the three assessments they were supposed to take.

They were at the moment all taking a break. Be it professors or students.

"...From my group, several students stand out."

One of the Assistant Professors, a young woman with short black hair commented.

She went on to say,

"Evelyn from the Verlice family, and Luxon from the Ravenscroft family. They scored quite high on the Mana examination test, with 2.58 and 2.31 respectively. They've also scored quite highly on the Mental examination test, with a score of 2.01 and 2.11 respectively... Their results already surpass that of the top cadets of last year's batch."

"Hmmm."

Professor Kelson quietly nodded while listening to the report. Indeed, the results were quite frightening.

For first-year cadets to reach a score above 2 was quite rare. That signified that the cadet was already in the Tier 2 range.

Such feat was extremely rare and only occasionally would the academy be blessed with such individuals.

For two to appear...

"I'd like to add to that."

A tall man with long black hair and a skinny frame displayed his clipboard.

"Actually... It's about my group."

His expression was quite serious.

"My group took part in the Physical and Mental examination. Two students stood out in my group as well. It's just that..."

He took a short pause while looking at the clipboard in his hand. Scratching the back of his head, his face scrunched up in what appeared to be disbelief.

"I really can't believe we had such monsters in our year... Leon Ellert. Physical examination score, 2.91. Mental examination score, 2.98. Aoife Megrail. Physical examination score, 2.87. Mental examination score, 3.01..."

"...!"

"Th-this...!"

A still silence shrouded the space as Professor Kelson and the other assistants gaped at the results.

It took a while before they could recollect themselves, and when they did, one of them asked again to make sure they hadn't heard wrong.

"...I didn't hear wrongly, right? Did you just..."

"Leon Ellert. Physical examination score, 2.91. Mental examination score, 2.98. Aoife Megrail. Physical examination score, 2.87. Mental examination score, 3.01..."

The assistant professor repeated.

Only when he repeated did it finally sink into the mind of those present as they looked at each other at a complete loss for words.

"Monsters..."

Breaking the silence was Professor Kelson who looked at the clipboard incredulously while repeating.

"...We've got monsters this year."

And then, her gaze finally fell on the last assistant professor.

"What about you Gilbert? Any notable figures from your group?"

"Yes."

His deep voice quietly echoed out in the group.

Taking out his clipboard, he frowned.

".....Only one though."

Whether he spoke out of disappointment or not, nobody could be sure. His expression was hard to read.

He began to announce,

"Kiera Mylne. Mana examination test, 2.504. Physical examination test, 2.281."

"Another monster..."

"Wow."

The other assistant professors seemed impressed by her performance. All but Professor Kelson who saw the crux of the problem.

"The Black Star..."

She began to speak,

"Wasn't he in your group? What was his result?"

"That's what I want to talk about..."

Finally, a shift occurred in Gilbert's expression as it darkened.

"Julien Evenus. Mana examination test, 1.716. Physical examination test, 1.189."

Gilbert's grip on the board tightened.

"....He's currently ranked amongst the last in my group in terms of average. An embarrassment."

The utter disregard in his tone couldn't be hidden. Although he tried his best to keep himself from displaying such emotion, it was starting to become hard when confronted with such results.

'He is not fit to be the Black Star.'

That was the only thought that ran through his mind.

"Those are indeed quite low scores."

The Professor couldn't deny it. Her gaze turned toward the distance where a particular figure appeared. He easily stood out from the rest of the students. Just his appearance was enough to warrant that.

But there was also the fact that he stood alone, with the cadets actively avoiding him.

It was hard for her to not spot him under such circumstances.

She rubbed her forehead.

"For now, we can do nothing about this. Let's proceed with the next examination. I'd like to go home early. Who knows, he might do a little better in the next examination."

"...I doubt that."

Gilbert went on to put his clipboard under his armpit and headed back for his group. The last examination was the mental test. Of all the other examinations, it was the hardest one to score a high grade on.

He doubted Julien could do well in such an examination given how miserably he had performed in the other examinations.

As he walked, he shook his head.

'...Pathetic.'

Word of Julien's score started to spread amongst the first-year cadets. Many showed surprised looks while others didn't seem as surprised.

"Did you hear about Julien's score...?"

"I did."

"Then..."

"Nothing surprising."

Leon stretched his muscles while secretly channeling the mana in his body. His next test was up. The mana examination one. He planned on doing well in that one too.

"What's up with your reaction? Why do you seem so unsurprised?"

"Because I'm not."

Taking a deep breath, Leon turned his head and looked at Evelyn. She was constantly alternating her head between him and Julien.

"At this rate won't he get in trouble? As his knight, won't that affect you?"

"Ah..."

When she put it like that...

"I'll be fine."

Thinking about it, there was no need for him to worry.

"He'll also be fine."

"But..."

"I wouldn't be as relaxed as you are."

A voice suddenly interrupted. When Leon turned his head, he saw Aoife approaching their direction.

Her gaze similarly fell on Julien who was standing by himself in the distance.

"He managed to deter people from approaching him during the first lecture thanks to his performance. However, now that the results are out... How long do you think before someone challenges him?"

"...I'm not sure."

Leon truthfully answered.

"....."

Aoife blankly stared at Leon for a few seconds and shook her head while silently muttering in a low voice, 'Are you really his knight?' before steadying her expression again.

"You're forgetting that we currently need him. I won't be able to take his title away until the Mid-terms. In that case, he needs to make sure he retains his image."

"..."

Leon quietly listened to Aoife speak as he kept his gaze locked on her. She seemed rather adamant about taking his spot when the mid-terms came.

He couldn't exactly put that against her.

The title of the 'Black Star' carried a lot of significance. Be it within the institute, and politically.

"....He's still fine because of what he pulled during the first day and the fact that the institute wouldn't grant someone the title without merit. However, at this rate, people will start forgetting this."

Aoife frowned while gently brushing her red locks behind her ears.

"There's a high chance he won't be able to perform well in his last test. I suggest you prepare yourself for the after-effects. It won't be big, but you'll need to be ready for it."

She paused and turned to look at Leon.

"....Because you'll also be at the center of it. As his knight."

After a short break, we were led toward a strange device that sat in the middle of the training grounds. From where I was, I could still see the other groups readying themselves for the upcoming examinations.

In the end, my results ended up being subpar.

The way some of the cadets looked at me changed as my results spread. While none of them still seemed keen on targeting me, I could feel some of the bolder cadets entertaining the idea.

'How troublesome.'

It was indeed getting troublesome, but it was still manageable.

I wasn't afraid of getting challenged. In fact, I more than entertained the idea.

But...

'I wonder if my current self is capable of even putting up a performance...?'

The only thing I had was Emotive Magic and a single spell that I could hardly use. It was quite obvious to me that I would end up losing pathetically.

Even so...

A part of me really wanted to fight. Not because I didn't care about losing, but because I knew it was the fastest way to grow.

"The Mental Examination can be said to be the hardest test yet. It won't be testing your mana or your physical abilities, but the firmness of your mind. To be able to withstand pain under critical situations, to be able to remain composed under serious situations..."

The assistant professor began to introduce us to the examination.

"This is one of the most important assessments you will face so make sure you try your best."

He then proceeded to point at the device that stood behind him. At a glance, it seemed to be a regular chair.

No, maybe it was...

"The test is simple."

The assistant professor took out a small metallic black bracelet from his pocket.

"This is the device that we will use for the examination. It overloads your sensory systems with all sorts of feelings. But primarily, it will give you pain. Your main job is to withstand the pain for as long as you can without screaming or passing out. The more time passes, the greater the pain."

Searching around with his eyes, his gaze eventually fell on a particular figure. One with long white hair and red eyes.

"Kiera, you will be the one to try it first."

'Haa... This...'

I wanted to laugh at the situation. The order until now had always been the same. Me first, then Kiera, and so on...

The reason why he hadn't called my name was fairly obvious.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. The other cadets noticed too as they threw second glances my way.

I kept my expression firm while staring ahead.

"Understood."

Kiera walked up to the chair and sat down.

"Put this one."

Taking the bracelet, she put it on her wrist as it latched itself onto it. She didn't seem at all nervous and leaned back on the chair.

On the other hand, the assistant professor took out a small device from his pocket. A stopwatch of some sort, and pressed on the top end.

"Let's begin."

"Ukh...!"

Her body jolted immediately after the assistant professor's voice fell. Her eyes shot open while the bracelet in her hand trembled.

"Akh... ukh...!"

Her struggle wasn't as pronounced at first. However, with the passing of the seconds, her body started to tremble with more intensity.

"Don't scream. If you scream, you fail."

The assistant professor's cold voice served to remind her to keep herself composed.

"0.1"

"0.2"

"0.3"

As well as recounting her score.

"0.8"

"0.9"

"1.0"

"Akh...!"

The moment the count hit 1.0, the pain seemed to escalate to a different level as Kiera's body spasmed with even more force.

Even so, she kept herself from screaming.

The surroundings were quiet as all eyes were fixed on her.

"1.7"

"1.8"

"1.9"

"2.0"

"...!"

Her body jolted and her head smacked back. Her entire body spasmed, and for the briefest moment, she almost screamed.

However...

With some absurd level of willpower, she was able to keep herself from screaming.

Kata! Kata! Kata!

The chair rattled with force asnd her body continued to trash around.

"2.1"

"2.2"

The count continued.

Her legs flayed in random directions.

"Akh...! Ukh...!"

Saliva spit out from her mouth as she clenched her teeth tightly and glared ahead.

"Ukh...!"

"2.5"

"2.6"

"2.7"

The count continued.

Everyone stood in silence, staring at her with heavy expressions as she continued to trash around.

She looked like she had lost her mind by this point, but the fact that she had yet to scream proved she had lost anything but her mind...

She was still there.

Hanging there.

Withholding the pain. It was almost impressive.

But that eventually came to an end...

".....Akhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Her scream ended up piercing through her silence as her body started to spasm uncontrollably.

Click—!

A gentle click sounded that moment and her body finally relaxed.

Only when she fully calmed down and was capable of moving her body again did the assistant professor announce her result.

"Kiera Mylne. Mental Examination score... 2.93."

Swoosh!

The expression of many of the students changed after hearing the score with many looking at her with traces of awe.

I too was impressed by her score.

Although I wasn't sure how much it hurt, the way she was trashing about and her expression, it must've hurt a lot.

"Next cadet."

But things moved on rather quickly.

Another cadet was called.

"Jaylen Roshtelia."

Yet again my name wasn't called.

A tall man with short black hair moved forward and sat down on the chair.

"You've seen the steps. Please put it on the device. I'll start you shortly."

He went on to score 1.81.

Another name was called up next.

Yet again it wasn't mine.

I stood patiently at the back, waiting for my name to be eventually called up.

But that never happened.

Not until...

I was the last cadet standing.

"Julien Evenus."

Only then was my name called.

"You're up next."

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I calmly walked up toward the chair under the eyes of all the cadets.

'In the end, I ended up being the last.'

I didn't mind it. Rather, it helped me to more or less understand better how the test worked and understand what things wouldn't work well. One such example would be tongue-biting.

During the trial, one cadet ended up biting their tongue off while training to keep themselves from screaming.

They ended up going to the infirmary.

"Put on the bracelet. I'll start when you're ready."

Click—

I felt my body tingle the moment the bracelet closed on my wrist.

'....How weird.'

It felt rather heavy.

"Hue."

I took a small breath and looked toward the assistant professor. Even now, I still didn't understand the reasoning behind his displeasure.

However, such things were trivial to me.

My thoughts quickly focused on the examination at hand.

'I wonder....'

I once again looked at the assistant professor and turned to look at the bracelet on me.

'...How much pain must I go through in my life before finally becoming immune to it?'

I felt the corner of my lips pull up at the thought as I mouthed.

"I'm ready."

Was I even close to such a point?

"I can start."

*

The pain started off as mild at first.

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

The sensation coursed through every corner of my body.

"0.1"

The assistant professor's voice echoed in the background.

The pain intensified.

But...

'Is this it...?'

I looked around. Everyone was staring at me. Closely observing me as I sat down on the chair while the assistant professor announced the score.

"0.2"

There was still hardly any pain. This wasn't pain. I was familiar with pain. It didn't feel so weak.

"0.3"

The tingling intensified, but it was still tolerable.

Uncomfortable would be the right word to describe the current situation.

Yeah...

Uncomfortable.

"0.4"

My chest felt a little tighter, but that was still tolerable.

"0.5"

"0.6"

"0.7"

Finally, I felt a familiar sensation. Pain. It was finally starting.

It wasn't intense just yet, but it was there. Lingering toward the deepest part of my mind, it was starting to claw its way up into my mind.

"...."

The entire time my eyes had been open, taking in my surroundings without once closing them.

I wanted to make sure I was conscious.

"H-huh..."

At some point, I realized...

Breathing was becoming more and more difficult.

"0.8"

"0.9"

The higher the numbers, the harder it became for me to breathe.

I still persisted.

This much was...

"1.0"

"Ukh...!"

A groan escaped my lips.

The pain was sharp and different. Unlike before, when it felt like electricity was running through my body, the sensation changed. It was now more akin to me getting stabbed from all sorts of spots.

"1.1"

A stab in the chest.

"Ukh!"

"1.2"

A stab in the arm.

"...khhh!"

"1.3"

A stab in the leg.

"....Kaugkh!"

"1.4"

The pain focused on a singular point and was less spread apart. Such pain was a lot harder on the mind than the previous one. Especially since it became sharper and stronger with each call.

"1.5"

"1.6"

"Khak...!"

The count continued, and with each count, the pain intensified. I thought I'd be able to tolerate it given how much pain I had been able to sustain throughout my entire life, but that had been a naive thought of mine.

Pain...

I was still not used to it.

My lips trembled at the thought as I managed a mumble.

"Kh... B-bullshit...!"

'So you're telling me that after all this time, I'm still a slave to pain...?'

"H-ha...!"

"1.8"

How could that be?

"1.9"

"Kh....!!!"

How could that be....!!

"2.0"

".....!!!!!"

I almost faltered as I felt my body tremble and my arms shake unsteadily.

The pain had changed yet again. It was no longer stabbing at me from every corner. It now felt as though I was being literally squeezed alive.

As if a massive boulder was resting on my shoulders, gradually growing heavier with each passing second.

But even in such a situation...

I persisted.

"2.1"

"Ah—!"

I almost screamed then.

I was close. So very close. But I held myself back.

'No, not yet...'

2.1 was high. It sure was... but I expected more of myself.

How could I be satisfied with such a score?

Me...

Who bragged about knowing pain?

"2.2"

How comparable was this to the pain I felt when my parents died?

It was incomparable. It was a different pain, but it was a pain that took the breath out of me and kept it that way for months.

Each day... Knowing that they were gone, never to be seen again...

The hollowness that it brought.

"H-ha..."

It stung my heart.

'It's milder than that pain...!'

So.... What reason was there for me to not be able to withstand such pain?

What reason...!?

"2.3"

"Kh...!"

What about when compared to the pain I felt when I was told I was going to die early?

That I had no future to look forward to? That I was supposed to just give up and live the rest of what remained of my life.

Bullshit!

Bullshit...!

Bullshit....!!!

How was this comparable to that....!

Who the hell are you making fun of?!

"2.4"

....And what about the pain I felt when I watched my little brother almost kill himself in the vision?

"Kh...!"

And the pain from my repetitive failure in trying to understand a single spell?

How about that?!?

Fucking bullshit!

Bulshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!

'Ahhh...!'

Unknowingly, the world around me had long turned black and the noise outside disappeared.

It took me a while to realize, and when I did, I no longer screamed.

There was no longer a need to.

I wasn't alone anymore.

It was just me and the pain now.

Right...

Once more, it was just the two of us.

Even in this life, it still haunts me.

Yet, simultaneously, walks beside me.

I yearn to rid myself of it, yet I can't summon the strength to cast it aside.

Why is that?

It was a silly question when I thought about it.

In the end, pain is the one that remains by my side, never truly leaving me.

My one and only companion.

Which is why..... I know I can't get rid of it.

'Haha...'

Such is my life.

"Huaaa....!"

Light returned to my eyes as I felt my head roll back.

"Khh...! Kh...! Kaht!"

My body started moving on its own and my arms flayed around.

Kata! Kata! Kata!

Unknowingly, I had lost control of my body as it started to trash around on its own, the chair rattling wildly at my movements.

Amidst the chaos, I felt something trickle down my eyes as I locked gazes with the assistant professor who was staring at me with wide-open eyes.

While I lost control of my body, I hadn't lost control of my mind.

Even as it flayed and spasmed, not once did I take my eyes away from the assistant professor.

Not once...

"Kk...!"

'Why...?'

This persisted for several more seconds until my body eventually started to calm down.

Kata... Kata...

"...."

Silence persisted over the surroundings as I continued to stare at the assistant professor.

Something boiled in my chest as I stared at him.

It threatened to spill at any second as my jaw clenched tightly and I tightly gripped the arms of the chair I was on.

"...Why did you stop it?"

To the point where I found myself gnawing at him.

"The test..."

I spat each word through my clenched teeth.

"Why. did. you. stop. it."

It was hard to describe the type of rage that I was currently feeling right now.

It wasn't one that was born out of frustration. It was different. A lot more vicious than that.

Hatred...

Yes, that was the right word.

"W-why...?"

Yet again... This man!

My chest heaved.

"You...!"

"Stop it right there, cadet."

A voice descended down on me, stopping me mid-sentence. A familiar figure walked in, her heels clicking against the ground as she walked to stand in front of me.

Professor Kelson.

"He-he stopped me...! He..."

"I stopped you."

The Professor cut in all of a sudden, shocking me as my mouth shut.

She stopped me...?

Bringing her hand forward, she touched my cheeks and pulled her hand back, showing me her finger.

"....This is why I stopped you."

Only then did I realize the severity of the situation.

"Blood...?"

"Your blood."

"....Ah."

What was bleeding?

"Your eyes are bleeding. I had no choice but to stop the test. If I had kept it going on for longer, you might've gone permanently blind."

".....I see."

So in the end... My body had failed me. If only...

"You still don't get the reality of the situation, do you?"

When I heard the Professor's voice again, I looked up and tilted my head. Only for me to hold my breath upon realizing something...

Everyone.

Be it those from my group, and those in the other groups.

They were all staring at me.

Unlike before, they all wore similar expressions to one another.

The reason why became clear to me shortly after.

"5.04"

The Professor said in a low tone while staring deeply into my eyes.

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

This is the first chapter of today. There will be another one at the usual time.

Chapter 34: Progression Analysis [5]

"5.04? 5.04?! That's impossible...."

Evelyn stood with a blank face, gazing into the distance, uncertain of how to interpret the unfolding situation. Silence gripped the training grounds as every gaze fixated on the figure seated in the distance.

His demeanor remained unwavering, just as impeccably poised as ever.

Despite the creased clothes and disheveled hair, his expression retained the usual indifference it always carried.

The blood trickling down his eyes seemed inconsequential to him as if it was never there to begin with.

And so were the stares.

".....It's possible apparently."

It was Leon who brought Evelyn out of her thoughts. With a slight furrow of his brow, he tapped lightly against the sword at his hip.

His expression was hard to read, but to Evelyn, who had known him for as long as she had, it was evident that he, too, had been taken aback by the unfolding events.

'He doesn't like to show it, but he's shaken as well...'

Why else would he be tapping on the tip of his sword so much...?

"He's got a firm mind."

Leon concluded after a while, and the tapping stopped.

".....A very firm mind."

He repeated.

In a manner that seemed to be more for him, than for her.

Very firm mind...?

Evelyn blinked, recalling the scene from before.

It was nothing at first. Nobody had been curious about his result at first. Everyone was doing their thing. Focused on their upcoming examination.

That was...

Until a change began to take place in the training ground.

The noise that once filled the surroundings died down and what replaced it was a strange silence.

One that started to consume the surroundings bit by bit, swallowing it whole by the next minute.

At first, Evelyn was confused.

But when she turned her head she understood.

'4.4'

Even now...

Recalling the professor's gruff voice as the count went down, she felt herself lose her breath.

4.4...

Had she heard wrong? How was this possible...?

But...

'4.5'

The rough voice continued.

It thundered in her ears, and the ears of all present.

Most gripping was Julien's steadfast figure as he sat in the middle of the chair. His back was firm, solidly placed on the chair as if nothing was happening.

His eyes were closed and so were his lips.

...His composed expression seemed unfitting to the occasion.

It was to the point where one questioned whether he was truly undergoing the tough experience they had all gone through.

'Is the test faulty? Is something wrong with it...?'

Seeing him like that, Evelyn couldn't help but start doubting the situation. Even now she could still recall the spine tingling and terrifying sensation she felt during the test. Just thinking about it sent shivers down her spine.

And yet...

Julien was taking double such pain without so much as flinching?

No way...!

Impossible.

It was Impossi-

Drip... Drip...

Such thoughts stopped the moment she noticed two red streaks falling down his closed eyes.

Even as his body remained unmoved, and his expression unwavering, his body was not. It was starting to betray him.

She understood then...

She hadn't heard wrong...

He truly...

"Just what the hell happened in the last five years?"

Evelyn's gaze fell on Leon. Her eyes deeply stared into his as he turned his head to look away from her.

"...."

He didn't say much, but his silence told her many things.

In the end...

Something did happen in the five years they hadn't seen each other. Something terrifying enough to turn him like that.

But what...?

What happened?

"We've only just recently parted ways, and you're already back here..."

The familiar doctor grumbled while he shone a light on my eyes. It was quite bright, and I reflexively tried to close my eyes.

"Help me out here."

After the examination, I was brought to the infirmary by Professor Kelson to get my eyes checked. I didn't resist. I too was a little worried about my eyes. It wasn't normal for someone to bleed from their eyes.

"....Do you feel any pain?"

"I don't."

It was strange. A weird sensation had taken hold of my body. I felt light all over. My entire body was numb, and be it pain, or the sense of touch... I had lost it all.

Smack—!

A loud smack caught my attention. When I looked down, I noticed a red mark on my thigh and looked up.

"Did you feel anything?"

"....No."

Did he just....

"I see."

The Doctor sighed and turned back to look at the Professor.

"He's fine, but he's temporarily lost his sense of pain and touch. It shouldn't last longer than a week, but things will be rather troublesome for him in the next week. I suggest he doesn't do anything big in the next week for his own sake."

He then proceeded to look at me in the eyes.

"....I'll say this now because I don't want to see you again over here. Don't. do. anything. strenuous. in. the. next. week. got. it?"

"I can't train?"

"No."

"Then..."

"What don't you get about my orders? Don't do anything that involves moderate to light exercise. It may seem like nothing, but you've lost your sense of pain. You won't know when you're overexerting your body when you train. This can very well get you killed if you're not being careful."

"...."

At that, I had nothing to argue about.

Thinking about how I usually trained, I knew that his words were the correct ones. There was a high chance that by the time I was done training, I'd also be done with this life.

Still....

Even though I knew all of this...

I clenched my teeth.

It was frustrating.

While a week didn't sound like much, it was a lot of time for me. When every single day meant so much to me, wasting seven meant losing a lot... I really couldn't afford to miss out on so many days of training.

But...

"Huuu."

I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

'Right, the situation is like this. I have no choice but to accept it and find a new way to grow.'

Even without training my body physically.

Yeah, because...

I had no choice. Rather than crying over my situation, I had to adapt to my current one.

That's the type of mentality that I needed to have.

'Adapt. I need to adapt.'

One leg. No legs. No eyes. No senses. No arms.

Regardless of my situation, I had to adapt.

No excuses.

There were none for me.

Because...

An excuse was nothing more than a self-imposed roadblock.

I couldn't allow that.

Not me.

"Did you understand my words?"

Hearing the doctor's words, I raised my head to meet his eyes. After a short while, I nodded my head.

"Understood."

[Julien Dacre Evenus] (Black Star)

Family - Evenus Barony [First Born]

Progression Analysis :

- Mana Examination — 1.716
- Physical Examination — 1.189
- Mental Examination — 5.04

Delilah glanced at the results that were spread on her table. The once dirty room was now clean. At least... partially.

Num...

Chewing on a chocolate bar, she tossed the wrapper on the ground. Just as she did, her hand froze and her eyes fell on the wrapper on the floor. Her expression cracked and her face crunched up.

"...I'll do it later."

Her gaze fell on the paper in front of her.

Yeah, this was more important...

The numbers weren't anything impressive at first glance. At least, not until the final value was shown.

"5.04."

Delilah double-checked several times to make sure hadn't received the wrong numbers.

Eventually, once she was sure that they were indeed the right ones, she sat back on her chair without saying a word.

'...What happened?'

To display such numbers at such age and Tier... It was unheard of. Not here, nor in the other Empires.

And yet...

Here she was, staring at such unbelievable results.

"Anger. Sadness. Fear."

These were the emotions he had displayed so far. Each of them to an unbelievable degree.

No, not quite.

"Sadness."

There was one that stood out from the rest.

She hadn't seen it herself, but she had heard of what he'd done with it.

Unlike the other two, he was capable of harnessing such power with mere words. That alone suggested he had already reached the next stage for such emotion.

"Eighteen, but shows such an unbelievable display of emotions."

It became clear the more Delilah thought about it.

There was more to Julien's past. The one she hadn't managed to unseal from her background checks.

Something happened that she wasn't aware of.

.....Something that broke him to the point where pain seemed meaningless, and traumatic enough to allow him to such emotion to such degree.

But what exactly...?

The image of a certain tattoo kept replaying in her mind over and over again.

"I'm missing something..."

Something extremely important.

But what exactly?

Her gaze continued to linger over the profile on the table until eventually, she closed her eyes, and opened them again, replacing the cold gaze with a softer one.

"...Right, he's my assistant now."

The truth of the matter...

She was bound to find out sooner or later. Especially since he was now close to her.

All she had to do was be patient.

"One day..."

Yeah, one day.

Chapter 35: Smile [1]

News about Julien's achievements at Haven quickly reached the Evenus household near Westernborn, one of the two regions under the Evenus Barony management.

".....This doesn't make sense."

Aldric M. Evenus muttered while staring at the files in front of him.

It had been a while since he had heard the news of his son becoming the Black Star, and even now, he had trouble believing the news.

Was this really his son...?

Though not incompetent, he was also not this competent.

And as he read through the new report, his brows further furrowed.

"It's not adding up."

If it were not for the fact that Leon personally said that this was Julien, he would've believed there was something wrong with Julien.

To Tok—

A figure entered after knocking. It was a young man with brown hair and hazel eyes. His expression was clean, and his face held perfect symmetries. By any right, he was a handsome man.

"Father."

He addressed politely as he entered.

"...Linus."

"Yes."

Linus lowered his head in acknowledgment. He was the second son of the Evenus Household and the next one in line for the position.

Unlike Julien, he had a warmer disposition and seemed more approachable.

"Have you noticed anything strange with your brother before he left for the institute?"

"...Hm? Brother? Did something happen?"

"Check this out."

Aldric slid the papers over his desk. Though confused, Linus walked toward the desk and checked out the papers.

"This..."

Gradually, his expression strained. He put the paper down and looked up.

".....Is this real?"

"Yes."

Aldric nodded.

"I haven't told you yet because I found it hard to believe myself. Leon has confirmed everything."

"Ah, is that so..."

Linus casually glanced at the documents one more time before nodding.

"If Leon said so, then there's nothing to worry about."

His expression seemed genuine. With a sigh, Aldric drummed his fingers over the wooden desk. Then, as he casually glanced up at Linus who was staring at the documents with a strange intensity, he waved his hand.

"You may go."

"Hm...? Now?"

Linus appeared surprised by the sudden dismissal.

Aldric didn't look up and sat down on his chair.

"I just wanted to double-check on you. Since we agree, I'll wait for Julien to return after the mid-terms to confirm."

"Ah... I see."

Though reluctant, Linus didn't argue and nodded his head in understanding. Then, with a short bow, he left the room.

Clank—!

A large corridor met Linus's sight as he came out. It was wide but empty.

Tak. Tak.

The sound of his steps echoed rhythmically as he calmly headed toward his room which was located on the second floor of the Evenus estate.

Upon entering his room, he closed the door behind him and headed toward his desk where he poured himself a drink.

Gulp.

The burn lingered in his throat as he relished the drink.

The glass emptied and the pain at the back of his throat eased, cooling his head in the process. Taking a deep breath, he sat on his sofa while muttering a name.

"...Julien."

It was the name of his older brother.

His grip on the glass tightened, and his expression distorted.

"Have you finally decided to reveal your true self...?"

An image floated in his mind.

One of a specific individual. Staring down at him with a cold gaze while his house burned, and everyone he cared about died.

"Fucking bastard..."

He quietly spat through his teeth as his hold of the cup intensified.

Others may not know, but he knew.

His nightmares told him...

Julien.

His brother.

He was a monster waiting to destroy everything they had.

There weren't many things that I could do now that I was injured. Training was apparently off the list, but I refused to believe there was no way for me to train without the assistance of my body.

It was why I was now back in the library.

"What kind of nonsense is this..."

There were still many questions that I had regarding the English sections, and how the books were here. Presumably, this world was a game. It wouldn't be strange for there to be English in this world if that was the reason why English was present.

However...

'What if this world isn't a game...?'

Perhaps it was because everything felt so real, but there was something that nagged at the back of my mind. What if...? What if....?

"Haaa..."

My head throbbed at the idea.

It was crazy thoughts, but my mind couldn't help but wander there on the occasion. Unfortunately, there was also something that became more clear to me the more I had these thoughts.

And it was that...

"I still know too little."

The Mirror Dimension, this Empire, the other Empires, and its history. If I couldn't train with my body, then there was no reason for me to waste time doing nothing but learning.

'I might just find the answers I wanted here... And also a way to train without straining my body.'

Which was exactly what I was doing.

"Let's see...."

I looked around me, scanning all the books that were carefully lined up on the bookshelves. From magic theory to history, I picked up book after book.

There were also several interesting ones from the English section that I took.

By the time I was done, I had gathered over a dozen books.

"...."

Managing to find a very secluded area of the library, I set the books down and sat down on the chair.

Thud.

The books were quite thick and they numbered a lot, but...

"I have to do this."

Knowledge was important.

Even though I was reluctant to do this, I had no choice but to.

And with such thoughts, I began to open the first book.

"Oh, right..."

But just as I did, I recalled something and took out a pair of glasses from my pocket. It was something the doctor had given me.

The damage my eyes sustained was quite serious.

To the point where I had no choice but to put up with wearing glasses whenever I needed to read.

"How odd..."

They felt weird, finding myself squinting a couple of times. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to this, but since it was temporary, I ignored the discomfort and began reading.

I had been through worse.

Flip—

There were a few things that Aoife kept secret from the world. Hardly anyone knew this about her, and she never planned on anyone finding out about it.

And that was...

"Ba dum~ Ta tum~ Lalala~"

She liked to sing when there was no one around her.

"Ba dum~ Ta tum~"

Such was how she was when she didn't have to pretend to be perfect. Flaws weren't something that the Megrail family accepted. At least, not on the outside.

"Ba dam~"

Her feet stopped and her gaze fell on the rows of books in front of her.

She was currently in the library.

It may have only been the second week of the institute, but for a top student like her, working outside of lessons was extremely important.

How else would she be able to become the Black Star?

Ever since entering the institute, it had always been her goal to snatch the position away from Julien. She was of royal descent, and the fact that she wasn't first, despite all her advantages made her strive to work harder.

She could accept there being more talented people than her.

What she couldn't accept was losing out to them when she had such clear advantages. It gave her a sour taste in her mouth.

As if the world was telling her she wasn't doing enough.

That she... wasn't enough.

"Mhmmm~"

There was also another thing that she really liked about the library.

It was that there was hardly anyone that was there.

She could sing freely without any problems. Well, to a moderate level. There was a chance that a cadet might be hiding somewhere, but she could just silence them if need be.

"...."

She scanned around and looked around the bookshelves.

[Magic Theory]

[Combat Theory]

[English]

She collected all sorts of books. There were many classes that she attended, and it was therefore important that she kept up with all of them.

Aoife even went as far as taking some books for classes that would be taught from the next semester onward.

She was that dedicated.

"Hmm~"

The pile was slowly starting to increase. One book, two books, three books...

It didn't matter how many books she had. Unlike the other cadets, she could check out as many as she wanted.

After all, the Vice-Chancellor was her cousin.

"Ta da~"

All was going well.

Aoife had never been in such a great mood. So much so that she even found herself hopping in a light dance.

To! To!

But that all stopped after a certain point.

"...."

Her steps ceased and her expression stiffened.

A face she least wanted to see. He wore a set of unfamiliar dark-framed glasses. Strangely, coupled with his dark blazer, and undervest, it suited him. His hazel eyes beneath the glasses held a peculiar allure, compelling one to gaze into them.

Standing before her was the last person she wanted to see.

"...."

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

Seconds passed, and all she could do was open her mouth like a fool, trying to find an excuse, something... to justify her actions... to... to... but....

"...."

Nothing.

Her mind was blank.

Flip—

Her thoughts were rattled by the sound of a singular page being flipped. When she looked up, she saw Julien staring at his book with his usual indifferent expression.

It was as if he wasn't bothered at all by her antics.

"Huuu..."

Aoife wasn't sure why, but she felt herself sigh in relief at the thought.

'Maybe he didn't see...'

Yeah, that could be it.

He must've missed it.

Pursing her lips, she turned around and prepared to head back, when...

"Singing..."

"...!"

Julien's cold voice reached her ears, causing her to involuntarily flinch.

"...Do it somewhere else next time. I almost lost my sight. I don't plan on losing my hearing."

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 36: Smile [2]

[Disclaimer : I felt compelled to write this after a few readers pointed this out. This chapter may contain some sensitive topics. I personally don't think it's sad, but I feel the need to put this here for those who are more sensitive.]

Aoife felt a strange heat rise in her face as she rigidly stood with her back faced against him. It started to spread through every corner of her body.

She felt her face was currently the same color as her hair.

The thought made her face stiff.

Flip—

"...."

In the silence that took hold of the surroundings, Aoife pursed her lips.

'This bastard... Did he just...?'

What replaced the shame that she was feeling was another feeling. Anger. Yes, she was angry.

Of all things...

Her fists slowly clenched, and so did her teeth.

"Huuu..."

Taking a deep breath, she suppressed the rage that was boiling within her. She was afraid she'd do something stupid otherwise.

Then....

While still holding onto her books, she turned back to face him and headed toward the same desk he was on.

Thud.

And placed her books on his table.

"...."

He stared at her with a look that seemed to say, 'Have you lost it?' but Aoife ignored it and proceeded to sit.

And...

"Ba Dum~ Ta la~"

She proceeded to sing.

It was now his turn to flinch. Only that, Aoife felt her heart squeeze at his reaction. Her singing... It couldn't be that bad, right?

For some reason that hurt more than she thought.

'No, it's him.'

Yeah, it had to be.

She was a great singer.

"Tu lum~"

"....What are you doing?"

Flip—

It was her turn to ignore him. Casually looking at the book in front of her, she continued to hum.

That was until his hand came pressing down against her book.

She looked up.

"What."

"....Can you stop?"

"Why? This is a public space."

"I'd like to study, not lose my hearing."

"I... you..."

Aoife clenched her teeth while struggling to retort. She then whispered, "...It's not that bad."

"It is.

His fast reply felt like a hammer to Aoife who found herself unable to retort back. Rage boiled within her, but she didn't show it as she kept her face firm.

"..."

'....What am I even doing?'

Aoife was stumped. She wanted to leave, but couldn't. Now that she sat down, she needed to sit there for at least five minutes before leaving.

'I was too impulsive.'

Now, she had to pay the consequences of her actions.

Or so she thought.

Creaaak...

Julien's chair scraped as he stood up. Their eyes met for a brief moment before he scanned the books and selected a few.

"...Are you leaving?"

Aoife felt compelled to ask. If so, then she didn't have to leave.

But...

"..."

He didn't reply to her. It was as if he wasn't even listening to her. Aoife's lips opened. For the first time in a while, she was unsure of what to do. She felt a strange sense of humiliation in this entire ordeal as her face flushed a further shade of red.

Her gaze eventually fell on one of the many books he left on the table and she didn't hesitate to take it.

"Since that's the case, you won't mind me taking this, right?"

Tok Tok.

Julien's calm footsteps echoed as he headed out for the library.

His back had always been turned on her. The utter disregard he had for her grinding Aoife's gears further, and just as she opened her mouth to say something again, he pointed at his ear.

"...Can't hear."

It may have seemed like I was exaggerating, but I genuinely was hurting in my ears. What sort of singing was that...?

It felt as though someone was scraping a window with their nails.

Goosebumps.

All I felt were goosebumps.

'It's a bit of a pity for that book that I left, but I can't focus with her here.'

There was one book I really wanted to read but unfortunately couldn't. Mainly because it was a waste of time and I couldn't afford to waste time.

Now then...

To Tok—

I knocked on the familiar door.

"Come in."

A voice I was starting to grow familiar with answered, and I opened the door.

"...."

Only to stop at the entrance.

"What?"

I blinked. Then blinked again. Then turned around and prepared to head out.

"You don't have to clean this up. I'll do it... Later."

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned around. Ignoring all the wrappers and papers on the floor, I headed back into the office space.

"...."

Delilah just stared at me with a blank look, but I ignored her. She also didn't pursue the matter and continued.

"How many spells do you know?"

Spells?

I counted in my head.

If we counted the six basic emotions, there were only two.

"Eight."

"Eight? Hmm."

Delilah frowned.

"I assume six of them are the six basic emotions, correct?"

"Yes."

With a quiet nod, she leaned back on her chair and crossed her arms. She then proceeded to ask,

"How far have you learned?"

"Both beginner. I have only unlocked one."

Hands of Malady was currently the only spell I could use at that moment. I still couldn't use the other spell.

There were five stages to a spell.

Unlocking, which was the integration of a circle in the mind. Only when a circle connection was established with the mind would one be able to use the spell as wanted.

It was usually the hardest part of learning a spell.

The next five ranks were—beginner, intermediate, advanced, superior, and perfected.

".....Any intermediate?"

"Yes. Sadness."

Currently, only sadness was intermediate for me.

It was the one I understood the best, and it was also the one that hurt the most.

So...

"Try it on me."

I felt a little reluctant when she asked me. But I understood that this was important and took a deep breath.

"Now....?"

"Yes, I need to know the extent of your skills before helping you."

"...."

Briefly, I glanced at my forearm before taking my gaze away from it.

I needed to evoke sadness.

The wheel couldn't guarantee such emotion. And...

'I want to see how deep my powers are.'

Could they affect someone as powerful as her?

"Huu."

The thought boiled in my mind and I took another deep breath before closing my eyes. I let my mind sink into my thoughts.

I was going to give it my all. Without the immersion. Without cheating. Just me, and my thoughts.

And for me to do that...

I needed to unseal memories I had kept hidden in my mind.

"H-huu..."

A certain pain pierced my heart. It stabbed at it like a sharp knife and I felt my chest tighten.

An image conjured in my mind.

My lips... They felt dry all of a sudden. My fingers felt restless, and my lungs started to heat with every breath.

A familiar sensation.

...And a familiar smell.

Earthy, pungent, with a touch of sweet notes.

Haa... This was...

Tzzz—

The sound it made with each drag.

The calmness it brought.

The taste in my lips.

I recalled everything. To the little detail. As if it were yesterday.

Even the conversation that came along with that feeling.

'....Why did you start smoking?'

Who was it that asked me that question...? My mind was fuzzy. My surroundings were gray, and the figure's face felt faint.

I couldn't recall much besides the conversation.

But even now...

I remembered my answer.

'There was a time when I wanted to get cancer.'

My cheeks twitched. It was as if the knife stuck in my heart twisted, forcing me to react.

It started to feel suffocating.

Like someone was strangling my neck. Squeezing as tightly as they could.

I couldn't recall the expression he made when I said those words. I wasn't looking at him, then. He was an afterthought. The one I was speaking to was none other than myself.

'....I smoked because I wanted cancer.'

Each sentence pierced harder than the other.

Harder.

And deeper.

'So that my parents for once... would care about me.'

Because...

'They never did.'

It was sad.

'They died before that. They never...'

But it was the truth.

'...Got that chance, you know? The chance to pay attention to me as I lay on my deathbed. It's funny right?'

"H-ha..."

I could hardly breathe by this point.

The weight on my chest seemed immense.

I...

My lips trembled.

I persisted.

'The death of my parents... It never saddened me.'

I let the conversation flow.

'The only thing that saddened me was the fact that they couldn't see me suffer. Pay attention to me once.'

I had been smiling then.

The irony felt funny too much for me.

"H-haa..."

'I regret it now, though. I don't... want to die.'

Their death made me regret my actions.

I was eighteen then.

'I thought that if I stopped, my body would heal. I was young. I am young. And yet...'

I was still smiling.

'...I ended up getting cancer after I stopped. After I found reason to care.'

And I am still smiling now.

Because...

That's my life story.

My pathetic life.

I stopped then. I couldn't take it anymore. My mind couldn't take it. The memories...
They felt too vivid... too real...

Light returned to my eyes.

Delilah appeared before me, her expression as stoic as ever. How long had passed?
Probably a second or less, but it felt like an eternity to me.

Tears trickled down my eyes.

I let them.

And then, I spoke.

"....It's strange. Emotions. I didn't think they'd hurt so much."

The silence felt stifling.

"...."

Delilah stood by the window of her office. She stared down at the campus from above,
quietly staring at the moving cadets.

It had been ten minutes since Julien had left.

Even now, she was thinking about him.

About his 'sadness'.

The expression he made after she had asked, his change in expression, the tears in his
eyes, the power of his voice...

Images of him—that moment—continued to replay in her mind.

She had asked out of curiosity. It was after hearing the reports about what he had done
back in the classroom that she felt compelled to test.

Emotions were a scary tool.

Regardless of strength, they could affect someone. Everyone had emotions. Some were
just better at hiding them than others.

"It's still a bit raw."

His mastery over his emotions...

They weren't very refined just yet. He still had some way to go. It was also why she hadn't felt anything then.

But it was also true she hardly felt anything normally.

She had hoped that maybe, just maybe...

He could help her feel something.

It was a slim hope, but one she didn't cling to for long. He was only eighteen. Her expectations weren't that high to begin with.

"....Unfortunate."

Truly.

Delilah turned around to focus back on her work. As her eyes fell on a document on her desk, she felt her eye itch.

"...."

It was an odd itch.

An annoying one.

Especially when...

Drip!

...It ended up staining the paper beneath.

Chapter 37: Smile [3]

"Ugh..."

I rubbed my eyes. They were somewhat puffy now. I hadn't expected my memories to affect me like that. Or maybe I did...

Still...

"Nothing."

There had been no reaction from Delilah when I used my skill. Even as I put everything in it, she remained expressionless and unfazed.

It was a bit disappointing but understandable.

She was the closest to the Zenith. For her to be unaffected by me didn't come to me as a surprise. Disappointing, but expected.

'I wonder when I will be able to affect someone like her...'

Emotions could affect anyone regardless of their tier and strength. That much I was aware of. Unfortunately, the stronger one was, the more powerful their mind was.

It became a lot harder to affect the emotions of someone like that.

And the fact that she seemed unguarded when I used my spell and was still unaffected spoke volumes of her mental resistance.

"Haaa..."

The reality of my situation became more glaring to me.

I still had a long way to go.

*

In the two weeks that I had been at the institute, I had never really paid any particular attention to my surroundings.

It was with such thoughts that I looked at my surroundings for once. It was beautiful. The place looked stunning with greenery everywhere and intricately designed buildings that seemed unfit for this 'setting'.

Cadets walked around the campus talking with one another and enjoying their life.

There was also a strange scene in the distance. A middle-aged man with a thick mustache and round glasses sat by a stone stool, playing checkers alone.

"What sort of..."

Yes. He was alone, but...

He still seemed to be having fun.

.....I felt a little envious staring at the scene.

Had my circumstances been a bit different, perhaps I would've enjoyed my time here more thoroughly, but...

'I can't.'

There were things that I needed to prioritize.

I needed to remain consistent with my mindset.

"Hm?"

As I walked the campus, I suddenly paused. In the distance, a particular scene caught my attention. Four cadets were circling over a single person.

'It's her...'

I recognized her in an instant.

With her platinum long hair, sour expression, and red eyes, she easily stood out.

It was one of the top-ranked cadets.

Kiera Mylne.

'Why is she...?'

"Think about our offer. If you join us, we'll be able to have more power over the first year. You'll be able to do whatever you want... Even smoke."

The offer seemed rather tempting.

Smoking... Smoking...

"Hmm."

Yeah.

"...I'll have to decline."

"Hm?"

"What do you...?"

Kiera rummaged through her pockets and took out a cigarette which she quickly lit up with her finger.

Puff

She then proceeded to blow the smoke toward the four people surrounding her.

"Akh!"

"What are you....!"

Kiera smirked as she looked at their faces.

"I can smoke regardless. The fuck do I care about joining a faction? It's bothersome."

They had been pestering for the past week or so. Something about joining their faction. Each time she refused them. However, their persistence never ceased. It was starting to get on her nerves.

"If you have nothing else better to do, why don't you do something more productive like breathing water? Trust me. You'll do me a service."

The faces of the four cadets surrounding her flushed. They seemed unsure of what to say which Kiera found hilarious as she smacked her thigh.

"Pfttt, you should take a look at your expressions. Fucking ridiculous."

And proceeded to laugh to herself.

"Kakaka."

Only that... Her laugh wasn't the most pleasing to the ears. Eventually, though, the four cadets snapped out of it.

A tall cadet with blonde hair cut in a bowl cut, and sunken cheeks stepped forward. He frowned while looking at Kiera.

It was obvious from their body language that they were all wary of her. It was probably why they hadn't resorted to any violence or threats.

".....I'll ask again, do you want to join our faction or not? It will be very beneficial for you in the long run. We'll make you the Vice-Leader if you want to. Jackson is adamant about wanting you in our group. If you say the wo—"

Puff

Smoke blew on his face, forcing him to halt mid-sentence.

When he looked up, he saw a middle finger pointed at his face.

"Kindly... Fuck off."

"Ah..."

The cadet opened his mouth and then closed it as his teeth ground together.

"Do yo—"

"You there."

A cold voice pierced through the surroundings as all heads turned.

"Who...!"

The expressions of all present stiffened at the sight of the figure headed their way. A mere glance into his eyes compelled them to avert their gaze, finding the intensity within them too overwhelming.

With his well-maintained uniform and intimidating expression, the four cadets struggled to keep themselves composed.

He was someone an enigma and someone nobody wanted to associate with.

Tok.

He stood tall in front of the cadet. His gaze lowered to meet his eyes.

"....Are you the ones I've been hearing about?"

Even his voice sounded intimidating.

"Yes?"

"That faction thing."

"Ah..."

The cadet secretly gulped. He found it hard to remain composed under Julien's intense gaze.

He was still able to force a small nod.

"Yes."

".....I see."

Julien calmly closed his eyes before muttering.

"Your leader, or whoever is in charge..."

"....!"

All four cadets looked at Julien with wide-open eyes. He cared nothing for the gaze as he flatly continued.

"Get him to meet me tomorrow."

His words...

They seemed more like a command than a request.

"I'll talk with him tomorrow."

It was as if they had no right to refuse. And it was the intensity at which he looked at them that made them unable to refute. Forcing them to quietly nod before leaving.

"....."

Only once they left did silence fall on the surroundings.

Kiera, who had been watching the entire time, frowned and blew her smoke away.

Puff

"What was that for? Were you trying to help me or something?"

Julien turned his head and their eyes met.

'It's that expression again...'

The one filled with nothing but pity as he looked at her. Kiera silently clenched her teeth. Why are you looking at me like that...? Just as she was about to say something, he beat her to it.

"I didn't do it for you."

Julien said, his voice sounding rather quiet.

"....I'm just taking responsibility for once. I'd rather handle it now than wait before it gets harder to handle."

He glanced at her once again, his eyes falling on the cigarette in her hand.

Kiera frowned, expecting him to do something similar to last time.

"What?"

But...

"Stop smoking."

Much to her surprise, he didn't pursue the matter and turned around to leave.

"....It isn't good for you."

His back slowly faded from her sight.

Staring at it, Kiera looked at her hand where the cigarette was and mumbled,

"You think I don't know?"

It was nighttime by the time Aoife was done with her outing at the library. She normally wouldn't have spent such a long time there, but thinking back at the situation from before, she had no choice but to stay there.

....Had she left in her previous mood, she was afraid she'd kill someone by accident.

The moon hung in the night sky, illuminating the world beneath.

Lost in her thoughts, Aoife followed the path back to the dorm. It was a beautiful path.

The cobblestone path was embraced by all sorts of flowers as a gentle breeze gracefully swept through the air.

It felt strangely nice.

"...."

And then, a figure appeared in the distance. They seemed to be all sweaty, and haggard.

"Leon...?"

His identity became clear as he stopped under the light from a lampost. How could it not when his appearance stood out so much?

"Hm?"

He turned his head, finally noticing her.

"Aoife?"

"....Are you coming back from training?"

"Ah, yes."

Leon nodded his head. Then, lowering his head and focusing his gaze on the books in her hand, he tilted his head.

"Library?"

"Yes."

"So late?"

"Could ask the same of you."

"Right..."

Leon scratched the side of his head. Glancing at the books, he hesitantly asked.

"Do you need help?"

"No."

A flat-out refusal.

"I can carry this much."

They were only like, one... two... three.... eight books?

"Oh."

Though he didn't show it with his face, he seemed a little doubtful. But he still relented and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Aoife quietly picked up her pace to catch up to him, when...

"Oh."

Thud.

One of the books fell due to her carelessness. Or more like, she was just not paying attention. With her reflexes, she could've easily avoided such a situation.

"I'll get it."

Leon offered to help and bent down to pick up the book.

"An English book...?"

"Uh? Ah, yes..."

It was one of the books that Julien had left on his desk. She was curious about it. For him to be so good at English, surely there must've been reason. Therefore, after thinking about it, she decided to pick up that book.

Though she didn't particularly like him, she had to admit that he was competent. Her goal was to become the best.

Therefore, she needed to pick up things from the best.

"Tough language."

Leon casually glanced at the cover of the book, his eyes squinting slightly as he tried to decipher the meaning of the title. Only for his entire body to freeze the next second.

"Leon...?"

Noticing a change in his demeanor, Aoife cocked her head. What's wrong with him?

"....Where did you get this?"

His voice came out even. Strangely so.

"Where did I get this? I got it from the library..."

"Oh. I see."

He nodded calmly.

Then, he handed it back to her.

"Burn it."

"....?"

Was this a joke?

Aoife thought so at first, but when she looked at his face, she couldn't help but be taken aback.

He seemed serious. Almost desperate.

"Just..."

His eyes trembled. He seemed shaken.

The stupefied Aoife narrowed her eyes and carefully looked at Leon.

'What is....'

".....Don't ever give this to Julien."

"Yes?"

Yet again, Aoife was taken aback.

But I got it from him...

"Never."

He made sure to emphasize before excusing himself, leaving her standing dumbly. As he left, she ended up overhearing his mutters, 'Cursed book...'

"What kind of situation is this...?"

Aoife frowned and finally paid attention to the book. She hadn't paid attention to the title before since she just took it for the sake of it, but now she was intrigued.

Just what kind of book could get Leon so shaken up?

Her eyes squinted as she translated the title.

"....!"

Soon, the title became clear to her. And her expression changed.

: | 145 Jokes that will have you rolling on the floor.

It was a book about jokes.

"What sort of—"

Chapter 38: Forest [1]

Did the nobles hate the commoners?

Not in particular. At least, the vast majority didn't.

As future lords of their territory, most nobles understood the importance of commoners and how vital they were to their territory.

In fact, most nobles tended to build good relationships with talented commoners.

Everyone at Haven was talented.

Some were less than others, but they were generally all very talented individuals. One needed to have a certain standard to get here after all.

As such, for aspiring nobles, it was important to build good relationships with them.

At least...

That was how it usually was.

Unfortunately, things were different this year. Without someone to properly lead the first years, cadets with different agendas were allowed to come to power, shifting the overall situation.

"What did you say...? He wants to talk to me?"

A well-built young man, his blonde hair framing his jewel-like blue eyes, felt his brows furrow at the unexpected news.

Clutching a cup filled with wine, he directed his gaze at the four figures standing before him, their heads slightly lowered.

Anders Lewis Richmond.

First heir of the Richmond family—one of the four Marquess families—and the current leader of the 'noble' faction.

"Why is he suddenly interfering?"

His deep voice echoed in the quiet environment. His hold of the cup tightened as his expression scrunched up.

A face appeared in his mind.

He couldn't forget that face. How could he forget...?

His cold and overbearing gaze as he looked down on him. From the utter disregard and contempt within his gaze, and the last words he muttered to him.

'.....Pathetic.'

Anders's grip on his glass tightened as his teeth gnashed.

"Huuu."

Taking a deep breath, he suppressed the rage that was barely about to slip out of him.

Closing his eyes, he deeply pondered over the situation before asking,

"Tomorrow... Isn't it the survival guidance class?"

"That's correct."

One of the people in the room replied.

"And he said he wants to talk to me tomorrow?"

"That's correct..."

"..."

Anders stood in silence for a brief moment.

Then....

Seemingly having come up with a decision, he finally opened his eyes.

"Alright."

His eyes grew cold.

"...If that's what he wants. I'll talk to him tomorrow. Might as well."

But...

Unlike last time, he was prepared. How could he not be when all he could recall during those two weeks was the cold disdain his eyes bore when they looked down at him in class?

Inserting his hand in his pocket, he rummaged through it to remove a small necklace.

"....."

Gently, his lips pulled into a thin smile as he stared at it.

Things weren't going to be the same this time....

After all, his emotions couldn't be tampered with anymore.

It was early in the morning, and the sun was barely up. The morning breeze wafted through, adding a certain chill to the air.

We stood at the edge of a towering forest where trees of various sizes comprised the vast majority of the landscape. The forest—Hargrave Forest—was connected to the Institute and was considered safe by the instructor.

"Line up quickly."

The instructor, Candace Wallace, positioned us in a long line before the forest.

I stood at the very front.

That was only natural since the order was assigned based on rank.

As such, Leon stood behind me.

He seemed a little odd today. Very odd. Especially since the first thing he had asked me this morning was if I had seen the book.

What book...?

"In the backpacks, you will find all the necessary equipment for the upcoming task. In total, it'll last for a day. Points will be earned based on the criteria given to you in the booklet."

The class was called [Basic Survival Guideline]. It was a class that focused on the basics of survival. The objective of the class was to acclimate the cadets to living in the challenging environments of the mirror dimension.

From what I read, they were a lot worse than this.

Given the nature of the course, a 'non-combat' based one, I was judged to be eligible to attend this class.

"On that note, everyone please welcome Professor Bucklam."

Professor Wallance suddenly stopped to the side and introduced someone.

The individual in question was a middle-aged man with graying dark hair and a mustache. What caught one's attention the most were his distinctive circular gold-framed glasses which seemed oddly fitting.

Coupled with the wooden cane in his hand, he looked extremely refined.

Why does he seem so familiar...?

His appearance sparked something in my mind as I felt his figure to be vaguely familiar. But where exactly...?

".....Ah."

Then I recalled.

He was the one playing checkers by himself yesterday.

'So it was him...'

"I can't believe it's really him..."

"Hm?"

A noticeable change occurred in the faces of the cadets behind me.

"Holy crap, it's Professor Bucklam."

"...Wow, it's really him."

"But I heard that he was still ill..."

The way the students talked about him made him appear to be a very important person.

"He's a very important figure. One of the top professors in the Academy. Well... was."

Thankfully, I had Leon with me as he gave me a brief rundown of the situation while he whispered near my ear.

"Was...?"

"Yeah, he sustained an injury a few years back. He hasn't been the same since. His power dropped a lot too."

"Ah."

I looked back at that man who stood at the front. He seemed like an extremely warm person at first glance. Like a neighborhood uncle who everyone was friendly with.

"Haha, it seems like everyone is already aware of my identity."

Even his laugh was warm.

"Please don't worry about my appearance. I'm only here to observe several cadets. As you are all aware, the draft will be coming at the end of the year. I want to make sure that we select the best of the best."

Draft...?

A new term I was unfamiliar with entered my mind.

I thought about asking Leon but chose against it given that he was currently speaking. I made a mental note in my mind.

".....So, while this is indeed just a regular class, I'll be here to monitor you guys and observe your performance. Don't feel too concerned. This won't be the only class I'll monitor, so please feel free to go at your own pace."

He then went on to ramble about the same thing for the next few minutes before finishing.

"I have taken enough of your time. Please go on your way to do your thing."

Clap. Clap. Clap——!

The cadets began to clap.

I did too.

He returned our claps with a slight bow as Professor Wallace stepped ahead.

"You've heard him. Don't feel too pressured. There will be many chances for you to prove yourself."

She proceeded to clap her hands and I felt my body levitate all of a sudden.

"Uh...? What's go—"

Clap——!

"Have a nice trip~"

Those were the last words I heard before the world turned dark.

Thud...!

Light only returned after I felt my feet touch against something hard, and even then, the light was just minimal.

"....."

When I looked around, I realized.

I was in the middle of the forest. Alone.

Right as the students were teleported, Professor Wallace turned to address Process Bucklam.

"Has anyone caught your eye?"

"...A few."

The Professor replied with a thin smile. Leaning slightly on his cane, he stared into the forest as his eyes squinted.

"Aoife, Leon, Kiera, Julien, Evelyn, Luxon, Anders... There's a lot of interesting cadets."

"There's indeed quite a lot of talented individuals this year. More than the previous years."

"Haha, yes. The draft is going to be quite difficult this year."

"But isn't that a good thing?"

"Of course it is. The more competition, the better the final candidates."

"Indeed."

Professor Wallace nodded in understanding. The Draft was an important event for the Academy. It was an event that happened at the end of the year and only the top cadets were eligible for the honor.

But even that was just the start.

There were further steps down the line that the cadets needed to follow after becoming eligible.

And it was the 'scout's' job to make sure the selected members were good enough to pass such steps.

Professor Backlam was one such scout.

"...I guess it's time for me to do my job."

Lowering his head slightly, Professor Bucklam smiled. Then, without turning back, he calmly headed toward the forest, his figure disappearing into its depths.

"....."

Candice remained standing where she was for several minutes. Her mind wandered back to the image of his back.

Though he seemed warm and kind, all Candice could see was loneliness.

It was to be expected given his situation.

He had once been so brilliant, and yet...

She pursed her lips and shook her head.

"A pity. If only he didn't... Haa..."

It was dark and humid. My clothes clung to my skin, and the smell of my sweat permeated around. I was uncomfortable, but this much I could handle. There had been times in my previous life when I had been subjected to worse conditions at my job.

'Fucking bastards...'

The thought still irritated me to this day.

In any case...

I took out the guidebook from my bag and stared at its contents.

: Find water source — 1P

: Find food source — 1P

: Create shelter — 4 P

.

.

In short.

"Survive for a day."

With each objective achieved, one would earn points. The one who had the most points by the end would be ranked first. Because of my obvious disability, my results didn't matter as much.

That said, just because the results didn't matter as much, it didn't mean that I wasn't planning on trying.

"Hooooo..."

Taking a deep breath, I dropped the backpack down and prepared to get my camp ready. freeweb .co m

I felt energized and ready.

Although I wasn't in top shape, it didn't mean I couldn't do this.

Such was how I felt.

But...

'Uh...?'

Reality seemed to hate me.

Just as I was about to get ready to start, the world turned black. When light returned, I found myself back in the forest, but at an entirely different place.

Clank....!

Sparks flew in the air and the nearby vegetation shattered.

'What's going on?'

My voice refused to come out of my mouth. As if it were trapped in my mind. And it was then that I understood what was happening.

This familiar feeling...

The vivid sensations but the weird strange of entrapment...

'Vision.'

I was experiencing another vision.

'Shit...'

I wanted to curse. Of all times now...? No, when had it really had good timing? They always came randomly, and when I least expected them.

I once again wanted to curse at my situation, but I knew I couldn't.

The vision, though random, always ended up pointing out important events.

'Perhaps, major or minor events from the game...'

I wasn't aware since I had never played the game. But that wasn't currently important.

Booom——!

Several trees shattered, their remains flying in all sorts of directions. A figure gradually appeared, lying down on the ground with a pained expression.

"Ugh..."

It was a familiar face.

Long white hair, deep red eyes...

'Kiera?'

Was this vision about-

"Kh...! Shit."

Kiera forced herself up as blood dripped down from her mouth. Her expression almost seemed desperate. No, she really was...

"H-how... Why...?"

Her eyes widened as she suddenly screamed.

"Wait...! No!!"

Booom——!

Several more trees shattered as a huge explosion resounded. A gale rushed from the front as my ears rang.

Thud.

Something heavy fell right next to where I stood.

I couldn't see at first due to the dust, but when it all cleared...

'....!'

I stood rigid on the spot.

My heart tightened and my face stiffened. An array of different emotions coursed through my mind in that moment as I struggled to understand what I was seeing.

'This...'

I looked down at the familiar face.

The supposed main character. The strongest first year, and my knight...

'...How?'

His body lay next to my feet.

'Dead.'

Completely devoid of any life.

How...?

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 39: Forest [2]

Everything felt so vivid.

From the dust in the air to the gentle breeze that wafted through.

...And in particular, the chill that enveloped my heart.

It all felt so real that for a moment, just briefly... I thought I was standing there, reliving the moment, and that this wasn't a vision.

'How...?'

I struggled to comprehend the sight in front of me.

How could Leon have died...? Wasn't he supposed to be the main character of the game? Why would-

I stopped my thoughts there.

It became clear to me shortly after. The reason why he died, and in such a manner...

It all became clear.

'It's because of me.'

My existence had caused this. I was the one who created this situation. Originally, he was supposed to be the Black Star.

The first ranker.

My presence had taken that away from him and changed the course of how the game progressed.

His death...

It was all because I existed.

'...!'

But it wasn't over.

Scrunch... Scrunch...

My head raised to stare into the distance. Toward the one responsible for all of this.

Ah—

My heart tightened further.

The figure responsible for all of this...

'...I can't see it.'

It was hazy. Almost obscured. The distance between us shrank, eventually coming to a step a few meters away from me.

I felt my body stiffen at the sight of it.

It felt as though he was looking at me. As if it knew that I was here. But...

It wasn't possible. And that proved to be the case when they lowered their head to stare at Leon.

Drip...! Drip...!

Red stained the ground as the shadow cast its gaze down.

'Blood....?'

Ah...

A realization hit me. Whoever the figure was, it hadn't come out unscathed from the conflict with Leon.

"....."

The silence that gripped the surrounding felt stifling.

Kiera, who was a few meters away, stood in silence, staring at the scene with a look of despair as she tried to force herself up.

"Ukh...!"

But it was to no avail.

Her legs were broken.

The last thing I heard before the vision shattered was...

"Y-you of all people..."

Everything grew dark again and I felt in control of my body again.

"Huaaaa...!"

I heavily gulped for air the moment I regained control of my body as I hunched over and leaned my hand on a nearby tree for support.

"Haa... Haaa...."

Sweat trickled down the side of my face as my breath left my body.

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

I could hear the sound of my own heartbeat in my mind as I tried to recover from the shock of the vision.

"Haaa..."

My head felt light and the world blurry.

But in spite of that, I had no choice but to recover fast.

"F... haaa... fucking shit."

A curse slipped my mouth and I ruffled my head.

'Now of all the fucking times...'

Just what sort of situation was this...? Couldn't I catch a break for once?

"Huuu..."

Though I complained, I was already rummaging through my backpack where I took a small red object.

[Emergency use only]

I stared at the device in my hand. It was something that all cadets were given. Although the area was safe, and most cadets were powerful, accidents could happen. The device was supposed to be used in case such cases occurred.

That said...

"....What kind of excuse am I going to use?"

There were repercussions to using the device in case there was no emergency.

I was afraid of such consequences, but...

"Whatever."

It wasn't something I could think about at the moment. At worst, I could just say that my injuries were too much for me.

With such thoughts, I pressed on the device.

Click—

But...

"...."

Nothing happened.

"What...?"

Click—

I clicked again.

But...

Yet again, nothing happened.

That's when I realized. My device... It was broken.

"This...."

I felt my stomach drop at the realization. This couldn't be a coincidence, right...?

There was simply no way. At the very least, I refused to believe that to be the case. It certainly had something to do with the situation.

But yet again...

It brought a new question to my mind.

"Why is the institute not aware of this?"

Was this perhaps another one of their tests...?

"No, it's not."

I could still recall Leon's lifeless expression as he fell by my feet. Kiera's shocked expression, and the intensity of the obscured figure in the vision.

This...

It wasn't a test.

This was real.

"Fuck..."

I could do nothing but curse. I was at a loss as to what to do. The figure was a lot stronger than me. To be able to kill Leon, a Tier 2 knight... It had to be at least Tier 3 in strength.

The higher the tier, the faster, and more efficient they were with controlling mana and utilizing spells.

I was merely at Tier 1.

How was I supposed to do anything about the figure...?

But...

"Damn it."

I clenched my teeth and grabbed my backpack.

I had no choice but to do something.

Leon couldn't die.

If he died...

I was screwed.

"...."

A strange silence gripped the surroundings as Leon carefully scanned the landscape.

There was something about the environment that felt...

Unsettling.

SHIIIIING—!

He unsheathed his sword and narrowed his eyes. A grave expression marred his features.

All humans were born with a [Innate] skill. Though the Academy didn't require one to share what it was, a few cadets with lower talents tended to expose it in hopes of getting accepted.

Leon's [Innate] skill was called [Instinct].

It was an innate skill that granted him the ability to feel when things weren't right.

It was for this exact reason that he was sure that the current 'Julien' was a fake, and that he hadn't been lying about his circumstances back then.

...And it was also for this exact reason that he was hesitant about fighting him.

His instincts...

They told him to not fight him.

That he wasn't someone that he could easily take on.

"Huuuu..."

There were hardly any times when his instincts had been wrong. There were occasions where they had been, but those times were rare and he always liked to play things safe. And it also wasn't like it was active at all times.

There were many times his instincts didn't detect anything. But in the rare times that they did... He always made sure to be ready.

Therefore...

Scanning around once more, he secretly started to run the mana in his body.

As a Tier 2 knight, his senses were rather sharp. Within moments, he felt every little detail of his surroundings.

From the speed of the wind to the number of grass stalks around him.

".....!"

It was also because of this that he was able to react in time, suddenly shifting his body by pivoting his foot and positioning the blade in front of him.

Bang—!

Sparks flew in the air as Leon felt his body skid several meters back before stopping.

"Ukh...!"

A groan inevitably escaped from his lips as he felt his chest cave slightly. The power of that strike...

It wasn't something he would've been able to take on unguarded.

Whoever this enemy was...

They were without a doubt stronger than him.

Scrunch... Scrunch...

Leon felt his body tense as the nearby bushes rustled and a figure gradually became clear for him to see.

When the figure became clear, Leon's eyes widened and his expression cracked.

"It's you...?"

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

I was lost. I had no idea where to start. The forest was massive, and finding Leon was easier said than done.

The only thing that I knew was the exact details of the location.

I remembered almost every little detail about the space.

But that was it...

Where exactly it was, I wasn't sure. Even the map in my hand was of no use.

'Crap...'

By now he had most likely already met the enemy. For how long could he last? A minute? Two minutes? Ten minutes...?

The idea ate at my mind as I continued forward. I had no choice but to move. Leon couldn't die... His death would mean that the likelihood of me getting exposed as a 'fraud' was almost guaranteed.

What then...?

Go into hiding and wait for the world to forget about me? Even if that was possible, that wasn't what I wanted.

I had a clear goal in mind.

And Leon was the key piece to helping me achieve that goal.

....I couldn't do without him.

"He can't die..."

I reminded myself of the fact.

He couldn't die.

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

I had been running for a few minutes, when...

Rustle—

The bushes near me rustled and a voice followed suit.

"Found you."

"Tsk....."

Kiera clicked her tongue as she looked around. She was all by herself in the forest with no one in sight.

Her hands tingled and she instinctively reached for her pocket.

But they were empty.

"...."

Her heart started to beat faster.

So did her breathing as her fingers twitched. A sense of emptiness spread across her chest as her left eye twitched.

"Shit..."

Why did people smoke....? Each person had their own answer to the question.

Kiera's answer was...

'It's warm.'

Her lungs would heat up, her mind would relax, and she'd forget that she wasn't alone for a moment.

It was the gruesome reality of her life.

She was alone.

The people she called 'family' only cared about prestige and honor. It was for this reason that despite being one herself, she hated nobles.

She also hated the dark.

It felt stifling.

It was her curse. She didn't even know why she was like it. It had been like this for as long as she could remember. But it had haunted her for as long as she could remember.

It was for this reason that she smoked.

To her...

Smoking was her medicine.

It brought warmth.

Ziiiiip—

Kiera unzipped her bag where she took out a pack of cigarettes.

[Milton's Rose]

The familiar box, and the the familiar smell. Briefly, it eased the darkness that surrounded her.

Puff

An orange light flickered in the dark as Kiera took a drag of the cigarette.

Her lungs burned with an all too familiar sensation, and her mind calmed down. But she soon frowned.

"....Looks like I need to change the intensity."

Cigarettes had different intensities. Mainly because superhumans that were capable of wielding mana had certain resistance to the chemicals in normal cigarettes.

It was hence why the cigarettes that Kiera was using were specifically designed for superhumans.

While normal cigarettes couldn't harm them, these ones could....

The higher the Tier she reached, the more intense the cigarette had to be for her to feel anything.

It was also because of this that the damage from smoking couldn't be healed.

Puff

But it wasn't like she cared.

Closing her eyes, she leaned against a nearby tree and savored the taste of the cigarette.

Her mind relaxed and all her worries disappeared.

By the time she was done, her mind was clear. The dark didn't seem as intimidating as it had been moments prior.

Her body felt warm.

"Let's get this shit done."

She tossed the pack back into her bag and took out the booklet for the task.

Flip—!

She had just opened the first page when...

—————!

A resounding roar reverberated. At the same time, the ground beneath her quaked, and the nearby trees shattered.

Her body's equilibrium shifted, leaving her with no time to respond.

"...Huh?"

Thump!

A figure skidded back, only stopping after impaling their sword against the ground.

Kiera's eyes widened at the sight of him.

And her mouth opened to mumble,

"Leon...?"

Chapter 40: Forest [3]

[There was a glitch in previous chapter. If you read it in the first 30 minutes of release, there's a small scene missing just a bit before Kiera's POV.]

Rustle—

The bushes rustled and a figure I vaguely felt was familiar appeared.

'Who is he...?'

"You were looking for me?"

A dry voice came out from my lips as I grew wary. He couldn't be someone related to the one in the vision?

If that was the case...

My body grew tense and I started to channel the mana inside of my body.

"Didn't you say you wanted to see me? I am here."

"....?"

Wanted to see me?

I paused and thought about it. Then, as if recalling the events of yesterday, I realized.

"You're the leader of the noble faction?"

Right, judging from his age, and the fact that he felt familiar, this made sense. Especially since I distinctly remembered asking his minion to tell him to come to me.

"....How did you find me?"

Weren't we supposed to be stranded in the middle of a forest?

For him to find me...

I frowned and had a sudden thought. Just then, he appeared to want to say something as his mouth opened, but...

"...I want to—"

I cut him off immediately and lightly tossed something in his direction.

Thud.

It landed right beneath his feet, stopping him as he looked down.

I took the chance to explain.

"My emergency device doesn't work. I believe yours doesn't work as well. I think we're under attack."

"Under attack...?"

He looked back at me, his eyes wearier than before.

"...Are you trying to get my guard down or something."

"No."

Perhaps because time was running out and I couldn't waste time, my voice came out rather harsh as I squinted my eyes at him.

"That's a needless effort on someone like you. Check your device."

"...."

His face scrunched up, but under my serious gaze, he eventually relented and opened his backpack, taking out a similar device from his it.

He turned to look at me and seemed to want to say something, but after staring into my eyes, he thought otherwise and just pressed on the device.

Click—

"...."

As expected, his didn't work either.

"This..."

Finally, his expression changed as he realized the gravity of the situation. But I didn't have time to waste.

Therefore, I carefully approached him, only stopping a few meters away from him.

I looked down at him to meet his eyes.

"...."

I thought back on the situation and how he had managed to find me.

It was only a guess, but maybe...

"Help me find someone."

He could help me find Leon's location.

Rustle, Rustle, Rustle—

'Why am I even doing this...?'

Anders continued to run, pushing the vegetation away. Fiddling with the necklace on his neck, he looked behind him where a figure was casually following him.

Even now...

He seemed unfazed by the situation as he looked around with the same expression he always wore.

It was as if he didn't seem bothered by the entire situation. And yet, he was also the first one to notice.

'How did he know?'

Anders was curious. He turned his head slightly, when...

"How far?"

Julien's voice reached his ears.

Even the tone of his voice sounded annoying to his ears.

He was the last person he thought he'd work with, but...

'....I have no choice.'

The circumstances left him with no choice but to work with him. He didn't trust him, but he trusted his abilities.

After all...

He had experienced them firsthand.

"We should be getting closer."

"Mhm."

Julien acknowledged with a soft hum, his attention once again on the surroundings. Anders pursed his lips and continued forward.

His [Innate] ability—[Predator's Plight]—granted him with the ability to enhance his senses. Be it his eyesight, smell, and hearing. It was thanks to his ability that he had been able to find Julien easily.

His original plan had been to face him head-on. He thought about sneaking up on him, but that simply went against his morals.

He was no coward, after all.

As they moved forward, Anders suddenly grew curious.

"...Can you tell me why you asked me to find Leon instead of the Professors? I'm sure they would be of more help than him."

Julien looked ahead and their gazes met.

Anders felt his body freeze under his gaze which seemed to look at him with a bit of contempt.

'This bastard...'

Anders clenched his fists at the sight.

Julien's voice reached his ears shortly after.

"If the culprit is capable of disabling the emergency device, what makes you think they won't interfere with the professors?"

"Ah..."

Julien's answer left him at a loss for words.

Indeed, when he put it like that...

"Slow down."

Julien's voice reached him again from behind.

This time, it felt a lot more intimidating.

"....I have an idea of where we are."

'If the culprit is capable of disabling the emergency device, what makes you think they won't interfere with the professors?'

Yeah, no.

That was total bullshit.

While there was some truth to it, I had no idea whether the professors had been 'distracted' or 'taken care of'. The only thing that I cared about was getting to Leon before it was too late.

That being said...

'...If I can't, I won't.'

The idea behind saving Leon stemmed from the fact that I needed him. He was the main character of the game and my shield.

What sort of consequences was his death going to bring to the game?

That, I wasn't sure and I had never really thought about it. However, on further thought, his death was sure to bring a lot of variables to my future.

As of right now...

Although we both didn't trust each other, the two of us were allies.

As an ally, it was my duty to help him out when needed. But that didn't mean I'd have to throw my life away to help him.

If the situation seemed impossible then...

"Huuu"

I closed my eyes.

'...Let's see when I get there.'

The current plan was to interfere when most opportune. Given that at some point Leon managed to injure the enemy, an opening certainly existed.

I planned on exploiting it.

Opening my eyes again, I slowed down my pace.

"Stop."

Anders similarly stopped as he turned to look at me. I placed my finger on my lips before he could say anything and whispered.

"Keep your voice down from this moment forth."

"...?"

He seemed confused as he looked around him and squinted. But after an internal debate, he relented and nodded.

"...Fine."

'Now that I look at him, he seems quite reasonable...'

It took me no time to realize who he was. Back then, I had been so immersed in my emotions that I hadn't paid proper attention to how he looked. However, his face was now clear to me and the situation was rather funny.

Who'd have thought I'd end up working with the same person that I used to prove my worth in the middle of the lecture?

Scrunch... Scrunch...

I quietly led him forward. The surroundings were the same as I remembered. From the trees to the smell that lingered in the air.

If there was one good thing about the visions, it was that I could remember every single detail with perfect memory...

It was thanks to that that I was able to find the location rather quickly.

"This is it."

The exact same spot where Leon died.

It was where I was currently standing.

'They aren't here yet which means that I'm still early.'

I sighed in relief at the idea and looked around me. Only to see Anders looking at me in confusion. I could guess exactly what he was thinking from his expression.

"Use your abilities. See if there's anyone near us."

"Uh...? Why-"

"Do it."

He frowned but nonetheless listened. Was he afraid of me, or were the circumstances making him act this way?

In a way, I could see how he had become the leader of the nobles.

"...!"

His eyes quickly widened a few moments after he closed them and his gaze turned to look to the right where he pointed.

"Over there..."

I followed the direction of where he pointed as he continued, his voice trembling slightly.

"There are multiple people. A large conflict—uh, wait!"

Though he tried to stop me, I was already moving. The situation was still not bad. Since Leon could deal some damage to the opponent if I played my cards right...

"Uhm?"

My eyebrow twitched as I felt a sharp pain in my arm. It hurt so much that I had to stop for a brief moment. What sort of... I turned my wrist over to see what was going on when my eyes shot up.

"...!"

Ah—

The second leaf.

The one that I was unsure of what it did.

It was shining brightly.

Bang——!

"Uekh...!"

Leon felt his back crash against a nearby tree as he felt himself lose his breath.

Thud.

He landed on the ground, only keeping himself from falling thanks to his sword which he used to support himself.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

With uneven breathing, he looked up. Even now, he struggled to understand. How...? How was it possible?

"The fuck is this? Aren't you supposed to be our Professor?"

Kiera's startled voice echoed from his left as she held her hand forward. A red magic circle floated at the tips of her fingers.

Swoosh!

Flames surged from all around her, enveloping her entire body as amidst the inferno, her eyes, reminiscent of rubies, gleamed brightly, piercing through the raging blaze surrounding her.

Thrusting her hand forward, the flames enveloping her body twisted and coiled like a serpent before surging forward where a figure stood.

Unfortunately...

———!

The flames, which had been raging with a lot of intensity, were quickly put out with a single swipe of a cane.

Kier's expression changed drastically at this, but before she could do anything...

Bang——!

Her body was flung several meters back, crashing against the dirt as she skidded back several meters.

"Uhk..."

Her groaned reached Leon as he tightly held on the sword in his hand and stared ahead.

Indeed. They were severely outclassed. But how could they not be when their opponent was a Tier 3 opponent? Although the two of them were both Tier 2, their powers were still outstripped.

It took more than two Tier 2 individuals to get rid of someone of that caliber.

And to make matters worse, this was no regular opponent...

'Professor Bucklam.'

Even now, Leon didn't fully understand the situation. How could it be him? Was this a test, or was this real?

At first, he thought it was, but his 'instincts' told him otherwise.

That was when it became clear to him.

Professor Bucklam. For whatever reason... He was trying to kill them.

No, him.

Why?

Leon wasn't sure, but...

"Ukh."

He didn't have the time to care. Pressing his foot against the ground, he propelled his body forward.

Within moments, he arrived a few inches away from the Professor's body as he swung his blade.

It curved in the air and directly aimed at the Professor's exposed neck.

Everything was fluent. From the precision of his attack to its speed.

However...

Clank—!

His sword bounced back the moment it came down and a large translucent sphere formed around the professor's body. [Mana Sphere] an intermediate-ranked spell that provided a mage with great defense.

It covered his entire body and flickered the moment it came into contact with Leon's sword.

But that was it.

The force behind Leon's sword wasn't powerful enough to break it, leaving Leon exposed to a counterattack.

Swoosh!

Professor Bucklam took advantage of that moment as his cane came slashing down on Leon who just barely managed to avoid it by twisting his body in the air.

Thud.

Falling down, Leon pushed his body forward again and swung his sword.

Clank—!

But...

Clank—!

Regardless of...

Clank—!

What he did...

Clank—!

The shield surrounding the professor refused to budge.

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

Leon felt his breath grow heavy with each attempt. It wasn't just him.

Swoosh!

A fire directed itself toward the Professor, but even that was of no use as it simply scattered the moment it touched it.

"What kind of fucking shield is this?"

Leon could hear Kiera's curse from behind as she channeled another spell. Thinking about something, Leon bit his lips before bringing his body forward to slash at the shield.

Professor Bucklam prepared to receive Leon when his figure faded and disappeared.

Thud.

By the time Leon's touched the ground, he was standing behind Kiera who looked startled by the sight of him.

"Holy fuck! What are you doing? ...That scared the shit out of me."

"Hold him back for me."

A white glow formed over Leon's sword. It's aura intensifying by the second.

"What?"

Kiera was startled at first, but realizing what Leon was trying to do, she bit her lips and nodded.

"Fuck... Whatever, do it."

The flames around her body intensified and the temperature around them rose to an alarming degree.

They were so intense that the surrounding grass and trees started to catch fire.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

Kiera's breath started to grow heavy, but gritting her teeth, she pushed her hand forward, and the fire around her split into several threads which all rushed toward the professor who frowned and slashed with his cane.

Unfortunately, as if they had a mind of their own, the threads diverged, encircling him before adhering to the ground and forming a cage

"N-now...!"

Kiera shouted as she looked behind her where a powerful glow appeared.

An intense mana wave wafted through the air as Leon's sword shone with a majestic light. He didn't hesitate to move the moment she spoke.

Thump!

The ground caved as his body zoomed toward the professor.

"Khuek...!"

An intense pain invaded every part of his body as he rushed forward. His muscles were tearing apart, and his mana was running dangerously low.

But...

He had no choice.

This was do or die.

Bang!

His foot pressed against the ground, stopping his body just as he neared the professor who appeared somewhat alarmed.

"Ukh!"

Pain once again invaded Leon's body as he felt the muscles of his core snap, but he still persisted.

Using everything he had, he swung diagonally in an upward motion.

Booom———!

His blade clashed against the professor's shield as it flickered intensively. Unlike before, the flickering was even more pronounced, and just barely, Leon could see cracks form on its surface.

But...

That wasn't enough.

The shield was still standing.

"Kh...!!!"

He clenched his teeth with even more force as he pushed all the remaining mana in his body out and into the sword.

Cr-Crack...!

The cracks around the shield widened. But... It was still not enough.

'Not yet...!'

His lungs were on fire and every part of his body ached. Leon could hardly keep himself standing as he felt his knee buckle.

But...

"Kh...!"

He had to persist.

Not. Until. He. Reached. His. Goal.

"Akh...!"

His sword shone with even fiercer light. It blinded everything that was in sight. Power gushed out from it as the shield around the professor's body creaked under intense stress.

Rather quickly, the cracks started to widen and it was only a matter of time before the shield shattered.

"Kh!"

Leon kept pushing.

He used everything that he had to attack in that moment.

But the more he continued, the more he felt his heart drop...

'...It won't be enough.'

It started to become clear to me.

Even if the shield broke, the power behind the sword wouldn't be enough. If things went on like this then...

And then it happened.

Swoosh.

Purple hands sprouted from the ground beneath the professor. They came so abruptly that Professor Bucklam wasn't able to react on time and they latched onto his ankles.

That was all it took...

Crash—!

The shield shattered and Leon finally saw his sword slash down.

Pffttt!

Blood splattered in the air as he felt it make contact with the professor's body.

Clank. Clank.

Ah—

Leon dropped to his knees as the sword scattered on the ground. A strange hung in the air as Leon felt the muscles of his body give up on him.

"...Did I?"

But..

"...!"

When he looked up to see, much to Leon's horror, he could still see the Professor standing before him.

A large gaping wound appeared on his body, but his eyes still seemed alive. And they were.

He didn't even seem to care about what was going on around him. The Professor's eyes were fixed on him. As if he was the only thing on his mind.

His hand slowly raised and a magic circle formed.

It was aimed directly at the incapacitated Leon who could do nothing but watch.

No, this...

"...."

Just when Leon's eyes despaired, a hand reached out and grasped the Professor by the shoulder.

A pair of familiar hazel eyes met Leon's gaze as a dry voice echoed in the air.

".....You did not."

