

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 41: Forest [4] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 41: Forest [4]

Chapter 41: Forest [4]

There was only one opening that I could exploit to attack. A moment when the enemy would be too preoccupied with Leon to bother with me.

....The chance came and I took it.

I wasn't ashamed of my actions. Reaping the rewards of another's effort. I chose the easiest and least dangerous path.

I was sure Leon wouldn't mind me doing this.

But...

'He's still standing.'

It appeared as though the enemy was still standing.

Was that strike not good enough?

I didn't hesitate to approach him from behind. A burning sensation coursed through my forearm, causing me to pause right behind him.

In that brief instant, I glimpsed a miniature magic circle hovering at the tips of his fingers, directed towards Leon.

"...."

Even now, in such a state, he was...

'Why is he so desperate?'

I pressed my hand against his shoulder, and the world turned dark shortly after.

'Uh...?'

A medium-sized room.

That was how the world appeared to me.

'What is going on?'

My body floated as I looked around. It didn't seem like a vision. I felt in complete control and while I couldn't speak, I could look around and move just fine.

"You're finally awake."

Then, I heard a voice.

A woman sat by the bed where a man rested. There were three other people beside the man. Two boys and a girl. They appeared to be young, in their early teens.

'When did they get here?'

"Who are you? Where am I?"

A familiar face. He was younger, but it was without a doubt him.

Professor Bucklam.

'What is this...'

"Ah..."

"Father."

"Dad."

Information entered my mind at that moment.

A time when an incident occurred and he sustained heavy injuries, forgetting all about his memories. He woke up to find that he was married and had three children. A famed wizard with several groundbreaking theses to his name.

That was who he was and how the world knew him as.

"Who are you people? Why are you looking at me like that? And why..."

He squeezed his heart.

Emotions I hadn't expected flooded my mind. It was a familiar emotion and my heart squeezed briefly.

"....Is my chest like this?"

Familial love.

Even as his memories faded, his emotions hadn't. The unfamiliar people in front of him... He still cared deeply for them.

It was hence why he was able to push through the confusion and live a normal life.

Because he loved them.

"Robert, eat this. Is it to your tastes?"

"Dad, try it. It's your favorite."

"We made it for you."

"Ah, yes..."

Warmth.

It felt warm.

"That was us when we first met. It was a sunny day and you approached me all nervous..."

But that warmth...

How long could it truly last?

"That's the photo we took when Natalie was born."

"That's Jason."

The photos.

They were familiar and yet unfamiliar. It warmed his heart to see but also brought emptiness. The person in the photo... It was him, and yet... he felt unfamiliar.

Was this really him?

"How long do you think it'll take for him to recover his memories?"

"It shouldn't take too long. He suffered severe head trauma."

The doctor casually said while looking through a series of documents.

"It would take at most a year for him to get them back."

"You hear that Robert?"

His wife smiled at him.

Relief was evident in her expression.

"You're going to get your memories back!"

"...Yes."

He smiled back at her.

But his heart didn't.

'...Is the previous me that much better?'

His children thought so.

"Dad, when are you going to get your memories back?"

Everyday.

"I miss you, dad."

They'd ask the same question.

"When can we have our dad back?"

When was he going to come back?

'Am I not good enough?'

Such thoughts ate at his mind every day. Why was it that he had forgotten his memories about them, but not his feelings?

It wouldn't have hurt so much if that was the case...

And it was also because of such feelings that he'd pray to himself every day.

'I love them.'

'They don't love me.'

'It's because I love them that I must go.'

'Let me disappear.'

'Let him come back.'

'For them... You must come back.'

"...."

I stared blankly at the sight in front of me.

'What is this?'

The feelings. Everything that he felt... They were so vivid in my mind. The pain, the love, and everything that went through his mind...

I experienced it all.

Gradually...

It was starting to become unbearable.

He carried on such pain every day.

"Doctor? Are you sure everything is okay? It's been a year, and he still..."

"I'm just as stumped Madam Bucklam."

I was brought back by a certain conversation.

"So when can I expect him to recover?"

"....I'm not sure."

The difficult expression of the doctor and the pained expression on his wife's face.

It ate away at his mind.

'I'm trying.'

'I really am...'

'....but he isn't coming back.'

'Why aren't you coming back!'

It was like this every day.

The more time passed the more it ate away at his soul.

"..."

"..."

"..."

The dinners were silent.

And so was the once lively and vibrant house.

"Sob.. Sob... Sob..."

All except for the occasional sobbing he'd hear as he roamed the otherwise empty mansion.

The warmth...

It was gone. It felt cold. And lonely.

'Come back...'

'I can't do this anymore.'

'How long must I live like this?'

His emotions were like a chain to him.

'It's not my fault I'm different.'

'But I'm still him.'

'Just what was so much better about him than me?'

They glued him down to this suffering.

'Why can't I get rid of your past?'

"...."

The pain carried on.

He aged, and so did his family.

The same was true for the sense of estrangement.

"Goodbye."

"..."

He was merely a man living in someone else's body.

He could see it in their eyes and the eyes of everyone else. Be it at work, or at home. All he received were looks of pity and estrangement.

It was lonely.

His life was.

Tak—

The only comfort he had was checkers.

Tak—

Nobody played with him, but...

Tak—

That was fine. At least nobody judged him.

Because...

That was the only thing he had left.

.

.

.

"....."

I looked around me. It was the same park at the Academy. Students walked around and a nice breeze wafted through.

In the distance, a man played checkers by himself.

He was alone but satisfied.

"How may I help you?"

He turned his head to address me. His eyes were warm, and so was his smile.

"...Do you have a question about something? I do have some free time."

He placed the piece down.

"It's not like I have much else to do anyway."

"..."

I shook my head and sat down.

"Oh?"

"Teach me how to play."

"....."

The Professor looked at me. He suddenly seemed delighted.

"You want to play? Do you know how to play?"

"I don't."

"Hahaha."

Even his laugh was warm.

"Come, I'll teach you."

He started to teach me.

"The pieces can only move diagonally."

"Like this?"

"Yeah."

He continued to explain.

"This is how you take pieces and how you..."

He seemed rather passionate.

I listened quietly and followed his instructions.

Seemed pretty easy...

"I think I got it. We can start."

"Good. Good."

Tak, Tak, Tak—

"You've lost."

"...."

I looked at the board and frowned.

I didn't even last a few moves.

What sort of...

"Again."

"Let's do that."

Tak, Tak, Tak—

Again, I lost.

But...

"Again."

I didn't give up.

Tak, Tak, Tak—

"This... Are you cheating?"

"Hoho, I'm just better."

"That's bullshit. Let's go again. I'll beat you this time."

"Language."

Tak, Tak, Tak—

The matches continued. Five, ten, twenty, fifty...

I'd lose each time.

The Professor laughed with each victory. On the other hand, I got angrier.

"You have to be cheating!"

Bang!

I slammed my hand against the table.

I had long forgotten about my decorum.

Right now... I wasn't acting. I was being me. The real me. How long had that been?

"Again...!"

It felt liberating.

To be me once again.

In this world, I didn't have to worry about getting caught and what the others thought about me. I could just be me.

Tak, Tak, Tak—

I moved pieces around.

"Nice move."

"...It's only natural."

"But not good enough."

Tak—

"...."

Crafty old bastard.

"Again."

"Hoho."

The losses continued, but strangely, they didn't feel bad. Rather, each time I lost, I enjoyed the game more.

Especially when I saw myself lasting further and further in the game.

I found joy in my progress. Almost like the time when I learned the spell for the first time.

Time flew by like this.

"Ah! So close!"

I continued to play.

"I almost got you there!"

And he continued to beat me.

"Just you wait!"

But...

"There! Ah no!!"

I was getting closer.

"That's i—Fuck! You damn bastard!"

Until...

Tak—

"..."

My piece fell on the board and I looked up.

There was a silence as we both looked at each other.

Professor Bucklam smiled with such rare warmth that made me realize what had happened.

"I won..."

After so many tries, I had finally won.

I had been so immersed in the game that I hadn't realized.

"You did."

The professor nodded. As he did, his figure gradually started to fade. But even in such a situation, he didn't forget to smile as he lowered his head.

"Even a fake like me..."

He seemed happy.

"...Is fun to be with, right?"

He disappeared shortly after.

I sat down on the bench for a long time.

"...."

Quietly staring at the board.

In the end...

All he wanted was to be acknowledged.

?| Lvl 1. [Fear] EXP + 7%

Not for his past.

But for his present.

?| Lvl 1. [Joy] EXP + 13%

It was there that I understood.

There was nothing scarier than loneliness.

?| Lvl 2. [Sadness] EXP + 4%

On this day, Professor Bucklam was arrested.

Julien Dacre Evenus. Leon Rowan Ellert. Kiera Mylne. Anders Lewis Richmond.

These were the names of the four cadets who took down the rogue professor.

Chapter 42: The Inquisitor [1]

Clank, clank, clank—!

Chains rattled as a haggard figure was dragged across a dark corridor. Flanked by two robust individuals, both wearing a similar uniform, he was ushered towards a moderately-sized room.

Inside the room, a man with dark hair and deep brown eyes leaned by the wall.

Wearing a long gray coat that reached his knees, he casually looked up.

"You're here."

His dry voice echoed through the room as the two men halted, allowing the worn-out figure to collapse onto the floor.

Thud.

"....Inquisitor Hallowe."

The two saluted politely.

"Uh, yeah."

Cli Click—!

Lighting up a cigarette, he took a quiet drag while massaging his chin and looking down.

"....Robert Bucklam."

He muttered a single name.

"A renowned and well-respected Professor at the Haven Institute with over fifteen years of service. Quite a nice resume we have here, don't we?"

"...."

Robert Bucklam remained quiet on his knees, his head lowered to face the ground.

The Inquisitor didn't mind the silence and continued to speak.

"Why did someone of your reputation stoop to the point they'd attack some children? I'm sure they can be quite annoying. I was once their age, but..."

His eyes narrowed and he stepped closer.

"....I don't believe for one second someone of your stature would stoop to that level unless circumstances made you. Of course, this is just a hunch of mine."

He lowered his body to stand at eye level with Robert who refused to meet his gaze.

"....."

"Not much of a talker...?"

The Inquisitor smiled, and a sizzling sound echoed as he pressed the cigarette against the ground.

Tzzzz—

"That's fine by me."

He pressed his hand against his face and a white glow enveloped his hand.

".....This might hurt a little."

[At around 3 P.M. today, Professor Bucklam, a renowned professor of the prestigious Haven Academy went rogue attacking one of the students. The reasoning behind his actions has yet to be determined but an investigation is ongoing.]

One of the Haven staff in charge of the Institute's 'public image' commented through a speaker. Several reporters stood a few feet before the podium, holding what seemed to be cameras.

Click. Click. Click.

Their shutters flashed blinding my sight.

'I can't believe they have cameras in this type of setting. They look a little old, but...'

I wanted to admire them more but the situation didn't allow me.

"Cadet! Cadet! Would you like to leave a statement?"

"Cadet! Please let us know what happened. Why did he attack you? And how did you manage to defeat him "

"Please leave a statement."

Even in this world, reporters were annoying. Not that I knew given that I had never experienced it myself, but from what I had seen enough, it was probably the case.

[The cadets will not be answering the questions now.]

The reporter's attempts at asking us questions were quickly shot down by the staff who went on to announce.

[We're here to award the four cadets standing before us for their achievements. Not only were they able to neutralize the threat, but they did so in such a manner that prevented other cadets from getting injured.]

I sat at the center of the stage alongside Leon, Kiera, and Anders. We were all forced to be here to receive our 'medals' for our exemplary performance.

It was something that the Academy was very adamant about.

"....What a pain."

I thought I had muttered those words quietly, but Kiera managed to pick up my voice.

"Tell me about it."

I silently looked at her in surprise.

"...."

"What?"

"....Nothing."

"No, fuck. You can't just say nothing when you look at me like that."

"...."

"Oy."

"Stop. People are watching."

Leon interrupted all of a sudden. Kiera was about to speak when she closed her mouth and grunted.

"Fine."

She shot me a glare in the meantime. But I chose to ignore it. She was thinking too much. I thought the situation would end there when...

"Thank you."

I heard Leon's soft voice from beside me. I was surprised for a brief moment but then closed my eyes and leaned back.

Right.

".....I only saved you because I could."

"I know."

At least he knew.

'I wonder if it was the right decision.'

The decision to save him stemmed from the fact that he was the key person to help me achieve my goal. But at the same time...

'He's the same person that kills me in the vision.'

Indeed, I had potentially saved my killer.

'Killers...'

Kiera was there too.

"Heh."

I found the situation funny. But at the same time, I didn't think too much of it. The visions could change. They weren't set in stone.

Perhaps, in the near future, a situation such as that would indeed happen, but...

'I know it will happen.'

Since I knew it, I could prepare for it.

"Still, thank you."

"Um."

I quietly nodded before opening my eyes again. My gaze eventually fell on my forearm. More specifically, toward the second tattoo.

It had stumped me for the past few days with no reaction whenever I pressed it. I thought that perhaps there was something wrong with it, but recalling the events of last night, I now understood.

'.....It makes me relieve someone's most private memories. Another emotion related ability.'

Both my abilities were. No, rather than being abilities, they were more like a medium for me to improve in my understatement of emotions.

"Haa..."

The thought made me sigh.

This was a direct path to insanity. I could feel it.

"....?"

Suddenly, a powerful presence appeared in the distance.

"S-she's here."

Click. Click. Click.

Finally, the flashes were directed away from me for once.

When I looked in the distance, a familiar figure appeared. As the Chancellor, it was her duty to assign to us our medals.

Her flowing black hair curved slightly, swaying with each step she took.

Her extraordinary presence exuded regality that went beyond mere perception. With each step she took, a subtle ripple of magical energy, akin to a gentle breeze, flowed around her.

Her innate power had ascended to a level beyond what I could imagine.

"...."

Looking around the room with her piercing eyes, Delilah walked up to the stage.

Without paying a single ounce of attention to the reporters, she gracefully made her way toward the podium. Someone then ran up to her and handed her a short list. She quickly glanced at it before passing it back and nodding her head.

[We will now begin the ceremony.]

The announcer stated.

[Our Chancellor will have the honor of providing the cadets with their medals.]

It was pretty straightforward from there. Under the watchful eyes of the reporters and staff, I stood up and walked up to the podium.

We had been instructed beforehand so we knew exactly what we needed to do. From what order to move, and what to say when receiving the award.

I was the first to walk up.

Delilah stared at me with her usual blank look.

"....You did well. The Institute is grateful for what you've done."

"Thank you."

On closer look, she didn't seem to be really comfortable.

I guess she wasn't comfortable with this type of thing.

"Come closer, I will put the medal on you."

"Oh."

I did as I was told and leaned my head closer. In the moment when I leaned forward, I heard a soft whisper in my ear.

Feeling her breath on my ear, I shuddered at first.

Then, as I processed her words, my brow jumped up and I had to force myself from making any rash movement.

'Seriously...?'

Clank—!

The doors of the cell closed and Inquisitor Hallowe came out. His rough steps echoed across the dark corridor as he took a drag from the freshly lit cigarette nestled between his lips.

"...."

Waiting for him at the end of the corridor was an older gentleman.

Sporting a bald head and a thick graying mustache, the man stood erect, his slightly protruding belly. In spite of his physical features, he radiated an undeniable aura of authority as the Inquisitor's pace slowed, and he lowered his head.

"Warden."

"....Have you found anything?"

The Warden's voice was rough and dry.

Puff

"I've got something."

Hallowe nibbled on his cigarette before taking it out and letting the smoke linger on his lips.

"His emotions. They were manipulated."

The warden's brow raised.

"An Emotive mage?"

"Yeah, and a powerful one at that."

The Inquisitor's expression turned a little grim. What made Emotive Mages so dangerous? Was it their skill in battle that could disrupt an opponent's flow...? Or was it their support during difficult situations?

It was neither.

The scariest part about Emotive Mages was that they could manipulate just about anyone into doing something they'd normally not do.

By exploiting a weakness and carefully pushing certain buttons...

"He exploited Bucklam's past and situation and convinced him to do what he did. He most likely was told he'd get healed if he accomplished his job or some nonsense like that. He still hasn't talked, but that's most likely the case since the traces still linger on his body."

"...You didn't hurt him did you?"

"No. I'm not into that stuff."

"I was just asking to make sure. Don't want to deal with the annoying aftermath."

The Warden then proceeded to frown.

"What I'm more surprised about is the fact that this happened in Haven. Those guys..."

Shaking his head, he chuckled.

"...They were so busy preparing for outside threats that they didn't take into account internal ones. It's the first time I've seen them make such a mistake."

"Yeah..."

Hallow agreed to some degree. To some extent, this incident was out of carelessness from the Institute. Because Professor Bucklam had worked with them for so long, nobody thought he was mentally unstable.

It was hence why his actions probably came as a massive surprise to them. While there were means to protect oneself against Emotive Mages, such means were rare and expensive. It wasn't as if the Academy could afford have all cadets and professors to use them.

That brought rise to several questions.

Who was the Emotive Mage behind this, and... Why did he target the cadets? No, cadet.

From the reports, it was clear that he had a specific target.

Leon Ellert.

"Um."

He was a talented cadet in the report.

But that was it...

If the professor's goal was to target talented students, he could've gone for Julien who was ranked above Leon.

If their goal was Haven then Julien's death would've been more impactful.

'Surely, there must be something else....'

"...What are you going to do now?"

As his thoughts were broken by the Warden's voice, Hallowe raised his head. Nibbling onto the cigarette, he thought about his words before answering.

"I'll be going to Haven."

"Haven?"

The Warden raised his brows in surprise.

"Are you going to interrogate the cadets?"

"....Something like that."

But not exactly.

Outside of Leon, there was one individual he was particularly interested in. During the investigation, he had shown Bucklam four pictures. He had only reacted to one.

'Julien of the Evenus Barony and the Black Star.'

It was funny.

He too was an Emotive Mage. A very talented one at that.

'A connection...?'

It seemed unlikely given the potency of the spell used on Bucklam, but... He certainly knew something he didn't. Bucklam wouldn't have reacted like that otherwise.

It was an intriguing thought.

One that teased his mind the more he dabbled on it.

'Looks like I have no choice.'

To satisfy his curiosity...

He had to go.

Flick—

Hallowe flicked his cigarette away before lowering his head.

"Thank you for sparing me the time. I found what I needed. I'll be heading off now."

"....Alright, take care."

"Will do."

Placing on his leather gloves, Hallowe lowered his head at the Warden before leaving.

As his steps echoed across the spiraling stairway, his thoughts couldn't help but drift toward the situation.

Julien.

Leon.

'.....Is there truly no connection?'

"I wonder."

Chapter 43: The Inquisitor [2]

Returning to his dorm after the inauguration, Leon stood still in the silence.

"..."

His gaze was locked on the drawer by his bedside. With careful steps, he neared the drawer and opened it. Nestled inside the drawer was a small box.

Taking out the box, he carefully placed his hand over the box where a white glow formed.

Click—

Only then did it open to reveal its contents. Nestled deep within the box was a black chalice.

An old and antique one.

The contents within the liquid were empty, but there was a strange allure about the chalice that captivated Leon's sight.

He could hear faint whispers in his mind as he looked at it.

They felt disturbing, and his heart quaked.

"..."

His eyes closed and memories he had kept hidden resurfaced in his mind.

A burning mansion.

The desperate screams.

The ominous, shadowy figures that pursued him relentlessly.

....And the cold, yet warm hand that reached out to him.

"Huuuu."

Leon drew in a deep breath, sealing the box within his grip. When he opened his eyes, an icy coldness spread across his face as he quietly mumbled,

"They've found me."

Tak—

I stared at the book dropped in front of me and looked up. Delilah sat with her back against her chair. Staring at her, I felt my ear twitch. Recalling the moment when she whispered, 'Come to my office after this' into my ear back at the inauguration ceremony still gave me chills.

Thinking about it, I had the sudden urge to tickle my ear.

'Damn it.'

I forced those thoughts away and looked at the book.

"...What is this?"

"Your reward."

Reward?

I leaned forward to get a better look at the book. I noticed a small chocolate bar beside the book, and I felt the back of my hair stand when my hand hovered over it.

Thankfully, it disappeared the moment I picked up the book.

"Mana Synthesis?"

What a peculiar name.

"Your biggest weakness right now is the fact that your mana reserves are low. You're outstanding in everything but in your mana control and reserves. Although it isn't much, this is a Blue-ranked manual. It should help you accumulate more mana and speed up your progress."

Blue-ranked manual..?

I was surprised a little surprised by the gift. There were many ways one could increase their strength and jump to the next Tier. One such method was through certain manuals that one could practice to increase their mana reserves which would help one push toward the next Tier.

Manuals were ranked as follows; Green, Blue, Orange, Red, and Black.

Black being the highest.

The Academy provided each cadet with a Green-ranked manual at the start. Being a Barony, the one my family provided was also Green-ranked so it wasn't much of a difference.

Therefore, I was a little taken aback by the sudden gift.

Not that I didn't appreciate it since I didn't hesitate to take it.

"You're still currently injured so I suggest you memorize the contents of the book before you start practicing. From what I'm seeing, ever since the start of the institute, there has been no progress in your tier. I believe this should help you in that matter."

".....Thank you."

Indeed, I was still stuck in the same spot I had been from the start.

In the two weeks I had been in the Academy, besides unlocking a spell, the only progress I had made was in the Emotive field.

I had tried practicing the Green-ranked manual provided by the Institute upon entry, but I struggled to make much progress given that my priorities lay elsewhere. Mainly, in the unlockment of my first [Curse] spell.

But I knew things couldn't go on like this.

I was still lagging behind the other cadets. I needed to make more progress. At the current pace things were going, I wasn't sure I'd be able to survive.

....I needed to pick up the pace.

"Make sure you don't lose it. I'm only lending the manual to you for now. Once you memorize it, I would need you to give it back to me. The Institute... Is rather strict about these kinds of things."

"Understood."

I quietly nodded my head before asking,

"Is there anything else that you need me for?"

"No."

"Then..."

"You can go."

Delilah dismissed me while unwrapping the chocolate bar and eating it.

I stood up from my seat and lowered my head slightly.

"...Thank you."

But just before I left, my feet came to a pause and I hesitated.

"Julien...?"

"I..."

Whatever.

Turning around, I pointed at my mouth.

"Your mouth..."

Clank—!

Staring at Julien's departing back, Delilah felt her lips twitch as she wiped them with a tissue.

She tossed the tissue to the side right after she was done.

Then, she closed her eyes.

'Have I done the right thing...?'

She was unsure. However, this was necessary. With time, it became clearer and clearer to her.

Julien...

Outside of the Emotive field, he wasn't very talented. A gap would form between him and the current cadets at the current rate that he was progressing.

He may have been able to stand out because of his strong mind and Emotive abilities, but how long could that last?

A month? Two months...?

He didn't have much time, and as someone who had personally vouched for his position, Delilah felt compelled to interfere a little.

A Blue-ranked manual wasn't much to the Academy. However, it was an important asset.

The manuals couldn't be read as many times as one pleased. A certain mana flow was imbued into the book which would decrease with each read.

It wasn't an infinite resource.

Unless someone wrote the manual again, it'd be gone forever. And the higher the rank of the book, the harder it was to create.

It was for this reason that books that were ranked higher than Green were so sparse.

Simply put, the demand for them was too high, and the supply was too low.

"....."

Drumming her fingers over her desk, Delilah closed her eyes. Even now, her mind wandered back to the tattoo on his arm.

The more she looked at him, the more confused she became.

'Is he an enemy, or an ally?'

There were signs that pointed him to be an enemy and signs that said otherwise.

Which one was the right sign?

Chewing on her thoughts, Delilah's eyes slowly opened.

".....I'll only help you out this much."

When I returned to my dorm, the first thing I did was sit down and open the book.

"I'm supposed to do this, right...?"

I placed my hand over the book and channeled my mana over it.

Swoosh.

A pathway appeared in my mind. Seventeen channels, all leading toward the abdomen where my mana core was. The area where my mana gathered.

'That's five more channels than before...'

I immediately put the manual into practice.

As expected, this was a lot better.

?| EXP + 0.01%

The notifications appearing in front of me served to prove that.

?| EXP + 0.01%

For every five minutes that I followed the channels, a new notification would appear.

?| EXP + 0.01%

It went on like this for precisely one hour until I could no longer continue and stopped.

?| EXP + 0.01%

Drip... Drip...

My clothes were soaked and my breathing was rough. Even so... I could feel myself progressing. It was unlike anything I had experienced before.

I had managed to progress more in an hour than in the two weeks that I had been in this world.

"A pity."

I wanted to continue practicing, but recalling Delilah's words, I knew that I had to stop.

Further than this and I was risking my life.

"Haaa..."

I lay on my back and stared at the ceiling of the room.

....I felt a little tired.

It had been a little more than two weeks since I had been in this world, and so much had happened.

It felt as though several months had passed when in reality, it was a lot less than that.

My mind was exhausted and I wanted a little break from everything. However, I knew that it was impossible.

Even now...

I was blindly chasing a goal I had no clue about.

The more time passed, the more confused I was. What exactly was I supposed to do? Did I just have to get stronger and slowly unravel the clues that were laid out?

My path...

It felt like a dark road with no end in sight.

I was just going on a blind, hoping that things would turn out for the best.

But that wasn't good enough.

I needed more.

"But how...? How exac—Uh?"

[The Rogue Professor: You have overcome the First Event.]

A message flickered in my vision and I abruptly sat up.

"What?"

Another message flickered the next moment.

[Leon has realized he has been found and that he doesn't have a lot of time left.]

?| Game Progression EXP + 1%

Game Progression : [0%-[1%]—————100%]

?| Character Progression EXP + 12%

Exp : [0%——[28%]—————100%]

"What is this...?"

A warm current suddenly invaded my body. Just briefly, I felt the mana inside of my body flow smoother and become thicker.

The feeling was the same as the one from a few moments ago, but it was a lot thicker and more evident.

I sat there dumbstruck by the sudden development.

But if that wasn't enough...

[♦ Main Quest Activated : Prevent the Calamities from awakening or dying.]

Calamity 1 : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Calamity 2 : Slumber

: Progress - 2%

Calamity 3 : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Another window flickered in my vision and I felt my eyes widen.

"This..."

Chapter 44: Moving forward [1]

I sat frozen, staring at the window in front of me with wide-open eyes. I had a hard time trying to make sense of what was before me.

What is this?

The sudden situation. It made no sense. fr(e)e

How could it suddenly...?

"You have overcome the first event."

My mouth unconsciously opened as I read the first notification.

"Leon has realized he has been found and that he doesn't have a lot of time left."

I chewed on those words as I continued to stare at the notifications in front of me. I stood there for a couple of seconds before closing my eyes and taking a small breath.

'So the criteria to activate it was for the first 'event' to be cleared...'

Or at least, seemed to be. There were still that didn't make sense to me but I had no time to think about those matters.

There was something else that was more pressing.

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

Calamity 1 : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Calamity 2 : Slumber

: Progress - 2%

Calamity 3 : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

"This is..."

The more I stared at it the more confused I became. But in the end, I understood something.

"....I need to stop them from awakening or dying."

Kiera, Aoife, and Evelyn.

These were the Three Calamities. It was something that stuck with me ever since the memory of before my death.

Why were they called Calamities I wasn't sure, but...

For whatever reason, I needed to stop them from 'awakening' or dying. That was my main goal. I didn't quite understand the reasoning behind the task, or whether it was something I could trust, but to get answers, I needed to follow the quest.

Just what would happen when the game completion reached 100%?

Would I get to finally go back home...?

"What happens if I fail?"

There wasn't anything that indicated what would happen if I were to fail, but I could more or less guess.

「Game Over.」

"Right."

The situation became even more confusing, but...

"I need to try it."

I had to try it.

For the first time since entering this world, I finally had something to cling to.

A hope.

The dark path that I was following finally didn't seem as dark. I had finally found a path.

Whether it would lead to nowhere, I had no idea.

But...

I had to follow it.

This was my commitment.

A few days passed since then. It was Friday, the end of the week.

Things had cooled down after the incident with the professor. The Institute had kept a 'hushed' stance on the situation, stopping all cadets from talking about it.

That wasn't the only thing that changed. Everyone, ranging from cadets to professors, was assigned to a psychiatrist.

「Given the tragic circumstances, the institute has mandated that all personnel and cadets undergo mental health assessments to ensure a situation like this does not happen again.」

Such was the announcement of the Professor in charge of today's lesson. His words instantly aroused a wave of groans with one in particular being louder than the others.

"....This is bullshit."

That rough and unfiltered voice... I didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"Kiera Mylne."

The Professor sternly spoke. He appeared to be quite tall, with short brown hair framing his face, complemented by thin-framed glasses obscuring his green eyes. He was quite young, and his looks were on the good side.

"....."

He didn't follow up from there, but the meaning behind his gaze was quite clear.

'Don't swear.'

".....Tsk."

The class continued from there.

"Everyone please get on your stations."

It was a peculiar class.

"This over here is how you cook the Mandrigol. First, you cut its stomach open and remove its lungs. When you remove the organs make sure you remove the gall bladder."

The name of the class was 「Culinary Guidance」 and it focused on teaching the cadets about the monsters in the mirror dimension and how to prepare them.

"You must remove it as it is highly poisonous to us."

Perhaps it was because I had been taking care of myself and my brother for as long as I could remember, I was able to follow the class smoothly.

Tak, tak—

The knife effortlessly sliced the stomach of the creature set in front of me.

It was hard to describe. It appeared notably furry, with two of its eyes extending upwards from their sockets. Below, two long legs were aligned, and it appeared to have no eyes.

In short, it didn't look appetizing.

"Make sure you don't throw away the eyes. They're packed with nutrients and can be dried for rations later on in your journey in the mirror dimension."

But I still followed the Professor's instructions to a 'T'.

Guiding my knife around the eyes, I smoothly removed them from the creature and placed them in a nearby bucket.

"When you cut, you must make sure to cut it into equal pieces..."

Tak, tak—

It was weird, but I felt strangely at home.

This wasn't any harder than the things I had been cooking back at home when it was just me and my little brother.

Slicing the pieces into equal portions, I looked around me to see that I was the only one that was capable of following along with the instructions.

"Professor can you slow down..."

"....I cut it too short. What do I do?"

"Damn it."

Even Aoife appeared to be struggling as her eyes were knit together tightly.

"Okay, here's the next step. Once you're done cutting the Mandrigol into pieces, place it in the pot in front of you and let it boil in the soup. It's a very tough meat, so we must cook it on a low burn."

The Professor then proceeded to place the filets into a large pot in front of him. I also had one, and it had been put on simmer since the start of the lesson.

I had already put the necessary ingredients beforehand so all that was left was...

Plo Plop—!

Chucking the fillets into the pot.

And...

"Done."

I patted my hands in satisfaction. I felt a strange sense of accomplishment out of this.

".....Alright! It will take approximately until the end of the lesson for the meat to become tender. For those who are finished, please clean up your stations and wash up your dirty dishes."

The Professor's gaze wandered around before eventually falling on me.

"Ah."

That was when I understood.

I was the only one that had managed to keep up.

Simmer~

Aoife stared at her pot and swallowed her saliva. The water bubbled, and the pieces of the Mandrigol floated at the top.

It wasn't the first time she had eaten the 'Mandrigol'.

While not a rare delicacy, it was still an 'infant' ranked beast. With several noticeable health benefits such as the cleansing of impurities, it was a staple food amongst the population of the Empire.

But...

Plo Plop—!

'I can eat this?'

Aoife secretly swallowed. She had followed the instructions to perfection, so logically yes, but...

"...."

She closed the lid.

'Maybe not.'

It didn't look that appetizing.

Aoife looked around her. All the cadets were still busy cutting the Mandrigol. Only a few were done with that part and were now placing the cuts inside of the pot.

All with the exception of one.

'....It's you again.'

He was done a lot faster than them. Nine minutes faster to be exact. The gap between him and the rest was evident, and Aoife felt herself frowning at the thought.

'Why is he so good at everything..?'

In the time that she had spent at the Academy, he had beaten her in almost everything besides the magic and physical score.

There was a gap between them in that matter but...

'He's an Emotive Mage.'

It made sense for him to lag in such matters when he was so proficient in such a field. It was a frustrating thought, but he was... competent.

The thought made her competitive spirit flare up.

'...He may have been faster, but that doesn't mean it's better.'

Yeah.

Speed wasn't important. What was important was taste.

"...."

The image of the contents in her pot flashed in her mind and her blank expression cracked.

Aoife looked around. Julien was still away washing the dishes, and so was the Professor who went out to get a new supply of Mandrigol for the students who failed to cut it on the first try.

A thought struck her.

Just maybe...

".....Just a little taste."

Right.

She just wanted to check if had season properly.

Making sure that there was no one paying attention to her, she carried a few trays with her and moved toward Julien's desk.

It was on the way to the cleaning station outside and just a few steps away from her station...

She could play this out well.

"...."

Her steps stopped at the station. It was clean with the only thing left being the pot and the stove.

Pursing her lips, she looked around before carefully opening the lid of the pot.

Plo Plop—!

"....!"

A nice aroma wafted through the moment she opened the lid and her brow twitched.

"It can—"

"What are you doing?"

A cold voice echoed from behind her and Aoife almost flinched. Thankfully, she was able to keep herself composed and turned around.

Platinum long hair, deep red eyes, and a gaze that was filled with nothing but contempt.

With a look that suggested she had caught a rat, Kiera smirked.

".....Are you trying to sabotage the competition?"

She didn't even try to hide the disdain in her voice.

"You haven't changed, have you? You're still the same. Whenever someone better than you appears, you try to put them down. Aren't I right?"

Aoife frowned.

'What is she on about?'

She couldn't understand what she was talking about. And perhaps noticing her confusion, Kiera suddenly smirked while shaking her head.

".....Fucking bitch. You never change."

Aoife's face turned cold.

"What did you call me?"

"A. Bitch."

Kiera emphasized while leaning her head closer.

"What? Is the sheltered Princess angry?"

"...."

A small crack appeared on Aoife's blank expression.

"You think I wouldn't call you out on your shit? That I would just let you do whatever the fuck you wanted just because you're the fucking princess?"

The cracks on her face became larger. Her well-maintained facade was slowly crumbling...

"Still nothing?"

Kiera's eyes squinted as her smirk became more prominent.

".....Pathetic."

Aoife clenched her teeth and her expression almost crumbled. However, with the little rationality she had left, she turned to look away from her and focused her attention back on the pot.

"....."

All of a sudden, she didn't feel like tasting it anymore.

She was just about to close the lid when a finger poked into the soup.

"Oh? It's not bad."

Licking her lips, Kiera looked at Aoife before taking the salt and sprinkling it over the soup.

".....!"

Her eyes widened and she looked back.

"It's missing a little salt."

".....Stop it."

Her hand reached for the salt, but Kiera deftly avoided her and continued to sprinkle it.

"Or what?"

"It's not my soup."

"So? I'm just helping a classmate out."

"Stop it."

Aoife's voice grew cold but that only served to encourage Kiera who doubled down on the salt.

First the middle finger on the first day then this...

Aoife found her patience running thin. Her mana flowed and Kiera's hand stiffened.

"You..."

Unbothered by the look she was receiving, Aoife reached out for the salt when...

"Kkh...!"

Her 'Telekinesis' shattered and Kiera's hand swung in the air.

"Fucking bitch. Who told you that you cou—"

Plop—!

Her words were broken by an abrupt 'plopping' sound and the two of them stiffened on the spot.

Especially Aoife who found her mouth opening at the sight.

".....Oh."

A single word came out of her lips. When she looked up again, she found Kiera standing rigidly by her side.

A cold voice followed a few seconds after.

"....What are you doing here?"

"I..."

For a brief moment, Aoife panicked.

"Your food... It was overflowing."

"Overflowing?"

Julien's gaze latched onto her and Aoife felt her mouth go dry. Eventually, though, he turned his gaze away and focused it on the pot.

His nose wrinkled at the sight of the soup.

Aoife's face tightened.

"Where is the salt?"

His gaze wandered back to her and she almost flinched. Thankfully, she was quick-witted.

"Kiera borrowed it."

She pointed at Kiera and threw her under the bus. Feeling her finger, Kiera opened her eyes to rebuke but ultimately stopped and nodded.

"You were done, so..."

"Oh."

The two simultaneously sighed in relief at that moment and Kiera glared at Aoife who silently felt the corner of her lips pull.

Throwing her under the bus like that... It felt strangely nice.

"....Give it back to me when you're done."

"Will do."

With a quiet nod, Julien shifted his attention back to the pot. What he didn't notice was the sudden change in Aoife and Kiera's expressions.

"It should be ready."

"....!"

Especially when he picked up the spoon by his right.

Unable to notice anything out of the ordinary, Julien lifted the spoon to reveal a thick viscous brown liquid.

"Looks good."

Aoife felt every part of her body grow tense. The same was true for Kiera whose entire face was twitching.

And then, under the horrified eyes of the two of them...

Julien brought the spoon to his mouth.

"...Um!"

His expression immediately shifted the moment the spoon touched his mouth and his head flicked their way. A strange tension lingered over the area they were in as his voice, colder than it usually was, asked,

"....Did you do something to the soup?"

"No..."

"No."

The two of them shook their heads at the same time though their refusal sounded anything but convincing.

Even so...

"Is that so?"

Strangely, Julien didn't seem all that bothered.

Putting the spoon down, he frowned. It was as if he was undecided about something.

Then...

Just when the two of them were fearing for the worst, they heard his soft mumble,

"...Since when was I such a good cook?"

Visit for the *best novel* reading experience

Chapter 45: Moving forward [2]

It was a dilemma. Staring at the soup in front of me, I looked back at Aoife and Kiera, who seemed strangely stiff.

'Did they really do nothing to the soup....?'

I brought the spoon to my mouth and closed my eyes. My tonsils danced at the rich taste that invaded my tongue, and I found myself quietly nodding.

It tasted phenomenal.

To the point where I couldn't help but mumble to myself.

".....Since when was I such a good cook?"

While I didn't think I was bad, I had never made something so good.

Could it be because of the ingredients?

Was that what it was?

"Y-you think it's really good...?"

Kiera stuttered from the side, and I frowned. What's wrong with her? Perhaps noticing my expression, she forced a smile and turned back.

"Ah, anyway. Thanks for the salt."

She proceeded to head back to her station. That was when I felt another gaze.

"...."

I turned to look at Aoife, who was staring back at me. Her expression was hard to read, but for a brief moment, I thought I saw 'disbelief' in her gaze.

What sort of...

"...."

Picking up her trays, she left without saying another word. I stared at her back for a brief moment before shrugging my shoulders.

I really couldn't understand her.

Staring at her back for a brief moment, I turned my attention back to my pot and had another taste.

"Hmm."

I smacked my lips together and frowned.

"....It's good."

But...

"It's missing something."

What exactly? I thought for a moment before coming to a conclusion.

"It needs more salt."

The taste was a little too mild. Possibly sweet. It needed a little bit more salt.

I reached to my left, where the salt was, but I grasped nothing but air. I was confused at first, but then I remembered.

"Ah, right."

Kiera had taken the salt.

I turned to look at her, and our eyes met. She raised her brow.

"What?"

".....The salt."

I pointed at the one she had on her desk.

"...!"

"Can I have i—

Clank, Clank, Clank—!

I was interrupted by a loud noise. When I turned to look, I saw Aoife standing with all the trays on the floor. Her otherwise blank expression showed signs of breaking as her eyes widened.

What...?

She wasn't the only one who was behaving oddly.

Just as I turned my head, I heard Kiera's low mutter.

"...Lunatic."

She was also looking at me with wide eyes.

"Fucking lunatic."

When I woke up, it was Saturday morning. In a daze, I remained on the bed and stared at the ceiling. I finally had a day to myself...

It was hard to describe how I currently felt. The days had been so hectic that every single day felt like they lasted a year.

But today was different...

There was nothing on my schedule today.

Finally, I could take a much-needed break.

Let's take a shower.

Shaaa—

I needed something to wake my groggy mind. The cold water was especially useful, as I felt refreshed coming out of the shower.

There was nothing better than a cold shower in the morning to refresh my mind.

"...."

I looked at my wet body in the mirror.

It was chiselled to perfection, and there seemed to be no scars or imperfections. My shoulders and biceps were quite large, while my abdominal muscles were finely sculpted, and my thighs felt as solid as rock.

I had always wanted this type of body in my previous life. I would always tell myself to go to the gym on a daily basis, but I would stop with some sort of nonsensical excuse. The longest I had ever lasted at the gym was two months.

Seeing no progress in the mirror, I lost all motivation and just gave up.

But things were different now.

I touched my body.

With how hard I was training at the moment, I could easily maintain this body. Not only that, but it could probably get even better in the future.

"A pity it isn't my real body."

It was still hard for me to fully associate myself with this body. However, I was slowly getting there.

Even so...

"When I return, I'll get my old body back..."

I was merely rumbling at this point. The reality was that I wasn't sure if I could go back or not. No sign pointed out to that fact.

However...

I had to cling to this idea. It was the only thing that kept me going. If I were to learn that I couldn't go back, then...

"...."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Opening them again, I leaned forward to stare at my reflection.

".....I will be going back."

After drying my body, I went on to sit on the couch. Basking the sun's glow, I mumbled,

"Status."

— ●[Julien D. Evenus]● —

Level :17 [Tier 1 Magician]

Exp : [0%——[34%]—————100%]

Profession : Magician

└ Type : Elemental [Curse]

└ Type : Mind [Emotive]

Spells :

└ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Anger

└ Intermediate type spell [Emotive] : Sadness

- └ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Fear
- └ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Happiness
- └ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Disgust
- └ Beginner type spell [Emotive] : Surprise
- └ Beginner type spell [Curse] : Chains of Alakantria
- └ Beginner type spell [Curse] : Hands of Malady

Skills :

[Innate] - Foresight

— ●[Julien D. Evenus]● —

There was some progress, but it was still too slow. In the days that had passed since the 'quest', I had only grown by about 6%. And this was taking into account that I was now using a Blue-ranked [Mana Synthesis].

"I need to find a way to get a better manual."

From what I had learned, there were multiple ways one could get stronger. The first one was through the scriptures and manuals. The second one was through resources gathered from the mirror dimension, and the last was through the implantation of 'bones'.

I was still unsure of how the last one worked, but from what I read, certain monsters in the Mirror Dimension had special bones that one could implant in their bodies to gain skills.

[Innate] skills.

They had different grades, which mostly depended on the rank of the monster, and there were apparently a few in our class who already had a bone implanted in them.

".....I'll get there when the chance comes."

It was still a little too early for me.

I was just planning to start training again when...

Wiiing—

Wiiing—

My communication device, a small white orb, flickered. Confused, I turned it on and loaded the message.

[Julien Evenus, Leon Ellert, Aoife Megrail... May the following cadets show up at the entrance of the Institute in an hour.]

It was a message from the Institute board.

"....."

[Congratulations. You have all been selected for the upcoming Draft Selection inauguration. An instructor will guide the following students to the ceremony that will take place in Lens. Kindly make yourself available.]

"....."

I continued to stare at the message with a blank look before turning off the device and sitting down.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

"....."

Eventually, I lowered my head and stayed silent.

In the silence that took over the room, I closed my eyes and pursed my lips.

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

*

When I came out of my room, I found Leon already waiting for me.

"Oh."

I didn't even bother greeting him and just continued forward. I was in no mood for anything. But that seemed to be the case for him as well.

In the silence, we walked towards the entrance of the Academy.

When we reached the place, ten people were already waiting for us at the entrance.

...With eleven names on the list, we were essentially the last to arrive.

"You two are finally here."

At the forefront stood someone I found somewhat familiar. With a thick, long red beard and a muscular physique, he was Professor Chambers, one of the examiners from my examination day and a High-Wizard.

"Hurry up, you two. The train to Lens will depart in ten minutes. You will be held responsible if we miss the train."

His rough voice echoed throughout as I picked up the pace, slightly...

Honestly, I wouldn't mind missing it.

The Professor continued,

"As many of you know, there will be a Draft at the end of the year. The six best cadets from each year will be chosen to represent the Institute at such an event. You all must take this seriously."

Squinting his eyes, I felt his gaze pause on me.

"The ten of you are the most promising cadets that we currently have in our first years. Some of the most promising we've had in decades, and it is therefore extremely important that you carry yourself in a manner fitting of your status."

I then finally realized why he was looking at me. Taking a step closer, we were only a few steps away from each other. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he looked at me seriously.

"As the Black Star, you will be the center of all attention and the group's leader. I need you to carry yourself as such. Is that understood?"

"....."

I stood in silence without saying a single word.

"Cadet?"

Only when he called me again did I raise my head. Closing my eyes, I silently cursed.

Fuck—

[◆ Main Quest Activated : Unmask the Fraud.]

: Character Progression + 5%

: Game Progression + 1%

Failure

: Calamity 3 + 5%

Chapter 46: Taking it for myself [1]

It was just as the Professor was talking to me that it happened.

'Uh....?'

The world froze, and my vision turned dark. All of a sudden I lost control of my body.

It was a sensation I was all too familiar with...

'Another vision?'

The scenery shifted, enveloping me in the opulent embrace of a grand hall. Its lavish decor was blinding with all sorts of individuals present.

Such grand hall was silent.

It was as if the sound had been sucked out of the room.

"....."

All eyes seemed to be focused on a certain spot. Or more specifically, towards two people.

".....We've found it."

A towering figure with slender facial contours, jet-black hair, a long nose, and bushy eyebrows peered down at his palm, where a small orb, reminiscent in size of a glass pebble, rested.

'What's that...?'

There was something about the pebble that seemed intriguing. It had a strange allure to it. Almost as if it was beckoning me to take it.

But I had no time to dwell on it as the next set of events continued.

"Why did you steal it?"

The man's voice thundered down towards the other individual, a woman adorned with cascading violet locks and piercing blue eyes. She returned his gaze with a frozen look.

Her eyes trembled, and so did her body...

"I..."

He raised his hand to display a black purse.

"This is yours isn't it?"

Evelyn's expression remained locked in a state of disbelief, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly in a futile attempt to articulate her words.

"No, I..."

"There's no denying your crime."

He coldly cut her off.

"We've searched everyone and you were the only one that was found with this. Do you think you can talk your way out of this?"

He didn't seem interested in her ramblings. Coldly turning his gaze away from her, he looked toward the guard's station nearby.

"Take her in for questioning."

"No, wait...!"

The guards latched onto her arms from both sides.

"This is a mistake...!"

She tried to protest, but it was to no avail.

"That's not mine! I don't know where it came from! This is a...."

Under the scrutiny of all present, Evelyn was forcibly escorted by the guards out of the hall. Her eyes searched the entire hall, eventually falling on me.

Me...?

'Help me...'

Is what her gaze tried to imply.

I stood rooted to my spot, transfixed by her desperate expression, unable to tear my gaze away.

It sealed itself into my mind until the very end.

When her figure finally disappeared.

The vision ended there.

"....."

I stood in silence without saying a single word.

"Cadet?"

Only when I heard the sound of the Professor's voice did I finally raise my head. A screen appeared shortly after.

[◆ Side Quest Activated: Unmask the Fraud.]

: Character Progression + 5%

: Game Progression + 1%

Failure

: Calamity 3 + 5%

"Did you understand what I said?"

The Professor's voice started to sound irritated, and I quietly nodded my head. I couldn't focus on him at the moment.

The only thing that was in my mind was the vision.

'...So the quest is about exposing who the real thief is?'

Or was it to prevent Evelyn from finding herself in such a situation? Either way, I now knew who 'Calamity 3' was. It was Evelyn.

That only left me with Calamity 1 and Calamity 2.

Who they were... I was still unsure yet. However, given time, I knew I'd be able to piece it all together.

"Follow me in a single line. The train will be here shortly."

I once again looked up and saw that the other cadets were moving along. I picked up my pace and followed them from behind.

My gaze unconsciously trained toward a swaying set of purple hair not too far from me.

I thought back to the expression she made back in the vision. The one that was filled with shock, and desperation.

A thought ran down my mind at that moment.

'...Why did she look at me of all people for help in the vision?'

The Draft.

An Empire-wide event was broadcast and displayed all over. The Draft took place every end of the year, selecting the top 60 cadets from all the major Academies within the Empire.

There existed fifteen Guilds within the Empire. All associated with the Royal family, they were the only organizations besides the Academies that granted entrance to the Mirror Dimension.

If one became affiliated with the Guild, they could enter the Mirror Dimension whenever they wanted.

The competition among the Guilds was harsh, and each year, the cadets were intensively scrutinized to determine who would be the first pick of the draft.

The benefits of becoming the first-ranked pick were rather obvious for all. With sign-in bonuses that eclipsed those of the other picks, every cadet looked forward to becoming the number one pick.

"We have just passed Endson. We will be arriving at the station soon."

Professor Chambers informed all of us.

The City of 'Lens' was incredibly rich, with many different districts in place. Our current destination was 'Rudmon', the main commercial street of Lens.

It was the richest district and where the 'House of Picks' was located. An esteemed Auction House where the inauguration was going to take place.

Coming out of the train station, we strolled through the district, where magnificent streets lined with vendors on both sides greeted our eyes.

The House of Picks was located by the river that cut through the city. It therefore took us about ten minutes to get there from the train station.

A crowd had already formed at the entrance of the building. It was hard to see through the packed crowd, with reporters mingling among regular people. Thankfully, there was a separate area we could enter from.

"Welcome to the House of Picks."

It was a middle-aged man with refined clothing that greeted us.

"You must be the distinguished guests from Haven. We have already reserved a place for you."

He then proceeded to guide us toward a sizable room. I originally expected him to guide us toward the hall in the vision, but contrary to my expectations, we were guided toward a different place.

A private room of some sort.

'Wow.'

Coming into the room, I had to pause for a moment to admire the setting.

At the forefront of the room, a grand window greeted my sight, below which stretched a substantial stage adorned with hundreds of seats now filling with attendees. All of whom were wearing formal clothing, unlike the rest of us.

The scene below appeared chaotic unlike where we were.

"The announcement will be made shortly."

The butler proceeded to say from the entrance of the room.

"Please feel free to enjoy yourselves in this room for now. Once the announcement is over, we will invite you all to the main ceremony where you can interact with the other guests."

With a bow, he went on to talk with the Professor who had a few things to ask.

Only then did the other cadets finally start speaking again.

"Wow, this room looks awesome."

"Can we take this food?"

Despite most of the participants being sons of high nobles, they still seemed somewhat excited about the situation.

Well, all besides a select few. Aoife, Kiera, and Leon were the exception as they immediately found a seat and sat down.

I thought about finding a seat as well when...

".....Here."

Someone handed me a black book.

"This is?"

"It's the shop list."

Shop list?

I blinked my eyes and looked to my right where a person stood. I had grown a little familiar with him. I didn't remember at first, but I couldn't forget about him after meeting him during the forest incident.

Had it not been for him, I would've been unable to prevent the incident.

Anders Lewis Richmond.

Ever since that incident, his attitude toward me underwent a complete change.

He no longer seemed confrontational; in fact, he appeared to be making an effort to foster a friendlier relationship with me.

I was put off at first, but seeing how his intentions weren't malicious, I let him be.

"As you probably know, the House of Picks is actually a famous auction house. Although there is no auction today, the shop is still open. If you're interested in something, you can try buying it."

"Ah..."

I nodded slightly and opened the book.

'I wonder if there's anything I can buy...'

I was somewhat intrigued.

[Mana Association | Green] — 50,000 Rend.

[Essence Awakening | Green] — 70, 000 Rend.

[Melton Mana Manual | Green] — 120, 000 Rend.

'Holy fuck.'

My heart almost jumped at the sight of the prices.

The currency within this world was called the Rend. If I had to make a conversion rate compared to my old world, then it'd probably be 1 Rend for one Dollar...? The purchasing power seemed to be about the same.

...And just looking at the prices of the Green Ranked book, I knew that I had no business here.

I may have been the son of a noble, but the amount of money that I had didn't even come close to letting me purchase a Green-ranked book.

What sort of corruption was this...?

I immediately skimmed past the first few pages, but...

'100,000 Rend... 1,000,000 Rend... 17,000,000 Rend...'

The deeper I went, the more absurd the prices became. It was to the point where I was just scrolling through the book for the sake of wasting time.

As if I could afford any of this stuff.

That was until I found myself pausing toward a certain section.

[Metryl Bone] — 4, 320, 000 Rend.

A certain image captured my attention and my eyes widened.

'This is...'

It was only a picture, but the overlapped with the image in my mind. The one from the vision.

Ah—

The more I looked at it, the more certain I felt...

'...It's the item that was found in the vision.'

The one that caused all of the commotion.

"....."

I blinked and took a seat.

"Huu.."

So it was a bone.

I swallowed my saliva and stared at the image once more.

'So the item that she was framed with was this bone...'

It looked nothing like a bone, but perhaps there was something that I was missing. Either way, I understood now.

The reason why the situation seemed so serious.

So then...

"Why?"

Why did my chest tingle at the sight of the item on the list?

It wasn't just that, my fingers... They were twitching.

Thoughts I wasn't supposed to have suddenly engulfed my mind. As I sat down on my seat seat, my foot started to tap against the ground.

As I continued to stare at the listing, I silently swallowed.

A thought crossed my mind.

One that I wasn't supposed to have.

"This orb..."

Can I take it for myself....?

There will be two more chapters later.

Chapter 47: Taking it for myself [2]

A tall man stood on the stage.

His appearance grabbed the attention of all those presents.

—Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much for coming to the inauguration of the 57th seventh draft.

As he spoke, his voice boomed throughout the grand hall. It silenced all the noise within the venue.

—It's with great pride that I stand before you as the announcer of today's event....

He went on with the introductions. Useless ramblings that went on for several minutes before the lights turned off. What followed after was silence as the noise ceased.

—We will now be introducing the fifteen Guilds.

Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh—!

Fifteen banners fell from the sides, all displaying different intricate patterns and colors.

Lights flickered, pointing toward each banner, displaying their extravagance for all to see.

They appeared finely crafted, adorned with intricate golden patterns, and fashioned from rare fabrics. The patterns and insignias appeared to be meticulously handcrafted, with each banner's design particularly unique standing out in one way or another.

On any normal occasion, I would've been intrigued by the events.

But...

'I can take it can I...?'

All I could think about was the quest. Or more specifically, the bone.

Just how much stronger would I become if I were to take the bone?

A human was only allowed to implant five bodies into their body. Any more would be too dangerous.

However, from what I had read, after the integration of the bone, one would find their strength increasing and be granted an [Innate] ability that used to belong to the soul of the deceased beast.

....It was an extremely enticing opportunity, and I knew that I couldn't let it slip away from my grasp.

Especially given my current strength. I was in desperate need of something like that.

"But what about the quest...?"

Would it allow it?

The quest didn't specify what I needed to do. In my mind, what the quest demanded from was to expose the fraud and prevent Evelyn from reaching the scenario from the vision.

But...

There was nothing in the quest that suggested I couldn't take the bone.

...And it wasn't as if the quest could control me. Whether I chose to complete the mission or not, I had full freedom of choice.

Since that was the case...

Why couldn't I take the bone?

'I know who will have it. When she will have it. And how they find it.'

For what reason can I not find a way to take the bone for myself?

The more I thought about it, the more I felt my chest prickle. .com

Ah...

This sensation.

It threatened to consume my mind at any second. It was foreign at first, but it became clearer with the passing of time.

Greed.

Right, I was being greedy.

I was coveting something that shouldn't have been mine in the first place.

"Heh."

For some reason, the thought made me want to laugh.

I thought about all the implications that my actions would have on the innocent workers and staff of the auction house. It pricked at my consciousness, but at the same time, I knew that I couldn't afford to be sentimental.

'Morality.'

I needed to throw it away.

I was no longer Emmet Rowe.

Morality was no longer a thing for me. While I had a few lines that I couldn't bring myself to cross, the rest... I had to throw them away.

I had sworn I'd do anything to become stronger and achieve my goal.

And...

Taking the bone... Knowing that it was something I could do, and would be instrumental for my goal...

I knew I had to do it.

Right...

Because in the end, I couldn't afford to miss such a chance.

For my sake.

I had to be greedy.

Ever since the start of the inauguration, Evelyn felt weird. It felt as though someone was watching her every movement. And yet, when she looked, all she saw was the empty space behind her.

'Is it just me...?'

She looked to her left and then right. Once she was sure there was nothing wrong, she returned her gaze back to the front.

Her eyebrows slowly came to a furrow.

She could've sworn she had felt something. And she usually was never wrong about these things.

Her senses were generally quite accurate.

"Strange..."

"What is?"

A dry voice reached her ears.

"....!"

Her eyes widened at the sound of the voice and her head flicked to her right where a familiar figure was sitting.

"Julien?"

What is he...?

"Ha."

Her shock hardly lasted more than a couple of seconds before her face returned back to its normal icy one. It was a face she only displayed to those she deemed 'unfamiliar'.

Indeed, the current Julien was someone she was unfamiliar with.

"I was getting a weird feeling before. I thought someone was watching me, but I didn't think it'd be you of all people."

Things were starting to make sense to her now. The strange sensation... It was him wasn't he?

He was the one that was looking at her. Or at least, that was Evelyn thought to be the case.

But then again, why would he even look at her now when he had hardly paid her any attention back at the Institute?

She had liked the way things were so why the sudden change?

Was she missing something?

"...."

Her thoughts were further reinforced by his silence, and she felt puzzled.

"Is there something that you want to say?"

"Um?"

Julien raised his brow and the two of them looked at each other.

Evelyn frowned.

"You didn't come all the way here for nothing, right?"

"...."

He didn't bother answering her as he seemed lost in his thoughts. Evelyn found herself growing annoyed by his antics.

An image overlapped with his. It was a younger version of him. Unlike the current stoic expression he wore, he wore a look filled with nothing but disdain.

'Certainly, he's different from the past, but....'

Her mind was brought back to the memories of five years ago. It was a memory she could never forget. Regardless of how hard she tried, she couldn't forget. Even now, she could distinctively remember everything.

From the weather to the smells...

Everything felt vivid to her.

....And it was exactly because it felt so vivid that she couldn't find herself to see him differently.

'He's the same. He may act differently, but inside... He's the same.'

That's right.

She mustn't be fooled by how he was currently behaving. Five years may have passed, but he had done that day...

'I won't be fooled.'

At that moment, Evelyn caught sight of Julien. Leaning against the chair, his lips gently pulled into what seemed to be a smile. Her expression hardened.

"What?"

".....It's nothing."

With a shake of his head, he gradually stood up.

"I've already got what I wanted."

".....?"

Evelyn felt lost staring at him. What sort of game was he playing? She was just about to speak when his voice suddenly cut in.

"Enjoy your evening."

".....Ah."

He left shortly after that, leaving Evelyn unable to utter a single thing back.

In the end...

She hadn't figured out if he was truly the one that was looking at her.

'...She's being targeted.'

That was the conclusion that I came up with after talking to her briefly. I first drew up that conclusion from how she was behaving. Noticing how she'd turn her head to look around from time to time, I knew that something was up.

Would someone act like that unless they felt that something was off?

I would've normally not bothered, but superhumans tended to be a lot more accurate at judging these kinds of things.

It was highly likely that she was truly being watched.

....It was also for this reason that I initiated a conversation with her.

I needed to verify this conclusion. It was an important piece of information after all.

The end result...

'I thought someone was watching me, but I didn't think it'd be you of all people.'

She indeed felt like someone was watching her.

While it was indeed true that I was also watching her, that had only been from the point where she had started to act suspiciously.

Before that, I had been in my own thoughts. Thinking about the vision, and the quest. Only when I had digested everything did I turn my attention to her and notice her strange attitude.

In any case, I was now certain of a few things.

'The culprit might be someone from this room, and he's targeting her directly.'

I had been worried that in the vision she had merely been the 'culprit' out of bad luck.

That perhaps, whoever the thief was, made her the culprit simply because she was the easiest target to place the blame on.

If such a scenario were to be true, then I wasn't confident I could 'steal' the item.

Mainly because I couldn't guarantee the fact that I could act exactly as the version of me had in the vision. There was a real chance that someone else would've been used as a target instead of Evelyn.

All because of my actions in trying to interfere with the situation.

Some sort of butterfly effect...

But now that I was more or less sure that she was the intended target, I didn't need to worry about the vision changing too drastically.

The bone was going to be with her.

...And that was all the information that I needed to formulate a plan.

What I needed to do next was wait.

Wait for everything to begin.

When that happens...

'I'll take it all.'

Game progression, character progression, and bone...

".....I'll take everything."

Such was how big my greed was.

Already writing the next chap. Will try my best to get it done soon. It's a very big chap.

Read latest chapters at Only

Chapter 48: Taking it for myself [3]

—And with that, I will now be ending my speech. For any of you who are present, there will be an after-party that you may be able to attend.

The announcer's voice boomed, signaling the end of the ceremony. Just before he ended things, he made a small announcement.

—To the cadets who are present, take this chance to get acquainted with your competitors as well as get a better understanding of the fifteen major Guilds. It will be a great opportunity for you in the long term.

It was on that note that he finally left the stage and the hall erupted into a wave of applause.

Clap, clap, clap—!

Evelyn joined in the clapping, and just as Evelyn clapped once, the chair beside her skidded back.

"Uh, ah? What? What's going on...?!"

With visibly groggy eyes and messy hair, Kiera looked around in confusion. Then, seeing what everyone was doing, she joined in on the applause.

"Fucking amazing speech!"

Clap, clap, clap—!

"...."

Evelyn watched the scene at a loss for words.

She had been sleeping, hadn't she...?

Kiera Mylne. Evelyn's thoughts about her were rather conflicted. On the one hand, she was extremely talented. Rivaling her in almost every category. The only thing that set her off was her personality.

Her words were crude, and she was too confronting. She treated everyone as though they were her enemy, and it was because of that that Evelyn found herself struggling to get along with her.

A bit disappointing considering her talent.

"Haa."

With a long sigh, she leaned back on the chair.

The watchful feeling had disappeared about halfway through the speech, and only then did she sigh in relief.

'So it really could've been him...'

Julien.

It had only been a few minutes after he left that she stopped feeling that way. Was it a coincidence...? Or was he truly the one who was keeping an eye out for her?

"Ma'am. The afterpart will be held in the main hall. If you would please..."

Disrupting her thoughts was the butler who carefully passed on the same message to all of those present. He proceeded to hand her her purse back.

"If you keep going ahead, you will be able to find the entrance of the hall. There will be colleagues waiting for you there."

"....Thank you."

Without thinking too much, she took the purse and proceeded to head out of the room and toward the main hall.

It was as the butler said.

All she had to do was keep going straight. With many of the guests heading the same way, it wasn't hard for her to reach the hall which was already packed with guests.

The grand hall bustled with activity as hundreds of guests mingled within. Butlers gracefully walked around, presenting silver trays laden with drinks and snacks. Among them, cadets her age strolled about, engaging in superfluous conversations with their peers.

The fake smiles, and fake laughs...

Evelyn could see it from a glance. Being the daughter of a Viscount family, she was used to such scenes. It was something that she had grown accustomed to.

But even so...

"H-hu..."

She felt her chest grow heavy. The very air around her felt suffocating, and breathing was starting to become difficult.

'It's normal... I have to get used to this...'

Her social anxiety was acting up again. Pinching her hand, she bit on her lips and once again took in the fake expressions of all those around her.

It left a sour feeling in her heart.

Especially when...

"Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Kylian J. Marlin. It's an honor to become acquainted with someone from Haven."

She was no different than them. .c(o)m

Putting on a smile, she returned the greeting.

"The pleasure is mine."

I closed my eyes and let the memories sink into my mind.

The faces, the time, the silence... I recalled everything before opening my eyes again. What greeted my sight was the same environment as the vision.

Things were slightly different as the events had yet to unfold, but everything was practically the same.

Sip

Taking a sip of my drink, I quietly watched my surroundings. It was hard to not stand out on such an occasion, with multiple individuals trying to strike up a conversation with me.

"Hell—"

"Busy."

"Nice to—"

"No."

I thought about engaging with them for a short moment but decided otherwise.

Such fake pleasantries were meaningless to me.

All I cared about was my greed. I needed to quench it. The idea of not being able to quench it seemed to eat at me.

The bone...

'I have to have it.'

I closed my eyes and took another sip.

'I've got 30 minutes left... The event in the vision plays at 8:03 P.M.'

There was a massive clock by the wall. It was thanks to it that I was able to know the exact time the event was going to start.

However, the vision started after the search. Meaning that the event started slightly before 8:03 P.M.

In my estimate, taking into account that everyone had to be checked, my estimate was ten minutes.

The event...

It was going to start in ten minutes.

"Huu."

I felt a strange sense of nervousness all of a sudden.

I was taking a big risk. There was a chance that my actions would lead to me becoming what became of Evelyn in the vision. A criminal.

The thought made me realize.

.....I was walking on thin ice.

My heart quickened and my palms felt sweaty. Nervousness finally started to settle within me. However, I was quick to push it down.

Since the moment that I had appeared in this world, I had been walking on thin ice.

My situation was no different than it had always been.

If anything, I had gotten better at walking in such a situation. My worries... They were meaningless.

"...."

I shifted my attention away from my drink and back into the hall. My eyes wandered around until they found a set of familiar purple hair.

Surrounded by over three different people, she casually conversed with them.

"Does she have it, or not...?"

There was no way I could confirm this unless I directly checked her purse. But that in itself was a risk.

What if she didn't have it in the purse just yet?

I checked the time.

7:45 P.M.

I started to move.

Wherever I walked, I felt gazes directed my way. I let them be and continued forward.

"I'm envious of your talent. Surely, you'll be able to rank high in the draft at the end of the year. I hope that I too will reach a high rank."

"When you become successful, make sure you don't forget me."

"....I won't."

I only stopped when I found a familiar back. The conversation died, and all eyes fell on me.

"Julien...?"

Evelyn seemed especially shocked by my appearance. I glanced at the people gathered around her before returning my attention.

"I need to talk to you."

As if I had said the most shocking thing, her eyes widened.

"You..."

"...."

I continued to stare at her silently. Eventually, she pursed her lips and nodded her head. With a polite smile, she dismissed the cadets around her before following me toward a more secluded part of the hall.

She was the first one to break the silence.

"...I didn't need saving."

"Hm?"

Saving?

From what?

She frowned and insisted.

"Really."

I became even more confused but nodded.

"If you say so."

I thought she would be satisfied with that, but it only deepened her frown.

"You're wrong. I really didn't need you to save me. I could've handled the situation well..."

I continued to nod along.

"Sure."

"You, you..."

But it seemed it only irritated her further. Clenching her teeth, she looked around before leaning closer to whisper.

'I no longer have social anxiety. I've fixed that five years ago. I'm no longer the same person. Don't misunderstand...'

"Oh, okay."

Social anxiety?

That was a new piece of information to me.

Still, seeing her so desperately trying to justify herself before me felt rather funny. For a moment, I almost lost my composure and laughed.

But as I reminded myself of the situation, I recomposed myself and looked toward her purse.

"Your purse. Care to open it up?"

"I swear, I real—Uh?"

She blinked several times. Then, as if processing my words, her expression crumbled. I stopped her before she could say anything.

"You were right. Someone was watching you."

"...!"

Her expression changed.

"Be subtle when opening your purse. It's probably hidden somewhere, but it's there."

"What is...?"

I didn't answer and moved closer, using my back as some form of shield.

"Be quick."

"You, what—"

"Check."

I cut her off again. Her expression changed yet again, but as if noticing the seriousness in my tone, she lowered her head and subtly opened her purse.

".....Fine."

As she gritted her teeth, she added.

"But if there's really nothing, see what I'll do to you."

A strange silence took over our area as Evelyn rummaged through her purse. Seconds ticked, and she had continued to rummage through.

I felt my chest heave with unease with each second that passed. Doubtful thoughts started to cross my mind.

'Is it really going to be there?'

'...What if it's not there?'

'Was I too hasty? Should I have waited more...?'

"Ah—"

Such thoughts were broken by a strange noise that came out of Evelyn's mouth, when I looked down, I saw her holding a familiar orb.

My mind immediately raced at the sight of it.

'It's here...'

It had really happened.

"W-what... This..."

With a clear look of shock and disbelief, Evelyn held the orb in her hand. Her expression was reminiscent of the one she had made in the vision. However, ignoring it, I reached out for her hand and snatched it.

"Hey, you..."

"Stay quiet if you don't want things to blow over."

"Wha..."

I looked around me. There were a few gazes on me. Some from cadets, and some from older gentlemen. I made sure to memorize the faces of each and every one that was looking at me.

Then, just as I was prepared to leave, a hand reached out to grab me by the arm and pulled me back.

"I don't know what's going on, but it's best if you had that over to the sta—"

"It's already too late for that."

I nudged my chin toward the distance. Several guards were already starting to show strange movements.

"Ah."

Her grip loosened from there.

I thought she'd let go of me from that point, but just when I thought I could move, her grip once again tightened.

"....About what I said before. I really don't have social anxiety."

"Oh."

"You, why don't you believe me?"

"I believe you."

Her expression contorted, but she eventually let me go. I silently shook my head before moving away from her.

There was still one thing left that I needed to do.

But I didn't have much time left.

The guards were already showing signs of movement, and with the bone on me, I knew that if I failed on my next step, I was done for.

Therefore, I hurried my steps.

Gradually, a figure appeared in the distance. He was talking with several people and held a rather lofty position.

He stood tall with skinny facial contours, jet-black hair, a long nose, and bushy eyebrows.

A face that I couldn't forget even if I wanted to.

As his voice boomed down, forcing down judgment on Evelyn, I had a hard time forgetting his face.

Since coming to the decision to take the bone for myself, there was one part that I found particularly difficult to figure out.

How exactly would I be able to sneak the bone out of the venue?

With everyone being searched so thoroughly, how could it be possible for me to smuggle the bone out?

It was then that I had a sudden thought.

'.....Is everyone really going to be searched?'

Sure, he might be able to search every single person in the room, but in fact... there was one person he most likely wouldn't search.

Who exactly....?

Himself.

Right...

Because he knew that he wasn't the culprit.

'Haha.'

It was a daring idea. One that made me want to laugh at how ridiculous it was. But staring at the guards that were slowly starting to walk his way, I grabbed the nearest drink to me and approached.

I had just moved a few meters away from him, when...

"Oh...!"

Splash—

I suddenly tripped, spilling the drink all over him.

Chapter 49: Taking it for myself [4]

"Ah..."

As I glanced up, a pair of eyes met mine, their gaze bearing down on me. His black blazer was drenched, creating an eerie stillness in the surrounding space.

My face felt rigid, and my mouth moved soundlessly before finally finding my voice.

"....I apologize. It was a mistake."

I was quick to react.

My initial action was to gently remove the drink from his grasp and set it down on the nearby table. Then, I retrieved a tissue and proceeded to delicately pat down his clothes.

"....The ground was slippery, and—"

"It's fine."

He held out his hand to stop me and smiled. The tension that hung around the surroundings eased from that moment.

Looking up to address the other present, he started to speak in a warmer tone.

"It was an accident. There's no need for you to worry. The jacket isn't even that expensive."

"Ah, but at least let me repay you."

"It's alright." fre(e)

"But—"

"This much is nothing. Please be at ease. I've long heard of your reputation. Take it as a token of friendship from me."

"Ah, but..."

I insisted several times, but he refused me each time. In the end, I had no choice but to stop. I could more or less tell he was starting to grow annoyed by my responses.

Thankfully, he had managed to recognize my identity and wasn't overly harsh to me. Rather, he seemed keen on using the opportunity to build a connection with me.

There were perks to being the Black Star.

"Be more careful next time."

"....I understand."

I lowered my head to apologize again. Just as I did, the guards finally caught up to him and whispered something in his ear.

His expression shifted immediately.

Then...

"If you'll excuse me for a brief moment."

Under my watchful eyes, he picked up his glass and tapped it with his finger.

Ting—! Ting—!

The noise managed to reach the ears of all present.

The noise in the hall quieted down and all eyes fell on him.

Clearing his throat, he smiled.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there seems to have been an accident."

His voice quietly traveled throughout the hall. With the same calming smile, he went on to explain the situation.

"It's with regret that I have to inform you that one of the prized items of the auction house has been stolen. The reports have come just now, and we still believe that the culprit is hiding amongst one of us."

He went on to press his hand against his chest as his head lowered a little.

"Therefore, I hope that with some understanding, you won't mind if we search all the guests present. I humbly ask as the Head Chief of the Auction House."

A strange silence followed shortly after before the entire hall erupted into noise.

"A thief? If that's the case then I don't see why I should disagree. I've got nothing to hide."

"Are you saying that you're going to keep us here until everyone is searched?"

"This... Is this even possible?"

"I refuse to be searched!"

The response was a mix of protests and agreements. But it was only after the members of the fifteen Guilds came up to voice out their support that the noise died down.

"We agree with the search."

"We've got nothing to hide. Please don't mind us. Search as you want."

'...Has he bought them?'

Seeing the strange looks he was giving to the representative members of the Guild, it seemed like a plausible idea.

Or at least... The Auction House and the Guilds were on extremely good terms.

In any case, guards started to pour in from all entrances, blocking people from leaving.

Shortly after, someone came to my side.

"Please."

The Head Chief concluded with another bow.

"...Thank you for your understanding."

The search continued for the next half hour. Despite the many protests from the guests, and members of the Academies, they went to deaf ears and the search continued.

"...How is the situation?"

Overlooking the situation, the Head Chief frowned. It was taking a lot longer than he expected...

It couldn't be that the thief had escaped...?

But how was it possible? The moment the item had been stolen, all exits had been blocked and all the guests present had been kept.

The likelihood that the thief had escaped was slim...

"Head Chief, we still have found nothing. Most of the guests are showing signs of dissatisfaction. Especially those that have been cleared of suspicions. We've also searched the surroundings and found nothing."

Frowning, the Head Chief massaged his chin.

"How troublesome..."

All guests had certain standings within the Empire. Their actions were the equivalent of offending such high-class people.

Thankfully, given their great relationship with the fifteen Guilds, the situation had not turned out for the worst, but...

For how long could he keep it like that?

If things progressed at this rate, then there was a chance that he might end up offending several big shots at once.

He had to hurry up. He didn't have much time. Though the item stolen was expensive and would lead to substantial losses, it was something he could take given the circumstances.

He'd much rather want to keep the guests happy than lose out on the money.

Money could always be made. Connections...?

That was much harder.

But of course...

If he could, he'd like to find the culprit. What sort of person would not care about catching the thief who had stolen from them?

'See what happens when I catch that bastard...'

His grip on his drink tightened at the thought.

However, if they still couldn't find the culprit before the situation turned out like that, he would have no choice but to give up.

"Just where could it be...?"

The Head Chief felt his head throb, and his head turned to face a young man not so far from where he was. He currently was getting his body checked, but from how the guards were responding, he didn't seem to be guilty.

Even so, seeing his face, the Head Chief silently clicked his tongue.

'....An idiot.'

Such was his evaluation of the Haven Black Star.

Who would've thought he'd be such an idiot...? Recalling how his blazer had been smeared with his drink, the Head Chief felt his lips twitch.

The suit wasn't cheap. He had only lied to maintain his image.

It was in fact extremely expensive.

If it weren't for his position as the Black Star, then...

"Um?"

The Head Chief felt his hand suddenly pause and his expression changed.

He looked around him. All guards were busily checking patting down and checking the items of all guests present.

A sudden thought struck him then and he put the drink in his hand down.

The way he looked at the cadet near him changed as he tried to recall the incident. Out of nowhere, he had suddenly tripped over and spilled his drink on him. Thereafter, he went on to try to dry his clothes...

"Ah."

Blinking his eyes, he almost found himself laughing.

Right...

Of course.

Why didn't he think about it? Of all the people present, who was the most likely person to not get checked?

"Haha."

He laughed out loud then. Turning his attention toward one of the nearest guards, he extended his hands.

".....Search me too."

"Yes?"

The guard seemed taken aback, but he didn't mind. Nudging with his chin, the Head Chief's gaze wandered back to the young man as his eyes narrowed.

If his guesses were correct, then...

He had found his culprit.

Pat, pat—!

The search took quite a bit.

Patting down our bodies and using a strange item while doing so, it felt as though every part of my body was being checked. Most likely, the device helped to detect through the human flesh. In the off-chance the thief swallowed the item then they'd be able to tell.

"....."

Pat, pat—!

My arms were pressed.

Pat, pat—!

My legs were pressed.

Pat, pat—!

My pockets were checked.

I remained silent the entire time and kept my heart beating at a steady state.

Especially when I felt a certain gaze directed toward me. I felt the back of my hair stand under such gaze.

My palms were sweaty and I had a strange urge to fidget my hand.

Even so, I kept myself from showing any noticeable reaction until the search was finally over.

"It looks like you're good to go. Nothing has been found on you."

Only then did I finally step back. As I turned my head, I found myself locking eyes with another individual, causing a subtle tightening of my expression. He was looking at me with a gaze that seemed to say, 'I've got you...' I wondered what he was on about at first, but after seeing that he was also getting searched, I understood.

Ah—

I covered my mouth at that moment.

"....."

Swallowing my saliva, I forced myself to remain composed and stood still. My left hand twitched, and I wasn't able to stop my fingers from fidgeting together.

Such action was caught by his gaze as just faintly, the end of his lips curled.

".....You, there."

Finally, he called out for me.

"....."

I didn't respond immediately and pursed my lips.

He nudged me with his finger.

"Come here..."

His voice came out dry and commanding.

I swallowed before following his instructions and moved near him, only stopping at the opposite end of the table where a drink filled with ice appeared.

I unconsciously reached out for it and he didn't stop me.

Rather, he seemed to enjoy my actions.

"There's no need to be nervous."

His gaze wandered toward the guards that surrounded him as they were busily checking every part of his body.

Pat, pat—!

They carried a similar procedure to the one mine, patting his body all over and paying special attention to the blazer.

I felt my expression stiffen further as my grip on the glass tightened.

His voice once again reached me.

".....Do you want to come clean?"

"...."

I tilted my head and he leaned closer.

"If you come clean now, the situation will end more nicely. I'm currently not accusing you because I have no evidence. However..."

He suddenly smiled.

"Even though you're trying your best, I can see just how nervous you are. If you just come cle—"

"Chief."

His sentence was abruptly cut off by one of the guards. As he looked to meet his gaze, his expression quickly changed the moment he spoke.

"...There's nothing. You're also clear."

"Uh...?"

As if not expecting such an answer, his eyes widened and his expression crumbled. I stared at the scene from the opposite side of the table before lowering my head to stare at my drink.

"Are you sure there's nothing wrong? Did you check correctly...? I..."

His voice faded in the background as I stared at the drink in my hand. Or more specifically, one of the 'ice cubes' inside.

It blended in so nicely...

"..."

I blankly stared at the cubes for a few more seconds before bringing the drink closer to my lips.

Gulp—

Fucking idiot.

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 50: Taking it for myself [5]

I once used to be a salesman.

"Uh? Nothing...? Are you sure there's nothing?"

Learning to be able to read, or predict the actions of individuals I knew nothing about was something that had been engraved in me since my work days.

.....Our job consisted of doing whatever was possible to convince an unknown party to purchase the product that we were selling.

All means to attract sales were considered usable in such an industry. Even if we ended up resorting to underhanded methods in the process.

It was thanks to such an environment that I was able to more or less predict how one would react given certain circumstances.

Who would've thought such a skill would come in handy in a different world?

"We've checked again, there is really nothing."

"Check again."

"Yes..."

I watched as the Head Chief patted his blazer and clothes in confusion.

"...."

I stared at the scene in complete silence while swallowing the bone down my throat. It hurt a little, but I kept my expression firm and prevented myself from showing anything on the outside.

Having been cleared of all suspicion, I was now free to take the bone. I had been waiting for this opportunity from the start.

Since the beginning...

All of it had been flowing as I thought it would.

The way he behaved and reacted... It was in line with how I envisioned he'd act. And it made sense.

My actions...

They followed a certain sequence that prompted one to act in such a way.

What were the chances of me suddenly spilling the drink all over him before the guards suddenly came to alert him? Added to the fact that I was tapping his body in an attempt to 'dry' his clothes, it made sense for him to grow suspicious.

I wasn't naive enough to think that the Head Chief would fall for such a simple trick. It would be a little too obvious.

Which was why I never intended his blazer to be my target.

From the start, all of it was a cover up for my real target.

Sip

'....His drink.'

I swallowed and let the drink flow down my throat.

The 'bone' was the size of a small pebble, and while it wasn't completely transparent, it perfectly blended with the ice cubes within the red drink.

Unless one paid close attention to it, they wouldn't notice.

...And how would the Head Chief notice it when he was busy investigating the theft?

Diverting all my attention towards the jacket, I was able to slip the bone into his drink. As I said before, there was no better target than the Head Chief.

He may have had the guard check him after he recalled my actions, but unlike the other guests, where everything had been checked, from drinks to bodies, he only had his body checked.

It made perfect sense when taking into account that perhaps he hadn't even noticed his drink had been taken away by him in that instant that I spilled the drink over him.

Compared to how 'extravagant' the 'tapping' was in contrast to how I had taken the drink away from him, it was only natural that he didn't take it into consideration.

I had purposely diverted his attention away with my actions to make it slip his mind.

Sort of like how most magicians trick their audience in shows.

Only that, I was no magician.

"Huuu..."

I took a breath as I finally finished the drink in my hand and placed it down on the table again.

Even now, as I stared at it, I could see it trembling. The nervousness had been real, and even now I could feel the beat of my heart drumming in my mind.

In the end, while the plan was far from perfect, things panned out as I expected them to.

The bone. It was finally in my possession.

My plan had worked.

But...

'It's not over yet.'

As I said before, I wanted everything. From quest to bone. So far, I have only managed to achieve two of the three things that I wanted.

There was one thing left for me to do.

"Haa."

I let out a small breath and closed my eyes.

'Unmask the fraud.'

"You're good to go. There is nothing on you."

"....Thank you."

Evelyn pursed her lips and took a step back. Her thoughts were in disarray, but she didn't show it outwardly.

All she could think of at the moment was Julien.

'Why...? Why did he do that?'

For what reason did he go out of his way to help her? It made no sense to her. It couldn't be because he still cared about her, right?

Evelyn swallowed and pursed her lips.

The idea seemed impossible, and she knew herself that it was impossible, and yet... Why did she continue to have such thoughts?

It was obvious why.

....It was because that was what she'd liked to believe. That perhaps, he wasn't the heartless monster that she had seen. That there was perhaps still something in his broken self.

Something that could still be salvaged.

"Evelyn?"

Her thoughts were broken by a quiet voice. When she turned around, Leon appeared, standing beside her.

He stood quietly with his gaze fixed on her.

".....Are you okay?"

"...."

Evelyn opened her mouth but found herself unable to say anything. She eventually lowered her head and nodded her head.

'I'm fine.'

Was what she was trying to imply with her actions.

Her odd behaviour didn't go unnoticed by Leon, who frowned at the sight of her and leaned his head forward.

"What happened...?"

"No, it's—"

"What happened."

He cut her off decisively, leaving her with no room to say anything else. It was at that moment that Evelyn realized she couldn't fool him and bitterly smiled.

"It's Julien..."

She spoke slowly, keeping her head down.

"Do you think he can be saved?"

"...."

Her response was met with silence. When she looked up, she was surprised to see Leon staring at her with a complicated expression.

Then, with a long sigh, he shook his head.

"No."

He decisively said. Almost too decisively.

".....He can no longer be saved."

"Ah."

Evelyn felt a little part of her tear. Especially when she noticed the strained expression on Leon's face as he talked about him.

"...It's too late for that. The Julien you remember. That we remember. He's no longer in this world."

He paused before adding.

"Think of him as a stranger."

After another half hour elapsed and the guests' patience wore thin, the Head Chief decided to halt the investigation. (f)ree

"It appears we've detained you all for too long. My apologies for the inconvenience. Regrettably, we couldn't identify the culprit."

He announced, maintaining his professional demeanour.

With a slight bow, he went on to add,

"As a token of apology, for all the guests that were inconvenienced by our actions, the auction will offer a 10% discount on any of the products available from us."

Only then did the people in the hall calm down. It had to be noted that a ten percent discount was a large sum of money given how expensive some of the items listed in the auction house were.

Such a reward was enough to wash all pent-up resentment away.

It was a small price the Head Chief was willing to pay in order to keep the people in the hall happy. A smile marred his features when he saw the pleased expressions of the guests, and only then did he finally allow for the guests to be escorted out of the premise.

"Though the circumstances made the night sour, I hope you have all enjoyed yourselves. Once again, we apologize for any inconvenience."

One by one, the guests started to move out in an orderly line.

As the guests departed in an orderly procession, a man clad in a butler uniform joined the line, then discreetly veered off into a dim corridor.

Tok Tok—

His steps echoed throughout the otherwise quiet corridor as his calm expression changed.

".....Failed."

The plan had failed.

The butler's expression distorted at the thought. How could the plan they had been working on for so long fail like that...?

Everything had been flowing smoothly up until the very last moment.

While he wasn't exactly sure about what had happened since he hadn't managed to see it, he more or less had an idea.

Julien Dacre Evenus.

The Black Star.

He had interfered with their plans. It could only have been him.

'...I have to report this.'

The situation was serious. How did he find out about the plan? Why did he interfere? How much does he know...?

Tok Tok—

Questions continued to flood the butler's mind as he continued to move along the quiet corridor.

The plan...

It was supposed to be perfect.

For the Black Star to interfere in the matter suggested that there was a chance he knew something about them. And even if he didn't and had acted out of impulse, which seemed improbably given their investigation of him and his relationship with her... It was vital that he report the situation to the higher ups.

They couldn't allow for unknown variables to interfere with their plans.

Not when they were so close to accomplishing their goals.

"Not y—Uh?"

Mid-stride, the ground beneath him shifted abruptly, and unseen hands erupted from below, seizing his ankles in a tight grip.

"Ukh...!"

In an instant, a wave of weakness swept through his body, causing his balance to falter.

"What..."

Tok—

A single step shattered the silence as a dry voice cut in from behind him.

"...Where do you think you're going?"