

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 51: Taking it for myself [6] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 51: Taking it for myself [6] Chapter 51: Taking it for myself [6]

How was I so sure that he didn't have any powers?

The answer was obvious. No superhuman would work as a butler for an auction house, and given that we had all been checked just a few moments ago, had he been a superhuman, it would've surely been detected by the guards present.

Thud.

And as expected, my deductions proved correct when his body fell to the ground.

"...."

A strange silence enveloped the surroundings.

Only then did I sigh in relief and approach. Of course, I made sure to keep my guard up. Who knew if this was an act or not?

Thankfully, I didn't come to this situation blindly. If things went south, I still had a means to escape.

That said...

The aftermath of such action wasn't something I was planning on dealing with.

I had just taken a step forward when something flickered in my vision.

"Um?"

[Evelyn's fate has been slightly altered. The assailant was found dead in the corridor of the auction house. The future is changing.]

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

Calamity 1 : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Calamity 2 : Slumber

: Progress - 2%

Evelyn J. Verlice : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

My eyes widened at the sight of the third option.

'...It no longer says calamity 3.'

It now had a specific name.

Before I could process what was going on, my eyes flickered as another window appeared.

?| Game Progression EXP + 1%

Game Progression : [0%-[2%]—————100%]

?| Character Progression EXP + 5%

Exp : [0%——[39%]—————100%]

A familiar warm current ran through my body, and I felt my mana reserves increase. Although it wasn't much, it was still something.

However, despite the sudden increase in strength, I was anything but happy.

Quite frankly, I wasn't sure how to feel. While I was happy with the increase in strength, I was also apprehensive about it.

While my body accepted it, my mind rejected it.

...I still didn't trust this 'system' or whatever it was. What was its goal, and what did it want from me?

I felt more satisfaction working for my own power than relying on this system for it.

I felt more in control that way.

As if I was controlling my own path rather than someone else doing that for me. At the very least, just as it could give me power, it could take it away from me. I didn't want to be overly reliant on such a system.

There was also another thing that bothered me.

'The assailant was found dead in the corridor of the auction house.'

"..."

I stood in silence, chewing on the words displayed in front of me, before casting my gaze downward to the butler's lifeless body.

He wasn't moving at all.

"Get up."

I tried using Emotive magic, but even that aroused no reaction from him.

"...Get up."

Regardless of how many times I tried, it just wouldn't budge.

I clenched my teeth and took a deep breath. This was the second time that I had witnessed death in this life.

It wasn't as jarring as the first time, mainly because it wasn't as gruesome.

In a sense, I also felt a sense of relief in the way he died. He had most likely killed himself the moment that I had attacked, but regardless of how things were going to work out, I would've had no choice but to kill him.

I knew that he knew about me.

The only reason I was sure he had been the one to create this entire situation was because I had been eyeing Evelyn most of the time. The only person who could've implanted the bone into her purse was him.

He was also one of the few faces I remembered staring at me back in the hall when I was talking to Evelyn.

His death merely served to confirm the obvious.

"Huuu."

Taking a look around me, I took another deep breath and moved toward the 'corpse'. I closed my eyes and started to pat his body to see if he had anything on him.

Any clues... Items... Or anything of the sort.

However...

"Nothing."

Regardless of how much I looked, he had nothing on him. I searched all his pockets, and besides a few tissues, he had nothing on him.

Absolutely nothing.

"This..."

I was unsure of how to feel.

I was mainly disappointed. I thought I'd be able to find some clues regarding the situation, and some items that I could use, but when thinking about it, he wasn't even a superhuman.

Why would he have anything on him?

Plus, we had all been checked beforehand, there was simply no way he'd have anything of value on him.

"....."

Once again, silence gripped my surroundings.

I stared at the body in front of me for a few seconds before flipping it over.

My hands twitched and I felt my knee shake a little. But... I ignored the weird sensations and brought my hand toward his throat.

I felt his throat at my hands. It was large, and I felt my heart race. Adrenaline was coursing down my body, and my hands felt tingly.

The next thing I knew, I was squeezing.

"Kh..."

I squeezed as tightly as I could.

He was dead.

The notifications suggested it. But...

I didn't trust it.

I wanted to make sure that was the case.

What if he was using some sort of ability to make himself look dead...?

.....I couldn't allow even the slightest chance of that happening.

Therefore, even as my stomach churned and I felt disgusted by my actions, I increased my grip on his throat.

"Kh."

Despite doing the choking, it felt as if I was the one being choked.

I felt suffocated and at some point, my hands started to tremble.

But I persisted...

In the silence, I continued to press my hands over his neck and squeezed with everything that I had.

Thud.

"Haaa... Haaa...."

By the time that I stopped, my breathing was rough.

I knew that I didn't have much time left and that I needed to leave. Given the circumstances, there were bound to be people coming soon. Thankfully, with everyone having moved toward the main hall after the incident, the area was still somewhat deserted.

"Huuu..."

Recomposing myself, I stood up and fixed my clothes. The entire time I kept my eyes lingering on the corpse.

If he wasn't dead before, I was sure he was now.

I imprinted the sight in my mind.

"I killed him."

I told myself that.

It wasn't going to be the last time I would kill someone.

That much I knew, and understood.

Which was why I burned the image and emotions I was currently feeling in my mind. Once again, I reminded myself of my new identity and situation.

Slap—

I slapped myself once in the face to remind myself of that fact.

Only then did I calm down. I was just about to stand up when I noticed something and squinted my eyes. It was dark so I couldn't see properly.

But there was something that grabbed my attention.

I slowly rolled up the butler's sleeve to get a better look. When I did, my eyes widened and my heart, which had just steadied, jumped up.

A familiar tattoo. One that I had.

Four identical leaves.

All in black.

"What is..."

The journey back to Haven felt like a blur. None of the cadets spoke throughout the entire way back, and the Professor was busy handling reports and calls from the other Professor at the Academy to care about us.

I was fine with such development.

I was in no state to talk with anyone. The only thing in my mind was the image of the butler's tattoo.

Rolling up my sleeves, I stared at mine.

It was identical in every way. Perhaps, the only difference between my tattoo and theirs was that mine was glowing. At least to me. From an outsider's point of view, mine was also not glowing.

I was the only one that could see the glowing.

'What is the meaning of this....?'

A wave of questions flooded my mind. They just endlessly poured into my mind like the water from a broken dam.

What was the meaning of the tattoo and why did the butler have it? Was it some twisted coincidence and the two did not correlate...?

'As if.'

I wasn't naive enough to think that.

There was something more to it. I was sure.

'...But what exactly?'

He had died before I could find any information. I had been so shocked by the development that I had only snapped out of it when I heard the sound of footsteps coming from behind me.

Only then did I wake up and hide the body away before joining back with the group.

Thankfully, nobody asked about my whereabouts when I returned. I had only been gone for less than five minutes. It wasn't suspicious enough to gather their interest.

....And in some way, most didn't have the courage to ask. Most weren't on good enough terms with me.

I guess there were perks to being anti-social.

Still...

"...."

I once again stared at my forearm.

My thoughts kept wandering back toward the tattoo. Just what connection does it have with the one that I have?

It felt as though I had finally found something. An idea to chase after. Only for me to find that the path was just as dark as the other ones that I had been following.

'Just how would I be ab—Ah.'

It was at that moment that I recalled something.

A certain conversation I had a while back. In fact, there was someone else that knew about the tattoo. Or had asked me about it.

I hadn't thought much about it back then but...

'Delilah.'

.....She definitely knew something.

What if...?

Chapter 52: New Ability [1]

Tok Tok—

Calm and even steps.

They moved toward a small building where several people were gathered. All eyes fell on the dark robed man as he entered and took off his top-hat. Their expressions immediately shifted, and they all lowered their heads to address him respectfully.

"Inquisitor Hallowe."

"....Inquisitor."

But he paid them no attention. His eyes fell on the naked corpse that lay in the middle of the table.

A middle-aged man wearing formal attire stepped up to explain.

"....We've found him like this after the guests were all let out. We believe it to have happened in less than five minutes after we let them out. We were only able to find the corpse after one of our staff went in to clear the rooms."

He then went on to point toward the neck of the perpetrator.

"If you look at his neck, we believe that he died from strangling."

"....."

Yet again, the Inquisitor remained silent. He inched closer to the naked corpse in front of him and placed his hand over its chest.

"Inquisitor?"

Just when the others were questioning his actions, he finally spoke.

"He didn't die due to suffocation."

"Uh? But—"

He tilted his head and frowned.

"I sense traces of curse magic. Faint, but I can sense them."

"Ah."

"But even that isn't enough to kill him. They're too faint. A low Tier mage."

A picture of the scene replayed in the Inquisitor's mind. It was a scene he more or less was certain of.

He went on to open the eyes of the corpse before nodding.

"This guy killed himself."

"Killed himself?!"

"What? But...!"

His conclusion drew the shock of all those present, but as the Inquisitor's eyes wandered to the forearm of the victim, his expression changed slightly.

"Yes, he killed himself."

He was even more sure of it now.

The picture in his mind became clearer.

"Curse magic was used to detain him. However, before he could get anything answered, this guy killed himself. The strangling is probably something that was done to make sure he was dead. Quite meticulous."

A subtle praise. But that was all. He shifted his eyes away from the corpse and turned around.

"Uh...? Inquisitor?"

"My job is done here. I more or less understand what happened."

"...But what about the thief?"

"Thief?"

The Inquisitor blinked. Then, recalling the information he received from 'Central' he subtly smacked his forehead.

"Right."

He pointed at the corpse.

"It's probably him."

Before the people present in the room could even say anything back, he put his hat back on and pulled the door open.

"If you would excuse me. I have a place to be."

A place he looked forward to visiting. An interesting place.

He stepped outside of the premises.

Just before leaving, he left a few last words.

"Well... Probably?"

It was the next day and I came out of the bathroom holding onto a familiar-looking orb.

I set it down on the desk and sat on a chair where I took a book and opened it. For now, I decided to set aside the problem regarding the tattoo on my hand.

While there was indeed a chance that Delilah knew about my situation...

"No, she probably knows."

It made no sense for someone as powerful as her not to know about such an organization. It was probably why she had mentioned my tattoo back then.

If I were to ask she'd probably be able to give me an answer, but...

"Haha."

I suddenly laughed.

Leaning back on my chair, a few things made sense to me.

"....So that's why she made me her assistant."

It wasn't because I was weak or whatever excuse she had told me back then.

Far from it.

"She wants to monitor me."

That much became clear to me after thinking about the situation. This tattoo I had... While there was a chance that I was wrong, I was inclined to believe that my deduction was correct.

Now that brought rise to several more questions.

How much did she know? What sort of organization was this? Did she think I was part of that organization? If so, is she my ally or enemy?

"...How troublesome."

My head throbbed the more I thought about the matter.

The situation became even more complicated. Another reason why I decided to hold off on meeting her.

Until I knew what her stance was, I planned on taking my time to observe the situation.

"Haa."

I shifted my attention toward the book in my hand, [Bone Classification and their usage]. It was a book that was given to us as part of our course selection.

That turned out for the best since borrowing from the library would've been problematic.

Especially if someone came to investigate the Academy and found that right after coming back from the Auction the first thing I did was research bones.

Talk about suspicious.

Flip—

I flipped through the pages of the book and started to read. I knew the general information, but that wasn't enough. I needed to know more.

Which was what I did.

[Introduction: Dimensional bones and their usages]

There were three sections in the table of contents. Ranks and classifications, usage and integration, and types.

For the next hour or so I absorbed all the information in the book before finally summarizing all the information in my mind.

"Hu."

I took a pen and jotted everything down.

: Ranks. Bones were ranked based on the rank of the originating monster. An infant rank monster produced an infant rank bone and so on. Primordial ranked monsters existed, but no such bone had ever been found. The greater the strength of the monster, the more powerful the ability.

: Types. The human body could only accept a maximum of five bones and once integrated couldn't be taken out. Any more and the body would break down. There were only seven types of bones that could be integrated into the human body: Skull Bone, Rib Bone, Ulna Bone, Femur Bone, Pelvis Bone, Vertebrae Bone, and lastly Mandible Bone.

"...."

My pen stopped there and I shifted my attention toward the orb on my side.

Lastly, integration.

"This way, right?"

I pinched the orb in between my fingers and channeled my mana into it. The orb glowed a white hue as the room turned bright all of a sudden.

A magic circle floated in the air. It lasted several seconds before shattering.

Then...

Thud!

A long black bone fell onto the table with a dull 'thud'.

"....No wonder it looked so small."

In reality, it was merely a container for the actual bone which was about the size of my thigh.

I carefully observed the bone in front of me and stepped back. There was a certain aura that radiated from it that made me feel uncomfortable. It made my face winch. Not only that, but the smell it gave out was also anything but pleasing.

Still, after a careful look, I was able to understand what bone it was.

"The right Ulna."

The bone right beneath the forearm.

".....The rank also seems to be Junior Rank."

The bone belonged to a Metryl which was typically known to be a Junior-ranked monster. Even if it wasn't, the book stated that bones from Terror rank and up glowed and were extremely mana-dense.

This one wasn't so it was fair to assume it was a Junior Rank bone. Maybe Infant, but I doubted it was given the price.

"For a Junior Rank bone to be this expensive..."

Just how ludicrous were the prices for higher-ranked bones? The thought made me want to puke.

I really needed to find a way to make more money.

My progress would surely increase then.

"Huu."

I took a deep breath and reached out for the bone. The steps for integration were rather straightforward.

Place the bone on the respective area and create a mana flow between the two.

While I understood the principle behind the integration, I wasn't exactly confident I could pull it off.

I still tried nonetheless.

I followed the usual steps. Focusing my attention on my core, a certain warmth invaded my body.

I guided it toward the bone in my grasp.

"Hm."

I felt my brows furrow.

There was a little resistance from the bone at first, but with the passing of seconds, it started to accept my mana.

The first step that I needed to do was 'Assimilation'. In short, I needed to get the bone used to my mana. This was a necessary step before the 'Integration' part.

So I decided to be patient. This wasn't going to be an easy step.

"....."

I was right.

The 'Assimilation' process was taking a little longer than I expected.

However, as I glanced at the clock, I smiled.

It was Sunday.

I had all the time in the world.

In total, it took about thirty more minutes for me to finally be able to smoothly channel my mana into the bone.

"...Hah."

As soon as I reached that stage, I let out the breath I held in. It was now time for me to move toward the most important part.

"Integration."

This process was also not very complicated. However, the book described this next stage as the hardest. Not because it was hard to do, but because of the pain one would experience during the integration.

It was for this reason that the Institute tested one's pain tolerance.

Unless one reached a score of three, they wouldn't allow any of the cadets to try to integrate with a bone without any assistance.

But to me...

That didn't matter. Three, four, five, six... So long as my body didn't fail me, it was nothing.

Pain... It was something I could deal with.

So.

I didn't hesitate with the next step.

".....!"

The bone stuck to my forearm and an excruciating pain invaded my body.

The pain was hard to describe.

It felt as if the bones on my forearm had gotten crushed by a large boulder as it fell. The muscles twisted and squirmed as a result, and the bone attached itself to my skin.

Creak...! Crack...!

The sounds that came out of my forearm were all for me to hear.

My lips trembled and my heart squirmed in pain.

The pain was something that I could vividly feel in my mind.

But.

Even while getting baptized by this intense pain, I didn't let out a single sound. I simply refused to yield to the pain.

Pain.

It meant a lot to me.

Having experienced it so much, I knew all sorts of pains. And... screaming from this type of pain felt pathetic.

'There's worse. This is nothing.'

So.

"...."

I stood in silence and watched as my forearm squirmed and spasmed.

Creak...! Crack...!

The sounds continued but nothing came out of my mouth. I wouldn't let myself let anything out.

Such pain continued for the next hour.

The entire time I stood motionless and took in the pain.

Memorized it.

....So that the next time I experienced something similar, I could tell myself, 'I withstood this, why can't I withstand this?'

".....!"

Snap—!

As I heard a loud snapping sound, a sense of weakness finally hit me.

I stumbled several steps back before falling onto my chair.

The world spun and the edges of my vision started to become dark. Gradually, the darkness spread, reaching down from all areas before finally taking away my sight.

Even in such a state, I remained silent.

"....."

I felt my right arm twitch and something came out.

I wasn't sure what.

I couldn't see.

It took several minutes for my vision to return.

When it did, I stared around me.

All I saw were...

".....Threads."

Chapter 53: New Ability [2]

They covered my surroundings, wrapping over the furniture and hanging suspended in the air.

"....."

I sat there dazed for several seconds before swallowing and lowering my head to look at my forearm.

A slender white thread extended from the underside of my forearm, looping over my arm and dividing into five finer threads that wound around my fingers before darting out into the room.

I had a hard time spotting the threads given how thin they were, but I could feel them. As though they were a part of my body, I knew exactly where each of them was.

"This..."

I hesitated to move from the spot.

While I could feel every single thread in the room, I had no idea how to control them. Only when I closed my eyes did I get a better idea.

".....So it works like this."

Swoosh—

The threads withdrew with a single thought from me.

When I opened my eyes, the threads were no longer scattered around the room.

In the end, it all depended on my mana control.

"Hm."

The thought made me frown.

There was a simple reason for this. My mana control was awful.

To prove this, I closed my eyes and channeled the mana in my body. Then, mimicking what I had done before, I felt my forearm tingle and a connection established.

A single white thread appeared in my darkened vision as I kept my eyes closed. Like a snake, I tried to direct it forward, but that proved to be a more difficult task than I expected as it continued to veer toward the left.

Drip... Drip...

Sweat trickled down the side of my face the more I focused on my task, and just as the thread inched forward a couple of meters, I had no choice but to cut my mana connection and open my eyes.

"Haaa..."

I took a deep breath.

Not only was it difficult to control, but it took a lot of mana too.

I reached my hand forward and touched the thread that coiled around my fingers.

"Hisss..."

I drew a cold breath when I felt a sharp pain on my finger as a red line crossed down my finger.

"Sharp."

I suddenly grew excited.

This was what I had been missing the entire time...

A skill that could complement my curse magic which leaned more toward the support side like Emotive Magic.

Not only was this skill great for offense, but it was also extremely important for control.

If utilized properly, then I was sure my strength would increase drastically. At the very least, I wouldn't be so helpless.

There was something else that I was curious about.

"...Let me check my status."

A familiar widow popped in front of me.

— ●[Julien D. Evenus]● —

Level :18 [Tier 1 Magician]

Exp : [0%-[3%]—————100%]

My eyes immediately widened after staring at the first part.

"My level increased?"

I was no longer level 17, but level 18....?

What an unexpected development. I more or less expected it given that I felt my mana grow. But my surprise didn't end there. When I looked down, my eyes locked on the last section.

Skills :

[Innate] - Foresight

[Innate] - Etherweave

— ●[Julien D. Evenus]● —

"So it's called Etherweave..."

My new ability.

I opened my mouth for a moment before closing it.

....Interesting.

Evelyn sat serenely in the lobby of the Rondeo Dorm, surrounded by three figures whose mere presence drew the curiosity of passersby.

They were none other than Josephine, Aoife, and Luxon.

Within the common room, they were engrossed in their studies, preparing diligently for the upcoming exams in just a month's time.

But not all were here to study.

"Did you guys hear? A person was found dead after the incident."

Josephine, being the talker that she was, started the conversation off with some gossip regarding yesterday's incident.

Only that nobody seemed interested in what she was talking about.

Fiddling with the pen in his hand, Luxon casually replied.

"Uh, yeah. I heard about it."

"...What's with the lukewarm reaction? Weren't you there yesterday? It was in the same place you guys were in."

"Ah, right."

He still didn't seem interested.

That was until Josephine took out a paper and placed it on the table.

"Look, it's this guy. Did you see him yesterday?"

"Right, I want to st—uh?"

Luxon stopped mid-sentence and his eyes widened.

"Isn't this..."

His reaction prompted the others to look, and Aoife's blank expression twitched slightly.

Clearly, she too recognized the figure in the picture.

The one who didn't show any reaction was Evelyn who blankly stared at the article in front of her. She had actually seen the article beforehand. Therefore, it didn't come as a shock to her.

However...

"The apparent cause of death is a suicide, yet traces of curse magic have been detected on the body..."

Her mind had been continuously haunted by one thought.

'....He did it.'

Julien was the culprit.

She was sure of it.

It was a wild concussion that ate at her mind, but thinking about it, the butler was most likely the person who had planted the 'item' in her purse.

He was the one who wanted to screw her over.

Even now, she didn't understand why she had been targeted. Was it because they had a grudge against her family?

"Evelyn."

That could be a reason. Her family was rather influential and it made sense for people to target her.

It was because of this that she had her knight accompany her most of the time in the Academy.

....But even so.

'To go as far to kill him...'

Evelyn was once again reminded of the past. A past that she wanted to forget. However, the more she tried to forget, the more it seeped into her mind.

Like a curse, it wouldn't stop haunting her.

"Evelyn."

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

'Think of him as a stranger.'

She reminded herself of Leon's words.

What exactly did he mean by these words....? Was he trying to say that the current Julien was someone different? Or that he had been consumed and fully turned into the monster they had seen?

But if that was the case, why did he help her?

Why-

"Evelyn!"

"Uh? Ah."

Evelyn felt her head snap up as her name was called out. When she looked around, she noticed that all eyes were gathered on her.

Josephine neared her as she asked,

"Evelyn, are you okay? I've been calling you for the last minute."

"Ah, no I'm fine."

I'm not.

"....I was just thinking about this question."

She tapped her pen on the paper in front of her.

"Oh, ah."

Scratching the side of her face, Josephine's face twitched as she was reminded of their situation and she sat back down on her seat.

"Right... We're here to study."

Only then did she seem to recall the purpose behind their group and sighed.

"Fine~"

"...."

Evelyn stared at her for a brief moment before pursing her lips and paying attention to the question in front of her.

Though 'he' continued to haunt her mind, she had no choice but to pretend to be fine. At least, she had to pretend to be fine in front of everyone.

She thought she was doing a good job at it, but...

What she didn't notice was the sudden squint of Aoife's eyes as she looked at her.

Her yellow pupils flickered as she similarly lowered her head to focus on her paper.

Scribble~

In the newfound silence, the collective sound of their pens scratching their papers echoed throughout.

A week later.

It was now the Monday of the next week. The week passed without any hiccups. Attending lectures, training, and even more training.

Such had been my life for the past week.

I was content with such a life. Sort of. My progress had started to stagnate, and I was once again reminded of my lack of talent in the magic field.

"This will be the second time that you will all explore the Mirror Dimension. For the past two weeks, we've been preparing you for your current trip. Unlike last time, we will allow you freedom of travel."

We stood by a familiar crack.

There was a certain tension that hung in the air as all the cadets waited patiently for the Professor to speak.

I could feel the nervousness of some of the cadets beside me as they chewed on their nails.

I couldn't blame them.

We were currently headed into the deeper territory of the Mirror Dimension.

Contrary to them, rather than being nervous, I was somewhat excited. I wanted to see the result of my training.

To what extent had I improved over the past week?

"Of course, when I say freedom of travel, there will still be a limit to how far you can go. The Black Region is your limit. Going further into other regions is prohibited. We will not be responsible for your safety if you wander deep into those regions."

The Mirror Dimension was classified into several regions which ranged from, black, yellow, orange, and red.

The Black Region stood as the safest domain, firmly under the Empire's control, boasting numerous supply stations strategically dispersed across its territory.

The Yellow Region lay southward from the Black Region, inhabited by numerous Terror-ranked monsters.

Following the Yellow Region was the Orange Region, and lastly, the Red Region, an infamous no man's land.

"You will be free to go in groups, or you may go alone. We suggest you go in groups, but if you don't want to, it's not a requirement. However, with that said, this isn't going to be a simple walk in the park. There are things that you must achieve during your excursion."

Ah, there it was.

The expected catch.

"Points will be assigned for each monster that is killed. Infant-ranked will count ten points. Junior-ranked will count a hundred, but... I don't see how any of you are capable of defeating such a monster at your current level. Perhaps if you work together, but..."

The Professor shrugged and ended things there. The meaning behind his words was clear.

"Now then..."

He called his hands and turned to face the crack.

"Let's head in. I expect great things from you all."

I was just about to follow when I felt a hand press against my shoulder. When I turned around, I was surprised to see two gray eyes staring at me.

"You...."

His brows furrowed into a tight frown, his expression betraying his hesitation. But in the end, he managed to get his words out.

And when he did, my brows jumped in surprise.

"....Do you want to pair with me?"

Uh?

Chapter 54: Hunt [1]

"....You want to team up with me?"

I was somewhat confused by the sudden proposal. Of all people, I didn't expect Leon to be the one suggesting this.

He was the one who usually avoided me when he could. Why the sudden change of heart?

That was unless...

"You need something from me?"

"....."

He remained silent but that was all I needed to hear.

"No."

Which was why I rejected him.

I planned to make use of the time to practice my skills and train. I had no time for distractions.

I thought that my message was clear, but just as I prepared to leave, Leon spoke.

".....It'll be beneficial for you too."

That's when my steps paused.

Beneficial for me too?

Suddenly, I recalled something; *'The game is called Rise of the Three Calamities, and the main character is called Leon'*

They were my brother's words before my death.

Ah—

It then clicked to me.

This person was the main character. He was the character that the world was centered around. It didn't feel that way to me because I had been so focused on myself, but such was the reality of the situation.

While his presence brought a lot of danger, it also brought a lot of opportunity.

'I may be taking this opportunity from other characters, but I don't particularly care...'

To begin with, I didn't know the plot of the game.

Whether I changed the plot or not, I didn't care.

'Hmm, but maybe I should...'

Would this affect the events that the quest window would display?Or would the quests adjust to the situation?

It was certainly something to think about, but it didn't weigh heavily on my mind.

If there was an opportunity, then I didn't plan on missing it. Even if it ended up screwing with whatever event that was going to happen in the future I wasn't sure existed.

So...

I turned around to look at Leon.

"I'll listen. What sort of opportunity are you talking about....?"

Whether it screwed with the future or not, I didn't care.

I didn't live for the unknown future.

I lived for the present. f(r)eeweb(n)ovel

Leon stared at Julien's back as it disappeared into the crack. Shortly after he left, a figure walked up from behind him.

"...Did he accept?"

It was none other than Aoife. Behind her were four other people. Of which, Leon only managed to recognize Evelyn and Luxon.

"He said he wanted a few days to himself."

"A day to himself?"

Aoife frowned, but before she could say anything, Leon cut in.

"I accepted."

"...Hm?"

Aoife's eyebrows jumped a little but they soon recovered.

"Are you sure?"

"...Sure."

The conversation was supposed to end there, but a figure with long black hair jumped in on the conversation.

"Is it really a good idea to invite him?"

Leon looked towards him.

Wesley Montague. One of the top rankers within the year. He was ranked within the top 10 the last time Leon recalled.

But as Leon stared at him, he felt himself grow uncomfortable.

He couldn't quite put it, but...

'I don't like him.'

There was something about him that felt off to Leon.

Still, considering that he had been chosen for the team, he pushed his feelings aside and asked,

"Why do you think so?"

"Don't get me wrong. He is strong. However, he will be a burden to us. Monsters don't have emotions and without emotions..."

Wesley ended his sentence there but the meaning behind his words was clear for everyone to understand.

Leon looked back to see the reaction of the other group members. Besides Aoife who seemed unsure, and Evelyn who seemed confused, they all shared the same opinion as Wesley.

Leon sighed.

Not because he didn't understand where they were coming from, but because his 'instincts' told him otherwise.

That...

If he didn't bring him, he'd regret it.

But how could he explain this to them? In the end, frowning, Leon looked at Wesley and answered.

"...Whether he'll be of use or not, we'll see later. For now, we will wait."

Swoosh—!

"Ah... Tsk."

I stood up and clicked my tongue.

"...Another fail."

Extending my hand, I withdrew the thread that extended from out of my forearm. I then sat in silence and stared at the distant creature running away from the area.

It had been two hours since I had left the supply station at the Academy gate's entrance.

"I don't have much time."

My appointment with Leon was set for exactly three days, Zone [F].

With our expedition lasting for about a week, three days was plenty of time for me to train and improve.

The Black Region was split into 7 different zones which went from [A] to [G]. Each Zone contained a different environment and habitat.

I was currently in Zone [A].

The safest of all the seven zones.

Such was my current limit. Besides my new ability and curse magic, I was practically defenseless against the monsters.

I had no choice but to go to the safest zone.

"Thankfully, I'm not as helpless now..."

Swoosh—!

A thread coiled down from my forearm, slowly crawling toward the cracks of the rocky surface beneath. I used my mind to carefully guide the thread around the cracks and towards the distance where a furry creature stood.

'Aurarahemoth'

Such was the name of the creature I was currently hunting.

Despite its name, it was one of the weakest creatures found within the Mirror Dimension. With its tiny body and short limbs, it was essentially a standing target. It bore a resemblance to a rabbit but it was a lot more grotesque in appearance.

With its mouth split into four sections, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth that twisted within its gaping maw, it was anything but cute.

And yet...

Swoosh—!

".....I missed."

Regardless of how much I tried, just when the thread would reach a certain distance, it would detect it and hop away.

"How troublesome."

I wasn't disheartened by the failure.

Though I kept on failing, I was getting closer and closer to the creature with each attempt. That wasn't all. I could feel my control over the thread to be smoother with each attempt.

This was a great experience, but...

"Still too slow."

The rate of progress was nice, but I was still not satisfied.

I sat down on a nearby rock and stared into the sky. It was gray, and a white sun hung in the distance. The air was dry, and there was hardly any vegetation around me.

I closed my eyes and let my mana course through my body before agglomerating towards the tip of my fingers.

Rune One—Rune Two—Rune Three—Rune Four—Rune Five—Rune Six—Rune Seven—Rune Eight—Rune Nine—Rune Ten—Rune Eleven....

Tzzz—

A familiar sound.

Opening my eyes, I pursed my lips.

".....That failed too."

Nothing seemed to be going right for me. [Chains of Alakantria]. I was still struggling to unlock this spell.

It was frustrating, but I had become numb to the sense of frustration.

All I felt was frustration.

"Hah."

As a hollow laugh escaped from my lips, I directed my attention toward the distance where another creature greeted my sight.

I looked toward my arm and took a deep breath.

Immediately, a thread coiled out of my forearm, coiling around my hand and splitting into five different threads.

Drip...

Sweat trickled down the side of my face the moment I split the threads.

Accompanying the pain was a sharp pain. Having to split my attention five different ways was quite exhausting.

Ignoring my eyelid which was twitching, I guided the five threads towards the creature in the distance.

The distance between the creature and the creature shrank.

Ten meters...

Nine meters...

Eight meters....

"Huu."

Sweat continued to pour down from my face as my right eyelid twitched. The pain in my head intensified, and my jaw clicked.

Even so, I persisted and separated the threads.

"....."

I forced myself to suffer in silence as the threads split.

Biting my lips, I imprinted the sight ahead in my mind. Then, closing my eyes and letting darkness embrace my vision, I envisioned a path for the threads which were the only things that appeared in my darkened vision.

Like snakes, they coiled around the ground and neared the creature.

Seven meters...

Six meters...

Five meters...

"Ah."

I stopped right there and opened my eyes.

The creature's ears perked up as its head raised to look around. Clearly, it had detected something but couldn't understand what.

"Five meters..."

That was my current limit.

My finger twitched. One of the threads lunged forward. As if expecting such action, the creature jumped ahead.

Swoosh—

But...

"Hiek!"

It was surrounded.

"Kh."

My hand clenched tightly, urging the threads into action as they surged towards the creature.

This time, there was no avenue of escape. With every path blocked and suspended mid-air, the creature could only observe helplessly as the threads ensnared its body, coiling around its limbs.

"....Hah."

I watched from the distance as the pain in my mind intensified. However, I ignored the pain and smiled.

"I did it."

A wave of relief washed over me as my chest trembled.

"Hieek—!"

The creature continued to trash in the distance as the threads coiled around it. I was just about to put it out of its misery when I frowned.

"Hm."

All of a sudden, I felt multiple pairs of eyes falling on me.

When I turned around, I felt my body freeze. Tens of different pairs of eyes were staring at me. Their expressions were anything but friendly.

I didn't let myself fall into panic and took a deep breath.

The Professor had warned beforehand that there was a likelihood of such a scenario occurring. It was for this reason that I wasn't panicked.

Furthermore, Aurorahemoth's weren't known for their speed.

'I'll probably be able to run away if I want to.'

But...

I clenched my teeth.

For what reason did I need to run away? If I couldn't even handle such weak creatures then how was I supposed to get stronger?

I smacked the side of my head and took another deep breath.

"Right, whatever..."

"Heek—!"

Clenching my hand, the creature in the distance split into ten different pieces.

"Hm?"

?| EXP + 0.01%

The sudden notification that flashed before my very eyes took me by surprise. However, taking note of the advancing creatures, I put it to the side and recalled the threads back to me.

This was probably going to hurt, but...

"Come."

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Chapter 55: Hunt [2]

Swoosh—!

I stepped back to avoid an incoming attack as my eyes fell on the large rows of teeth facing me. I silently gulped.

....Would I even be able to keep my head if they managed to land a hit?

Probably. But it would certainly deal a lot of pain. And while I could withstand pain, I didn't like pain.

If possible, I wanted to avoid it.

Therefore...

"Ukh...!"

I continued to avoid the incoming attacks while focusing on the threads coming out of my arm. There were a total of three at the moment. I thought about making more, but my mind couldn't keep up.

There were too many things that I needed to focus on.

My environment, the incoming Aurorahemoth's, and my mana reserves. My mind couldn't keep up.

Three threads were my limit.

I continued like this until I couldn't.

"...."

Gradually, my steps halted and I looked around me.

"Hieeek—! Hieeek—!"

I was surrounded from all sides. Stepping above the scattered rocks around me, their glowing eyes fiercely stared at me.

My heart sped at the sight of them and I had a hard time keeping myself from panicking.

...But I had to stay calm.

That much was necessary.

"One... Two... Three... Fifteen..."

Fifteen creatures surrounded me. The reality of the situation seemed even more grim than I had anticipated.

For some reason, the creatures just stood and observed me. As if they were waiting for something.

....I didn't know exactly what, but I didn't let that affect my mind and introduced two more threads.

Now that I didn't need to move, I could split my attention toward creating two more.

Quietly, they coiled around my fingers before descending towards the ground, permeating through the cracked earth and positioning themselves along the perimeter where the rocks were.

It all happened quickly, about a second and a half...

The threads had just started moving when I noticed a change.

I hastily looked up only to feel my heart drop.

"Oh..."

All fifteen Aurorahemoths had their mouths open, their large teeth exposed for me to see.

Ah—

I stopped and reflexively took a defensive stance.

But...

That proved to be futile on my end. With their mouths open, the Aurorahemoths's bellies inflated.

I realized then what was happening then.

But it was already too late.

"Hieeeeeeeeeek—!"

Their collective screech pierced through the surroundings, heading directly toward me as I stood helplessly in the middle of their screech.

"....Ukh!"

It came fast.

Before I knew it, I was hit. I couldn't describe the pain. It felt numbing and it came as fast as it left.

....But it took my hearing alongside it.

Tzzzzzzzz—

A constant buzz echoed within my mind as my balance shifted and I struggled to keep a footing on the ground.

It was at that moment that I saw all the creatures make a move.

As if their minds were connected, they all lunged at me from all sorts of angles. I tried to avoid them, but there were simply way too many of them.

"Kh...!"

A sudden, sharp pain jolted through my right leg. As I glanced downwards, a deep wound met my sight.

Ah...

It took just a second for another one to appear. This time on my shoulder, and I stumbled forward.

"...Ukh."

Then another...

"Urgh...!"

And another...

"Akh!"

And another...

"....."

Wounds started to pile up on my body. My blood seeped onto the ground staining it red. I had long stopped screaming as the pain continued to accumulate.

Thud.

I fell on my knees as I hunched down.

"....."

I felt my jaw tremble from the pain. It wanted to open it. To scream at the pain that was currently invading every part of my body.

But I didn't let it.

This much pain wasn't worth screaming over.

"....."

I looked up.

What met my sight was a set of razor-sharp teeth. It was headed straight for my face. That was when I knew I had to make a move.

"....."

Amidst the silence that took over my mind, I slowly clenched my hand.

The threads that I had carefully laid all over the ground sprung up as they grew taut. A sea of blood littered my surroundings, splattering all over my face.

?| EXP + 0.01%

?| EXP + 0.01%

Notifications filled my vision as I cleared my face with my hand.

?| EXP + 0.01%

?| EXP + 0.01%

?| EXP + 0.01%

My hair and clothing were a mess as I moved my hand away and splattered the blood onto the ground.

Too bad I couldn't hear a thing.

When it all calmed down, all I saw were limbs and blood scattered throughout.

"....."

I looked around me to make sure that there was nothing else around me before finally taking a deep breath and calming down.

Extending my hand, I withdrew the threads that were connected across the scattered rocks.

Only then did my mind feel clearer and the weight of the pain hit me.

"H-hah..."

It was bearable.

At least... That was what I told myself.

The truth was probably different, but it was something that I had to do. It was the only way I could've envisioned myself winning.

While I could've used [Hands of Malady], it wasn't a great skill when facing against fifteen different opponents.

By the time I incapacitated two to three Aurorahemoths, I'd already be out of mana.

Such was why I had no choice but to use my body as bait.

It hurt...

"But it worked."

Taking a deep breath, I reached out for my bag and took out several ointments which I placed over my wounds.

Thankfully, they were merely superficial wounds.

A little deep, but still manageable.

"....They should heal in a couple of hours."

Such was the magic of the ointments of this world.

While I waited for my wounds to heal, I reflected on the fight I just had.

It was pathetic.

I was pathetic.

This wasn't the way that I wanted to win. I understood that I was still learning and that this was merely just the start, but...

It didn't stop me from feeling frustrated with myself.

Simply put my control was still not there yet. Because of that, I needed to make sure my attacks landed in one hit.

I couldn't afford to just graze them.

That woul-

"Uh."

I paused and blinked.

A thought suddenly struck me.

What if...?

"...What if I combine Etherweave with my spells? Emotive? Hands of Malady?"

The moment the thought entered my mind it didn't leave it.

It just remained there and continued to repeat itself.

Over and over again.

At that, I had no choice but to give in to my desires. I brought my hand forward where a thread slowly moved out from my forearm, coiling around my middle finger.

A purple magic circle soon manifested over my hand.

It hovered around it before shrinking down. Typically, it would trace a downward path, enveloping my entire hand and casting it in a purple hue. This time, however, I changed things up.

I focused my intent away from my hand and toward the thread.

The circle shrank and moved down my finger.

Sweat started to accumulate down the side of my face as I focused my attention on the circle hovering over my finger.

It gradually inched closer down, reaching the tip of my finger.

Then...

"....!"

My heart sped at the sight before me.

It was hard to see given how thin the thread was, but it was gradually turning purple.

My eyes widened at the sight.

"Can it really..."

I felt my heart beat faster than before. I felt a strange sense of excitement and nervously swallowed my saliva.

The circle inched further down.

It was now halfway down my finger. The thread turned purple for each part the circle passed.

Even more sweat trickled down the side of my face as I maximized my focus.

I was close...

So very close.

....And just as the circle continued to move down, I suddenly frowned.

The magic circle stopped.

"No."

I voluntarily shattered the circle.

That was because I realized I was doing things wrong.

"....."

I stood there in silence to collect my breath and mana again. Then, I extended my hand forward and a magic circle again formed. Just like last time, it shrunk and hovered over my middle finger.

This time, I didn't let it move down.

Rather...

Swoosh—

I guided the thread out and into the magic circle.

".....As expected."

The thread changed color and my mana expenditure significantly reduced. Not only that, but so did my amount of concentration.

I stared at the purple thread before me.

Now this...

It was certainly something.

The Mirror Dimension was vast. It covered a massive expanse of land, its size rivaling, if not surpassing, those of the entire Empire, which itself occupied a substantial portion of the world.

The Black Region was regarded as the smallest among all the regions. Considering the difficulty in conquering even a small portion of this dimension, its status as the smallest seemed only fitting.

Typically, when entering the Black Region, most cadets jumped at the opportunity to go toward the more dangerous regions.

Such was the best place to train.

However, there were a few who preferred to start in the lowest zone to get accustomed to the environment and monsters.

Swoosh—!

"Ah, fucking hell...."

Kiera was one such cadet.

Staring at the numerous burning corpses in front of her, she pressed her finger against her ear. It was still ringing.

"....Fuck, I can't hear shit."

No, she could, but it was just a constant ring.

The more it continued, the more she got annoyed. Especially when she noticed two more headed her way.

"Tsk... How much do these fuckers reproduce? They're endless."

A red magic circle hovered over her hand as the two creatures caught fire in the distance. They shrieked in pain, but Kiera had none of that.

"...Agh, fuck. Is that how it is? Are you all so good at screaming because you mate so much?"

Just when she thought she was done, another one appeared.

Her eyes widened.

"My word. They really can't stop fucking..."

In the end, after dispatching the creature, she decided to leave. The creatures, while easy, were hard to handle when in groups of more than five. She doubted anyone would have a hard time handling them en masse.

Packing up her staff, she slung her bag over her shoulder and headed out toward the next region.

The route wasn't far. It was about an hour's walk according to the map.

"...."

She was halfway there when she suddenly paused.

From the peripheral of her eyes, she caught something in the distance.

Something felt off.

No, it was off.

Her head turned to face the distance and her expression finally changed.

"What is..."

Her eyes widened considerably and her bag fell on the floor.

Thud.

Off into the distance, she could see the mutilated bodies of over several dozen Aurorahemoth's. The same creatures she struggled to deal with just moments prior.

"What sort of..."

She jogged over to carefully analyze the situation. Her surprise increased as she noticed how cleanly they had been killed.

A sword...? An arrow?

For the cuts to be so clean...

"Leon?"

A name popped up in her mind.

He appeared to be the only person capable of such a feat.

Kiera meticulously examined the corpses in front of her. Just as she was looking around, her eyes froze on a specific area.

"This..."

A shoulder pad.

It looked to have fallen off during the exchange and most likely belonged to the one responsible for all of this.

Staring at it for a good minute, she quietly pocketed the pad.

Her curiosity suddenly peaked.

"...Who did this?"

Chapter 56: Hunt [3]

Three days passed in a blur.

It was the day of the appointment and Leon and the other members were already waiting in Zone [F].

"So this is the [F] zone?"

Evelyn looked around with wide eyes. In their view lay a luminescent forest, emitting a deep blue glow that starkly contrasted with the dull grayness of the surrounding world. In a sense, it added to the ominousness of the area.

Bordering next to the Yellow Region, it was the most dangerous Zone within the Black Region.

Leon looked around before turning back to look at the others.

"Be careful. Do not stray too far. I can sense multiple strong presences deep within."

"Your senses are that sharp?" freeweb . com

Aoife asked while she leaned on a nearby tree. She closed her eyes and tried to sense her surroundings, but after a while frowned and shook her head.

".....I can't sense anything."

"I'm a knight. That's why."

"I am too."

Aoife didn't seem to be satisfied with the answer but left it there.

There was a fundamental difference between those that belonged to the [Body] category and those that belonged to the [Mind] and [Elemental] category.

To be classified as a knight, one had to belong to the [Body] category which focused on enhancing the human body.

Aoife was proficient in both [Mind] and [Body]. However, unlike him, she focused most of her attention on [Telekinesis] which belonged to the [Mind] category.

It was understandable that his senses were sharper than hers.

After all, his only talents lay in the [Body] category.

"Isn't he late? How much longer are we supposed to wait for him?"

A voice suddenly broke Leon out of his thoughts. When he looked back, Wesley, who was similarly leaning against a nearby tree, frowned.

"It's been an hour since we arrived here and he's still not here. Are we sure he's coming?"

Leon frowned but still answered.

".....He should be coming."

"Uh, well, if you say so."

Leon thought he'd leave it at that, but he suddenly continued.

"You don't think anything happened to him on the way?"

"....."

"I mean, he did go by himself. And like I said, he's not very strong. It wouldn't be out of the question."

"...."

"What if he got hurt and can't make it? How much longer should we wait for?"

'He talks too much.'

It was starting to become more and more apparent to Leon. This hadn't been the first remark he had made toward Julien.

For the past three days, he had been throwing random jabs at him.

Nobody said a thing considering that they were a group and none of the group members had anything to say about him.

But...

It was starting to grow on Leon's nerves.

"You, c—"

Rustle—

A gentle rustle halted Leon mid-sentence as he turned his head in the direction of where the sound came from.

Then, a figure slowly emerged from the other side of the trees.

"This..."

"Ah."

The moment he appeared, the expressions of all those present changed. This was especially so for Wesley who couldn't help but cover his mouth.

"Pfft. "

A weird mixture of expressions greeted my sight the moment I managed to clear the forest and arrive at the meeting area.

I couldn't blame them.

While I wasn't injured, my clothes were a mess with tears all over the place. Dry blood stained my attire, adding to the disarray.

I had been so immersed in my training that I had almost forgotten about the meeting.

Thankfully, I managed to make it in time.

"Pfft."

A certain sound caught my attention and when I looked up, I found someone staring at with me a look of mockery.

'Who is this guy?'

With long black hair, hazel eyes, and handsome features, he appeared somewhat familiar, but I couldn't quite put it where.

"You're here."

My attention shifted away when I noticed Leon approach me.

He sported a small frown on his face but didn't say anything about my clothing and started to brief me on the situation.

"Near here there's a Nyxfernal nest."

I raised my brow.

'Nyxfernal nest?'

Having studied the books before coming here, I was well learned on Nyxfernals. They were an underground creature that loved to dig tunnels. Highly toxic, and nimble with sharp claws, they were monsters that the Academy recommended avoiding.

...So why was he telling me this?

"I've already scouted the area beforehand, and there's only one Junior ranked one. The rest are infant ranked."

"And?"

"Within the nest, there is a handful of Lumicore Fungi."

"Ah."

"It may not be useful for you, but it can fetch a high price if you were to sell it on the market. If you help us, we will give you a share of the gains."

"...."

I didn't answer immediately. Staring into Leon's eyes for a brief moment, I proceeded to lower my head.

Lumicore Fungi. I knew about them. They weren't exactly useful for me. They were resources more fit for those who practiced the [Body] category.

However, that didn't mean they were worthless.

No, rather, they were worth a lot of money. I wasn't sure exactly how much, but each gram was worth at least multiple dozen Rend.

I was in desperate need of money.

To become stronger faster, I needed more resources. Money was the key to gaining access to such resources.

I had no other choice but to accept.

And when my thoughts paused there, I looked up to Leon and nodded.

"Alright. I'll accept."

Just briefly, I noticed Leon's lips pull up slightly. But it left as fast as it came, and I had a hard time figuring out whether I had seen it wrongly or not.

In the end, I let it be.

"...Get ready. We will be leaving soon."

*

Located deep into the [F] Zone was a certain web of tunnels that one could enter from a few spots above.

Somewhat familiar with the area, Leon guided us toward a dark cave that one couldn't see the end of.

"Is this the place?"

Luxon glanced around with a frown.

"Do we have some light? Or do you-"

"There's no need."

Leon casually looked back before stepping in.

"You'll see once we reach deeper inside."

"Uh..."

His figure disappeared into the cave. Aoife followed right after him. Though confused, Luxon sighed and followed right after. I was just about to follow when someone turned to face me.

He appeared friendly.

"Make sure you stay behind me."

"....?"

"I have no idea why Leon wanted you to come, but..."

He lowered his head to scan my body.

"....I can protect you if you stay behind me. Since you seem to be struggling so much, I thought it'd be best if you stayed with me. I'm a sharpshooter so I've got great eyesight."

What is this guy...

"If you stay next to me you won't get in the way of others and might even be able to contribute."

Every word that he spat was spat with a friendly smile, and yet... All I felt was a strange sense of disgust.

I was just about to respond to him when he turned around and entered the cave.

"Just make sure you listen to me. It'll do all of us good."

"...."

I stood in silence for a short moment before lowering my head to stare at my hand.

Struggling?Might be able to contribute?

This...

"Hah."

I almost laughed.

What sort of situation was this? I wasn't even mad. I was just baffled. He couldn't even hide his own dislike towards me.

I shook my head.

I had thought people would finally leave me alone after what I had done, but there were still a few who were not convinced.

Most likely, he had some basis behind his confidence. Given that I could somewhat recognize him, he must've had some strength to back up his confidence.

Still...

"What a pain."

Just when was it going to be enough?

Scratching the side of my head, I entered the cave and embraced the darkness. I had just taken several steps when I stopped.

The air was thick with the scent of earth and dampness, and the sound of dripping water echoed softly in the distance.

"Hm?"

However, off in the distance I took notice of a strange glow.

I didn't hesitate to follow the light and soon enough I was left shocked by the sight that greeted me. Covering the walls and ceiling of the cave was an unusual blue moss, emitting a soft glow that illuminated the entire cavern.

'Wow.'

It looked like a scene straight out of a movie and I had to take a moment to observe the area.

"Julien."

I only looked away when I felt someone call my name. Looking up, I saw everyone looking at me. I briefly paused my gaze on the black-haired kid before turning it back to Leon who pressed his hand against his mouth and nudged me forward.

"We're near the nest so be careful. If you—"

BOOOM—!

".....!"

The cavern shook all of a sudden. Unable to keep it steady, I lost my footing and fell against the ground.

I was the only one that fell as almost everyone was able to keep their footing.

"Hiek!"

Someone else did fall on me as my vision was covered by a set of purple hair.

The moment she fell on me, I felt her body turn rigid and our eyes met. I hardly reacted given that I knew that this was an accident, but she didn't think so as her eyes darted all over the place but me.

Then, just as she was about to say something, I caught sight of a massive figure headed in our direction from the distance and I pushed her off of me.

"...!"

A tremendous pressure that made it hard to breathe emitted from the creature's body as I tried to get my bearings.

Just as I was about to move forward, a hand pushed me back.

"Don't interfere."

"Get ready!"

Leon's voice reached me shortly after. With his glowing sword, he pushed his feet forward and dashed forward.

His figure blurred forward as it headed toward the distant creature. Following him right behind was Aoife who was just a tad bit slower.

The others also got into position as they readied themselves to face the creature.

I was the only one who did nothing as I met a pair of hazel eyes.

"We discussed it before, right? Stay with me so that we don't interfere with them."

"..."

Just then, I deeply stared into his eyes. He met them back. As if he was trying to challenge me. However... that didn't last for long.

He soon started to grow uncomfortable with my gaze. So much that his eyes started to dart away from me.

"...."

I kept at it until he couldn't bear it anymore and finally looked away.

I knew then the reasoning behind his attitude.

....He was afraid of me.

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Chapter 57: Hunt [4]

....He was afraid of me?

Was that the case....? I thought so at first, but surely that couldn't be the only reason for his hatred and dislike towards me.

There had to be something else.

"....."

Thinking things through I realized that I hadn't exactly been the friendliest of people.

I tended to mind my own business and avoided interacting with others. It was mainly so that my cover wouldn't be blown but at the same time because I didn't want to get attached to anyone.

But still...

For him to be afraid of me. There had to be a more concrete reason.

BOOOM—!

The cave shook as Leon's sword came into contact with Nyxfernal—a large creature with a stout body and thick, fur-covered form. Its sharp claws gleamed under the light from the moss as its small, beady eyes fiercely glared at us.

"Kh....!"

Upon coming into contact with the Nyxfernal, Leon's sword ricocheted back. Just as he was about to lose balance, Aoife raised her hand and his body halted mid-air.

"....Thanks."

She followed up with another wave, stopping the beast's claws from slashing at him.

Kacha!

Lighting burst from out of nowhere, landing on the Nyxfernal thick fur. Evelyn, who stood by the side, held both hands forward as her uniform and hair fluttered.

But...

That too seemed like a futile attempt as Evelyn let out a small curse.

"Shit."

"Let me."

A figure rushed the creature. His speed was fast, and within moments, he appeared right beneath the creature's body. Two magic circles formed around his fists as he punched out with everything he had.

But...

Clank—!

Even that seemed like a meaningless attempt as his fists stopped right after making contact with the creature's underbelly.

Luxon immediately panicked as he looked behind.

"Shit, Aoife! Save me....!"

Just as he said those words, the Nyxfernal's body flexed and its tail swung right at Luxon who crossed his arms to brace for impact.

Thankfully, Aoife was quick enough to react as she pulled him back just in time to avoid the attack.

Bang—!

The cave shook even more fiercely as Luxon skidded several meters back.

"Haa... Haaaa... Thanks."

"Try again."

With cold focus, Aoife lifted her palm and continued to support from behind. She wasn't the only one supporting.

Xiu!

An arrow flew at fast speeds, hitting the tough fur of the Nyxfernal. Sparks flew, but nothing came out of it.

Aoife frowned and turned her head slightly.

"...Aim for its eyes."

"Got it."

He pulled the string of the bow back and prepared to attack again.

"...."

I stood quietly beside him. Until this moment, I remained standing without doing a single thing. I had no business interfering.

I knew the extent of my skills. There wasn't much I could do. At least, not yet.

I closed my eyes and extended the threads towards the ground, splitting them in three. I looked around to locate the best area to set them up.

BOOOM—!

I ignored the chaos around me and guided the threads carefully around the walls of the cave.

My head twitched as I felt a sharp pain. However, I ignored the pain and continued to guide the threads around the walls of the cave.

I was waiting for the right time to act.

For...

"Hm?"

I felt a sudden vibration and opened my eyes.

"What..."

There was something odd about the vibration. It wasn't coming from the Nyxfernal in the distance. It was coming from somewhere else...

"Beneath...?"

I looked down.

It was then that it happened.

—————!

Something exploded from beneath me and the ground split. The area it covered was small, and it was right beneath where I stood.

The footing I held disappeared, and my body jolted with a weird sensation as gravity started to pull me down from beneath.

In that split second, I felt the world around me slow down.

I managed to catch a glimpse of everything around me. From the changing expressions of Leon, Evelyn, Aoife, Luxon... to the look of panic on Wesley's face as he fell alongside me.

.....I caught all of it in my mind before everything turned dark.

The last thing I remembered was recalling the threads and creating new ones.

"Julien..."

It all happened so fast that nobody was able to react on time.

BOOOM————!

All Leon felt was a subtle trembling of the ground behind. When he turned his head, he caught a glimpse of Julien.

...As usual, he seemed unperturbed. Even as the ground beneath him quaked, he stood with a frown. As if this had nothing to do with him.

Or maybe things had happened too fast for him to react.

Even so...

His figure, alongside Wesley's disappeared from their sight.

"Ah."

He could hardly make a sound before his ear detected an odd whistling noise heading right in his direction.

Instinctively, he moved back and just barely managed to avoid the tail of the Nyxfernal.

Bang—!

"Get a grip."

A cold voice echoed beside him. When he looked, he saw Aoife staring at the monster with a tight frown.

"I know you're his knight, but you need to focus on the monster in front of us. We can look for them later. They should be f—uh!"

Her words halted and she raised both her hands.

Leon looked at the creature which stopped mid-motion before nodding his head. She was right.

There was no point in thinking about Julien. He was going to be fine.

There was no way his instincts would lie to him.

He...

Was definitely fine.

I opened my eyes. Darkness embraced my vision as my head throbbed. I hung suspended in the air as the threads kept me in place.

"Where am I....?"

I looked up.

There was hardly any light.

It seemed like I had fallen into a deep hole.

I closed my eyes and felt the threads. There were a total of two left. The other one had snapped. I focused on creating another one and safely planted it into a crack on the wall.

"Hmm."

I tried pulling myself up, but that seemed to be impossible given my current abilities.

The threads were still fragile. It was already a miracle that I was safe.

"...Looks like I have no choice but to go down."

It was the only thing I could do.

"Hah."

In the darkness, I slowly and carefully extended the threads, guiding my body toward the bottom of the hole.

I thought back on the situation and frowned.

There was someone who had fallen with me. What had happened to him? Had he died...? Or was he still alive? I pursed my lips and continued to guide myself down until I eventually felt my feet touch a surface.

Thud.

The air felt damp and a still silence filled my surroundings. A strange tension lingered over my surroundings as I felt my muscles tense and my skin grow cold.

"....."

I took a quiet breath and took out my bag where I reached for my torch.

".....!"

A pair of eyes immediately greeted my sight the moment I lit up the torch and my heart almost stopped. Thankfully, I was able to keep myself composed.

....I was somewhat used to fear.

"Took you long enough."

A familiar voice reached my ears, and when I got a better look, I stood frozen by the sight that bore before me. The only thing I could recognize were his hazel eyes. Everything else was different.

The contours of the face were distorted, with areas of puckered flesh. The color was uneven, ranging from red to mottled shades of brown and gray.

What had...

Happened to him?

"You're alive."

That was all I managed to utter in the end.

He smiled then.

"What's with your expression, phecdá? Are you mad at how I told you to stick close to me? I had to do it. You didn't pick up any of my messages. We're supposed to start soon."

".....?"

Phecdá? Message? Start soon?

I felt my blood grow cold and my fingers twitched.

'No, this...'

All of a sudden, an idea sprouted in my mind.

"This isn't the first time you've seen my face. But right, yeah..."

His expression twisted slightly.

"I guess you were disgusted by the way I looked. You made that pretty clear back then when you beat me up."

A lot of things started to click in my mind all of a sudden. The reason for his fear, and his antagonism towards me.

'Ah, this...'

"Why aren't you speaking....? You were rather vocal back at the camp when you killed your way to the top. I'm supposed to be following your orders, but you went and outdid yourself didn't you?"

"....."

His eerie smile stuck right close to me. His hazel eyes turned, and I felt the back of my neck tingle as my heart started to beat faster.

Slowly my head lowered, and my eyes fell on his forearm.

His clothes were ripped so I could see it well. However, much to my shock, I saw nothing. As if noticing my actions, he frowned and followed my line of sight.

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

He stopped and looked at me.

His expression changed all of a sudden.

But it was too late.

In that split second, my threads were already at his throat. Before he could even react, I clenched my hand as a fountain of red sprayed on me.

Pfittt—

The scent of iron lingered in the air as I felt my face grow wet.

"Ukh."

I took several steps back.

My stomach churned and I hastily closed my eyes.

Thud.

"H-hah..."

...I had to do it.

I repeated such thoughts in my mind. It hardly worked as my stomach continued to churn, but it didn't stop me from repeating it.

'I had to do it.'

It was either me or him...

That much I knew.

My thoughts were further confirmed the moment I opened my eyes again and my gaze once again fell on his forearm. The once clean forearm suddenly changed as a black clover appeared.

"...."

I knew then that my guesses had been right and I turned to stare at the tattoo on my arm.

"What is the meaning of this...?"

New pieces of information entered my mind.

Pechda? Camp? What sort of situation was this...?

I thought about keeping the conversation going to get more information, but I realized it was a stupid idea. I knew nothing about the organization. A simple slip-up and he would've noticed that I wasn't Julien.

What would happen to me then?

I didn't care to find out and acted swiftly. His guard was down, and his attention was away from his surroundings.

All it took was a simple moment.

....While I didn't expect him to be helpless against my attack, I was still ready for any counter he might've made. His death seemed surprising.

Perhaps, he really didn't think I would kill him.

'Is there some sort of harsh rule that forces members to not kill each other? Is that why his guard was so down?'

If not for that, I didn't think I would've been able to kill him so easily.

Still, his death only brought more questions. There was also the fact that I had to deal with the aftermath of this.

Thankfully, I was the only one aware of Etherwave. I could place the blame for his death on the monsters here. Perhaps even hide the traces of the threads...

"...."

My mind continued to spin in the silence as I forced myself to look at the headless body in front of me.

I took a deep breath and looked at my forearm.

Or more specifically, toward the second leaf.

It was once again shining.

'He may not be alive, but there was a way for me to find more information...'

I pursed my lips and quietly looked up. I didn't want to do it. I hated the sensation that came with understanding another's emotions. But... I had to do it.

To get some clues... I had to do it.

"I have to."

I lowered my hand and placed it over his body.

That's when I pressed the leaf and my world darkened.

Sorry for bad upload rate. I ended up scrapping this chapter 2 times before I got to this. There will be another one.

Chapter 58: Hunt [5]

A large mansion.

A familiar feeling washed over me. Yet again, I felt present, but at the same time not. I could see and move, but I wasn't... 'here'.

'....Will I be able to gain anything?'

I looked around me.

The place was finely decorated with furniture and paintings all over. Clearly, whoever lived here was rather well off.

I focused my attention on one of the paintings hanging by the wall.

'A family of four.'

Two adults, and two kids. Two males and two females.

'....Are these the owners of the mansion?'

"H-help...!"

It was then that I heard it. A young voice. One that seemed to belong to a child.

Crackle—!

"I-I can't breathe..."

Flames engulfed the surroundings.

"B-rother... I can't breathe."

Two children huddled by the corner of the room. They stared at the raging flames in fear.

I felt a familiar sensation as information flooded my mind.

A high-class family. One that was highly respected within the Empire. The two children in the room were the sole heirs of the estate. One year older than the girl, the boy was the older brother.

In these raging flames.

"Mom and Dad will come..."

His instincts took over and he protected the girl.

"It hurts... It hurts..."

The sister cowered in his arms.

"Don't worry, mom and dad are coming... Just wait a little..."

Though he said that, the boy didn't seem sure. I felt every emotion he felt. He was primarily dominated by fear, but he did his best to keep himself from showing it.

For the sake of his sister...

"I'm going to protect you."

He was prepared to push away his fears.

Crackle!

"Akhhh...!"

But the flames continued to rage on.

"It hurts...! B-brother."

"Stay behind me."

He covered her with his arms.

The heat of the fire burned him.

He was just eight years old, and yet...

"Ukh."

He understood his duty all too well.

"...."

I stared blankly at the scene in front of me.

The scene hit harder than I thought it would. It reminded me a lot of myself. No, it was a perfect reflection of what I tried to be.

But...

'I ran away from my duty.'

"Hah."

My chest tumbled as it was pierced by an all too familiar pain.

"Eli! Emily!"

A voice broke me out of my thoughts.

In the distance, a figure appeared. Her appearance was haggard and she seemed to be in distress.

Crackle!

The flames continued to burn.

But amidst the flames, the faces of the two children lit up.

'She's finally here.'

Just in time.

"Mommy!"

The children hastily stood up to head to where their mother was.

But....

Bang—!

"Ahhhh!"

The ceiling fell apart and the fire spread.

"Eli! Emily....!!"

The mother's scream echoed within the sea of flames as the two children ducked down in fear.

'It hurts.'

'I don't want to die.'

'Mommy.'

'Daddy.'

'Save us.'

Their voices entered my consciousness as they held their heads.

'....Please save me.'

'Mom!'

'I'm scared.'

'I'm so scared...'

The fire intensified and the walls burned. The crackling of the fire echoed. The roof collapsed inwards. Embers scattered in all directions, and smoke covered everything.

"Cough...! Cough....!"

In the struggle, the pair of siblings held each other. As if they were the only thing left to rely on.

Bang!

Bang!

The structure started to collapse.

All hope seemed to have been lost when.

"Grab my hand!"

A hand reached out from behind the flames. The faces of their mother appeared from behind.

"Grab it!"

"Mom!"

"Mom...!"

Hope ignited within the children's minds as they reached for the outstretched hand.

They both reached for it at the same time, but...

Only one hand grasped the outstretched hand.

The boy stared at his mother who was looking at him with open eyes. The arm pulled back and he felt his sister disappear.

Crackle!

Shortly after, the flames fully engulfed his vision, flooding his body with intense pain.

But the only thing that the boy could think about was his mother.

'It hurts...'

'Mom.'

'...Where are you?'

He waited for her.

'I'm here...'

'Are you coming back?'

'Mom.'

For her hand to reach out for him again.

But...

It never did.

Even as he felt his entire body burn.

The hope.

It still lingered, and I felt it.

But it never came.

?| Lvl 2. [Anger] EXP + 3%

Darkness took over from then. Only for it to be shattered shortly after as the heat that had been invading every part of the child's body disappeared and he felt someone's presence.

'Mommy...?'

Had she finally come?

A sense of relief washed over the child's body as the darkness embraced his consciousness

That sense of relief was short-lived, however.

"Wake up."

A voice brought the young boy back.

It was a rough and detached voice. When his eyes opened again, the boy found himself inside a large cave.

He wasn't alone. There were several other children around him. All of them huddled together, scared.

"Mom?"

He called for his mother but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Forget about all you've known. Your identity no longer matters. If you want freedom, then you've got to earn it."

The man smiled. It was a smile that seemed warm to those looking. But it was also the same smile that forced the children to starvation.

"Work harder."

He was a total bastard.

"You didn't work enough. You won't be eating today!"

'No... I'm hungry... I will work harder... Please... Just a little bit...'

"Shut up!"

'Ahhhh—!'

Even as the children's cheeks sunk in due to the hunger, he didn't care.

"....For the Inverted Sky! Pray!"

A fanatic.

"Not enough!"

A lunatic who enjoyed torturing the little children.

"You useless things! You won't be of use at this rate!"

Starving them.

'I am useless...'

Brainwashing them.

'It hurts... It hurts... But it's for the Inverted Sky.'

'I'm hungry...'

That was who he was.

'....All is for the inverted sky.'

The children gradually forgot about the pain and hunger. Even as they passed out due to starvation and pain, the only thing they muttered was...

"For the Inverted Sky."

It was as if their lives were no longer important.

I watched this happen over and over again. Thousands of children came and went. By the end, all that was left were mindless puppets who only believed in one thing.

"Long live the Inverted Sky."

Their identity had been stripped.

So had their humanity.

The only thing left was their voice.

"H-hungry... H-hurts..."

But even that was starting to fade.

Only one child hadn't lost his voice.

"...."

In the silence, I approached him.

"Hurts... Hungry... Mom..."

Even now, he clung to the past. To his mother who had left him in the flames.

Gradually my steps stopped and he turned his head.

A familiar burned visage. His eyes, though innocent, carried a certain clarity to them as they looked at me.

".....You're not Julien."

I closed my eyes before nodding.

"I am not."

The child nodded his head as if understanding the situation.

He looked around him.

"These were memories I had long forgotten."

"...."

I listened in silence.

"My memories of my family are rather fuzzy. How are they doing right now? Are they healthy? Is my sister okay? Do they still think about me...?"

His face suddenly changed and I felt my jaw clench.

"You saw my memories, right? How I got my face."

The way he was looking at me...

It made my skin crawl.

"That hand..."

His head tilted and I felt my breath stop.

A variety of emotions flooded my chest all of a sudden.

But primarily...

"...Was it for me or my sister?"

All I felt was anger.

A strange suffocating feeling overtook me as my chest grew heavy.

"You've seen her face. Who was the one she was trying to save?"

His face remained stoic and unchanging, but his anger didn't. It boiled even more ferociously.

"Was it because she reached faster than me? Was that it? What would've happened had I reached for the hand first?"

My chest felt like it was ripping apart as his eyes remained glued to me.

"...Would she have taken my place? Or would I still have been discarded?"

He disappeared right then as the world turned dark.

But even then, his face didn't.

It remained stuck in my mind. His voice whispering at the back of my mind.

'Who was she trying to save?'

'Me?'

'...Or her?'

In the end...

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

I was never able to answer his question.

"...."

But I had no time to dwell on the question. The moment I regained my vision, I was met with a dozen different eyes staring in my direction from the distance.

I knew then that my path was blocked.

But I didn't care.

I brought my hand forward where five threads slowly came out. A purple magic circle floated above as the threads changed color.

Then...

Staring at the incoming creatures, I clenched my hand.

Swoosh—!

"....Do you think they're waiting for us down there?"

Evelyn's voice echoed through the empty tunnels, mingling with the sound of their footsteps as they rushed towards the hole up ahead.

She was the furthest one back as Leon led the group from the front.

His expression was hard to read. However, it was clear that he was concerned.

"I don't know."

Leon shook his head.

It had been just a minute since they had managed to defeat the Junior Ranked Nyxfernal.

They held off on collecting the fungi and directly headed down the hole to search for Julien and Wesley.

Thud. Thud.

The moment they touched the ground, all they were met with was darkness. The air was moist, and a putrid smell lingered in the air.

"Ugh..."

"What is this smell?"

The smell was so horrid that Evelyn had to cover her nose to prevent herself from gagging.

Though she didn't show it directly, Aoife also appeared to dislike it as her nose wrinkled.

Drip... Drip...!

There was a faint rippling sound in the distance that caught everyone's attention. It shattered the silence that gripped the surroundings.

Without hesitation, Leon reached out for his bag to take out his torch. He wanted to get a better look at his surroundings.

...And when the light finally shined, he froze.

So did everybody else.

"Ah..."

Looking at the corpses that were littered on the floor, Leon's head slowly raised to stare at the person sitting on top of them.

Drenched from head to toe with blood, his figure twitched the moment light shined upon him.

Then...

His head slowly raised to stare at them and his hoarse voice echoed.

"You're here..."

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Chapter 59: Hunt [6]

"Hey, why did you sto—"

Evelyn almost bumped into Leon's body as she swiftly stepped to the left in time. She was just about to complain when she found herself stopping at the sight that greeted her eyes.

"Ah, this..."

Aoife, Luxon, and the others followed shortly after.

They too wore similar expressions.

"You did this...?"

The one who seemed to be in the most shock was Luxon who looked at the corpses littered on the ground in shock.

While they weren't exactly strong monsters, judging from the aura they gave off, there were still a lot of them. Even he felt that it would be difficult for all of them to handle these many of them at once. So for him to be able to do it all by himself...

"How?"

He found that hard to believe.

But...

Such was the reality of the situation as Julien calmly stood up from his spot to brush his clothes which were covered in blood.

A strange silence gripped the surroundings as all eyes fell on him.

That was until...

"Ah...!"

Evelyn's shout brought everyone back.

"What? What's going on?"

The first to react was Luxon who looked at her with a frown. She was looking toward the distance with wide-open eyes as she pointed toward a certain area.

"T-that..."

"Uh?"

"....!"

From there, everyone could see what she was pointing at, and their expressions shifted once more.

"Wesely...?"

A headless corpse. One that wore a distinctive uniform that could only belong to those who belonged to the Haven Institute.

Almost immediately, all eyes fell on the figure that stood in the middle.

He seemed completely nonchalant about the situation. His eyes weren't even on the corpse or them.

It was his behavior that made all of them grow wary as a sudden thought crossed their minds.

What if...?

"Julien."

Leon was the first to call him out. Of everyone present, he was the only one who didn't jump to conclusions.

"...What happened?"

Finally, Julien's head turned and their gazes met. As if he understood what he was talking about, he slowly answered.

"He died."

".....I can see that."

Leon slowly blinked.

"How did he die? Did you...?"

"No."

Shaking his head, Julien pointed toward a certain direction. Following his line of sight, Leon's eyes jumped up.

It was there that he managed to catch a glimpse of a severed head. One that was badly burned.

"I wasn't the one who killed him. I'm not capable of doing that."

"No, that makes no sense."

Aoife cut the conversation short as she moved towards the severed head. She closely examined it before turning to look at Julien with a frown.

"These scars... They're obviously healed."

"..."

Julien calmly stared at her for a short moment before turning to look at the severed head. For the briefest of moments, Leon saw Julien's face contort. However, he was quick to hide it.

"Possibly. I didn't have the time to check..."

"Right."

Aoife glanced at the surroundings briefly before nodding. She didn't seem too convinced but accepted the explanation. Especially when considering how differently the monsters had been slain compared to the corpse.

He could've perhaps done that on purpose, but there was no denying the burned-up face before them.

Julien...

He wasn't capable of doing such a thing.

And with such thoughts, Aoife looked at Leon who looked back at her.

"For now, let's head back. We'll report this to the institute. They'll do the investigating."

"Okay."

Leon readily agreed and turned his attention away from Julien.

The same was true for the others who looked anywhere but his direction.

.....There was something about his current demeanor that threw them all off. His eyes especially.

They were cold. Almost detached.

But within them, they could feel a certain rage that they didn't want to address.

They felt...

Maddening.

"Please come with us. We will need to detain you until we manage to get a clear understanding of the situation."

".....I understand."

The moment we returned from the cave and the situation was reported, I was immediately brought away by the Academy security.

I didn't complain and obliged.

"Please place your hand over the orb."

"Understood."

"Test results... 1.897."

"Mana Density... Tainted."

As I continued to undergo testing, a familiar set of results appeared in front of me. This pattern persisted for several hours until I was finally led to a small room furnished with a wooden desk and chair.

"Someone will come in shortly. Make yourself comfortable in the meantime."

"....."

I sat down and closed my eyes.

The lingering traces of the anger I had perceived from the vision began to fade, and I started to feel normal again.

I was confident in my chances of making it out without any problems. I didn't use curse magic when dealing with Wesley. Had I used it... There would've been a strong chance his death would've been linked to me.

But...

There wasn't. I made sure that to be the case.

It was likely that the Academy would attribute his death to one of the monsters.

"Hah."

But that wasn't the only thing they'd be worried about.

The fact that his true face had been revealed probably was what the Academy was investigating.

...They probably didn't care about his death as much as his real identity.

I couldn't blame them. After all, he had managed to sneak in right under their noses. It made me think deeply about the organization I was dealing with and their strength.

Surely, an organization that could sneak in 'spies' in such a prestigious institute had to be extremely powerful. Several times more than the Institute itself.

'The Inverted Sky.'

Was what they called themselves. At least, from what I had managed to glimpse from the memories.

They appeared to be a group of fanatics who kidnapped young children to brainwash them.

Even now...

Thinking about what I had seen, my stomach churned in disgust.

'Evil bastards...'

The memories of the vision remained glued to my mind. Constantly reminded of what I had seen, and just what atrocities they had committed.

There were a lot of things that I had managed to learn from the vision. However, what bothered me the most was the fact that I... No, Julien was part of this very organization.

And he wasn't simply a small member.

'Phecda'

Such was the name I was referred to back in the cave.

What did it mean, and what did it signify...?

I wasn't exactly sure, but... I knew that it meant a rather important position.

"...."

I sat in silence staring at the empty desk before me as I felt my back tense.

'They're probably going to come for me soon.'

Wesley and I were supposed to carry a mission.

The fact that he had died and I was present was rather suspicious. However, I knew the moment that I was part of this organization that there was no point in trying too hard to make it seem as though it was an accident and that I wasn't involved.

They weren't stupid.

I was sure they knew I was in some way involved in his death.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I drummed my fingers over the wooden desk.

But...

'It's not exactly a bad position.'

This situation...

I could make use of it.

Within this area where the institute's discipline was upheld, several school board members tasked with administering disciplinary measures for the cadets were present.

The accused sat on the other side of the "invisible glass," awaiting his judgment.

He sat quietly behind a desk with a calm face.

"Julien Dacre Evenus. The Black Star."

The accused name and title were read out to the members of the room.

"How deeply is he involved in this matter?"

The disciplinary elder, a rough man with a thick frame and bald head stood at the center of the formation.

Besides him, a young man who appeared to still be a cadet held up a piece of paper as he spoke.

"The results have come back negative. The likelihood of him being the culprit is unlikely. There are no traces of curse magic, and given how cleanly the head had been severed,

it is also unlikely to be done by a magician. The biopsy suggests that it's more likely a monster who did it."

"Right..."

The elder had also read the biopsy and after having observed the corpse, he also believed that to be the case.

However...

There was something off about the situation.

Something simply didn't add up.

He eventually turned his head toward his right where a woman sat. She had been silent the entire time, and her attention had been on Julien from the start.

"Chancellor."

He called out to her.

Only then did she turn her head to meet his gaze. The elder felt his breath leave his body the moment their gazes met, as an intense pressure bore down on him.

Thankfully, as a high wizard, he was able to remain composed.

Forcing those feelings down, he managed to ask.

"What do you think about the situation....?"

A strange silence filled the room shortly after he asked that question.

With her gaze lingering over him for the briefest of moments, she turned her attention back to Julien who seemed to have felt their gazes as he lifted his head.

Then, with a slight tug of her lips, she leaned her cheek on her propped-up fist.

".....I wonder."

Chapter 60: A little closure [1]

".....Did you kill him?"

A familiar woman sat on the opposite end of where I sat. Her presence felt suffocating, and her deep eyes seemed to lure me in the more I looked into them.

"..."

Even so, I kept calm. While pressuring, my mind was firm. The vision had messed up with my mind and the resentment I felt from Wesley was still present.

The current me...

Couldn't be fazed by this much.

"I didn't."

My voice came out rather dry.

Delilah's blank face suddenly cracked as her lips gently pulled up. Then, amidst the silence, her finger pressed against the silence.

Tap—

A subtle whistle sounded as the space between the two of us froze.

"....Alright, you're free to go."

"Hm?"

I thought nothing could faze the current me, but this was an unexpected development.

"Are you surprised?"

".....I wouldn't say I'm not."

Surely, while I had hidden my traces quite well, there was still a reason to suspect me as the culprit. At the very least, there was reason to believe I knew something about Wesley's death.

She had even more reason to think so.

Especially when I knew she had seen the tattoo on his arm and that his true face had been revealed.

I thought she was going to mention it during our talk, but she didn't. Rather, she didn't even bring the topic up once and just let me go.

Why?

"There's not enough evidence to assume you did anything. All of our tests suggest that it's unlikely for you to have done it."

"Then...?"

"...We're not unreasonable. Since it seems like it was an accident, we don't have any right to detain you for any longer. You're free to go."

Just like that...?

I stayed rooted in my seat for a few moments, attempting to comprehend the situation. I gazed intently at her expression, which resembled that of a blank piece of paper, before gradually rising from my seat.

".....Okay."

There were a lot of things that I wanted to ask, but decided otherwise.

I knew she had some answers to some of the questions I had, but I chose to remain silent. It was still too risky. I didn't have enough leverage for myself, and how would I even explain to her my situation?

For what reason would she even believe me?

It was with such thoughts that I stood up from my seat and bid her farewell.

For now...

I needed to thread carefully.

It wasn't the right time yet. I knew it was going to come soon.

In the ensuing silence following Julien's departure, Delilah continued to fix her gaze on the door of the room.

She could see the surprise etched on the faces of the school board members from the other side of the door as they closely stared at the leaving Julien. She didn't blame them. The choice to release him rested solely on her shoulders.

But it wasn't without any reason.

Primarily, she knew that it would've been a wasted effort. If he did do it, there was no chance he was going to come clean.

There was also not enough evidence to pin the blame on him...

Since that was the case, why hold him in for longer?

Delilah cared a lot for her time.

Since it was just going to be a massive waste of time, she let him go. As if she was going to let those old bastards take her weekend again.

"....."

Delilah kept those thoughts to herself.

But outside of that, there was something else that intrigued her.

"....An internal conflict?"

While she couldn't prove Julien's role in the cadet's death, she was more or less certain that he had played a part in it.

And... if that was the case, then did that mean that there was some sort of internal conflict within the organization?

Or maybe, he was someone who had betrayed the organization.

"....."

Delilah couldn't fathom why Julien had never bothered to conceal the tattoo on his arm. Despite the organization being known to only a select few important figures within the empire, she was certain that if anyone discovered the tattoo on his arm, he would have hell for it.

The fact that he never intended to hide it was what aroused Delilah's curiosity the most.

She felt like there were a lot of possibilities for such a situation. Perhaps there was an internal conflict between the groups within the Inverted Sky.

...Or perhaps he was a traitor.

Maybe it was just a random tattoo he got and he had no part in all of this at all.

Delilah wasn't exactly sure the exact reason, but...

"....I'll know soon."

Of that she was sure.

Regardless of what he did, his actions were sure to bring those from the Inverted Sky over to the Institute.

All would become clear then. Whether he was with them or not, or a traitor... It would all become clear the moment they came.

It was for this reason that she let go of him.

Whether he was an enemy, she wasn't so sure anymore.

However...

That didn't matter anymore. She had to get ready now. They were coming, and while she didn't know when or how she knew it was only a matter of time.

"Finally..."

Delilah's eyes flashed coldly.

"....I've got something."

In light of the events that happened, I was given a day off.

I took that chance to leave the Academy. I had a certain destination in mind. Taking the train from the Academy to Lens, I took a change and headed for 'Rosea'.

Located two hours from Lens, Rosea was a much smaller town located near a sizable mountain range.

The air was fresh and greenery covered the surroundings.

I retraced my memories and walked along a small path. It was a place I had never been before, but I knew exactly where I was and the path I was following.

Soon enough, the remains of a large mansion appeared within my sight.

".....I'm here."

I could still picture the mansion in my mind.

It stood tall and grand, capturing the attention of all that passed.

....Such was how it was before the vision.

Right before the flames came.

"....."

The silence that gripped the surroundings felt stifling, but I paid no attention to it.

I just felt like I had to be here.

It brought me a strange peace of mind. Especially towards the anger and rage that was gripping my chest.

Even now...

I was still under the effects of the vision.

The anger that had been transmitted to me refused to leave.

Scrunch... Scrunch...

I stepped around the mansion and looked around. The entire structure lay in ruins with charred spots all over the place. Vegetation had already started to reclaim the remnants of what was once a grand and imposing mansion.

Eventually, my steps halted.

I stood before a headstone.

[In loving memory of William Kenneth]

"..."

I gripped my chest.

The anger that resided in my chest threatened to boil all over all of a sudden. A voice echoed within the depths of my mind.

'Which one was she trying to save...?'

'Me.'

'....Or her?'

'Who?'

The voice continued to whisper within my mind as I had the sudden urge to break the headstone apart in front of me.

Unknowingly, my jaw clenched tightly and so did my fists.

'Who?'

Even I was starting to question this.

But it all stopped by a sudden voice.

"Who... are you?"

I turned my head to see a young girl with long black hair standing not so far from where I was. Her appearance seemed vaguely familiar.

"...What are you doing in front of my brother's tomb?"

Brother...

I closed my eyes for a brief moment.

'Right, it's her.'

Eleonora Kenneth.

William Kenneth's sister and the little girl in the vision.

I lowered my hat to hide my face.

"I was just passing by when I saw this place. It seems like an unfortunate event has happened here."

"Yes. It's been over a decade since."

She walked up to the tombstone and sat down. Then, under my watch, she placed a rug over the stone and started cleaning it.

The way she cleaned the stone seemed to be extremely thorough. As though she was treating an extremely precious object.

I broke the silence between us.

"You must really care about your brother."

"...Uh?"

Her movements stopped and she turned to look at me.

I didn't mind and continued.

"How old was he?"

She was hesitant at first, but glancing at the headstone in front of her, her eyes lowered and she answered.

"...My brother was just eight then. I was six."

"You must've forgotten about the incident then. So long has happened."

I could hardly remember anything from back when I was six.

"No."

Unexpctantly, Eleonora did.

"....I remember everything. I've never forgotten."

Perhaps because the topic was brought up, she recalled the events in her mind.

Her lips pursed, and her arms trembled slightly.

"I... can never forget that day. It haunts me every day."

She blinked rapidly to hide her tears.

But I could see them from where I was.

"It's my fault... I-f I hadn't started to fire... If Mother had taken his hand instead of mine..."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she started to choke on her words.

"I shou—"

"He never resented you."

I cut her off dryly.

"Ah...?"

Her eyes widened.

"What are y—"

"Not once."

I stared at the headstone in front of me.

He had never once resented his sister for taking the hand.

".....He was happy you were safe."

He resented the idea of her going through something he had had he taken the hand.

Not that she had taken the hand instead of him.

"And he's also happy that you still think about him."

His mother may have abandoned him.

But she hadn't.

The feelings that boiled within my chest started to ease.

It no longer felt as suffocating.

"W-why are you saying this...?"

Eleonora choked on her words. Her eyes were red, and her hands were trembling. I could see that the events of the past had been eating at her every day as well.

He wasn't the only one.

I smiled then.

I didn't need to pretend to be Julien. I could smile now.

".....I know because I felt what he felt. It's part of my ability. I felt it in his soul right now."

I didn't mind lying a little.

Because it was partly true.

"H-hah..."

The rug fell and she began to cover her eyes with both hands as tears finally streamed down her face.

"B-brother... Ah..."

Her sobs echoed quietly in the surroundings.

I felt my lips quiver slightly and I looked up at the sky.

'Neither one resents each other for what happened.'

They truly were...

Siblings.

"....."

I had no obligation to do this. I didn't feel responsible for his death. I had done what needed to be done to survive.

But...

I was also human.

I needed to do this for myself.

"T-thank you..."

Suddenly, I heard a soft whisper.

For some reason, it hit my feelings. I had a hard time grasping the meaning behind her words of gratitude, but I soon understood.

For over a decade...

She blamed herself for his death.

Thinking that his death was because of her. That he resented her for it.

...And for someone to tell her the opposite. Even if it was a lie.

"Haaa..."

Staring at the sky, the weight that pressed down on my chest disappeared.

What replaced it was a lighter feeling.

A warm and embracing one.

I didn't understand it well, but I let myself sink into the feeling.

?| Lvl 1. [Joy] EXP + 4%