

# Advent of the Three Calamities

## Chapter 6: Julien D. Evenus [5]

What does it feel like to be consumed by fear?

"Haaa... Haaa..."

Small, shallow, and repetitive breaths coming out of the mouth.

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

A rising heartbeat that drummed in the mind.

A trembling body.

Sweaty palms.

Shit—

It felt like shit.

"H-hah."

Regardless of what I tried, the trembling wouldn't stop.

I tried to take deep breaths but struggled, occasionally inhaling too deeply and choking on my saliva.

"...Akh."

It was a pathetic sight.

I knew it.

But.

"...H-hah."

I couldn't stop it.

It was slowly consuming every part of me.

Creeping toward the deepest parts of my mind.

I was able to hold onto my composure up until this point. But now that I was alone... I was struggling.

I couldn't stop the shaking and the feeling that was taking every part of me.

*'Let this stop... Let this stop...'*

At this point.

Death didn't seem too bad.

But.

"Kh...!"

I grit my teeth.

"No."

Such pathetic death...

Not again.

And not when I still didn't know what was going on. I wanted to know at least that much. Who was I...? And why was I here?

Dying in such a moment was the last thing I wanted.

Therefore.

"Khhh...!"

I continued to grit my teeth and endured the fear that was taking hostage of my mind.

*Riiip——!*

My hands were fiercely clenching at my shirt as my legs wiggled on the ground.

For some reason, my body would reflexively avoid the puke on the ground during my struggle.

The thought of touching the puke seemed more repulsive than the fear that was clouding my mind.

It was as if it was ingrained in my body.

"Just... let this pass..."

The situation seemed helpless but... I could slowly feel it. The sensation was dying away. Slowly, but surely I knew I could regain sight of myself.

I just had to...

"Kh... Endure."

I bit my shirt and pulled at my hair.

"Khak!"

That was when I noticed something.

"The pain..."

The pain appeared to take away from the fear I was experiencing.

"Ukh...!!"

I took advantage of that and bit on my forearm.

The sensation of my teeth digging into my skin eased many of my symptoms, and despite the intense pain, it helped me finally achieve a sense of calm.

Pain.

Pain I could deal with.

"Huuu..."

For the first time, I was able to take a deep breath.

My hands were still trembling but my mind was clear.

I glanced down at my arm, observing the intricate red patterns weaving across it, converging at the tip of my finger before eventually trailing down toward the ground.

*Drip. Drip.*

Red stained the ground.

Ignoring it, I continued to take deep and even breaths. Slowly, I was regaining control over my body.

Enough to be able to stand up.

I wasn't sure how long had passed when I was finally able to be myself again.

But it didn't matter.

Right now, all I wanted to do was figure out my situation.

"Where is this place...?"

Walking around the room, I traced my finger over a wooden desk.

It felt real to the touch.

Although I already knew, I did it to make sure.

None of this felt real to me.

"A medieval style setting, strange powers and visions, a grey-eyed man..."

The pieces started to put themselves in my head and a conclusion drew up in my mind. One that I struggled to come to terms with.

I was in the game, wasn't I?

*'Rise of the Three Calamities.'*

There wasn't much that I knew about since I'd never played it before, but from what I was told by my brother, it was a very popular game.

"Why?"

For what reason was I here?

And.

I turned to face the nearest window. It was dark outside so it was hard to see outside, but my focus was elsewhere.

Toward my reflection.

With deep hazel eyes, black hair, and a chiseled jawline, he appeared to epitomize perfection solely through his looks. I raised my hands to touch my face.

"This is me...?"

I found it hard to believe, but as I pinched my cheek, the reality seemed undeniable.

"Crazy... This is crazy."

Even though this seemed to be my reality, I still found it hard to believe.

Creaaaaak—

My head flicked.

"..."

"..."

A familiar figure stood by the door. He stood motionless, staring at me with his cold grey eyes.

"Not feeling so well?"

His tone seemed calm but all I felt was chills.

*Step—*

The wooden floor creaked under his step.

A strange tension lingered over the room as he stepped forward.

His eyes briefly paused on the puke on the ground then settling back to me.

*Step—*

He took another step.

Inching closer to where I was.

His every movement and action felt suffocating. As if he was dragging me deeper and deeper into the water.

I thought about running but realized it was futile.

There was no running from this man.

And...

I didn't feel like running.

*Step—*

He stood in front of me.

His eyes were intense. Closely reminding me of the ones he had in the vision. When his sword pierced me.

What did he...?

*SHIIING—!*

My neck felt cold.

It all happened so fast that I had no time to react.

His mouth parted slightly,

"You, who are you?"

"..."

My neck stung as the blade sunk slightly into my skin.

A wet trail traced down my neck.

"You're not him. Who are you?"

He seemed sure of himself. As if he was certain that I wasn't the person whom this body belonged to.

And he was right.

I wasn't.

Strangely, staring at the sharp tip of the sword that was pointed at me, I didn't feel a thing.

Would you look at that?

After all that fear, when the time came for me to feel fear, I didn't feel it.

It seemed to pale in comparison with what I'd experienced back in the examination room.

I cocked my head slightly.

"What makes you think that?"

My voice came out much calmer than I thought it'd come out in such a situation.

His lips pulled upwards.

"He wouldn't have reacted the way that you did had he been in a similar position."

Is that so?

"How would he have reacted?"

"By cursing me."

I thought back to the vision.

He didn't strike me to be that type of guy.

I still tried.

"Get your fucking hands off of me."

"No, not quite. Still missing something."

"As in?"

"Try, 'get your fucking hands off of me dirty bastard'. That's how he'd reply."

"I see."

Quite informative.

I gripped the blade that was attached to my neck and tried to pull it away. Through my gritted teeth, I spat,

"Get your fucking hands off of me dirty bastard!"

"Better."

Unfortunately, the blade wouldn't budge.

Was the difference in our strength that vast?

"Don't bother. I'm a knight. Our strength difference is not something that you can bridge with that body of yours."

"I see."

I let go and stared at my hand.

It was bleeding.

Still, it helped me calm down even more.

My heart was no longer beating as fast as it was before, and my mind felt a lot clearer.

"..."

"..."

We stood face to face with each other, neither one of us speaking.

He was the first one to break the silence.

"I heard an interesting rumor."

I stood still and listened to his words.

There was nothing I could do at the moment.

The powers I displayed before, I knew nothing about them nor how to use them. I had been trying the entire time.

Right now.

I was just a normal human.

"An amazing examinee appeared. From the rumors, he stunned all the judges in his performance. So much that they had to pause the selection process."

He looked at me with a meaningful look.

"That was you, wasn't it?"

Ah.

It then finally dawned on me.

The reason why I was still alive up to this point and why he still hadn't killed me yet.

He was...



I glanced at his hand. The one holding the sword.

...Wary of me.

"I wonder."

I kept things short, slowly pulling my lips into a smirk.

"And what would you do with that information?"

The grip of his sword tightened, and the blade dug deeper into my neck.

I suppressed the pain and forced myself to not react.

"I hate to say this, but this..."

I lightly tapped the blade on my neck.

"...It isn't scaring me."

Fear was the least of my worries.

"..."

His eyes grew more intense.

*'Ah, right there.'*

He was faltering.

I raised my right hand.

It was stained red as blood dripped down onto my forearm. It was quite the sight. Also why I chose this hand.

"All I did was touch him."

"..."

"I didn't expect him to react the way that he did."

It's true.

I really didn't.

"I wonder."

I looked at the man in front of me and brought my hand to a close.

"...How would you react if I tried that on you?"

\*\*\*

The man that stood before him was not the young master he knew. His demeanor, his actions, and most importantly...

His calmness.

Leon was sure of it.

...He was not Julien D. Evenus.

Having spent enough time with him, he was certain of it. He had first noticed the change before the examination.

He seemed strangely silent.

Something unfitting considering how he normally was.

*'He's probably nervous...'*

Leon brushed it off, thinking about how he had probably been nervous about his examination.

But.

"Why is the examination on hold?"

"I'm not quite sure, but I saw someone being brought out from the examination room on a stretcher. Apparently, it was done by one of the examinees."

"Ah? There's someone like that...?"

"Yeah, I caught a glimpse of him too. He was really handsome. Black hair, hazel eyes..."

The sudden rumors made it impossible for him to no longer think about it.

He didn't hesitate to look for him.

And...

"That was you, wasn't it?"

Feeling the edge of his blade press Julien's neck, he tightened his grasp of the sword.

*'There's no way they're the same person.'*

He was sure of it now.

He wasn't the young master he knew.

What made him especially wary was his lack of reaction. Faced with the prospect of his sword slicing down at his neck, he appeared unperturbed.

The hazel eyes he seemed so familiar with suddenly felt different.

As if he was looking at the cold shell of the young master he knew.

"I wonder."

His lips pulled into a smirk. Taunting him, almost.

Mocking him.

"And what would you do with that information?"

Leon further tightened his grasp of the sword and dug the sword deeper into Julien's neck.

It was a threat.

*'No reaction...?'*

One that didn't seem to be effective.

He was merely standing there.

And yet...

Yet...

He felt so intimidating.

Why was that?

"I hate to say this, but this..."

With light movements, he tapped the tip of his blade.

"...It isn't scaring me."

"..."

Leon remained silent, the muscles of his body tensing.

Then...

*Drip. Drip.*

Julien raised his blood-soaked hand.

"All I did was touch him."

He voiced out in a low tone.

His words seemed to describe the situation. Probably what had happened back at the examination room.

But.

"I didn't expect him to react the way that he did."

To Leon.

His words.

"I wonder."

Seemed more like a...

"...How would you react if I tried that on you?"

Warning.

This chapter is updated by

### **Chapter 7: Black Star [1]**

The tension in the room felt stifling.

His eyes felt intense. As if they could swallow me whole at any second.

Devour me.

But.

I never looked away.

I continued to stare back at him. I knew I couldn't look away. Looking away meant showing weakness. I couldn't do that.

Not when I knew he'd kill me for it.

*Drip... Drip... Drip...*

Blood continued to drip down on the ground. Softly disrupting the silence that seemed eager to envelop the room.

Then,

"What is your goal?"

He asked me a question.

One that I couldn't find the answer to.

Goal... What is my goal...

I'd like to know that as well.

Suddenly thrust into this situation, I was still struggling to come to terms with everything that had happened to me.

Why was I here...? Who was the one responsible for all of this? And why me?

For now, my goal was to find,

"Answers."

Reasoning behind my situation.

And what the end goal of all of this was.

"What I want is answers."

I repeated. Sort of as an affirmation for myself. A goal was important. It was so that I wouldn't fall astray in the future.

"Answers?"

His brows knit and the pressure that bore down on my neck alleviated. He seemed to be in deep thought, and when he looked back at me, he asked,

"What sort of answers are you looking for?"

"Who am I?"

"Hm...?"

"Where am I? Who are you? What is this place? Why am I here? What was the goal in putting me here?"

I threw one question after another. His expression gradually changed with each question, and before I knew it, the sword was no longer at my neck.

For the first time, his eyes didn't seem that intense.

"You didn't possess his body by choice?"

So body possession was possible?

"No."

I shook my head.

"I'm just as clueless as you are in regards to this matter."

I wouldn't be having such a hard time if I knew.

"..."

He stood quietly, perhaps contemplating my words.

*Step—*

In the meantime, I walked toward the nearest chair and sat down. I felt lightheaded. With all the blood loss and puking, I was in no state to stand.

I had just taken a seat when something flashed in my vision.

?| Lvl 1. [Fear] EXP + 0.5%

A familiar notification.

I felt like laughing and my lips gently pulled up. What sort of joke was this?

The room grew tense again.

Turning my head, the same two grey eyes were staring back at me. He seemed strangely stiff.

"I won't bite."

"...How do I know you're not lying?"

Lying?

I rested my cheek on my propped-up fist.

"Beats me."

And shrugged. I really couldn't do anything if he didn't believe me.

Had I been in his position, I too wouldn't have believed myself. Not only was I unaware of how things worked in this world, but the blood loss was making it hard for me to keep a clear mind.

But even so, under such circumstances, staring at the man in front of me, I understood something.

"You already know I'm not lying."

Somehow.

Someway... I had a feeling he already knew I wasn't lying. How? The expression he was making.

It was rather easy to read.

"..."

His lack of words served as a silent confirmation to me.

There was something he wasn't telling me.

But I didn't push for an answer.

"Haaa..."

I couldn't afford to.

Keeping myself level-headed was starting to prove difficult.

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

Hearing his voice, I lowered my head to stare at him.

"...I don't know."

I wasn't in a state to contemplate.

Plus, I knew too little of the world. I needed to know more before making a decision.  
Haste made waste...

"I see."

He seemed satisfied with that answer.

Once again, the room fell silent. I took that moment to close my eyes and rest. But just as I closed them, I heard his voice again.

"Julien was arrogant. Not very talented. And someone who hated commoners with every ounce of his being..."

Is that so...?

Sounded like an amazing guy.

"The way you act is too different. When the moment arrives for you to encounter someone connected to the previous Julien, the fact that you're not him will easily be exposed. It wasn't hard for me. How hard would it be for others?"

I figured that much.

"But..."

He dragged on his sentence, enough to capture my attention.

But?

"I can help you."

His tone lowered.

"Let me use you."

And I opened my eyes.

Our gazes met.

"In exchange, I'll let you use me."



\*\*\*

The Haven Institute, better known as [Haven], was the most prestigious and renowned 'Academy' in the Empire.

As such, the admissions were extremely challenging. Fitting for an institute of such renown.

With such a reputation, there was no social segregation between commoners and nobles. There was, however, a consensus amongst the staff.

And that was that commoners were not equal to nobles.

But it wasn't for silly reasons such as the purity of their bloodline or background. It had to do more with the Empire's law.

Commoners were only allowed to practice mana from the age of 17.

To maintain their authority within the empire, the royal family—The Megrail Family—strictly forbade the common people from practicing mana until they hit a certain age.

The same was true for nobles as well.

In contrast to the commoners, individuals of nobility were permitted to practice mana at a younger age. However, there existed an age restriction that varied based on their noble status.

Only the direct lineage of the Megrail Family was allowed to practice mana since birth.

It was therefore normal for those of the Megrail lineage to rank first whenever a descendant entered Haven.

And yet,

"You're saying there's someone better fit for the top rank. Not just one, but two?"

*Flip—*

A black glove delicately turned a page. The motion, though simple, conveyed an oddly graceful fluidity.

"This will be a first for our institute. For a lower-end noble to be elected as the Black Star. I wonder if there's ever been such a precedent in the past. And not just one candidate like that, but to have two of them..."

The Black Star.

A title given to the top entrant of each Academic year.

Without failure, each of them ultimately evolved into an influential figure within the Empire.

It was an important position.

"...It has to be done."

A crisp voice replied.

The tone sounded strangely calm. As if the one who spoke was dealing with a trivial matter.

But it wasn't such a trivial matter.

At least, Atlas didn't think so.

"It'll certainly bring forth a lot of headaches. Not just for me, but to him as well..."

The position didn't just symbolize status.

It also served as an index.

Someone that the cadets had to look up to and strive to become.

A goal.

Atlas Megrail sighed as he removed his glasses, unveiling his yellow eyes—a distinctive symbol of his direct lineage with the Megrail family.

"If he can't handle the pressure that comes with being the Black Star, I'm afraid..."

"That won't be necessary."

[Julien Dacre Evenus]

[Leon Rowan Ellert]

Delilah glanced at the two profiles in front of her. She thought back to what had happened back in the examination room.

*Tap—*

Her finger slid over to one of the profiles.

"He's not someone that will feel pressure from something as trivial as that."

She was sure of it.

After all.

She had seen him in person.

*Slide—*

And she pushed his profile forward.

"The Black Star."

[Julien Dacre Evenus]

"It can only be him."

\*\*\*

*Shaa—*

Cold water trickled down from above, each droplet stinging upon contact with my skin.

My heart raced wildly, yet I remained motionless beneath the frigid stream. I clung to my composure, letting the sensation engulf me as I let my body be consumed by the cold.

Beneath the showerhead, an unusual tranquility befell me, my mind emptying.

In that brief moment, I savored a small taste of freedom, however fleeting it may have been.

My neck and forearm stung.

But under the cold of the water, the pain seemed meaningless.

*Click—!*

The fleeting sense of freedom disappeared as soon as the shower came to an end, and the weight of reality crashed back down upon me.

"Use me..."

It had only been an hour since I parted ways with him, and yet, it felt as if it was just a few moments ago since we had that conversation.

"I wonder if I made the right choice."

I studied the reflection before me.

Every aspect appeared meticulously crafted, from facial symmetry to eye depth and jawline definition. It was flawless.

Yet, I loathed it.

"Emmet Rowe."

I muttered aloud for myself to hear, my hands silently grasping the edges of the sink.

"Twenty-four years old. Male. Salesman. Brother, and Patient at the San Burrough's Hospital."

That was my real name, my real identity, and who I was.

I couldn't forget this.

"I mustn't forget this."

This world wasn't mine, nor was this body. Both were foreign to me. This world didn't belong to me, just as I didn't belong to it.

I needed an answer.

A reason to keep on this facade.

And for that...

*Shaa—!*

I turned on the sink, calmly washing my face as the water dripped from my hair.

"I'll do anything."

## **Chapter 8: Black Star [2]**

"——The match has concluded! The victor is Aoife Kell Megrail."

*Wooo——!*

The crowd erupted in cheers. Their cheers rained down on the platform where an expressionless figure stood.

She held the spotlight, captivating all with her presence.

Cascading down her back, her red hair complemented the most striking feature—her yellow pupils.

...Aoife Kell Megrail.

The future Black Star, and one of the most promising new entrants at Haven.

Faced with the cheers, Aoife simply disregarded them and stared down at her opponent, Jordana. A promising knight of the family.

"... Disappointing."

Her cold voice descended on the young girl, passing down her evaluation of her.

Jordana lowered her head in shame.

"I apologize."

"Don't be."

Aoife extended her hand, which Jordana took.

"This was the expected outcome."

"I tried my best, but it seems like even I am not your opponent. I'm afraid that with your current strength, you won't find a single opponent in your age group. Not even in Haven."

"..."

Aoife had no words of rebuttal.

It was the hard truth of the matter.

Her talent, coupled with the gap in years she had to practice made her someone who was on a level that the regular cadets couldn't reach.

That was what she believed, and everyone else believed.

So then,

『Letter of Admission』

*We congratulate Cadet Aoife Kell Megrail for their admission to the Haven Institute.*

*We are proud and delighted to have you join us in our program.*

*It is with great honor that we invite you to join us.*

■ [Cadet Rank : 3]

『Letter of Admission』

"Third rank?"

What sort of situation was this?

"...Is there a mistake?"

When she confronted her cousin about it, Atlas, his response to her was a clear-cut,

"No."

Casually flipping through the pages of the book in his hand, he didn't even spare her a glance.

"There are two cadets that we deemed to be more talented than you."

"More talented? Then... me?"

For the first time in a considerable while, Aoife's composed expression faltered. She opened her mouth, but the words refused to leave it.

As though something was stuck, all she could do was move her mouth.

That was until,

"Julien Dacre Evenus."

She received a name.

One that she deeply engraved in her mind.

"He's the Black Star."

And.

"The one we deem to be more fitting of the role than you."

\*\*\*

"....Speech, huh."

I looked at the letter in front of me. It was given to me this morning by a member of the Haven Institute staff.

It went on to say: "Congratulations on your admission to Haven. We're proud to announce your entry to the institute..."

It was a long letter.

But the key important points were,

"Black Star, and speech."

A week had passed since the examination had taken place. I was now a lot more knowledgeable about my situation.

Therefore,

".....Hah."

I knew exactly what 'The Black Star' symbolized.

It symbolized excellence and perfection. A goal for the other cadets to follow. All of which I wasn't.

I extended my hand and a faint purple magic circle formed.

*Tzz—*

It shattered within seconds of me activating it.

"Still nothing..."

There was magic in this world. That was a fact I was made aware of quite early on. And apparently, I was talented at curse magic.

Julien that was.

Me...?

"Seems like you've still not figured out how to properly use mana."

I continued to stare at my hand and ignored the voice that reached me from the end of the room.

I concentrated all my attention on my hand.

A warm current flushed from the center of my abdomen. One that I guided until the very tips of my fingers.

In my mind, a vivid image took shape, and peculiar runes hung in the air, gradually arranging themselves within the purple circle that hovered above my fingertips.

Almost...

Sweat formed on my forehead.

It trickled down my nose.

Stopping at the tip.

The runes set themselves within the circle. A faint glow surfaced on its edges.

*Yes... A little more...*

I was close.

I could feel it.

I was...

*Tzz—*

"Ah."

The circle shattered.

All the progress disappeared in an instant.

?| [Hands of malady] EXP + 0.01%

It wasn't an unexpected outcome. It had been like this for the entire week.

But.

"...It's frustrating."

Trying over and over and over again, with little to no progression.

I thought that with enough time and practice, I'd see some improvement, but in the week that I started practicing, the only result I received was failure.



Drip...

Something wet trickled down from my nose.

I used my sleeve to wipe it. Only for it to be stained in red.

That was when I realized.

"Blood..."

"You're overworking yourself."

Finally, I looked up. There, standing by the entrance of the door to my room was Leon. His grey eyes were as intense as ever.

"You're trying to learn curse magic, right? So that you wouldn't look suspicious when the time comes."

"...Right."

No, not really.

It was part of the reason. But it was mainly because learning any other magic would prove to be too hard of a task for me.

The current me that was.

"Here you go.

Leon walked up to me to hand me a piece of paper.

"This is the speech I prepared for you. You won't have to worry about practicing it because it's pretty straightforward. Plus... Nobody will suspect a thing if you say it exactly as it's written."

"I see."

I reached out to take it when he pulled back. I was taken aback.

"...What are you doing?"

"On second thought, I'll give it to you later."

"Hm?"

He pointed at my nose.

"Clean yourself up. You're in no state to think about the speech."

"Ah."

Right.

I reached for the nearest tissue to clean up my nose. It was still leaking blood. As expected, I had been practicing a little too hard. freeweb .co m

Leon stood quietly beside me.

Closely observing me.

That was until,

"I'll take my leave. We'll meet before the speech."

He decided to leave.

"Wait. The speech...!"

He left before I had the chance to ask him for the paper.

"...Shit."

I stuffed a tissue up my nose.

"He's still wary of me."

In the week I spent with Leon, he always seemed on edge around me. I knew exactly why he was like that, and I took full advantage of it.

"I don't have much time."

But I knew that I couldn't keep the facade for much longer.

It wouldn't take too long for him to understand that he could kill me with a thought. That was why I was so desperate for progression.

Only through power would I be able to keep myself alive.

"...I should go."

I checked my watch.

It was almost time for me to give my speech. It wasn't as though I was nervous. I was far from it.

But.

"What then...?"

My goal was to find answers. And despite a week having passed, the only thing I managed to gain was even more questions.

This was indeed the world of 'Rise of the Three Calamities'.

Although I had never played the game, the situation became clear to me after experiencing the world for the past week.

In the week, I continuously thought about leaving this place.

The vision that preceded my arrival here depicted me getting killed by a long blade, with three women in pursuit.

Was the vision the Julien of the future, or was it me of the future...?

Even if it was, how long did I have before Leon killed me?

"...Regardless of the outcome, it seems like every move I make leads to my death."

For such a future, wasn't the appropriate answer to just run away? Leave this place. Surely, I'd be able to live a good life if I did.

"...As if."

The thought of not knowing why I was here seemed to eat at me more than my desire to live.

I guess, having already died once, I placed less importance on my life than the truth.

"That's not all..."

My eyes wandered back to my arm.

Turning it, a four-leaved clover entered my sight.

"..."

One of the leaves lit up.

A feeling of dread welled up within the depths of my mind as my gaze remained fixed on the leaf. It was the same leaf from last time.

It reminded me of the time during the examination.

The leaf was the reason why I was able to become the Black Star.

I still didn't know what it did.

By the time I woke up the next day, it had lit up again. I hadn't touched it since. The lingering aftereffects of the situation were still affecting me. Was my mind even capable of withstanding such intense emotions again...?

I wasn't quite sure.

But if there was one thing that I knew...

"Emotions."

Anger, sadness, joy, love, surprise, fear...

"...I won't be consumed."

*Rustle*—

I donned a black blazer and black leather gloves to hide the wounds on my hands. Making sure that it all fit, I proceeded to head out of the door.

*Not now, not ever.*

### **Chapter 9: Black Star [3]**

*Rustle*—!

A fluttering of the clothes.

"Haa..."

The small wisps of water vapor swirling in the air before vanishing.

And the cold chill that pressed against the cheeks early in the morning.

Indeed, this was real.

I was once again reminded of that.

".....Took you long enough."

Waiting for me outside the residence was Leon. Clad in a matching blazer, a sword at his hip, he casually brushed his hair.

"We'll be late if we don't hurry."

"Right."

The two of us walked on the empty streets.

*Tak*—

The gentle click of our heels echoed in the air.

He walked by my side, maintaining a respectable distance. That was his duty as Julien's designated knight.

The city we were in was called Lens.

It was the nearest city to Haven and our temporary residence. Currently, being early in the morning, there weren't many people outside.

The cobblestone streets were empty.

It was just the two of us.

"We're here."

We didn't walk far. Our destination was merely a few minutes away from the residence, located near the city center. Unlike the streets, this place was packed with people.

Leon handed me a small paper.

"Here's your ticket."

"Thanks."

One that I took.

Rather than a knight, secretary seemed more fitting for him.

"Wow."

I stopped in my tracks to stare ahead.

I was still having a hard time getting used to the sight before me.

A means of transportation unfitting for a world like this. One that seemed to function even better than the locomotives in the modern age.

"...This really is a game."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"Nothing."

I boarded the train, making my way toward my cabin. [A-25] *Ah... Right here.* It was rather spacious and had a wide window for me to look at.

From there, I could see the scenery outside. The lush trees, the tall mountains in the distance, and the orange glow that dyed the sky.

...It felt peaceful.

"How is it? Is it to your satisfaction young master?"

Leon's voice brought me back. I turned to glance at him.

"You can drop the act when it's just us."

The whole 'young master' thing felt rather uncomfortable. I wasn't Julien. He didn't have to call me that.

"I'd rather not."

"Suit yourself."

But he seemed insistent on calling me that.

I wasn't going to force him.

There were other things that I needed to pay more attention to.

Like,

*How would Julien conduct himself if he were to give a speech?*

The speech.

As Leon said. I needed to act closely as the previous Julien acted. In this world, possessing someone else's body wasn't merely a fantasy.

Many were capable of such a feat. Some for looks, and others for longevity reasons.

Unless I acted like Julien, then there was a chance someone might find out.

I couldn't allow that to happen.

"Here's the speech."

Thankfully, I wasn't completely unprepared. Having discussed it with Leon, he already had a speech prepared for me.

"....Ah, thanks."

I opened the paper to see the speech. A quick scan and I didn't see anything wrong with it. In fact, it was quite short.

*Is this good enough...?*

"I could've prepared the speech by myself."

Things would've probably been easier for me if that was the case.

"Maybe."

Maybe...?

"I just didn't want to take any risks."

"Then couldn't I have just shown you my speech while you helped me correct along the way?"

"That would've taken longer."

"..."

I chose to leave the subject there. It didn't seem like my words were getting through to him.

*He doesn't trust me at all.*

Noted.

I shifted my attention back to the speech. It wasn't long and also wasn't hard to memorize. I could learn this.

While I immersed myself in the speech, the train started to move.

The pistons roared and the train picked up speed.

I naturally turned my head to look at the window.

Unknowingly, the paper in my hand wrinkled.

*Rustle*—

Finally.

I was walking into the devil's den.

\*\*\*

Haven, Leoni Hall.

His presence grabbed the eyes of all in attendance.

An exquisite appearance that stood out from the rest. Clad in clothing that highlighted his lean and muscular physique, his appearance imprinted itself in the minds of all present.

He strode with measured steps, reaching the center of the podium.

"The Black Star."

Julien Dacre Evenus.

"...He's here."

A fact Aoife was made aware of the moment his name was called out.

Her gaze traced over his body. His every action, movement, expression... she marked them in her mind, making sure to miss nothing.

He was the one who took the title away from her. Someone her cousin and the institute's board seemed enamored with.

And the one that stood above her.

「It's a pleasure to be standing here amongst all of you.」

His tone felt rather flat.

It lacked any highs and lows, sounding rather indifferent.



「It is with great honor that I find myself in this position.」

As if he didn't mean the words that he was saying.

That was what Aoife thought at first. However, all of a sudden Julien's gaze shifted.

「Many of you stand at the very peak of the Empire. Proud sons of heaven...」

It turned sharp.

「Everywhere you go, people will praise you. Call you the elites of the Empire.」

Like that of a sharpened blade.

「Someone that should be worshiped.」

Stabbing right at those present in the hall.

「But...」

He suddenly paused, and just faintly, Aoife noticed a change. His lips... They were pulled into a smile.

「Remember.」

And as his gaze swept the hall,

He slowly muttered,

「I stand above you.」

The entire hall fell into a state of silence.

Aoife's expression underwent a small change.

"What is he....."

She looked around her. All the cadets wore similar expressions. One of utter shock which soon morphed into anger.

The previously quiet hall started to heat up.

"What did he just say...?"

"Who is this arrogant bastard?"

"Did he just say that?"

Aoife took in the sight around her. The disorder and chaos that was slowly taking shape. The flustered and shocked looks of the professors. The angered looks of the cadets.

.....And the stoic, yet arrogant look of the Black Star who stood at the center of it all.

"This isn't right."

The Black Star was supposed to be a leading figure.

Someone the other cadets looked up to.

And yet,

Aoife tore her gaze away from the chaos happening around her and closed her eyes.

"As expected..."

Her fists slowly started to clench.

"Julien Dacre Evenus."

He wasn't fit to be the Black Star.

\*\*\*

The weight of over a hundred eyes weighed heavily on me. My every action seemed to be closely scrutinized.

From the way I walked, the way I looked, and the way I spoke.

All of it was assessed.

But even so, I didn't feel nervous. I had been a salesman in my past life. Things like this weren't a problem for me.

I tapped on the small ball in front of me.

"It's a pleasure to be standing here amongst all of you."

It appeared to be a microphone. My voice echoed throughout the hall, reaching the ears of all present.

The gazes were now truly on me.

"Many of you stand at the very peak of the Empire. Proud sons of heaven..."

I kept my tone flat.

"Everywhere you go, people will praise you. Call you an elite of the Empire."

This was simply because Leon suggested me to. He was the one who came up with the speech after all.

"Someone that should be worshiped."

But that wasn't the reason why I followed the speech.

"But..."

The main reason why I followed it was because,

"Remember."

I liked it.

"I stand above you."

I almost laughed after saying that line. Taking in the expressions of all those in the hall, I almost regretted not having a phone.

It wasn't a pretty sight.

Amidst the glares of disgust, hatred, and scorn directed towards me, I chose to stand my ground next to the podium, taking in everything that was directed my way.

Leon's reasoning behind the speech was that he believed this was what the previous Julien would've said.

I didn't doubt it.

But that wasn't the reason why I went through with it. If I wanted to, I could've said something different.

But I didn't.

"What sort of joke is this?"

All of a sudden, one of the cadets stood up from their seat and shouted,

"Are you seriously supposed to be the Black Star? I refuse to believe someone like you can be our top ranker! I request a duel!"

Ah, yes.

This was what I wanted.

A cliché scenario.

"Me too!"

"Julien Dacre Evenus. I request a duel...!"

What came after the first was the second, and then the third...

"Fight me!"

The entire hall became heated with several cadets standing up and challenging me on the spot.

While some appeared to be influenced by a few instigators, a significant number seemed genuinely eager to fight me.

*'Yeah, this is it.'*

It was the effect that I desired to achieve.

My time was limited.

I needed to get stronger. And for that, I needed a target on my back.

Pressure.

A comfortable environment wouldn't shape me into a stronger individual. What I craved was pressure, and the best way to intensify the pressure on myself was to provoke every first-year in attendance.

*'It was bound to happen anyways...'*

I wasn't naive enough to think nobody would challenge me the moment I entered the institute.

It was bound to happen.

I only hurried that process.

*'Only this way can I force myself to improve faster...'*

I could already feel the weight of my actions on my shoulders. It weighed heavily on them, but it was necessary.

Growth can only be achieved through struggle.

And what better way to make myself struggle than this?

*'That's right.'*

This had to be done.

For the sake of my growth.

"I'll do anything."

## **Chapter 10: Black Star [4]**

It felt like I was standing on the cliff's edge, my feet inches from the abyss that stood behind me.

Ready to swallow me the moment I moved.

That was how I'd describe my current situation.

One that I brought myself in.

*'Yeah, this is it...'*

I stared at my hands. They were trembling slightly.

I was playing with fire.

A deadly fire.

But what could I do? There was no way back for me.

I had already set my bed.

What were the chances of me coming on top if any of the people in front of me challenged me?

Realistically speaking, close to zero.

I could hardly evoke or control my magic, and my knowledge of the fundamentals was close to zero.

Yet, despite all that, I did what I did.

It felt almost thrilling.

"Hah..."

*Crazy... This is fucking crazy... I think I've lost it.*

But of course, it wasn't as though I did this out of impulse.

I knew that the institute wouldn't allow first-years to challenge each other just yet. It was something I learned through Leon and my research.

Still, my time was limited.

It wouldn't be long before everyone came at me.

My back was against the cliff.

I could only step forward from this moment forth. Stepping back meant the end of me.

Desperation was slowly creeping up on me.

I could feel it.

There was no backup plan.

But,

*'It has to be this way.....'*

I sought desperation.

Desperation pushed people to their limit.

To points where they'd normally not go toward.

I was now in such a place.

"...You've created quite the stir."

Leon appeared. He walked toward me with an air of casualness. The speech had ended up causing a stir, forcing me to leave early.

He was probably just coming out of it.

"You're the one who made the speech. Why does it seem like you're surprised?"

"I didn't think you'd go through with it."

"...And why is that?"

So he was expecting me to say something else...?

"No..."

He pursed his lips and shook his head.

"It's nothing."

"Hm?"

What was up with this guy?

Closely looking at him, his expression seemed unusually stiff. As if he was holding himself back.

"Are you okay?"

He really didn't look so good.

I inched closer to get a better look, but...

"..."

He took a step back.

"Let's keep things cordial."

Cordial? What is this guy on about?

"No, no..."

I shook my head and moved closer. Something felt off... I couldn't quite explain it.

That's when I finally noticed it.

*This fucker.*

I pressed my hand against his shoulder to stop him from moving and tilted my head to get a better look at his face. He was looking away from me.

Why was that...?

"You're trying not to laugh, aren't you?"

"..."

"No way?"

This motherfucker.

"You find the situation amusing?"

"...No."

"Hah. Then why are you looking away?"

"..."

I raised my brow. His shoulders were slightly trembling.

"...Kh"

Kh?

"You..."

"Julien."

I stopped and turned my head. The trembling on my hand stopped, and my expression stiffened.

"You've changed a lot."

A voice reached my ears.

She stopped a few meters ahead of me.

Her appearance was amongst some of the best I've ever seen. Long flowing purple hair and crystal blue eyes. An image overlapped with hers.

One that was filled with nothing but hatred toward myself.

"...It's been a while."



Evelyn J. Verlice. This body's childhood friend, and someone who knew Julien extremely well.

I hadn't spent the past week doing anything outside of practicing magic.

To make sure everything flowed smoothly, I had Leon provide me with details on all important characters related to Julien and their relationship with him.

It was why I knew who she was.

"I see that you've become the Black Star."

An empty compliment. Her tone was cold and lacked any form of praise. She was also not looking at me.

Her eyes... They seemed to be glued to my hand.

The one grasping Leon's shoulder.

She softly whispered,

"Maybe you haven't changed, after all."

Her tone was laced with disappointment.

"..."

Only that I had no idea what she was talking about.

I only pretended to understand her, and her expression pained.

"When will you stop...?"

She couldn't meet my gaze at all.

The disappointment seemed to be too much for her to handle.

In a situation like this, the only way I could respond was,

"Stop what?"

"...Yeah, right."

She smiled weakly.

It was as if she expected such an answer from me.

"I waited for you. I really did. Even when you changed, I waited. I thought you'd come back to how you normally were, but...."

Stopping herself, she shook her head.

Softly, she mumbled in a voice that I could barely hear, *'It's not worth it. There's no point.'*

"..."

I thought she'd give up from that point, but yet again, her eyes fell on my hand.

And then toward Leon.

"Why do you let him treat you like this?"

"..."

Leon stood quietly. He seemed to be chewing on his words, seemingly thinking about how to respond.

She spoke before he could,

"I know you're loyal to the family, but why let yourself be treated like this? You're better than thi—"

"It's none of that."

Leon cut her off mid-sentence.

Her expression froze.

"He wasn't doing anything to me."

"Ah."

She stepped back and made an incredulous look. She seemed even more disappointed.

"...Do you take me for some sort of fool? I saw all of it."

Saw all of it?

I couldn't help but speak out.

"What did you see?"

I struggled to understand what she was trying to say.

"Seriously...?"

Her expression seemed scornful.

"It was obvious what you were trying to do. How many times do you think I've seen the same scene in the past? You were using him as your test dummy, as usual."

Test dummy?

I looked at Leon who looked back at me. His expression didn't say much, but his subtle nod told me all that I needed to know.

Ah.

So that's how it is.

I was just about to speak, when all of a sudden, Leon spoke.

".....It isn't the case this time."

Her eyes widened.

"You're still defending him? Even after-"

"He told me a joke."

Uh?

Both me and Evelyn were taken aback.

A joke?

I looked at Leon who looked back at me. *What is this guy on about?*

Though his expression seemed indifferent, his eyes seemed to say, 'Roll with it.'

Roll with it...?

"...A joke?"

I felt Evelyn's gaze on me. She was staring at me with a face of utter disappointment.

I didn't understand why she was looking at me like that, but I felt like I needed to play along.

So,

"Yeah, I did."

I went along with it.

"..."

All it brought was silence from her. One that she broke shortly after.

".....Do I look that easy to you?"

I felt my skin crawl all of a sudden. If before she looked at me in disappointment, she was now looking at me with scorn.

"I'm seriously asking. Do you take me for a joke?"

".....No."

"Hah."

Her expression was overcome with distraught.

I don't know why, but I felt like I needed to do something.

So I did,

"Why don't they play poker in the jungle?"

Evelyn seemed to have been about to say something when her mouth closed.

"...."

I used to chance to say,

"Too many cheetahs."

Regret came quickly.

"..."

My face burned, but I kept it from changing. On the outside, it was as if I had said something trivial.

But.

Evelyn didn't seem to think of it the same way. After a brief moment of silence, she managed to force a weak smile.

"....I guess you truly do think of me as a joke."

Turning to look at Leon, she bowed her head. Then, without looking back she left.

Her back seemed rather frail when I looked at it.

\*\*\*

At first, they were slow.

Tak, tak.

The sound of her steps as her heels tapped against the marble floor.

Tak, tak, tak.

But they soon hurried.

Her head was lowered the entire time. She could see her expression through the polished floor of the campus hall.

"Hah..."

The burning in her chest didn't seem to ease no matter how long she walked. Her vision blurred and her lips stung.

"B-bastard."

Her feet eventually came to a stop.

A person stood in front of her.

"....Are you okay?"

It was her knight, Natasha. Standing tall, her platinum hair and crystal eyes made her stand out from the rest. Nobles had a unique perk when joining the institute. They were allowed to bring a personal attendant.

In Evelyn's case, she was able to bring Natasha with her. It was a precaution the noble houses took considering the political importance each child held within their houses.

The Verlice family was one of the five Viscount families within the Empire. They naturally were able to provide her with a powerful knight as her escort.

"Was it him?"

And as her knight, she was naturally aware of her circumstances.

"..."

Evelyn's silence told many things.

Natasha's grip on her sword tightened.

"So it was..."

Julien Dacre Evenus.

A name tingled the tip of her tongue.

His relationship with Evelyn was hard to describe. At one point, the two were close. Almost inseparable.

But things changed after a certain point.

His personality changed, and his lust for power started to display. He changed, and his spiral started to affect Evelyn who could do nothing but watch.

It eventually ended with her cutting ties with him.

That was five years ago.

"...You know, I thought he could've changed."

Evelyn let out a strained laugh.

"I was naive, wasn't I...? In the end, it's always like this... H-hah."

Her chest trembled.

So did her lips.

"Disappointment after another."

Her lips were tucked under her teeth.

"...In the end, I was made fun of by him."

She looked up to face Natasha. Unlike before, her eyes seemed a little clearer but they were still a little misty.

Natasha's grip on her sword tightened.

*That bastard...*

"Do you know what he said to me?"

Natasha shook her head.

"...Why don't they play poker in the jungle?"

"Yes?"

Natasha blinked, unable to understand what was going on. Poker? Jungle...?

But Evelyn continued.

"Too many cheetahs."

"..."

Evelyn's shoulders trembled as she lowered her head. Natasha's expression changed all of a sudden.

"Young miss...?"

Fearing the worst, she approached her.

"Are yo-"

But stopped herself halfway.

That was because,

"Uht."

Uth...?

"Young miss...?"

Holding her mouth, a strained sound escaped Evelyn's lips. Natasha was taken aback. *What's going on...?* And just before she could do anything, Evelyn's shoulders trembled even more.

"Young...?"

"...Kaht."

Khat...?

Another sound came out of her mouth.

Natasha felt her stomach drop.

"What-"

Her hand reached out for her, when...

"Puchi...!"

Evelyn's cheek's deflated and a laugh escaped her lips.

"Hehe-he"

Even her laugh seemed strained. She looked up at Natasha, tears rolling down her eyes.

"I do-n't even know what is happening to me..."

A sharp pain pierced her chest as she continued to laugh.

Her hand reached to her shirt and clenched it.

"W-why am I like this...? Hehe... The joke is bad so why..."

She looked helplessly at Natasha. The tears continued to roll down her eyes, and the pain in her chest intensified.

"He... Hehe, why can't I stop laughing...?"