

Advent of the Three Calamities

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It was a quiet journey back to the Academy.

I allowed myself to sink into my thoughts, gazing blankly at the shifting scenery outside the window of the moving train.

Before I knew it, the sun had started to set and I was finally back at the Academy.

I took in my surroundings before finally heading for the dorms.

The walk wasn't very long. About a five-minute walk. The surroundings were quiet, and I basked in the silence that surrounded me.

It felt oddly peaceful.

That was until...

"....."

I passed a certain figure and I found my steps pausing.

I turned around and our eyes met. Long platinum hair, red eyes, and a face that one wouldn't forget even if they tried.

"What?"

Kiera Mylne.

She looked at me with her usual scowl.

"Tsk."

Then, with a click of her tongue, she tapped the cigarette in her hand against the ground.

Tzzzz—

"Happy now?"

".....I didn't say anything."

I was starting to learn to not let such things bother me. While the smell that lingered in the air still made me feel nauseous, I was starting to learn to take it.

I had no right to force someone to do something against their will.

"Pfft."

But Kiera didn't seem to think the same way as me.

"Your fucking expression says it all."

"Does it...?"

And here I thought I had kept my expression firm.

"...Tsk."

She clicked her tongue again and flicked the cigarette away.

"Whatever, I don't feel like smoking anymore. You've ruined the mood for that."

"....."

I didn't say anything to that.

All I did was pause for a second and suddenly she lost all interest in smoking.

That was on her not me.

"Oh, right."

Kiera paused all of a sudden as she recalled something. Rummaging through the pocket of her skirt, she took out something and tossed it to me.

"Here. I think this is yours."

I caught it with one hand and looked at it.

"What is this?"

It appeared to be a torn shoulder pad.

Was this...

"It's yours."

It sounded like she was quite certain of it.

"I saw you when you were coming back from the expedition. You were missing a shoulder pad. I found it in an area where a lot of monsters were killed. Gruesome shit."

"....."

I remained quiet and took my gaze away from the shoulder pad and back to her.

"You know what's crazy?"

"....."

"The injuries of the monsters I found coincide with that guy's death. You know, that Weasel guy?"

Weasel guy?

"Wesley."

"Ah, right. Yeah, that guy."

She traced her thumb across her neck.

"Clean as shit. Never seen anything quite like it. Well, I did. The wound looked eerily similar to the ones from the monsters I found the shoulder pad in"

I knew then what she was trying to imply and I felt my muscles grow tense. Though I didn't show it outwardly, Kiera still smiled. It was as if she could read my inner thoughts.

I thought she was going to push things further from there, but surprisingly, she didn't.

"Whatever though. None of my business."

Yawning, she stretched her body.

"None of my fucking business. Was just saying."

Then, as if the conversation had never happened, she left.

"...."

I stood in silence for a brief moment before staring at the shoulder pad in my hand. I thought this before, but she really was a...

"Crazy bitch."

Clank—

Darkness engulfed the room as the door closed. Kiera blinked twice before reaching for the switch and turning the light on.

The dark.

She didn't like the dark.

The moment the light came on she felt her chest lighten.

".....Ah."

She looked at her room. It was extremely clean. Contrary to her messy appearance, Kiera liked to keep things organized. If even the slightest thing was disorganized, she'd lose focus over everything and would think about it all day.

It was something she was born with.

"Uh..."

She had just taken a step into her room when she noticed something.

Fiddling with her pockets, she smacked her head.

"Fuck."

Without hesitation, she rushed towards one of the drawers in the room and opened it.

Clank—

But there was nothing inside.

Clank—

The same was true for the drawers beneath.

Clank—

They were completely empty.

"Fuuuuck."

She...

Had run out of cigarettes.

And it was too late for her to get any because it wasn't the weekend yet.

"...."

Kiera slumped down on her bed and blankly stared at the ceiling. She was fucked. Royally fucked. Cigarettes were like medicine to her... They were what kept her panic attacks from occurring.

Without them, she was...

"Fuck, it's all that bastard's fault."

No, it wasn't.

But she wanted to blame someone. At the very least, it would make her feel better.

"Haaa..."

Julien Dacre Evenus. He was like a piece of wood. His expression was hard to read. She had been sure about her accusations. That it was not an accident. He was the one who had killed Weasel.

On the outside, he appeared to be a victim just like him, but Kiera was confident of her conjecture.

"But who am I to care...?"

It was none of her business to begin with.

All nobles were like that. Rotten on the inside.

She wasn't one to rat out people like that. Especially since the evidence she gathered wasn't going to hold up well.

It was just...

Interesting.

"....He's stronger than he lets out."

Right, he was the Black Star. The number one ranked amongst the first years. However, it was a general consensus within the first years that he was weak outside of his Emotive skills.

His progression analysis results proved that to be the case and a reason why there was doubt about his involvement in Weasel's death.

Kiera thought so too.

But...

As she recalled the images she'd witnessed back in the mirror dimension, she found herself smirking.

"What a load of bullshit."

The guy was a snake.

There was more to what he let on than people thought. For what reason was he hiding his strength, she wasn't sure.

Nor did she particularly care.

So long as he didn't involve her in his bullshit she was going to not care.

Still, it was an interesting thought.

"Julien."

Mumbling his name, Kiera closed her eyes.

"...You owe me one."

The next day.

While Leon was waiting for the Professor to come.

"How many funghi did we manage to collect?"

"About seven."

Evelyn and Aoife were busy discussing the splits of their finds.

"Seven...? That would mean that there's one in excess."

"Hmmm. We would've been even if he..."

Evelyn paused there, but the meaning behind her words was clear. Had Wesley still been alive, then all shares would've been equal.

The only problem was that he wasn't.

Aoife, while staring at the mushrooms displayed on the table, suddenly turned her head and asked,

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. I'll think about it later."

Class was about to start soon.

"Right."

Aoife frowned before nodding her head. Then, recalling something, she quietly asked,

"There's work experience next week. Have you selected which place you want to go to?"

"...I'm a knight."

Leon answered flatly.

Of all the people present, he was the only one who didn't need to attend the mandatory work experience that everyone had to attend.

Why?

Because he was already working.

"Ah, right."

Aoife turned her head to briefly stare at the front where a lonesome figure sat.

As always, he was by himself. He was staring at the front with no particular expression.

"Is it tough to be his knight?"

The question attracted the attention of those around.

They all seemed somewhat curious.

Leon thought about the answer. Had it been before, he would've answered yes without a doubt, but the current Julien...

"Yes."

Right, the current Julien was different.

However, the two of them still needed to keep their act.

"Doesn't surprise me."

Aoife deliberately sighed.

"Oh, looks like the class is full~"

A middle-aged lady entered the classroom all of a sudden. She was tall, and despite her aging features, she still was quite beautiful.

Professor Bridgette. In charge of today's class, [Understanding of Spells], the students favored her due to her bubbly personality.

Arriving by the podium at the front, she set her files down and cleared her throat.

"Before we start the lecture, I have an announcement that I want to make. Please pay attention."

Her words seemed to have had an effect as the class quieted down. She smiled as a result and continued.

"As you may know, in a month the Guild Lantern Festival will begin."

Leon's eyes narrowed upon hearing the name of the event.

His body slightly tensed as his gaze wandered to Aoife who was staring at the front with a straight face.

'Looks like there isn't much time left.'

Something big was going to happen on that day.

And it was something that directly involved Aoife. He was sure of it.

"A lot of important figures will be coming, and we must set a good impression on them."

The Guild Lantern Festival was an academy-wide event that was hosted by the academy each year and invited all the top officials from the fifteen major guilds.

They weren't the only people that were set to come as celebrities and important figures were also set to attend.

It was a 'must attend' event that couldn't be missed.

"Outside of the combat analysis that will take place, I've discussed it with the other departments and we've got several events that you can take part in for extra credits."

The classroom immediately became rowdy at that. In order to pass the first year, one had to accumulate a total of 110 credits.

Each class held different weights. For example, this class held about 8 credits. And they could only be accumulated through passing the examinations.

It was tough to collect credits.

It was also for this reason that the eyes of the many people in the class lit up at the mention of possible credits.

Even Leon felt his back straighten.

"The events are as follows."

Unfurling a piece of paper, Professor Bridgette began to read.

"Food preparation. Your job will be to host a stand and sell food that you produced."

Leon shook his head.

Wasn't very interested.

Thump!

"Hm?"

He turned his head to see Aoife sweating. She seemed to be glaring in a particular direction. Following her line of sight, he was surprised to see her looking at Julien.

"Hm?"

Why...?

"Next up is play. The Language department is looking for suitable people to carry out a play in English."

He didn't pay further attention as the professor continued to list the events.

That too didn't sound very interesting.

Leon felt that his English was decent at best.

"Next up is Parade. You can help out the seniors who are planning on...."

"Cultural exchange. Create or bring some products of your hometown to share with..."

"Children's activities. There will be a lot of younger..."

The list went on and the more Leon listened the more he shook his head.

Parade? Didn't care.

Cultural Exchange? The Evenus Barony hardly had any cultural products.

Children Activities? He already had a hard time dealing with Julien.

There wasn't anything that was suitable for him.

He frowned.

'Should I just choose something easy...?'

At this rate, it would be his only option.

Or so he thought.

"Talent activity. Display your talent at the theater. From special talent, to even a stand-up routine...."

From the corner of his eyes, Leon caught a glimpse of Julien's figure.

He had been rather calm the entire time while listening to the events. However, the moment the 'stand-up routine' was mentioned, his body twitched.

It was as if he was planning something.

"....It can't be."

Leon unconsciously muttered those words out loud.

"Leon?"

Enough to warrant the attention of Evelyn who was close to him.

But he didn't care.

No, he couldn't care.

"It's an event that's hosted by the comedy club, but they didn't specify who can participate. So long as you want to participate, you can sign up and..."

Julien's head raised again.

"Oh, no..."

Leon felt his body grow cold and the hair at the back of his neck stood.

"If anybody is in—"

Bang—!

"Leon!?"

Leon found himself standing abruptly.

He could feel the gazes of everyone in the classroom directed his way. But he didn't care. He stared straight at the professor who tilted her head at him.

"The comedian part..."

Leon slowly started to say as his gaze lowered to meet Julien's.

Julien wore an expression that seemed to say, 'You? A comedian? What joke is this...?'

Leon felt even more reassured about his decision as he firmly gripped the side of the desk and muttered through his clenched teeth.

"...I'll do it."

For the sake of everyone present.

"The stand-up. I'll do it."

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62 Spells [1]

'Has this guy lost it...?'

Such were the thoughts of everyone in the classroom as they stared at Leon who had abruptly stood up at the opportunity of becoming the stand-up for the talent show. I shared similar thoughts with the others. 'This guy is biting more than he can chew.'

What comedian? He hardly even changed his expression. Furthermore, he always seemed to be against my jokes.

With someone who had no sense of humor, how could he even be a comedian?

"Are there any objections?"

The class was quiet from that point. Nobody seemed to have any objections. Mainly because it was Leon who had volunteered. One could argue his voice held more weight than mine. On the other side of the classroom, Professor Bridgette seemed shocked by Leon's sudden decision to take part in the role.

But she was quickly delighted.

"If it's you, then it would be amazing! With your reputation and look, the seats will be filled in no time."

"....Ah, yes."

Leon nodded. Was it just me or did it seem somewhat awkward?

'Wait...?'

A sudden thought crossed me and I felt my brows furrow.

I turned to look at the professor who was mumbling to herself.

"Yeah, this is great... I'll let the organizers know so that they can put it on the list..."

"Professor."

I interrupted her thoughts. All of a sudden I felt the eyes of all present directed towards me.

"Julien? Is there something you'd like to add?"

"Yes."

I nodded and turned to look at Leon whose eyes started to widen slightly.

".....I'm just a little skeptical. Is he capable of making jokes? I would like to hear something fro—"

Snap—

I was interrupted by a small snapping sound. When I turned to look, I noticed that the pen in Leon's hand had snapped in half.

His expression remained the same. "Leon...?"

When Professor Bridgette addressed him, his expression changed a little as he looked at his pen.

"It snapped."

"I can see that."

"A mystery."

The fuck is this guy on about?

He was about to say something else when she cut him off.

"But Julien has a point. Do you have anything to share? A small sample?"

I added fuel to the fire.

"I'd be willing to take his place if he doesn't wa—"

Snap—!

The pen snapped into smaller pieces.

"I'll do it."

I held onto my stomach. It was cramping for some reason.

"Kh."

"That's great."

The Professor seemed even more excited. Clap—! Clap—! She clapped twice to gather the attention of everyone in the class.

"If everyone would quiet down for a second. I'd like us to hear a sample."

The classroom fell silent then. With all eyes on Leon, he stood rigidly on his spot.

I too looked at him.

I was curious. He seemed to always trash my jokes. How much better were his jokes to think that? "I..."

He silently swallowed before looking around. Then, clenching his fists, he lowered his head to mumble something.

"...do... call... fish... eyes..."

Given how low his voice was, it was hard to understand what he was trying to say.

"I couldn't quite catch that. What did you say?"

"....."

I watched as Leon's jaw tensed under the Professor's words. Then, as if he has resigned himself to his fate, he spoke,

"What do you call a fish with no eyes?"

I felt my eyes widen all of a sudden.

It couldn't be...

".....fsh."

"...."

"....."

The entire class was engulfed in a strange silence as the eyes of all those present widened.

The way some people looked at Leon changed. Especially Professor Bridgette who seemed taken aback. Leon on the other hand tried his best to keep his expression straight. "Hmm."

In the silence that ensued after he said his joke, I found myself frowning intensely. I felt a sudden sense of crisis. This guy...

"...He stole my joke."

What bullshit. It was one of my favorites too. "Ah, this..." Following the awkward silence that plunged the classroom, Professor Bridgette forced a smile.

"Well, it was a great attempt." Her words also seemed rather forced. "Ehm, so... I'll talk to the comedy club. We'll.. ah, see how things will go from there. I'll let you know then, okay?"

"...Yes." Leon quietly nodded his head before sitting down. I took a moment to look around me. Everyone was staring at Leon with complicated expressions. It was as though they couldn't believe he had actually done what he did. I was taken aback. 'Was the joke not good...?' "Ah." And then I understood. Delivery. ".....He messed up his delivery." Snap—! * The class proceeded from there. For now, Professor Bridgette left the festival selection list by the podium saying something along the lines of, 'We'll figure this out later... I'll talk with the other departments. You can come fill it up whenever you want. Even after class.' Nobody brought up the situation since. The class began. "Spells. What do we know about spells?" A hand raised immediately the moment the Professor asked the question. I didn't need to turn to know who it was. "Aoife." Who else would it be but her? With stellar grades in almost everything, she would've been the Black Star if not for me and Leon. "As we know, there are five stages to a spell. Beginner, intermediate, advanced, superior, and perfected." "Yes, and what else?" "The difference among spell categories lies in the number of runes each possesses. Beginner spells comprise twelve runes, while intermediate spells include eighteen. Advanced spells entail twenty-four runes. Superior spells contain thirty runes, and finally, perfected spells consist of precisely forty runes."

I paid close attention to the words that were being said. Although I knew it, it was still important. "Correct." Professor Bridgette clapped enthusiastically. "As expected of you Aoife. Well done." Just then, when I turned around, faintly, I saw the corner of Aoife's lips pull up. She tried to hide it, but it was obvious that she was happy with the praise. It was kind of cute. "Now then..." The lecture continued. "Since everyone already knows the basics, I'll ask a different question." Professor Bridgette looked around the classroom. "Who here can tell me the requirements for learning an intermediate spell and up?" A hand raised up again. It was Aoife again. "....Aoife." "The requirement corresponds to your tier."

She went on to give a detailed explanation. 09:48

"An Apprentice is restricted to learning beginner-type spells due to their low mana capacity. A Master Mage can advance to learning Intermediate ranked spells. High wizards are eligible for advanced-ranked spells. Arch-Wizards have access to superior ranked spells, while only a Monarch can harness a Perfected ranked spell."

I frowned all of a sudden. There was something about her explanation that didn't quite make sense to me. Her next words served to prove that. "It's crucial not to waste too much time learning too many spells. After all, mastering even one spell requires a significant investment of time, and as you progress, the number of spells you'll need to learn only increases." What sort of... I felt my brows furrow further. A lot of the information that was being said I knew. However, it wasn't as though I knew everything. I had been learning a lot of stuff, but not everything. That was why I suddenly raised my

hand. There was something that was bugging me. "Julien? Do you have a question?" ".....I do." Sorting out my thoughts, I suddenly asked. "Can spells be upgraded?" The thing was... I actually was already capable of using an intermediate-ranked spell.
[Sadness]

At tier 1, I was still an apprentice-ranked mage. To become a Master Mage I needed to reach Tier 3. Was it just because the Emotive Field was different? But then... Hands of Malady — Lvl. 1 [18%]

Chains of Alakantria — Lvl. 1 [0%] Why...? Why was there a Lvl. 1 written beside the two spells? No, all my spells...? Could it be... "Upgrade a spell?" My thoughts were broken by the Professor who tilted her head and looked at me strangely. She wasn't the only one who looked at me like that. Half of the class was. Some were frowning, while others were looking at me weirdly. I knew the answer then. But the Professor continued. "...It's not possible. You can't upgrade a spell from beginner to intermediate. As you know, spells have different sets of runes. All runes are connected and form a perfect balance. Adding more would simply destroy the spell." "Ah." I unknowingly let out a strange sound. It suddenly struck me then. My spells... "I see, thank you." I could upgrade them. 'This...' I felt my heart race at the thought and all noise from my surroundings drowned out. 'I didn't pay much attention to it because of everything else that I was learning, but my spells..... they can be upgraded. And I'm the only one that can do it...'

What did that mean? Why me? And what would happen if the spells upgraded? Would they change to a fundamental level, or would they remain the same but stronger?

The sadness spell went from only working when touching to working with just my voice.

What would happen if it were upgraded further?

"Huh." The thought suddenly made my breath feel heavier. I quietly called up the status window to look, and another thought suddenly crossed me. Would it be possible for me to learn intermediate-ranked spells as an Apprentice? If so... I silently gulped. Clap—! Clap—! It was the sudden sound of hands being clapped that broke me out of my thoughts and I looked up. Professor Bridgette was smiling, looking at the clock on the right side of the classroom. "We've got thirty minutes left to class. I think that's enough for me today. I'll give you the remaining thirty minutes to practice your spells for yourself. I'll be observing from here, and if you have any questions feel free to ask me." She went on to sort out several documents at the podium. I stared at her figure for a few seconds before lowering my head. There was still a spell I hadn't unlocked.

[Chains of Alakantria] I had been at it for the past month and failed each time. I could practice [Hands of Malady] to push it to intermediate, but after thinking about it, I discarded the thought. That process was going to take time. On the other hand, I was almost able to unlock my last spell.

I could feel it. "....."

Taking a look at the time and Professor, I decided to immerse myself in my spell. It was time I finally learned this spell. *** It's unfortunate that I have to go premium. This is a message for those who are considering buying priv. Please don't. At least, not until the end of the month. There's only 5 days left in the month, and I wouldn't want you to waste your money.

.com

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The thirty minutes we had at our disposal flew by faster than I had anticipated.

Tzzzz—!

Immersed in my practice, I barely heard the Professor's words.

"Would you look at that? The class has ended. You may leave if you wish to. If there are any questions you can ask me. I'll be here for a few more minutes." She went on to press her hand against the podium. "If you haven't by now, please put your name on the list. I'll leave it here for today. I'll be here to collect it tomorrow morning."

The class became rowdy then, and it was only once I heard the noise that I fully realized it was the end of the class. "Hua... I'm so tired~"

"Tell me about it. Good thing I don't have anything after this. I think I'll go eat something at the canteen."

"Oh, I'll join you."

"Ah, right. Before we leave let's sign up for the event." "Alright." I frowned and looked up.

The conversations were disrupting my concentration. I sighed then and leaned back on the chair.

I thought back on what I managed to accomplish in class.

And...

'.....Not much progress.'

I was still stuck at eleven runes. I hardly accomplished anything in the thirty minutes that were given to me.

The last rune simply just refused to connect.

Unlike last time though, I was able to learn to manage my frustration. The more well-learned I was about an emotion, the more I could control it.

For this reason, I wasn't disheartened. Having already experienced the intense frustration that came with failure, it took a lot more than this to get me frustrated. "Hmmm."

I looked at my timetable.

There was no other class that I needed to attend.

"Should I....?"

I looked around me. The noise in the classroom was starting to quiet down. The place was big, and I felt more refreshed staying here. Since I didn't feel like going back, I decided to stay behind and practice more.

As the class started to empty, I felt the gazes of the other cadets on me as they left, probably wondering why I was still there. It felt a little disturbing, so I waited for all of them to leave before resuming my practice.

Only then did I feel at peace and once again started to practice. Rune One—Rune Two—Rune Three...

This time...

"....I'm going to succeed." ***

In life, there were highs and lows that one experienced. It was something that came with age. The older one got, the higher the chances of them experiencing a low. Leon today experienced a low.

"What the hell was that...?"

Feeling Evelyn's gaze, he found himself turning his head away from her. She was the only one who even bothered to stay back to talk to him. Everyone else just left. "Did you seriously think that was funny?" "Ah." Leon pursed his lips. How could he tell her that he had no jokes prepared and panicked? The only reason he had volunteered in the first place was to stop Julien from joining. He hadn't expected Julien to retaliate like that. "..." Leon frowned and found himself clenching his fists. If only he had been ready... He wouldn't have used Julien's joke had he been ready. Though...

"Heh."

He felt his stomach cramp a little recalling the face Julien made when he stood up to volunteer. The look of hurt and betrayal on his face...

"Hehe."

It made him chuckle unknowingly. All until he felt a certain gaze. It bore through his face and stung quite a lot. "You..."

As expected. A horrified Evelyn met his gaze. Her face was pale, and she took several steps back. 09:49

"No."

Leon cut her off and tried to explain himself. 'I was laughing at the face Julien made.'

But stopped himself from speaking. How exactly could he say that...? Misunderstanding his inner struggle, Evelyn took another step back as realization dawned on her. "So you really did laugh at Julien's joke back then."

"Uh...?" Evelyn's face scrunched up. She seemed to want to say something but stopped and sighed.

"Promise me something, Leon. Just... don't sign up for the stand-up. I don't know why you want to do it, but you're just not fit for it."

Before he even had the chance to say anything, Evelyn left. The only thing he could remember as she left was the disappointment in her face as she looked at him.

It... "Haaa..." At that moment, Leon raised his head to stare at the tall ceiling.

There was only one thought that ran through his mind then.

".....I saved them."

Yeah.

He was a hero. ***

Late into the evening.

It was already dark outside and the training grounds were empty. Mostly.

Clank——!

A large metallic noise resounded throughout the expansive grounds as a large black box dropped on the ground with a loud sound.

The surroundings shook slightly as it bounced on the hard ground. Drip...! Drip.

The sound was accompanied by the patter of sweat dropping and the sound of heavy breaths. "Haaa... Haa..."

Aoife stared at the box in front of her with a pale face.

"Fifty kilograms..."

That was her current limit. It was the heaviest her telekinesis powers could go up to. However, it was meaningless.

While it was indeed the heaviest she could go, her control was not there.

35kg was her comfort weight. The weight where she could freely control the box. It wasn't much, but as a borderline Master Mage, this was her limit.

Any more and she would lose all control. That would mean she'd only be able to lift the item, but not move it. Drip! Drip...!

Sweat continued to drip down her face as she brushed her hair away from her face. It was sticky from all the sweat.

".....I think it's time." Aoife checked the time. It was 10 P.M, almost curfew time. 'Right, I need to fill in the form.'

The one for the festival. Her original plan was to do it after dinner, but she had been so immersed in her training that she forgot. "Hopefully, the list is still there."

It should be.

She was just about to clean up when her pocket vibrated. Frowning, she reached into it and took out a small orb. Her brows immediately jumped up and she hastily tapped onto the orb. An illusionary face appeared. A handsome man with short red hair and distinctive yellow eyes appeared. "Brother?" He was none other than her brother, Gael K. Megrail. Immediately, Aoife cleared her throat and fixed her hair. It was something she did unconsciously. "Is there a reason for why you've called me?" —Is there a reason for me to call my little sister?

An all-familiar smile greeted her. Aoife attempted to smile back but found herself unable to. Especially when she noticed how pale his expression was.

Her fists clenched. "How are you doing...?" —Haha, I'm fine. What are you so worried about?

He raised his right arm and flexed. —My mana may be sealed, but my body isn't. Look at this! All Aoife saw was a skinny arm. There was hardly any muscle.

She forced a smile again. "Looks good..." —Oh, come on. I can tell you're lying.

"I'm not." He cocked his head. —It's obvious.

"It's not. "

Aoife insisted while trying to keep her face straight. —Haaa... What am I going to do with you? In the end, he resigned himself and sighed.

—Fine, you win. You weren't lying.

"Yes." Aoife finally found a small smile. However, it didn't last for very long. Especially when she took note of his cheeks which had started to sunken. '...Brother.' She secretly bit her lips. He hadn't always been like this. There had been a time when he was the center of attention. The crown prince and the next in line for the throne. If only... Her fists clenched tightly and an image appeared in her mind. With an arrogance that was fitting of someone of her talent, she stood before her father. 'Seal his mana.' He, the Emperor of the Empire, could do nothing but helplessly stare at her. Her talent was too dazzling.

The stronghold her family had was starting to shatter. A new power started to emerge and they could do nothing about it.

'Remember. I know my worth. If you want to keep me in this Empire then you're better off meeting my demands. You can try eliminating me now, but I doubt you'll be able to. When the time comes, I'll join another Empire.'

Even now she could recall her arrogant voice as it echoed throughout the halls of the royal palace.

'I'm not being unreasonable. I just want to see how committed you are in wanting to keep me. Suppress his mana just as you did to the commoners. Do it for five years and you'll have my loyalty.' A figure stepped up. 'I'll do it, father. Please let me do it.' Aoife clenched her fists.

She had only been fifteen then. Three years had passed since, and every day those memories haunted her.

She remembered everything. From the helpless expression of her father to the resigned look of her brother who, despite being more talented than her, had no choice but to stop practicing mana for the next five years.

Five years didn't sound like much, however, for someone like her brother who had a large mana pool, sealing his mana was equivalent to crippling him. His body which was accustomed to the high mana started to fail him, resulting in his current condition. — Cough...! Cough! "Brother!"

Aoife's face changed. —Cough... I'm fine. Don't worry. It's just... the usual. However, seeing how adamant her brother was, she could only bite her lips and watch as he held a tissue next to his mouth. —Anyways... cough... I just wanted to see how you were doing at the institute. Seeing your current state, you must've been training. I guess I won't take any more of your time. "Ah, no it's fine." —Just do your thing. Call me whenever you need something. "...." —Oh, and... He paused to look at her. Aoife met his gaze back. —....Don't resent your father for the decision. It's something I agreed to do as well. Aoife frowned.

—Just focus on yourself and don't think about revenge. She... isn't someone you are capable of catching up to. "...." Aoife clenched her teeth tightly. She was just about to rebuke him when his face disappeared.

—Remember my words. Make sure you eat well and don't resent father too much! The last thing Aoife saw was his smiling face. "...." Silence plunged her surroundings as she stood in the training grounds without saying a word. "Haaa..." In the end, all she could do was let out a long sigh. "....As if I can forgive him." her father...

He was just as guilty as she was. That much was clear to her.

64 Work Experience [1]

Cleaning up after herself, Aoife headed straight for the Dorset Hall. There were several activities that she had in mind for the festival, but in the end, she settled for the 'Guide' position.

Her job was rather simple.

All she had to do was guide people around the Academy campuses. It was an important position. One that many coveted. With many important figures attending, the 'Guide' was the role that enabled cadets to interact with them. Of course, Aoife didn't need such a position given her background. However, it was also because of her background that she felt compelled to do this job. She was, after all, acquainted with most of the attending people. It wouldn't hurt to choose it. "It should be this classroom." Her feet stopped in front of a familiar door. The corridors were empty, and it was pretty dark. Reaching for the door, she opened it and prepared to enter when she stopped. "Mh?" Drip...! Drip...! A certain dripping sound caught her attention and when she looked inside to see where it was coming from, her eyes shot open. "Almost..." Off by the far end of the classroom, a familiar figure sat. His back was straight, and his facial features could only be described as 'flawless'. He was a man Aoife struggled to understand, as he rarely displayed any expressions.

"...Again." Here he was, sitting in the middle of the classroom, wearing a different expression than his usually stoic one. His focus was on his hand where a set of runes were floating in the air. They were slowly interconnecting with each other to form a circle. 'Is he trying to unlock a spell...?'

That was what it seemed. But...

"Why is he bleeding?" Unlocking a spell wasn't that difficult. At the very least, it wouldn't need someone to force themselves to the point of bleeding. As she counted the number of runes, she was also sure that it wasn't an intermediate-ranked spell. 'He's struggling with unlocking a beginner rank spell...?'

Was that even possible? Tzzzzz—! Aoife frowned after witnessing the circle shatter. Drip...! More blood dripped down from his nose. 'Is this the limit to his talent?' It wasn't as though she didn't expect this, but it was somewhat disappointing given the many surprises he had given her. She thought he was going to stop there, but... "Again." He continued. "Uh?Is he crazy?" Aoife felt her eyes widen. Staring at his arms which were trembling, his pale face, and bleeding nose, Aoife forgot all about her goal and stood rooted behind the door. She started to grow curious all of a sudden. For how long was he going to keep this up? "Again..." Another circle shattered. Drip...! Drip...! More blood dripped down from his nose. His usually stoic expression was replaced by one of pure focus and determination. It was as if he was a completely different person than how he normally showed himself. "Again." Regardless of how many times he failed, he'd wipe his nose and continue. It was as if he didn't care at all about himself. Even as his entire body trembled, and his eyes turned bloodshot, he continued. The only thing he could mutter seemed to be, 'again'.

"...Crazy. Lunatic." It was all Aoife could think about when staring at him. She couldn't understand why he was putting himself through such trouble. And yet... Even though she thought all of that, she found herself unable to tear her gaze off of him. There was something about his current appearance that struck her deeply. "....." Time continued to pass. "Again. Failure became the norm, and blood continued to drip down his nose. Even so, Aoife continued to watch in silence as he tried each time.

Even as he failed, he continued to try. "Again." Nothing changed. He still failed. And just as she thought he was going to fail again, something happened. ".....!" Bang—

Julien abruptly stood up. He stared at his hand where a magic circle formed. "I..." An expression she had never seen him make before. A smile she had never thought was possible. "Hahaha." And laugh that she never thought he was capable of making.

Aoife stood dumbfounded in her spot.

Taking in his expression, she unknowingly found herself mumbling something under her breath. "...So he can make a face like that too?" *** "I... did it...." I stared at the

completed circle resting on my hand. I couldn't believe it...I had actually done it. "Hahaha." I laughed. I didn't know why I laughed, but I just did.

Drip...! Feeling my nose run again, I wiped the blood away and finally started to pack up. I looked around and saw that it was completely dark outside. How long...? "Shit." I checked my watch and realized it was almost past curfew. I hastily packed up my stuff and dashed to the dorms. Even as I returned back to the dorm, I was still shaken by the sudden development. I hadn't expected myself to succeed. I had grown so used to failure that when success did come, all I felt was bafflement. "...." I looked at my hand and a purple magic circle was slowly starting to form. The mana inside of my body started to drain at a rapid pace but I didn't mind it as something was starting to form in my hand. Clank. Clank. Clank. A peculiar metallic rattle resounded as purple chains began to materialize within the grasp of my hand.

Clank——! The process took no longer than several seconds and by the time all was said and done, I found myself holding a long chain. "....." I stared at the chains with a frown. "How does this work?" I closed my eyes for a moment and followed the link that connected my mind to the chain. In the darkness of my vision, all I saw was a long purple line. It was bent in a '∩' shape.

"Hmm." Finding the connection, my brows twitched and my hand shook slightly. Clank...! Clank...! The chains started to move.

At my will, they followed everything my mind told them to do. They could both lengthen and shorten at my command. However, the mana consumption for such a move was rather high. Frowning, I settled for just the right length. About the size of my arm. I opened my eyes and stared at my arm where the chains were coiling. "....." I clenched my hand into a fist. The chains glowed a strange purple hue. I knew from the description of the spell that it had a similar effect to [Hands of Malady] in the sense that it weakened an opponent upon contact. However, unlike [Hands of Malady] it wasn't a long-range skill. I slowly clenched my fist and stared at the chains coiling my arm. I started to think about all the possibilities that came with the skill when I suddenly felt lightheaded. "...Ah, right." The chain shattered and I sat down on my bed. "Huu." The mana expenditure was no joke. Just a few minutes and I was already low on mana. "I guess I'll put it off for now." My mind was not in the right state of mind to figure the skill out. I planned on leaving it for tomorrow. There was something else that I needed to pay particular attention to at the moment.

I reached out to grab a paper from the desk and stared at it. "Work Experience." Who would've thought I'd be looking for a job again? Work Experience. It was a mandatory event that we needed to take part in according to the Professors. It was an event that was supposed to last for a week, and depending on our performance, credits would be awarded to us. ".....Looks like I have to do it." I needed as many credits as possible.

My knowledge was rather 'primitive' compared to the other cadets. Coupled with the amount of time I spent each day training, I hardly had enough time to study. I tried my best, but...

"It's not enough." I was desperate for credits. ".....What should I choose?" The list wasn't very long. About a single page with over thirty listings. I was just about to go through the list when the world around me froze. 'Uh?'

I lost my voice and a familiar feeling gripped me. 'A vision....? All of a sudden?' No, when did they ever have a good time? They always came randomly and when I least expected them to. I sighed and embraced the incoming vision. "It was a disaster." An unfamiliar voice echoed, and my surroundings started to change. It was dark, and the air felt damp. 'A room...?' Why would... "How many have managed to escape?" "Five in total. Two Extreme-risk, one High-risk, and two low-risk." Escaped? Five...? Extreme risk, high risk, low risk? The information, while scattered, did make sense in some way. My surroundings started to become clearer as I found myself inside an empty prison cell. It was just as I expected it. This was a prison. Two people stood by the cell looking around. Wearing similar uniforms, they were probably rather high-up in the prison system. "Haaa... This is a fucking mess. Central has been calling non-stop demanding some answers. The same is true for Haven." Haven...? Why would Haven... "Ten cadets died in the escape. They're demanding answers. I don't blame them. They were here for work experience, and nothing should've happened considering our reputation, but..." The individual sighed again. "....What an embarrassment. Not only were we unable able to keep our prisoners in check, but we also got students involved in this mess." Students?

'Oh god.'

Realization dawned on me and I felt chest my tighten. A quest was coming, wasn't it? "How am I supposed to handle this mess? If only..."

He was clearly distressed by the situation, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear at the moment. I wanted to hear more. More information about the situation. I had a few leads at the moment. The event was set to happen in a week. During the work exchange. It was in a prison, and five inmates escaped. I knew the danger level of the inmates but didn't know their identity. This...

It wasn't enough. I strained my ears to listen more. "Oh, right." With a sudden halt of his steps, one of the guards suddenly looked up. He seemed to have something to say. I strained to listen even more carefully. "One of the prisoners that escaped..." My heart dropped when I noticed a change in my surroundings. No, not yet! The surroundings began to darken, and the guard's voice started to fade. In that moment, I knew the vision was about to end.

But I hadn't heard enough. Not yet! I used every little bit of willpower to strain my ears to listen. Just a little more... A little... "....Wasn't he a Professor from Haven?" The vision

ended there and I found myself back in my room. "Haaa... Haa..." My breath was heavy, and my head felt light. However, thinking back upon the vision, I found the corner of my lips gently pulled up.

"...I heard it." The last few words. I had managed to hear them. My vision flickered moments after and a notification appeared. [◆ Side Quest Activated : Prison Escape.]

: Character Progression + 21% : Game Progression + 3% Failure : Calamity 2 + 7%

The source of this content is

65 Work Experience [2]

I stared at the quest window in silence. 7%... "It's higher than last time." Not by much, but there was an increase. What did that mean? Why did the percentage increase? Did it signify that the event affected the second calamity more than the first event would've...? "Hm." I frowned and continued to stare at the quest window. [Prison Escape] The goal seemed pretty simple. Stop the prison escape. At least, that was what I thought. However, thinking about my previous quest, I knew that there was probably more to it. The quests... They revolved around the three calamities. "There might be more to it." For now, that was all I knew. It was for this reason that I didn't do anything rash like tipping the prison about a possible prison break. Even if I did send it anonymously, I doubted they would truly believe my words. And even if they did believe me, who was to say that it was the end goal of the mission...? "I can't act rashly." At least, not yet. "Hmm..." As I continued to stare at the quest window, a sudden thought broke my attention and I felt my brows jump. "Character progression twenty-three percent." That...

I hastily looked at my current experience and felt my heart pause. Level :19 [Tier 1 Magician]

Exp : [0%—[18%]—————100%]

"This..." With the Blue ranked book and my increasing mastery over it, my rate of progress was about 5% a day. 'If I focus my entire attention on it I might be able to push it to 8 to 9 percent, but that would require I drop everything else and reduce the amount of time I sleep...' "I'd be able to move to the next tier." The idea caused my heart to beat a little faster. It brought a strange sense of excitement. According to what I had been told, leaping to the next tier was a monumental stride. My strength would undergo a large change. Not only would my mana capacity increase but so would my control and speed at which I could create the spells. "Haaa..." Thinking about the pains I would go through in the coming week, I let out a long breath. I knew it was going to be a painful and boring week for me, but... "I have to do this." It was about time that I progressed to the next tier. I was tired of being stuck at tier 1.

*** *Puff* Reflected between Kiera's ruby-red pupils was the orange tip of her cigarette as she sat by the window to stare at the night sky. The moon shined bright, casting a white land over the land beneath. It felt oddly peaceful. *Puff* Kiera basked in the sight, her red pupils flickering slightly as they fell on the piece of paper by her desk—[Work Experience Selection Program]. There was a long list of possible jobs one could select for the program. Some were easy, and some were hard. It didn't particularly matter to Kiera though. Since the start, she already had one in mind. ".....Redknep Penitentiary." Two words escaped her lips as she took another drag of the cigarette. As the bitter taste lingered on her tongue and the burn coursed down her throat, she exhaled slowly. fr(e)e

"Haaa..." She chewed on those words. There was someone waiting for her there. Someone who she hated with every fiber of her being. Even Aoife didn't stand a chance against her. Just the thought of her made her chest burn with intense hatred. "I'll kill her." *Puff* With one last drag, Kiera flicked the cigarette away and exhaled, the smoke covering the view in front of her. "....." Her ruby-red eyes gleamed brightly beneath the veil of smoke that covered her face. A frigid cold lay hidden beneath those beautiful eyes as she went on to mutter,

".....If it's the last thing I'll do." *** A week passed without any trouble. "Huaam." Yawning to myself, I stared at the experience bar in front of me. Level :19 [Tier 1 Magician]

Exp : [0%—————[79%]——100%]

I felt proud staring at the experience bar in front of me. Having dedicated every little hour that I had to achieve this, I cut down on my sleep and spell training. Though work experience was set to last a whole week, I didn't think that I would be able to get much time to practice for myself. It was for this reason that I tried my best to get to this point. I didn't want to take any risks. "Looks like everyone is here." The Professor in charge was someone I was unfamiliar with. He stood tall, with long brown hair framing a chiseled face, and a muscular physique. His hair was somewhat disheveled and he wore a lazy expression. He looked like someone who didn't want to be here. No, maybe he really didn't want to be here. Wearing the same uniform all professors wore, he scanned the group which consisted of about fifty cadets. 'There's quite a lot.' I looked around me to scan the faces of all those present. I was looking for either Kiera or Aoife. Whoever was set to be here had to be the second calamity. So who... ".....Eh." I paused to look ahead. Two figures stood out from the rest, and I felt my face stiffen slightly. Right, as if my life was supposed to be easy. Massaging my forehead, I sighed. "They're both here." Leon too. He had been avoiding me for the entire week for some strange reason. I tried to talk to him several times, but he'd just silently stare at me before leaving. His attitude was confusing.

So was his appearance here. 'No, not really.' As the main character, it made sense for him to be present. But why were both Kiera and Aoife present...? There were so many other jobs that they could select, yet almost everyone chose to work at the prison. Was there something that I was missing, or was this just the power that Leon held? 'I guess I just have to be patient.' I was bound to find the answer sooner or later. With such

thought, I looked up at the Professor who had started to speak. "We will now be departing for the penitentiary. We've already discussed matters with them, and your role will involve assisting the guards in patrolling the perimeter. Due to safety concerns, you will only be assigned to guard the low-risk areas. Please ensure that you do not provoke any trouble during your time there."

The Professor's gaze turned stern. "Don't be swayed by their words, and do your utmost to avoid interaction with the prisoners. You're not dealing with ordinary individuals. You're dealing with scum—people who have forsaken their humanity."

There was an obvious disgust in his tone as he spoke about the prisoners. A bad experience maybe? Or was it that he had been there so many times and seen many things to speak like that? I wasn't quite sure. But I didn't pay further attention to his words. My gaze continued to linger between Kiera and Aoife. Between the two of them...

Who was the second calamity? Woom—! The gentle humming sound snapped me out of my thoughts, and I turned to see the Professor extending his hand to his right.

The space in front of him folded, and a gate the same size as him appeared. 'Wait, could that be...?' 'I've set up a portal. You can enter from here and you will find yourself in front of the penitentiary. Please enter one at a time.' I found my mouth parting slightly at the sight that bore before me. Such a thing was possible?

No, it made sense for it to exist, but still... 'Can I do that in the future?' It was a thought that stuck with me even as I lined up behind the other cadets and waited for my turn in line. In the meantime, I overheard the conversation between a few cadets ahead of me. "What do you think?" "I'm kind of scared, I won't lie. Do you think we'll get to see the high-security prisoners? There's quite a few big names in there." "Hu... I'm getting shivers thinking about them." "Haha, what can happen? This is a maximum security prison. There's no way they can escape." "...." The more I listened, the more I felt the urge to smack my forehead. What the hell was this conversation? Was it just some dialogue written in the script of the game to foreshadow what was set to happen? If so... I wasn't sure how to feel. Surely, there were better ways, right? "Next." Before I knew it, it was almost my turn. I was just about to step forward when I noticed a figure standing beside the portal. She was staring at it with incredible focus. 'Aoife?' I stepped near her and asked, ".....Are you not going in?" "Uh?" She looked at me before frowning. "I am." "Oh." I extended my hand. "You can go first." Suddenly, her frown deepened and she made a disgusted expression.

"What? I don't need your pity. I can go when I want to." "Uh?" The hell was her problem? 09:52

"It can't be that you're too sca—" "No." She cut me off before I could finish my sentence. I looked at her in surprise. "Really...?" "I said no." Aoife appeared adamant. I nodded. "Then you can go first." "Why should I?" "Because you were ahead of me in line." At

that, a vein popped on Aoife's temple. She stepped back to look at me. "...Like I said, I'll go when I want to. I don't need the likes of you to tell me what to do." Her eyes briefly glanced at the portal where they shook. It was only slightly, but I caught it. Oh. She really was scared. But how...? Wasn't she a Princess? Wasn't something like this normal for her? "Go. Stop wasting everyone's time." "Alright..." "Good." She appeared satisfied then. "It wasn't so hard was it?" I was just about to step in when I stopped and frowned. "What?" "Hmm." I continued to stare at the portal with a frown.

"There's something..."

"Something?" It was enough to warrant Aoife's curiosity as she too looked at the portal. "What? Where—Uh!!?" As soon as she turned to gaze at the portal, I pushed her.

"Hieek...!" She let out a shriek as her body lurched forward and vanished into the swirling vortex.

"..." Looking at the Professor who pretended to not have seen a thing, I nodded at him and stepped in. For some reason...

That felt satisfying.

66 Work Experience [3]

There wasn't much that I knew about the penitentiary. The location was undisclosed, and only a select few knew the exact coordinates of the place. Some speculated that it was located in the middle of an island while others speculated it was located inside a mountain range. There were a lot of rumors about the place, but nobody knew the real location. Woom—

I came out of the portal feeling a little wobbly. It felt as though my organs had flipped over. Thankfully, nothing came out of that and I was able to recover rather quickly.

"...." I looked up to stare ahead. Before us a large wall loomed, stretching across several kilometers. At its forefront, imposing gates greeted our sight, flanked by stationed guards.

'So this is the entrance of the penitentiary.'

It was rather imposing. "Follow along... Follow along..." I never had the chance to properly admire them before the Professor's lethargic voice brought me back. Scratching his head, his eyes drooped slightly. "Let's get you all registered..." Scratching his hair, he just seemed tired of life. I couldn't blame him. I was feeling the same way. Especially when I felt a pair of eyes burning holes at the back of my head. I paused and looked back. "Get over it." "...." "It was an accident." "An accident?" Aoife, who was glaring at me, clenched her teeth and finally spoke. "Do you really expect me

to believe that?" "Sure you can. You tripped over your feet." At that, Aoife's usual blank look showed signs of cracking. She appeared to be on the verge of losing it, but...

Taking a deep breath, she suppressed her anger and left. "....." 'She's definitely mad.'

But... It was worth it. "By the way..." Her steps continued even as I spoke. "....If you're scared, I can help you out agai-" "Uht!" She ended up tripping on her feet and losing balance. Just barely, she managed to keep herself from falling face flat and recovered rather quickly. Her head flicked back as she glared at me. "I wasn't scared." "Oh." Sure she wasn't. "Okay." I nodded, ready to leave things be, when suddenly, I felt the back of my blazer get pulled, and her face appeared inches away from mine. Like a wild animal, she bared her teeth at me.

"I. was. not. scared." Her teeth didn't open once as she spat those words out. "Not." Just then...

Almost faintly, I felt the corners of my lips pull. ".....if you say so." "I say so." Her face inched closer. I nodded. "Sure." "I wasn't." "Okay." "Good." "Perfect." "Excellent."

Where was this conversation going? Perhaps realizing this too, Aoife finally let go and stepped back.

"Good that you know." 09:53

Then, acting as if nothing had happened, she proceeded to head into the penitentiary. Of course, she didn't forget to add a few words before leaving. "....Remember, I wasn't scared."

I stared at her back for a short moment before shaking my head and following from behind. 'Sure you weren't.' That small incident aside, as soon as we passed through the gates, our bodies were subjected to a comprehensive check. I was stripped down to my underwear and thoroughly searched by the guards who used a device that scanned my entire body. For obvious reasons, males and females were separated. The process was rather quick and lasted less than several minutes. However, those short minutes felt like forever as I felt uncomfortable the entire time. "Has everyone been checked?" Another door greeted us the moment we stepped out of the checking room. After doing a head check, the professor began to give a final speech. "Behind me are the doors that lead to the lower security hall of the prison. It's where you all will be staying and guarding the place. Like I said before, try your best to minimize your contact with the inmates. They are not good people. Don't fall for their sweet temptations." As he spoke, a guard stepped up and took out a large set of keys which he quickly inserted into the door. Click——! It was sealed shut so I couldn't see what was behind it, but seeing the tense expressions the guards were making, I knew it was going to be something I wouldn't forget. "For your first day, you won't need to do much." As the door was getting unlocked, the Professor continued to give us instructions. "All you have to do is get familiar with the place. The current area is called the Manticore Residential Area. It's

where the Low-risk prisoners will be held. You are to not step outside of this zone." Click— Click—! "While you won't be in danger if you step out of the zone, there is still a risk that something might happen. We will not be held responsible for your safety if you wander around in areas you aren't supposed to be. Of course, we'll try to stop you from leaving, but if you somehow can go out undetected, if anything happens to you, then it's on you." The Professor's eyes fell on each and every one of us before turning back to face the door which slowly started to open to reveal what was behind. "...Welcome to Redknop Penitentiary." "Huuuuuu—!" As the door to the inmate's residential area swung open, a torrent of shouts and jeers engulfed us like a tidal wave.

"The rats are back!" "Hahahaha, you fuckers aren't tired of seeing my face already?"

"Look! There's a bunch of kids behind them." "Hahahaha." Amidst the jeers and shouts, a palpable sense of intimidation settled in as the prisoners regarded us with eyes brimming with malice.

It felt rather discomfoting. Especially when I started to become the subject of a few jeers. "Hahaha, look at that pretty boy!" "His face is stiff as a rock! Hahaha, he must be pissing his pants from fear." "Been a while since I've seen such beautiful girls. Come to me. I'll let you have a great time. Kakaka." The ones who seemed the most uncomfortable were the girls who showed looks of disgust. Well, most of them...

There was one exception. "Keke, look at these fuckers. They know a looker when they see one." "..."

Kiera. She was... Enjoying this? "Haha, little miss, why don't you come to my cell?" "Pfft, please. Take a look at yourself dickhead. You look like an oversized ball sack."

"What did you call me?!" "Kakaka." Smacking her thigh, she started to laugh. "Holy shit! I didn't think you could make yourself look ever worse than that, but here you are...! Kakaka." Clank—!

"You bitch!" "... " I tried my best to ignore her, but she really was a...

"Crazy bitch." Thankfully, the Professor intervened. ".....T-ah." Just then, she was about to click her tongue but stopped herself when realizing who she was talking to. I couldn't help but find her expression amusing as her face scrunched up as a result. It looked like she had just eaten shit. Snap— Snap— Snapping his fingers to gather our attention, the Professor spoke. "You may disperse and start to familiarize yourselves with the surroundings. For now, your role won't be anything big. If you see any of the inmates starting a fight, it's your job to break it up. All of them have their mana sealed so it shouldn't be a problem for you to deal with them." Or so he said. However, knowing what I knew, I didn't let my guard down and made sure to be on full alert the entire time.

"Alright, off you go. Wander around and familiarize yourself with the surroundings. If you have any problems come find me. I'll be at the guard station." With a lazy wave of his hand, the Professor finally left. "He's finally gone."

"Hey, do you want to team up with me?" "Let's go." From there, all the cadets went their own separate way. Most of them went in groups of four that they formed after the Professor's absence. I was one of the only few who remained alone. Well, it was something that I had expected and desired. I looked around me. "For now, I need to get a better idea of my surroundings."

I planned to meticulously learn all the details of my surroundings. While I didn't know exactly where the escape was going to happen, every little bit of information helped. In fact, there was something that I needed to prioritize before that. There was a certain person that I wanted to meet. That I had to meet. "Heh." 'I wonder if he still remembers me.' I wasn't sure. Back then, all of it happened due to the skill. I was still not sure whether the time I spent with him was something that he remembered.

Was the person I met his subconscious or just a manifestation of it? Something that the skill had created to mimic how he'd react? I wasn't sure, but I was about to find out. However, if he truly did remember, then...

"...It'll turn everything around." After separating from the other cadets, Kiera walked around to monitor the area. It had been several hours since, and she was somewhat starting to get accustomed to the surroundings.

As she scanned the surroundings, a voice echoed. "Look at you~" A whistle followed. "Come here and have some fun with me. I promise I don't bite." It belonged to a skinny man with a buzz cut and sunken features. ".....Is that so?" Kiera smiled as she neared one of the prison cells where the inmate appeared. Holding onto the bars, he brought his face closer. "What do you say? I'm not bad, right?" "I wonder." Brushing her hair behind her ear, she leaned forward a little. "I'm curious about something though." "Oh?" The inmate looked down slightly. "Ask away. I'll tell you anything. Hehehe." "How sweet of you~" The current Kiera seemed like a stark contrast to how she usually was. Normally, she would've insulted them back or thrown a middle finger, but such wasn't the case at the moment. "So, I was just curious... You are like the small dogs here, aren't you?" "Small dogs?" "Yeah, you know. The low-risk guys." The prisoners were separated into three ranks. They were ranked depending on the severity of the crimes committed, and their general strength; Extreme-risk, High-risk, and Low-risk. "....Where are the really scary guys locked up?" The face of the prisoner changed at the inquiry. No longer did he seem as keen to talk to her as he was before. "Why are you asking about them?" He almost seemed wary. Kiera could even sense some lingering fear in his tone. 'As expected, he might know something...'

She hadn't selected him for no reason. Having talked with the other inmates, she more or less came to learn about the general hierarchy within the prison. The inmate before her was an 'informant'. He was someone who knew a lot, and the exact person that

Kiera was looking for. "Dunno, I'm just curious. Heard a lot of stories about them before coming here." ".....I see." He seemed to have bought that, but... "Sorry, can't talk." "You can't...?" "Well..." He glanced at her, the meaning of his gaze clear. Kiera smiled and looked around her. Then, making sure nobody was looking, her hand flashed forward and reached for the inmate's shirt before she thrust it back and pulled him along. "Hey, wa...!" Bang—! A loud banging sound echoed. Several gazes fell on her the moment the sound echoed, and she returned them with a glare. "What are you looking at?" Only then did they look away and she returned her gaze to the inmate. She discussed it with the other guards, and so long as she had a proper reason, she could use some 'force' against the inmates. So long as it wasn't excessive... "Ukh... You!? What are you....!" Her head reached into the cell again and she once again pulled. Bang—! "Akh...!" Drip... Drip! Blood started to drip down from the inmate's nose as he looked up to Kiera. "Wh!" Bang—! He was never able to get a word out as each time she'd trust his head towards the bars. Bang—! It went on for several times before his expression contained nothing else but fear. "Huu... Hu..... Y-you..." Her cold gaze bore down on him as she looked at him from above. ".....Looking at me doesn't come cheap, you know? Time for me to collect my payment."

Chapter 67 Work Experience [4]

".....Nothing here."

Leon glanced around a few times before nodding and directing his gaze elsewhere. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

He was taking his job seriously.

Although he technically didn't have to be here considering that he already had a job, he chose to participate. Mainly because his 'instincts' told him that something was going to happen here.

What exactly, he wasn't sure.

That was why he was looking around and taking note of everything.

It was so that he could detect the abnormality and stop it before it was too late.

"What are you doing?"

As he walked, a figure suddenly walked up to him. The inmates jeered and whistled at her appearance. Leon couldn't blame them.

Her aura alone made her unique, and her appearance was hard to rival.

"Here."

Unaffected by all of this, Aoife handed him a small notebook.

"The Professor asked me to hand this to you. If you find anything that you think the prison needs to work on, then you can write it on here."

Surprised, Leon raised his brows.

Aoife raised her other hand to show a similar notebook.

"I've got one too."

"...I see."

Leon took the book and casually flipped over its contents.

It was empty.

"Is it going to be anonymous or do I have to write my name?"

"Whatever you want. The Professor said that it doesn't really matter."

"Oh."

If that was the case...

He took out a pen and started to scribble a few things. A dumbfounded Aoife looked at him with wider eyes.

"You've already got complaints?"

"Several."

The prison was generally well run, but there were still things that it could improve on. Having observed for over the past few hours, he had already made a short list in his mind.

"Overcrowded. The place has far too many inmates. There are over five inmates per cell. A situation like this is bound to create problems in the future. The nutrition is also not up to par with the meal composition missing a lot of fiber and protein. Ideally, it would be best if..."

He didn't shy away and started to write all the complaints he had.

Bang———!

He was suddenly distracted by a loud banging sound. When he raised his head, he saw Aoife looking in the same direction as where the noise came from.

He followed her gaze.

"....Ah."

There, in the far distance, they spotted Kiera glaring around at everyone who was looking in her direction. The two of them weren't spared from her glare as she had a gaze that seemed to say, 'What? Mind your fucking business.'

"Crazy bitch."

Aoife muttered in a voice audible enough for Leon to hear.

Leon was taken aback.

'Did I hear, right...?'

The usually quite and refined Aoife swore?

".....You don't like her?"

For quite a while, Leon noticed a strange tension between the Aoife and Kiera. Sparks flew whenever the two interacted with each other.

"I don't."

Aoife's words served to confirm this.

Leon was curious but decided to keep his curiosity to himself. It was none of his business, and he wasn't sure if his inquiry would annoy her.

But much to his surprise, it was her who elaborated...

"Do you know what the first thing she did to me when we met?"

".....No."

How would he know?

Aoife massaged her temples. From the frown on her face, it appeared that the memory was a rather unpleasant one.

"She told me to fuck off and threw a middle finger at me."

"Oh."

That sounded oddly a lot like something Kiera would do...

"So if you ask me whether I like her, the answer is no. I don't like her. She's crazy."

Bang——!

"....."

Leon found himself unable to refute her words. Staring into the distance, and seeing her beat up one of the inmates into a bloody pulp, he could only shake his head and ignore the commotion.

It wasn't his job to stop her.

He was about to go back to his job when his chest suddenly tightened.

"...Um?"

A familiar sensation washed over him, prompting his gaze to drift slowly towards the distance where a solitary cell came into view. His eyes settled on an inmate seated calmly in a chair, absorbed in reading a newspaper.

With his legs crossed, and his calm poise, there seemed to be nothing strange about him, and yet...

".....Why."

Why were his instincts telling him that something was wrong?

All of a sudden, as if sensing the gaze, the inmate put the newspaper down and looked up.

Their gazes met, and Leon felt the hair at the back of his neck stand.

'This...'

Who was this guy?

The residential hall was rather large. It took me several hours to walk the place, and even then, I couldn't find who I was looking for.

"....Is he not here?"

I was told that he had been imprisoned here. Furthermore, the vision also said something along the lines of a former Haven Professor being one of the few people to have escaped.

Was it perhaps not him and some other professor...?

"Or is he locked up somewhere else?"

I found myself frowning at the situation. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

".....Just where—"

I stopped mid-sentence and turned to look back.

Ah—

It was there that I finally spotted him. I peered beyond the large window at the end of the hallway, toward the outdoor area. A figure sat with their back turned, their hands moving in a familiar manner.

Tak. Tak. Tak.

Even though I couldn't hear from my vantage point, observing his movements and posture sparked my imagination as I heard the sound of the pieces falling against the board, and I found myself involuntarily smiling.

Even now...

He hadn't changed.

I stepped out of the residential area and onto the outdoor area.

Tak. Tak.

The nearer I got, the more pronounced the sound became. It was a sound that I hadn't heard in quite a while and felt rather nostalgic.

I eventually stopped a few meters away from him and asked,

"....Can I play?"

Surprised, Professor Bucklam turned his head and our eyes met.

It was at that moment that I finally found the answer to one of the questions I had been dying to know.

"You remember, don't you?"

He sat there, his face frozen in what seemed to be shock and surprise.

I sat down on the opposite end.

Tak.

And started to fix the board.

"I haven't played since then, but I'm still confident in my ability to beat you."

Even as I said those words, he didn't react. At least not immediately.

Eventually, he let out a soft smile and mumbled in a quiet tone,

"....So it wasn't a dream."

"What was?"

I already knew what he was referring to, but I still chose to pretend like I didn't know.

Tak.

"Let's get started. I'll make this a quick one."

"Ah..."

With a soft sigh, he shook his head and reached his hand forward.

"You've gotten very bold after beating me once. Things won't be as easy as last time."

Tak.

He went on to move his piece.

"Your habits are the same."

Tak. "So are yours."

"What makes you think I'm not doing it on purpose?"

"Same goes for me."

We went on to bicker like that for the next few minutes. Eventually, the area around us became quiet.

Strangely, the silence didn't feel at all uncomfortable as we both focused on the game.

Tak. Tak.

Though it had been a while, I still remembered how to play, and was able to keep up with his moves. Just barely...

This went on for the next few minutes until I eventually broke the silence.

"Are you planning on escaping?"

His hand froze halfway and his head flicked up. He looked at me with a look of genuine confusion.

I didn't lift my head and continued to stare at the board.

Judging from his reaction, it was clear that he knew something.

"I won't stop you."

That was the decision I had come up with for myself.

"You can escape. I won't do anything."

"....."

I couldn't quite tell what reaction he was making since I wasn't paying attention to him, but I was sure it was filled with surprise.

For the past week, I had been debating over the situation in my mind.

I was still uncertain of the goal of the mission, however, from what I knew, it was something related to the second calamity.

Things would surely become clearer to me with time.

However, if possible, I wanted to let him go. Of course, it wasn't because I felt pity for the Professor. I did to some extent, but not to the point where I'd help him escape the place.

.....I just needed someone on my side.

"I can more or less tell why you did the things that you did. You were either promised a cure for your memory problems or threatened with your family..."

Which one it was, I wasn't sure.

However, when I lifted my gaze to observe his reaction and saw his eyes quivering, I knew that I was right.

I continued.

"It would be unfair for me to stop you. I know exactly how it feels to lose someone important to you."

Just slightly, my voice layered.

The Professor's expression cracked and his arms started to tremble.

I reached to hold it.

"You must resent the people who did this to you, right?"

The mana inside of my body started to drain. I kept my face composed and continued to make contact with him.

I felt a little disgusted with myself. Using my powers to manipulate his weakness, but... it had to be done.

For the sake of my goal.

I had to do it.

His expression started to distort and his fists started to clench. A fit of visible anger.

I continued.

".....That's why I won't stop you. If possible, I want to help you."

What was my end goal in all of this...?

I realized quite a while ago that the organization that I was dealing with was a lot more dangerous than I thought.

Even now, I was clueless about the extent of their powers, and given how they had managed to manipulate a professor and succeed in getting five inmates out of one of the top prisons in this world, I knew they were powerful.

For this reason, I needed allies.

People who could help me from the inside.

Having seen all his memories, I knew exactly what type of person he was. What he cared about the most, and how desperate his situation was.

It was for this reason that I believed he would make for the right person to use.

I squeezed his hand and my mana drained further.

I instilled even more anger within him.

"I'm sure you have some resentment against the people that did this to you. That forced you to do things that went against your morals. I fully understand where you're coming from, and that's why I want to help you."

Finally, I let go of his hand and he lifted his gaze to meet my eyes.

I smiled.

"Let's help each other."

Please...

"Tell me everything that you know about the situation. In return, I'll offer you my help in taking revenge."

Join me.

Chapter 68 Work Experience [5]

"Akh...! G-get away from me...!"

"That's enough!"

"Stop struggling...!"

Kiera was eventually stopped by the stationed guards who held her back from both sides.

"I'm not done yet...! Let go of me. I still haven't beaten him enough!"

However, she didn't seem satisfied enough as her body continued to trash.

"Hold her back!"

"Akh!"

"Let go...!"

Despite her protests, the guards didn't let go of her and eventually pulled her back from the inmate.

Only then did Kiera finally calm down as she looked around with heavy breaths.

"Im-Haa.... Haa... fine... I'm calm... haaa..."

The guards looked at each other for a brief moment before finally letting go of her.

"Cadet. I understand you aren't very pleased with their words, but please hold some restraint. There's a limit to how much you can retaliate."

"Haaa... yes, yes..."

At a glance, it didn't seem as though she had gotten the message and the two guards looked at each other with bitter looks. In the end, warning her several more times, they finally left.

Kiera waited until they were completely gone before going on patrol again. This time, she could feel more eyes on her, all on high alert. They were clearly worried about the idea of her going on another rampage.

However, much to their surprise, she remained tame.

Perhaps it was because the jeers had gotten quieter due to her sudden outburst, or that she had taken the warnings to heart, she didn't lash out and diligently did her job.

This went on for several hours.

"....It's time." freeweb . com

It was only when she could no longer feel the gazes on her that she made her move.

Glancing around, she left her post.

The residential area was split into four different areas; North, South, West, and East.

Her current objective was the Northern area.

According to what she'd heard, that was where she needed to be.

She silently pretended to patrol while moving toward the direction she wanted to be.

Her steps eventually stopped in front of a small door. There was no one guarding the place and for a very good reason at that.

Clank—!

It needed a certain key to unlock.

One that Kiera managed to get from one of the guards who had reprimanded her just a few hours ago. Although a small part of her did indeed want to beat the inmate up for the way he looked at her, her true objective had been the key from the very start.

"Huuuu..."

Kiera took a deep breath. Finally, she was about to meet her. She hasn't come to this place just for credits.

There was something, someone, that she really needed to visit.

A person whom she held quite dearly, but at the same time despised.

Creaaaak...

The door opened and she stepped in.

Kiera was immediately greeted by a deafening silence and a long corridor. A stark contrast to the chaos that engulfed the main residential area.

"...."

There were hardly any guards around. She could see why. The cells were fully enclosed, leaving little room for observation except for small holes at the bottom and top.

But even that...

Wasn't where she wanted to be. She needed to go further. Deeper into the corridor. At the far end where she'd see what she came in for.

And so she did.

To Tak—

Her steps quietly resounded throughout the long corridor, their gentle rhythm quietly echoing in her mind as she continued forward.

She had to be careful.

There were guards stationed somewhere around. She didn't know exactly where they were, and how powerful they were, but they were here. Hiding somewhere and fully alert for any possible intrusion.

But that didn't matter to Kiera.

Her eyes flashed and her figure started to blend with the darkness. Gradually, her figure disappeared.

There were sensors set up around the perimeter. However, they were all meaningless. With the key on her body, the sensors had a hard time keeping track of her.

On the other hand, the guards that were present hardly felt her presence.

It wasn't because they were weak.

Most of them were stronger than her, but her mastery over the [Darkness] attribute was not something that they could detect. Only the truly strong guards would be able to detect her presence, but she was sure they weren't present at the moment.

At least, not to where she was headed.

Her steps eventually stopped. A large cell appeared in front of her.

She peered through the gap where she saw a figure slumped by the side of the wall. With her head lowered, her long blonde hair covered her face.

Clenching her teeth, Kiera called out.

"Maste-No, Rose."

"....?"

The head raised to reveal two gleaming red eyes. They blinked slowly, trying to make sense of where the voice came from before finally catching a glimpse of Kiera who stood on the other side.

Immediately, a smile flashed across her features.

"Oh my, if it isn't little Kiera?"

Her head tilted to the side as she peered through the gap to meet Kiera's gaze. There were hints of amusement in her expression as she looked at her.

"You've grown into quite the splendid woman since the last time I saw you."

All Kiera felt was disgust upon hearing the woman's voice.

It wasn't just her voice that disgusted her.

Her appearance, her poise, her hair, everything about her disgusted her...

".....You know why I'm here. Spit it out. Tell me why you did it."

"Did it...?"

She pretended to fall into thought before eventually knocking the side of her head.

"Sorry, I really don't know what you're talking about~ Can you clarify a little?"

Kiera's fist clenched tightly. She was the same as she had been in the past. Easygoing and bubbly. Never taking anything seriously.

There was a time when Kiera used to like her for her personality.

However, now...

"You disgust me."

All she could feel was disgust and loathing.

"You think this is some sort of joke...? Is everything to you a joke? Was the death of my mother, your sister a joke?"

Kiera venomously spat every word as she glared at the figure ahead.

Indeed, the woman before her was her aunt. Her master, and someone whom she had once regarded as the closest person in her life.

She was also the very same person that killed her mother.

Her very own blood sister.

"Why?"

It was all Kiera could ask.

"Why did you do it...?"

She wanted answers. She was desperate for answers.

But....

"Hmm, who knows~"

All she received was the same nonchalant attitude of hers.

It...

Pissed her off.

Right then and there, she almost banged on the door ahead. If not for the fact that she was worried she'd attract the attention of the guards behind her, she would've smashed it with everything she had.

Rose's mana was currently sealed. She was weaker than she was.

All it would take would be a simple spell to end her, and yet...

"Kh."

The only thing Kiera could do was glare at her from where she was.

"What a cute expression."

Rose licked her lips and finally moved her body, nearing the narrow gap that enabled the two of them to see each other.

Kiera stood still and watched as she approached.

Eventually, Rose stopped and Kiera got a good look at her face. It was no longer as pretty as it once was. With sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, it was clear that her time here hadn't been good. It made her feel a little better.

'If only her face wasn't so detestable...'

Kiera could hardly stand the sight of her.

".....You've grown up so much."

Frowning, Kiera was about to rebuke when she continued.

"You've gotten prettier and stronger than the last time that I've seen you. I'm proud of what you've managed to achieve, but..."

With a look of disappointment, she suddenly smiled.

"You're still as naive as ever."

"What non—"

"Did you truly think you could've made it here with the level of your skill?"

Kiera found herself losing her breath and her expression stiffened.

"You've always been quite talented with the [Darkness] attributed, but that wouldn't be enough to get here. Most of the guards here are about your strength, if not a little stronger, but..."

Rose suddenly brought her face closer.

"Do you really think they wouldn't be able to have means to detect you? Hehehe."

With a sudden laugh, Rose's gaze shifted away from Kiera who stood petrified as she felt the presence of a figure behind her.

Tok—

A single footstep reverberated through the silent hall.

Kiera felt her heartbeat quicken all of a sudden. A sense of crisis gripped her heart.

Tok—

Another one followed shortly after.

It seemed to be approaching their direction. Her gaze naturally fell on her master who stared ahead with a smile.

Her stomach dropped and she got into a stance.

Whatever was coming, she was ready to put up a fight.

But...

"...Uh?"

Kiera's eyes widened at the sight of the figure that appeared.

Tall frame, curly black hair, deep hazel eyes, and a face that one wouldn't forget even if they wanted to. He appeared right before her, his cold gaze bearing down on her as his steps came to a halt.

Dazed, Kiera looked at him.

"...You."

She was stunned.

"What are you doing here?"

And alarmed.

How could he be here? She had made sure to close the door the moment she had entered. It was therefore impossible for her to think he had followed her.

There must've been another reason for his appearance.

Kiera's head turned and the expression her aunt wore deeply etched itself in her mind.

"Yo—"

And just before she could say anything, she caught a glimpse of a thin thread heading for the narrow gap of the cell.

As Kiera's eyes traced over the thread that headed for the cell, her eyes widened all of a sudden as she hastily turned her head to stare at her aunt whose face suddenly changed.

"You, wait, what are—"

The last thing Kiera caught was the frozen expression of her aunt as her neck severed off cleanly from her body.

Pfttt—

Blood splurged all over, some of it making its way toward Kiera who stood frozen on the spot.

Thud.

The head fell and silence gripped the surroundings.

Only for it to be broken by a sudden blaring sound.

Wooooooooooooooooo—!

The prison alarm.

It had rang.

Chapter 69 Work Experience [6]

—A few minutes earlier.

Leon stared at the inmate in the distance. Every part of his instincts warned him against the man as he felt his back grow cold.

"....."

Nonetheless, he remained calm. If something was really up, then he couldn't make any rash movements like warning the other guards.

'I should take a look.'

Gradually, he moved towards the man.

His steps eventually halted a few meters away from the inmate, who raised his head to meet his gaze.

"Is there something that I can help you with?"

The inmate smiled at Leon. The look on his face... it was as if he was seeing something interesting.

Leon didn't reply and looked around the cell. It was spotless. Everything was in order, and there didn't seem to be anything strange about the place.

And yet...

'Something's wrong.'

His instincts warned him of something.

He paced around the room, lifting the pillows, the mattress, and the furniture as he searched.

However, regardless of what he did, he found nothing. Even after he used his mana to check the place, he found nothing.

Just what...

"You seem to be looking for something."

A voice quietly reached him from behind.

".....You can ask me, and I'll see if I can help you."

Leon turned his head to gaze at the inmate, who remained calm throughout. In that moment, a sense of foreboding washed over him, and he thrust his fist forward.

Bang——!

The surroundings shook as he felt his fist collide with another.

"....!"

At that moment Leon finally understood what was wrong, and his expression cracked.

"You... Your mana isn't restrained."

His words were met with a smirk.

"It's too late."

Thump! Thump!

Muffled sounds echoed in the distance all of a sudden, and before Leon could react, the alarms blared to life.

Woooooo——!

Clank! Clank! Clank!

What followed after was a loud metallic sound and the sound of the inmate's voices.

"Hahaha! What's this? Why are my cuffs suddenly off?"

"I can feel my body again...?!"

"My restraints are gone!"

Leon's eyes widened all of a sudden and his head lowered to stare at the inmate.

"You..."

The inmate smirked.

"It's too late. You can't stop the inevitable."

Woooooo——!

The blaring sound of the alarm echoed throughout as I stared at the cell in front of me.

Kiera stood a few feet from me, frozen in shock.

"You, you..."

Her words seemed lodged in her throat as she grappled to understand the reality of what was unfolding.

I was also similarly surprised by her appearance here. I hadn't expected her to be here, but considering a little obstruction on the way, I understood how she had made it here.

The guards around the place had their senses restrained, making it extremely easy to move around. Even if I were to shout right now, the guards wouldn't notice.

It was a chilling thought.

Just what sort of organization was capable of such a feat?

However, I didn't dwell on this for long as my gaze fell on Kiera.

'She's the second calamity...'

It became clear to me at this moment.

'Then, that would mean Aoife was the first calamity.'

Two pieces of the long puzzle finally stuck into place.

"Ah, this... fuck...what have you..."

A certain stutter broke my thoughts. I looked down to see Kiera looking at me with open eyes.

"You..."

"She's a clone."

"...Ah, uh. Ah?"

Kiera's eyes snapped open, and a voice echoed right behind me

"Oh? So you knew...?"

I turned back and immediately raised my left hand.

Clank—!

Sparks flew as I felt the tip of a long blade touch the tip of my nose.

"Chains...?"

With a look of surprise, her red eyes widened slightly as she voiced her surprise.

".....Is that your weapon, or a spell?"

I didn't say anything and distanced myself a little.

Cra... Crack—!

A subtle cracking sound emanated from the chains wrapped around my arm. The mana within my body drained, and they slowly began to repair themselves.

Indeed, this was the method I had come up with to use my new spell [Chains of Alakantria].

My greatest weakness was my defense. I pondered long and hard on how to compensate for it, and this was the result.

Clank, clank—!

The chains moved, wrapping over my left fist as I slowly clenched it.

I turned my head to look at Kiera who was still in a daze.

"....Get your act together. She's currently weakened."

Having had her mana sealed for so long, her current strength was a far cry from what it usually was.

There was no better time than to deal with her now.

Especially for someone who had been locked here. I didn't know the extent of her strength, but she was certainly powerful. A lot more powerful than the two of us combined.

"The more time we waste, the more things are advantageous for her."

"Ah, shit, fuck..."

Only then did Kiera snap out of her daze.

She went on to ruffle her hair.

"Fuck."

Her face was filled with doubt, but considering the situation, she put those thoughts aside and raised her hand where a red magic circle appeared.

"Try to buy me time."

She fell silent thereafter, but I sensed a tremendous surge of mana emanating from her. It became clear to me that she was preparing for a large spell.

"Oh my~"

The woman massaged her bruised wrist.

"That's quite a powerful spell that you're preparing Ki. How about you go easier on me? I'm not in the best of shapes."

Even now she didn't seem to take the situation seriously.

It wasn't as though I didn't understand. To her, we probably looked like amateurs. Still, her talk was meaningless.

"Her trait is [Body], and she specializes in the sword. Be careful in short-range combat. Keep a certain distance."

Kiera's voice reached me from behind.

The mana around her surged further.

"....I can try."

There was no guarantee. I could see that with each second that passed, her strength was increasing.

I didn't have much time.

I quickly channeled my mana and pointed forward.

[Hands of Malady].

Hands sprouted from the area beneath her.

Swoosh—! I somewhat anticipated her to dodge and had strategically placed several threads around to impede her movement. However, it proved futile as she deftly maneuvered around the threads.

'Fuck!'

She appeared in front of me, her fist already near my face.

I once again raised my left hand to block the incoming attack, but...

Booom—!

"Ukeh....!"

She altered the course of the fist mid-motion and directly hit me in the stomach.

I almost had the urge to puke as I took several steps back and glanced at Kiera who looked at me with a look that seemed to say 'The fuck are you doing?'

This...

Swoosh—!

Ducking down to evade an incoming sword, I thrust my hand forward. A magic circle formed, and five purple threads burst out, hurtling directly toward her.

The distance between us was very close, and I was confident that I'd at least graze her, but...

Swoosh—! Swoosh—! As if she had eyes at the back of her head, she moved around and dodged everything.

"...This is bullshit."

Her instincts and reaction time were no joke. And to add insult to injury, she was getting stronger and faster with each second.

"You i-idiot... She can sense the mana trace from whatever that shit is."

Hearing Kiera's scolding, I felt my brows twitch. I wanted to tell her to switch roles with me, but considering that I didn't have a final move like she did, I could only grunt at her.

Swoosh—!

The distance between us shrank.

I stared ahead and forced myself to remain calm.

This was clearly not working. I needed a new way.

Swoosh—!

Her blade thrust my way. The speed at which it was moving was extremely fast.

'Since she can sense my mana trace...'

I gritted my teeth and recalled everything. The chains, and the threads.

It all occurred in less than a second, and at that moment, I sidestepped and brought both my hands diagonally.

Sweat dripped down the side of my face as the blade neared.

It was only a few inches away.

....I could see it near my eyes.

Almost...

"Now!"

A translucent purple chain materialized on both my hands and I pushed to my left.

Clank—!

Sparks flew and something grazed my cheek.

I was pushed back several meters.

"Ukh..."

Feeling a sweet sensation at the back of my throat, I let out a groan.

It was obvious that she had come out on top in the exchange and that I had clearly lost.

However...

"...I did it."

I looked at the chains in my hand. Squeezing my hand, they shattered and I stared ahead where the woman was. She seemed surprised by the fact that I had managed to block her attack.

"Yo—"

I didn't let her talk. The more she talked and wasted time, the stronger she became.

I was quick to move and swung my hand in her direction.

Clank. Clank.

Simultaneously, chains materialized in the midst of the motion, prompting her to dodge backward.

"...Uh."

The chains shattered before they could hit the ground.

In the meantime, I twisted my torso and swung horizontally using my left hand.

Swoosh—!

Once again, the chains materialized mid-motion, further complicating her ability to gauge the distance and sense the mana trace.

Once again, she was able to dodge the attack.

I wasn't disheartened.

In fact... I felt nothing but excitement.

"This..."

It was working.

I had found something new.

As the mana rapidly drained and my breath grew heavy, I found myself becoming more accustomed to this new fighting style. Despite the strain, I grew more adept at manipulating the chains, shattering and reappearing around my hands.

Call.

Recall.

Call.

Recall.

There was a lag between each set of actions, but it was becoming smoother by the second.

Finally, the distance was starting to create between us. Unlike before, it was starting to become harder for her to dodge. Even as her strength increased, so did my proficiency.

Swoosh—!

I swung my hand again. She reacted before the chains appeared, ducking down, but...

"Heh."

I smiled and swung my other hand. It was a fake.

Clank—!

"Ukh!"

Finally, I made contact with her, and sparks flew through the air as the chains connected with her sword.

I wanted to celebrate but found myself unable to.

"Haaaa... Haaa..."

I was heavily out of breath, and my mind was starting to become blurry. It was clear to me that I was running out of juice.

I looked behind to stare at Kiera.

"How long...?"

She didn't respond, instead staring at her hands where an impressive magic circle appeared. Even from where I stood, I could feel the formidable power emanating from it.

That, however, proved to be a mistake as something flashed next to me.

It was headed straight for Kiera.

"Shit...!"

Reacting purely on instinct, I extended my right hand, conjuring five threads that swiftly enveloped the entire surrounding area.

"Ukeh...!"

A low grunt sounded as the threads snapped and I was pushed back. However, I just barely managed to halt whatever was attempting to pass me.

"Move...!"

I didn't even have time to catch my breath before I heard Keira's shout. Instinctively, I leaped to the side.

I was glad I did.

Wooom—!

A powerful flame surged forward, engulfing the entire corridor. A bright light covered everything as I felt the intense heat pressing against my back.

"..."

The pain was tolerable.

It burned my entire back and legs, but it was manageable. I had been through worse.

The flames continued to surge forward, persisting for several more seconds before finally dissipating.

"Ah..."

I raised my head after a few seconds.

"That."

It was powerful.

Really powerful.

Would I have survived if I hadn't dodged in time? I was doubting my chances.

"....."

The corridor was empty and a strange silence gripped our surroundings.

"Did we do it...?"

I heard Kiera's voice from behind. It sounded tired and haggard.

I pursed my lips.

"....I don't know."

I released a long breath and sat up, resting my arm over my knee. Calmly, I surveyed the corridor before muttering once more.

"I don't know."

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Chapter 70 Work Experience [7]

Wooom—

The sirens continued to blare, and footsteps echoed in the distance. I remained seated and stared in the distance.

"....I'm tired."

I could hardly move my body.

Out there, on the opposite side, the guards were probably fighting against the inmates who had escaped.

I knew the plan from Professor Bucklam who had told me everything. At least, everything that he knew.

Five other people were aware of the plan. They all seemed to belong to the same organization.

....The one that I also seemed to be a part of.

"You..."

I snapped out of my thoughts after hearing a certain voice. However, I didn't turn my head and continued to stare in the same direction.

"....How come you're here?"

In the end, that was all she managed to say.

I almost laughed then.

"I'd like to ask you the same question."

No, really.

I was actually curious.

"That's none of your-"

She stopped upon realizing her own hypocrisy. Her expression crumbled, and she eventually clicked her tongue.

"My aunt. That was my aunt."

"...I see."

It finally made more sense to me.

"....."

"....."

"....."

"...So?"

"So, what?"

I turned to look at Kiera who had her mouth open. As if realizing something, she ended up muttering something along the lines of, 'Would you believe this fucker...'

I could only hear because she wasn't trying to hide her voice.

"I only said, 'I'd like to ask you the same question'. Didn't mean that I was planning on sharing after you shared."

"You..."

She raised her fist and leaned her body slightly. It looked like she wanted to hit me. However, I didn't flinch and just stared at her.

"What are you doing?"

Her red eyes sparkled in the dark as she clenched her teeth.

"....."

That fist never reached me.

With a long breath, she leaned back and cursed.

"Fuck."

I silently shook my head and similarly leaned back. My body still ached, and my mana was recovering very slowly.

In the distance, I could still hear the muffled banging sounds. It seemed pretty intense out there.

"....You're pretty strong."

My thoughts were once again broken by Kiera's voice.

"Strong?"

I looked at her and almost doubted her words.

Did she really just call me strong...?

I wanted to laugh. Strong? As if. I was currently still weak.

The only reason I was even able to keep up with her aunt was because her mana had been sealed for so long that her body was still getting accustomed to life without restraints.

I would've been killed with a flick of her finger had that not been the case.

Still...

"....Thanks."

I received her words and didn't deny them.

Such was my persona.

"Not a trace of humility, huh...? Well, I get it. Annoying as you are, you are pretty strong."

Kiera ended up shrugging her shoulders.

"So yeah..."

She proceeded to scratch the side of her face.

"....Uh, yeah."

Scratch. Scratch.

"Yup."

Scratch—

"Right..."

Repeating the same words, she struggled to get the words out of her mouth. Confused, I continued to stare at her when she ended up clicking her tongue.

"Whatever, fuck. I just wanted to say thanks."

"Thanks...?"

I was taken aback.

This was the last thing I had expected her to say.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

"Killing that bit-my aunt...Thanks for helping me."

"...."

Even as she clarified, I had a hard time getting the words out of me. I thought I had gotten an understanding of her character, but...

Just what sort of situation was this?

Suddenly thanking me out of nowhere... I honestly never expected it.

'Maybe, she's the type that's really upfront about her feelings.'

The type that said what they thought. It made sense when I thought about it. However, I hardly knew her well enough to be sure.

I was just about to say something when Kiera's face scrunched up and she rubbed both sides of her arms.

"Ah, shit... You're making me cringe at my own comments. Ugh, fuck. Goosebumps. All I feel are goosebumps."

With the help of the wall, she proceeded to stand up.

"Whatever, I'm fucking leaving."

Without looking back, her steps echoed throughout. The entire way, she continued to run her arms while muttering 'goosebumps' over and over again.

As her back gradually shrank from my view, I managed to hear a few more words from her.

"Where's my cigarette when I need it? Shit."

I saw her smack her own head.

"That was so fucking cringe. Ugh-!"

"This..."

I stared at the scene and unknowingly found myself smirking.

It was funny.

And in a way... It was cute as well.

She was certainly a unique character.

But...

"....."

I shifted my gaze to look up at the ceiling and gradually, I lost my smile. Would she really be thanking me if she knew the truth?

"Haaa..."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

Her aunt... The person that she wanted to kill.

She was still alive and kicking. I knew this because I was the one who helped her escape.

"What a sick twist."

.....The fact that she was her aunt was a sick twist I hadn't expected.

Had I known, then...

"Heh."

I suddenly laughed as realization hit me.

"...I'd probably have done the same thing."

Of that, I was sure.

In the end, this was a necessary step that I needed to take.

'I wanted to only let the Professor escape, but that would indeed be a little too suspicious.'

After hearing what he had to say, I knew that if he had been the only one to escape, then my chances of getting what I wanted would decrease drastically.

Furthermore, given that he was no longer a professor at Haven, his value to the organization wasn't very high.

It was for this reason that I went along with his idea and saved Kiera's aunt.

Or more like...

"Allowed him to save her."

The figure that I had stopped with the threads was none other than the professor.

It was merely an act.

...A way to make her think he was on their side.

I wasn't sure about the price my action would have in the future. Whether it would make Kiera turn against me, or whether the professor would end up backstabbing me, but...

"It's necessary."

I was alone. I needed allies. People I could use to help me uncover the secrets of this organization.

Exploiting the professor's weakness, I managed to get him to my side. However, how much trust could I really put in him?

The only thing I could rely on was his character.

Was he the same person that I had seen in the vision? If so...

"It's worth the risk."

They were coming for me. From the moment I had killed Wesley back in the Mirror Dimension, their appearance was inevitable.

I knew that and for that reason, I had to get ready.

Even if it meant deliberately failing.

[Rose Keline, Kiera's master and enemy has survived and managed two other convicts. The future is following the same trajectory.]

An expected notification flashed in my vision.

It was followed up by another.

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

Aoife K. Megrail 1 : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Kiera Mylne 2 : Slumber

: Progress - 2 % + 7% ---> 9%

Evelyn J. Verlice : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

"....."

I wordlessly stared at the window that appeared before me.

Failure.

My first failure.

I felt my chest tighten staring at the +7%.

It was a necessary loss that I was willing to take. I still knew nothing about what the situation entailed, and what would happen once the bars reached 100%. Most likely, it was going to be something bad for me.

However...

I was willing to take the risk and allow it to build up a little. In the end, I gained something more valuable with my decision.

To build a solid foundation.

I was willing to sacrifice short-term gains.

In a remote forest.

Woo— Wooom—!

The air twisted and two figures suddenly appeared out of thin air. Stumbling forward, they managed to stop after a few steps.

"Huuuu... Haa..."

"This is....?"

They were none other than Rose Keline and Robert Bucklam. They could still feel the lingering heat from Kiera's spell as they immediately channeled their mana to cool themselves down.

Rose looked around in confusion. Then, as if realizing that they were no longer in the prison, she turned to look at Rober where she smiled.

"It looks like you've saved me."

Catching his breath, he managed to say,

".....I was only following the plan."

He glanced at the shattered glass in his hand. It was a one-time use relic that enabled him to teleport outside of the prison.

The organization had paid a massive price to get it into his hands.

There was also another inmate who had received the same relic. Their job was similar to his, which was to help the greater-

risk members to teleport out.

It was already hard for the organization to get them to have access to the relics. The difficulty of giving it to the higher-

grade inmates was almost impossible.

It was for this reason that the two of them had been given the relics.

Their job was to escape with them.

"Mhh~ Well, I should still thank you."

Rose broke the silence that had suddenly gripped their area.

Rubbing her wrists which were still bruised, her brows wrinkled slightly.

"I won't lie, I was having a rather tough time dealing with the two of them. Especially that boy. His fighting style... It was rather unique."

Recalling the way the boy from before fought, and the emotionless expression he wore as he attacked her, Rose chuckled.

"...An interesting one."

Such was her evaluation of him.

"A very interesting one."

He definitely was.

"But..."

Rose looked around and tilted her head.

"Are we the only ones here? Where are the others?"

"I'm not certain."

Robert looked around.

Their relics were set to similar coordinates and therefore, theoretically, they should have already teleported here.

.....From what he had been told, their job was supposedly easier than his.

It was for this reason that Robert felt confused by the situation.

'Could something have gone wrong?'

He hoped that was the case, but responded differently.

"They might've been held back by something. I went straight to you the moment I could so I wasn't able to see."

"Hm~"

The smile on Rose's face widened. She seemed very pleased.

"Indeed, your reputation precedes you as a distinguished professor. Your sense of priority is commendable. I consider myself lucky to have gotten you as my helper. I'll make sure to tell the Directorate about your contributions. I'm sure they'll reward you."

".....Thank you."

Robert lowered his head to express his gratitude.

"I'm grateful for your words."

"Don't be too excited. I'm only putting in my word. Whether you get anything out of this will depend on 'him'."

"Who...?"

Robert tilted his head in confusion.

Rose's smile suddenly faded.

Then, as if two hands were squeezing at her throat, she managed to force out a few words.

"....The one who walks among us."

The source of this content is