

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 71 Era of the Shattered World [1] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 71 Era of the Shattered World [1]

Chapter 71 Era of the Shattered World [1]

The main force within the Empire was the Royal Family.

With power over the Knight's Council and the Magic Tower, there was no other force that could rival their might.

At least, individually.

There was another organization within the Empire which was made up of the collective between all the noble houses. Entrusted with the Empire's administrative matters, the Megrail family not only tolerated their presence but also extended their support to them.

Central adopted a democratic approach, allowing the population to determine the allocation of seats among the houses within the organization.

Additionally, every four years, a new chairperson would be elected to assume control over the affairs.

Central.

—A meeting was taking place.

"What's the situation?"

A tall man with sharp eyes and long black hair glanced around the oval table where several important figures sat. His husky voice seemed unfitting for his small frame.

He was a representative member of the Joltice House.

A Viscount family.

".....Everything is contained. All inmates have been locked up. However, we've received reports of several losses within the penitentiary. Over a dozen guards have been killed, and several cadets from Haven have died. It also appears as if several inmates have escaped the facility. We've already sent the 'hounds' to look for them."

Responding to him was a middle-aged woman with sharp features and short hair. Representing the Verlice family, she was Johanna Verlice.

The conversation continued from there.

"Do you know who is responsible for all of this?"

"Im not aware."

Massaging his chin, another member present within the room interjected.

".....From the reports I've received the organization is called the Inverted Sky. We don't know much about them, but it's only recently that they've started to become active."

"Does the Royal Family know?"

"They know."

"If so, why haven't they done anything? It's strange. They're usually rather overbearing with stuff like this. Why are they suddenly so quiet?"

"It's because they can't do anything about them."

A crisp voice suddenly interjected and all members quiet down. Sitting at the end of the table was an enchanting woman with long black hair and deep black eyes. She was none other than Delilah.

The one closest to the Zenith.

"The Inverted Sky is an organization that even the Royal Family has trouble dealing with."

Her words brought a certain shock to the room.

While she wasn't exactly a member of Central, her family was. She took advantage of the sudden situation to make an appearance.

"Even the Royal family...? How come we've only heard about them now? How does that even make sense?"

Delilah stared at the members and held back her smirk.

Witnessing such esteemed figures at the helm of the Empire appear so clueless, Delilah couldn't help but feel a certain sense of amusement about the situation.

"We don't know much about the Inverted Sky. However, if there's one thing that I do know is that they are an organization that is much older than the Empire. They date back to the Era of the Shattered World."

"...!"

The looks of shock on the faces of the members were something that Delilah took in with gusto.

It had to be noted that the Era of the Shattered World occurred several thousand years ago.

To put that into perspective, the Empire wasn't even half a millennium old.

"You ask why the Megrail family hasn't done a thing yet..."

With cracks appearing on her usually stoic face, Delilah suddenly smiled.

"....What other reason than fear is there? The Megrail family fears the Inverted Sky, and so should you."

The temperature of the room dropped at her words.

Despite the esteemed status of everyone in the room, a palpable sense of unease descended as Delilah's words reverberated, casting a shadow of oppression over the gathering.

This was exactly what Delilah wanted to achieve with her words.

It was about time that the world was made aware of the organization that they were dealing with.

They had been in the shadows for far too long.

Now that they had started to show their fangs to the world, Delilah planned on dragging them out completely. Only then would she be able to completely get rid of them.

"They are a m—"

"That's enough."

A deep voice cut Delilah off. Frowning, Delilah turned her head to stare at the man seated beside her.

Meeting his eyes, her words remained stuck in her mouth and she turned her head away.

"While my daughter's words are indeed true, there's no need to worry too much."

Despite being in the late sixties, his appearance was flawless. With two deep eyes that seemed to be able to suck in anything that looked into them, Orson Rosenberg, the current chair of Central, and Delilah's father spoke.

"They may be strong, but the depth of their strength isn't as deep as Delilah is making them out to be. The one we should really be worried about is their leader."

His voice contained a certain magnetism that attracted the attention of all those who were listening.

"Their gender remains unknown, and among the members of the organization, they are referred to as 'The one who walks among us',"

Orson Rosenberg explained solemnly.

"However, hardly anyone in the organization has ever seen how they look like or made contact with them."

He paused then and looked up to take in the expressions of all members in the room.

"There's not much that we know about them. There are records dating back to the Era of the Shattered World. However, the records are inconsistent. I've yet to find anything concrete."

Narrowing his eyes, he interlocked his hands.

"However, if there's one thing that I'm certain of is that..."

He paused and took a small breath.

"....A human can't possibly have survived for so long."

His hands gradually tensed.

"It's impossible."

Haven.

In the end, the event proceeded as it did in the vision. There was no difference whatsoever.

—Clandice Brow. Jordan Watson. Emile Black...

Names began to flow forth, accompanied by a somber atmosphere that enveloped the surroundings. Subtle cries echoed in the otherwise silent air as Herman Chambers solemnly recited the names of the fallen cadets.

—This is a sad day for all of us. They were bright cadets with a bright future ahead. It's...

I looked around me and took in the sight.

A part of me felt responsible for this. Could I have saved them? Possibly.

However, that was a hard if. There were certain things that I could've done to ensure that at least one person could've been saved.

I knew that.

However, I also knew that such action would bring risk and danger to me.

.....I didn't want people to die.

However, I also knew that I wasn't someone capable of helping everyone. It wasn't my job to help everyone.

That job belonged to someone else.

"...."

I turned to look in the distance where a figure stood. Even now, his appearance attracted the attention of all those around him.

His face remained stoic and emotionless.

However, seeing how tightly his fists were clenched, I knew he was probably blaming himself for the situation.

'Right... It's your job to feel guilty for their deaths.'

I wasn't allowed to have such feelings. I couldn't allow myself to have such feelings. The world was ready to eat me at any mistake.

I couldn't be the hero.

That was something that I couldn't afford to be.

I was just...

A drifting pebble that was trying to stay afloat in this unfamiliar world.

".....I should get ready."

Late into the night.

It had been a few hours since the ceremony, and people were slowly starting to head back into their dorms to mourn the losses of their friends.

I spent the time focusing on increasing my experience.

Having failed the mission, I didn't gain the required experience to rank up. The loss felt rather painful since it was going to set me back a week.

However, it was a loss that I was willing to take.

"Failure is already something I'm used to."

Failing wasn't important.

Gaining something from the failure was the most important thing.

?| EXP + 0.03%

?| EXP + 0.01%

?| EXP + 0.02%

?| EXP + 0.01%

"Huuuu."

I took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

The progress was steady.

"Fifteen left."

I looked at the experience bar and sighed.

I was currently at 85%.

Fifteen didn't sound like much, but when taking into account that I needed to reduce my sleep and drop everything else to even get a chance to get there, it wasn't something that I was keen on doing.

"It's just not enough."

The Mana Synthesis book was too slow.

Well, at least for what I currently desired. I knew from the lectures that the effects of the book would diminish the higher the tier I was.

This meant that the moment I stepped into the next tier, things would progress even more slowly.

It was already rather slow for me. The idea of my progress slowing down didn't sit well with me.

"....I need to get my hands on a better book."

That much became clear to me.

However, how could I do that...?

I had little to no money, and I had never played the game before. I didn't know where the cheats were, or where to find the good books.

The only thing I had were unreliable visions which I never knew when they would appear.

"Haaa."

The more I thought about the situation, the greater the headache I felt.

I was just about to sigh again when all of a sudden, I felt a presence behind me and flicked my head.

"....!"

Immediately, I stood up and stepped back.

"What's the sudden occasion?"

It was none other than Delilah who nonchalantly looked around.

I stood while holding my breath. My heart rocketed out of my chest, and I struggled to keep myself composed.

Several questions flooded my mind as I forced myself to remain calm.

'Why is she here? Did she find something out? Is she here because of what happened at the prison? What are...'

As sweat dripped down from the side of my face and my muscles tensed, Delilah continued to look around.

Eventually, having seen enough, she stopped and looked back at me.

I held my breath and waited for her to speak.

Gradually, her voice reached me and she asked,

"....Do you have any chocolate?"

Uh?

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Chapter 72 Era of the Shattered World [2]

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Chocolate...?

Why in the world would I have chocolate?

I stared at Delilah and shook my head.

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

"I see."

Delilah nodded her head with her usual impassive expression. However, for some reason, I could tell she was disappointed.

Call it intuition.

"How may I help you?"

I kept my cool and addressed her recently.

Surely she didn't come here in the middle of the night to visit me for the sake of it.

Looking around the room, Delilah sat down on one of my sofas and made herself comfortable.

"...."

I remained where I stood and quietly waited for her to say something. She eventually did speak, but the words that came out of her mouth stumped me.

"It's four times now."

"Yes?"

Four times...?

What was that supposed to mean?

She elaborated.

"It's four times now that you've found yourself in some sort of incident."

Holding up her fingers, she started to recount.

"Survival training, Auction, Mirror Dimension, and now this..."

Delilah raised her head to look at me.

"Is it a coincidence?"

"Ah."

At that, I found the words that I had prepared in advance remain stuck in my mouth.

It was true. Now that I thought about it, I had indeed been in all of the incidents. For the most part, it was because of the quests.

But it was indeed rather suspicious.

"...I am a very unlucky person."

Even I was surprised by the bullshit that was coming out of my mouth.

Well...

To some extent, there was some truth to those words.

I certainly wasn't a very lucky person. At the very least, I didn't think I was.

"...."

Delilah just stared at me with her deep eyes. I knew she didn't believe me. Eventually, her gaze lowered to stare at my right arm.

"Show me your tattoo again."

"...."

I inwardly swallowed before obliging and rolling up my sleeve.

"Oh?"

It was to Delilah's surprise to see a cloth over the area around my forearm. Looking up, she meaningfully looked at me.

"I don't know how to hide it."

And I truthfully answered.

It started to become clear to me that the tattoo on my hand wasn't something that I could randomly show off on a whim.

The organization that I was dealing with was slowly starting to reveal its fangs and more and more people were becoming aware of them. I didn't know much about them, and regardless of how much I tried to find anything about them, all I'd see was a blank road with no end in sight.

Nothing.

There was simply nothing.

It was for this reason that I chose to hide the tattoo.

"I believe this is the best course of action considering that it might get misunderstood for something that it isn't."

I carefully looked at Delilah when saying those words. I wanted to gauge her reaction or lack thereof.

She simply sat where she was with her legs crossed.

It was hard to tell what she was thinking.

"...."

She was just staring at me. Her deep eyes peered deeply into me, trying to suck me in. The longer this went, the more uncomfortable I grew.

Why isn't she speaking? What is she trying to do...?

In the silence that took over the room, her lips finally parted open.

"I've asked you before, but does the words Inverted Sky mean anything to you?"

Inverted Sky?

I thought about it long and hard before shaking my head.

"No."

"Hmm."

Delilah silently nodded before standing up.

".....I can't feel any lies coming from you."

Lies?

She can detect lies?

'Uh, right... Even last time she was like this.'

Tak—

Delilah placed a book on the table. I immediately felt my eyebrows raise at the sight of the book. Could it be...

"Read this book. I'm not sure how much, but it'll help you out in the future."

"Help me?"

I looked at the cover of the book. It was completely blank and devoid of any illustration or font.

"Don't think too much. It's a common book that you can find in the library."

"Then..."

"You'll find it useful."

I didn't say anything from there. She seemed to want to help me, but at the same time, I wasn't sure what her real intentions were.

For now, I could only take her at face value and agree.

Either way, it wasn't going to hurt me. Whatever it was, it must have had some meaning to it. I planned on taking my time to closely examine the book.

"Hm."

I thought she'd leave things there, but all of a sudden, she said something else.

"As you've already probably guessed, I'm keeping you close to me to observe you."

Her words stunned me.

Although I had already managed to guess. For her to be so upfront about it...

'She really...'

Was someone I had a hard time figuring out.

If that wasn't shocking enough, all of a sudden, cracks formed on her face as her lips gently pulled up.

"...I think I made the right decision."

"What-"

Before I even had a chance to say anything, her form scattered and she disappeared.

Like the wind, she simply scattered away.

"...."

In the newfound silence that took over the room, I stood in a daze for a few seconds before eventually turning my gaze over to the book.

I picked it up and ran my hand over the hardcover. It felt cold to the touch.

Even now, I was still confused about her intentions. The more I thought about it, the more my head hurt.

"Is she helping me, or using me?"

I more or less knew the answer to that question, and I didn't mind it. So long as it benefitted me in some way, then I didn't mind getting used.

In the end, I had to just stop thinking about it and I flipped to the first page.

I was bound to find something from this book.

Flip—

"...."

Laying my eyes on the first page, I read out loud.

"Era of the Shattered World."

It was an interesting title, and it immediately gained my interest. I was just about to flip to the next page when all of a sudden something flashed before my eyes.

It was a simple notification.

One that I knew was bound to happen.

But even as it happened, I felt my shoulders grow heavy.

".....I guess it's starting."

[Synchronizing]

Kiera Mylne : 2% ---> 9%

The penalty of my decision.

—A few minutes prior.

"Ah, fuck... I forgot to buy them again."

Smack—

Kiera smacked her forehead and let out a curse. Rummaging through her pockets and finding nothing, she clicked her tongue and kicked one of the pebbles along her path.

Despite the darkness outside, the presence of lamps lining the path served to ward away her fear.

The thought made Kiera chuckle.

"It's funny."

Her traits were purely [Elemental] with her skills rooted in [fire] and [darkness]. Despite her aversion to the darkness, her power was inexorably linked to it.

It was for this reason that she never used her other element.

She simply had a hard time using it.

But of course, that didn't apply to the events of the day prior when she went to visit her aunt.

Her anger had taken away the fear that she had towards the darkness.

"Haaa."

Kiera suddenly felt her mood lift at the thought of her aunt.

Thinking about the death of that woman, Kiera felt like she was flying.

"Finally, she's dead."

It sounded too good to be true. The woman who had haunted her for so long was finally dead. And to think, she was the one who ended up killing her...

"...."

Kiera felt an odd sense of relief.

Even though she had sworn to be the one to do it, she didn't think she'd have the opportunity to.

"I can't believe it."

It still felt like a dream to her. A very nice dream.

In any case, Kiera's thoughts couldn't help but drift towards a certain figure. Had it not been for him, then she would've most likely died, or even worse, been kidnapped.

She hated to admit it, but...

"I guess I owe him one...?"

Tilting her head, she mumbled to herself.

"Uh, no. Technically speaking he owes me one too."

Right...?

Kiera felt her face scrunch up and she ended up rubbing her head.

"Ugh, fuck... This shit's so complicated."

Clearly, the values between their debts were quite different. He had saved her life, while she had... minded her own business?

There was an obvious mismatch in the level of their debts.

"But still. What was he doing here?"

Setting the fact that he had helped her aside, why was he there? She had sneaked in because she wanted to meet her aunt.

But what was the reason for his appearance?

He was also very strong. While it was indeed true that her aunt had her mana sealed and was just waiting to recover her strength, he had managed to keep up with her.

He was a far cry from how he was in class. He was definitely hiding his real abilities and intentions.

Of that she was sure.

The question was why he was doing all of this. What was his motive behind his appearance back at the lockdown cells and why had he helped her?

"Surely he ha—"

Kiera's words stopped all of a sudden. Her vision blurred and her surroundings started to change.

'What... What the...!'

A scorched smell lingered in the air.

The ruins of a familiar city and the lightning that crackled in the air. An air of oppression gripped the surroundings.

'...What's going on? Where is this place?'

Kiera found that she had also lost her voice.

However, she didn't need her voice to see what was going on. In particular, in the distance, she could see a figure.

They stood at the center of it all, their figure blurred.

Everything gravitated their way. As if the world revolved around them.

'What, why...'

There was something else that shocked Kiera outside of the blurred figure.

It was...

'Why am I feeling this way...?'

The intense feelings that were invading every part of her body.

All she could remember was feeling an intense hatred. A hatred that seemed to devour her entire body.

And all of it was directed toward the blurred figure in the distance. For what reason, Kiera didn't know.

However...

All she could think about at the moment was the hatred she felt towards the figure.

It was intense, and Kiera had a hard time containing it.

Suddenly, Kiera felt her mouth part open as a voice familiar with her own rang out.

"You... You are the one who let her go... I trusted you, and yet...!"

Kiera felt her teeth clench as her body moved on its own.

Darkness started to spread over every inch of the land. It covered everything in its path, devouring all light from the world.

"...I'll kill you for it!"

The voice ended there as the world froze.

Not long after, the world started to collapse and Kiera found herself back in the park.

"W-what...?"

Kiera found that her voice was back.

But that wasn't enough to shake off her confusion.

"Haaa... Haaa...."

With heavy breaths, she looked around her.

"What... Haa... the hell was... Haa... that?"

Chapter 73 Era of the Shattered World [3]

There were three major known eras; The Era of Sovereign Ascendance, the Age of Umbral Dominion, and the Era of the Shattered World.

"The age of the Sovereign Ascendance dictates the age of the emergence of the Four Empires. The Aetheria Empire, Verdant Empire, Aurora Empire, and the Nurs Ancifa Empire."

I read the contents of the book out loud.

"It marks a relatively recent epoch, spanning only around 700 years."

So far, it was stuff that I was already somewhat aware of.

"The Age of Umbral dictates the age of the Mirror Dimension expansion. Taking place approximately two millennia ago, this era signified the commencement of the struggle."

Flip—

I skimmed through the pages and immersed myself in reading. The more I read, the more confused I became. In the end, this was a history book.

It detailed everything about the past.

"Let me guess, the Era of the Shattered World is when the Mirror Dimension appeared, right?"

Flip—

"The oldest known era. Where the earliest records recount the shattering of the world and the emergence of a new dimension. This realm came to be known as the Mirror Dimension, where unimaginable creatures roamed its depths."

I was indeed right.

I continued to flip through the contents. The information was rather interesting. However, there was something that continued to bother me the more I read the book.

It went to the point where I had to stop myself from reading.

"...Is there nothing before the Age of the Shattered World?"

The more I read, the more obvious it became that the oldest recording known was the 'Age of the Shattered World.'

The book hinted at it with words such as, 'the last known record', and so on.

But...

"What about before that?"

Why wasn't there anything about the age before the Age of the Shattered World?

"Maybe there was nothing important...?"

Even so, surely there should've been records of the civilization before.

"I mean, Ancient Egypt was about five thousand years old... Maybe the people of this world weren't capable enough?"

I doubted that to be the case. But thinking about the technological level of this world, they were indeed a little lacking compared to Earth.

That said, they did have magic.

"....It might just be this book."

It was worth checking out in the library later. I eventually closed the book and sighed.

"Hmm."

It was certainly interesting information, but I still struggled to comprehend Delilah's intent behind showing me this.

"What sort of connection is there between the organization and this book?"

There didn't seem to be any connection with it. In fact, it only left me with even more questions.

Still, it wasn't as if she had given the book to me for nothing. There had to be something important in the book.

There was no way Delilah would give it to me for no reason at all.

It was for this exact reason that I opened the book again and immersed myself in reading. This time, I didn't skim through the contents and made sure to memorize everything.

As much as I hated learning history, for some reason, I found the information to be extremely interesting.

Flip—

The next day. The sound of scribbling rang out in the classroom. The preparations for the festival that was set to take place in three weeks were already in full swing.

Everyone was busy. Especially the cadets who not only had to get performance ready for the festival but at the same time prepare for the upcoming examinations.

"Kill me!"

Some of the cadets were already having a mental breakdown.

Kiera to be precise.

"....I want to die! Just stab me with a long sharp sword. Whatever it takes."

From the way she was talking, it was obvious that she wasn't very excited about the upcoming exams.

I didn't know exactly how good her grades were, but judging from her expression and words, they were probably not very good.

"Slow, quick, I don't care. Anything is better than this..."

"Ey~ It's not that hard. Just memorize the book. You're so dumb."

Next to her, Josephine shook her head with a laugh. Surprisingly, she was one of the more studious cadets. Not that I knew much about her.

"What did you say?"

"Hm? It's not that hard?"

"No, the part before that."

"Memo—Uakh!"

Josephine let out a strange sound as Kiera's fist smacked against her head.

"Bitch, don't pretend like you didn't say it."

"Akh... My head. Fuck, I think I'm starting to understand how it feels to be like you..."

"Uh?!"

"Can the two of you stop?"

It was Evelyn who put a stop between the two. Leon, who sat a few rows back also interjected.

"The Professor is about to come."

"Tsk."

Only then did Kiera finally stop complaining and focus her attention back on the paper in front of her.

I watched them interact from my seat before turning my attention away from them.

Talking about the festival, I hadn't signed up for anything. I thought about the stand-up, but I still needed to work on my delivery.

It wasn't quite there yet...

There were so many activities to choose from that I struggled to pick any. In the end, I just left it blank.

In case someone left their selection empty, then they would be directly assigned a role by the Academy. The same was true for cadets that didn't make the cut in certain roles like 'Guide' as there could only be so many people that could be selected for such roles.

'Actually, now that I think about it, I should be assigned a role today...'

I was curious about what it was going to be.

"Ah, it seems everyone is here."

As per last time, a cheerful voice echoed across the class as Professor Bridgette entered the classroom. Sporting her trademark smile, she glanced around the classroom before taking out a small stack of papers.

"I've received everyone's files, and have sorted through them. I will now be reading the names of the activities you have been approved for."

Taking one of the papers, she started to read.

"Anders, you have applied for the Guide Role. After careful review, the board decided to approve your request."

Raising her head, her gaze fell on two people

"Josephine, the same goes with you. You will work alongside Anders to ensure that all the guests will be guided around the campus during the start."

"Eh...?"

Unable to contain her shock, Aoife raised her head and let out a strange sound.

'She must've applied for the role, I guess.'

Seeing the shock in her eyes, it was clear that she had also applied for the Guide role. There were only two spots for it, and therefore, it was clear that she hadn't been selected.

The Professor went on to list the other approvals without offering her an explanation.

I took in Aoife's shocked expression and made sure to stamp it in my mind. It felt oddly satisfying.

'Uh, shit... This feeling again.'

I looked away from her.

Was there something wrong with me?

"Next up, Kyle...."

One name after another started to be recounted as more and more cadets started to get assigned roles. Some were happy to get their selected roles, while others were left disappointed.

Strangely though, there was someone who seemed to be happy for no reason.

"Haha, fuck yeah..."

I felt her gaze burn the back of my head when the list for the cooking activity was listed. Her reaction came out of nowhere.

'Is she happy that she didn't get selected or something...?'

If so...

Why did Aoife also look relieved?

"For the stand-up. Unfortunately, none of the members of the class made it."

Bang—!

I was taken aback again. Turning around, I saw Leon hold his fist close to his face. Though his expression appeared blank, he seemed strangely happy.

".....Was he that embarrassed last time?"

I was starting to feel sorry for him.

"I think that's all for those that made it."

Putting the papers down, Professor Bridgette looked up again as her eyes scanned the classroom.

"For those that made the cut, congratulations. For those that haven't, please don't worry. We've already assigned you all roles in the theater club."

Theater club?

"Think of it as an honor. Haha, who knows? If you're lucky, you might even get a chance to participate in the upcoming play. Everyone will be watching."

While I was still confused by her words, she continued,

"But don't get your hopes up. The group that will be performing are all renowned actors. Your main job will be to tend to their needs and set up the stage for them. That being said, the Director has agreed to let the more outstanding cadets participate as extras. If you end up doing well, you might receive bonus credits."

Clap— Clap— Professor Bridgette clapped her hands twice and directed everyone's attention towards the blackboard.

"With that settled, let's continue with the lecture."

The class went on for an hour. Once it was done, all cadets dispersed and headed toward their designated Activity.

I looked at the slip in front of me and headed towards the Leoni Hall.

That was where the play was going to be held.

"A play, huh..."

I didn't know how to feel about the situation. From what I heard, the chances of us cadets getting selected for the play were almost slim to none.

Not that I minded since I wasn't interested in acting.

I wasn't a very good actor so it was only going to end up with me embarrassing myself.

That meant that my job was just setting up the stage and props. That sounded easy enough.

"I'll take it."

All I cared for were the credits.

The Academy Campus was large. It took me about ten minutes to finally arrive at the destination, and when I entered the hall, I was surprised by the chaos that caught my sight.

"Over here!"

"Yup! Place that here!"

"No, not that one!"

"The lights are centered! Set it up properly."

If there was one word I could use to describe the current situation, it'd be 'Chaotic'. With people talking over each other, and props being moved around everywhere, there was no semblance of order.

"Ah, cadet!"

The moment I came in, someone tugged my arm and I turned my head to meet the eyes of a young woman with blonde hair and green eyes.

Judging from the clothes she was wearing, she didn't seem to be a cadet. Perhaps an organizer?

"Yes?"

"Are you here for the theater activities?"

I thought about it before nodding.

".....I am."

"Okay, good!"

The woman seemed delighted and I was suddenly dragged away by her. I wanted to ask her where she was bringing me, but just let her be.

I soon came to regret that decision.

'What am I....'

Standing at the center of the stage, I directed my gaze toward the four figures seated at the far end, below the stage.

Holding onto a paper, I glanced at it for a brief moment before looking up again.

".....You may begin."

The fuck...?

Chapter 74 Act [1]

The 'Curtain Call Collective' was a renowned association within the Empire.

Continuously filling theaters with their performances, no one was unaware of them. They were celebrities amongst celebrities.

Every year, they'd host a performance at the Haven Academy festival.

With many important figures showing up, there was no greater place to perform. It was for this reason that everything needed to be set up properly.

"No, that's not right! Put it to the right."

"Yes! Like that... no! A little to the left, yup, shit you went too much to the left again...!"

The organizer of the event was a middle-aged woman known as Olga. Not only was she the organizer of the event, but she was also the scriptwriter of the play.

Her fame was about the same, if not greater, than the lead actors of the play.

Throughout the Empire, there were only seven plays that were rated Five-Stars, which was the greatest and most honorable a play could receive.

The criteria to receive such a rating was extremely difficult, making it a very prestigious and coveted rating.

Olga had yet to receive her first Five-Star, however with several Four-Star plays under her name, she was set to be the next one to receive such a reward.

Her latest play, 'The Wounds of the Moon' was something she had been working on for the past several years. It was her masterpiece.

For this reason, everything had to be perfect.

"No! That's not the right place!"

From the major details to the little details.

Everything had to be perfect.

"Madam Olga."

"Yes, right there."

"Madam Olga."

"No, you're-"

"Madam Olga!"

"Uh? Ah!"

Startled, Olga turned to her left where a young woman with glasses stood. Sporting an annoyed look, she glanced around and sighed.

"Madam, we're about to audition for the extra roles in the play. Several cadets are waiting to audition."

"Ah, right. I have to select one of them..."

Olga's expression crumbled. As a perfectionist, Olga hated nothing more than having to taint her play by granting permission to amateur actors and cadets into her play. Regardless of how small their role was, Olga hated the idea of having them in her play.

If not for the fact that she was forced to do it, she would've completely rejected the idea.

"...Fuck."

Her distaste towards the situation reached a point where she ended up swearing.

"I can't believe I have to allow this."

The performance was extremely important to her. It was because it was so important to her that she had trouble controlling herself.

"Bring me to them..."

Clenching her teeth, she headed for the main theater which was currently almost completely empty. Waiting for her near the stage were three other people.

"Ah, madame Olga, you're here."

"Madame."

They were key members of the Curtain Call Collective, and judging from their expressions, it was obvious that they too felt the same way as her.

Wearing a helpless smile, a middle-aged man with a protruding belly and thinning hair, handed her a paper.

"We will hold an audition for the minor role of Azarias."

"Azarias?"

Olga frowned and almost swore again.

A serial killer from an exiled noble who enjoyed killing people. With his bloodthirsty tendencies and hard-to-decipher intentions, he was the first 'antagonist' of the play.

A 'minor villain' one could say.

But...

"I can't agree to this."

He was a key character. While he was indeed a minor villain, he was someone who propelled the main character towards the path that he embarked on.

How could they let anyone take on such a role?

"I can't allow it."

It was for this reason that Olga slapped the paper on the table and shook her head.

"You should all know the importance of this character. I won't allow it even if you force me to."

"Madam, but-"

"No, but! I won't allow it. Even i-"

".....You have no choice but to allow it."

A deep voice suddenly interjected, forcing Olga's mouth shut. When she turned her head, she almost cursed.

Standing a few meters from her was a tall and lanky man with thick squared glasses. Wearing an undervest without his blazer, his deep dark eyes scanned the surroundings.

"The rules are the rules. Since you have signed up for this, you have to go through it to the end."

"But Azarias is..."

"What other character then?"

"That..."

When Olga was unable to answer, the man coldly cut her down.

"Since you can't decide, be quiet and start the audition. You don't have a lot of time. There's a chance you might get lucky and find someone worth consideration."

Find someone worth consideration?

Olga almost scoffed at the statement. However, she didn't let it show and merely clenched her teeth.

".....Fine."

In the end, she relented.

How could she even disagree?

His name was Adonis, and he was the primary investor in the collective.

None of the plays would come to fruition without him. From the actors to the props. All was paid by him. His commands were absolute, leaving her with no choice but to quietly accept the situation.

'Damn bastards.'

Suppressing her fury, she sat down on her seat and looked up toward the stage where one of the attendees was waiting.

Olga waved her hand to signal the start.

"Send the first cadet in."

"Yes!"

Immediately, a cadet appeared on the stage. Sporting short blonde hair, and blue eyes, he appeared quite handsome.

"Oh, he's quite good-looking. The audience might like him."

"He can make up his lack of skills with his looks."

While the other judges were praising his looks, Olga wasn't interested.

The only thing she cared about was his acting skills.

"I'm-"

Olga cut the cadet off before he could say anything.

"You have five minutes to get ready and study the script in your hands. Tell us when you're ready to start."

"Ah..."

Flustered, the cadet immediately looked down at the paper and started to memorize his lines. Olga sat quietly and watched his practice. From the way he tried to change his expressions, to the tone of his voice.

In the end, by the time it was time for him to perform, a minute into the performance she waved her hand.

"Stop."

"Uh...?"

"You may leave."

Uncaring for the cadet's expression, she looked towards the assistant.

"Send the next one."

"Ah, yes...!"

A vicious cycle started from there. A cadet would appear, only for them to be shut down a minute after their performance started.

"Stop."

"Next."

"Send another one."

"Is this a joke?"

Olga didn't care for the cadet's feelings. Even as they tried their hardest, she rejected them the moment they made a mistake, or acted in a way that didn't fit her image of the Azarias in her mind.

Her actions didn't go unnoticed by the other judges who simply shook their heads and let her be.

"Get out."

This persisted for several hours until the sun started showing signs of setting.

Glancing at her watch, Olga asked.

"How many cadets left for the tryouts?"

"Five left."

"Ah."

Rubbing her head, Olga suppressed her urge to swear and took a deep breath. Another five? Kill me already... Then, with a wave of her hand, she muttered,

".....Let the next one in."

"Understood."

Tak—

His appearance instantly grabbed the attention of all present.

Clad in the standard attire worn by all cadets, his garments appeared to contour flawlessly to his physique.

Moving with deliberate and measured steps, he maintained a stoic expression, methodically surveying his surroundings with cool indifference.

In the moment he appeared, the judges found themselves unable to tear their gaze away from him.

...All except for Olga who frowned.

Staring at his flawless appearance, Olga only felt disappointment. His face, expressions... It was as if she was looking at a blank piece of paper.

There was simply, nothing...

'Another pretty face...?'

The more she looked, the more disappointed she became.

In the end, she leaned back on her seat and closed her eyes. Having seen her fair share of performances, a judgment had subconsciously formulated in her mind.

'...Another bust.'

With a wave of her hand, she recited the usual rules.

"You have five minutes to look through the script. Once you're done, please start acting. Don't feel too pressured. It's just a minor role."

It all happened so quickly that I had a hard time understanding what was going on.

I was standing in the middle of the stage with a script.

"You have five minutes to look through the script. Once you're done, please start acting. Don't feel too pressured. It's just a minor role."

"...."

I thought of refusing, but when I thought back at Professor Bridgete's words, all thoughts of refusal disappeared.

'Even if I do end up embarrassing myself, it's worth a shot.'

Those extra credits... I certainly needed them.

I wasn't confident I'd be able to do well in the written and combat exams. Maybe I could, but there was nothing wrong with getting a safety net.

"The character you will be auditioning for is a minor villain for the ."

One of the 'judges' said in a monotonous tone. From the moment I entered, her eyes never let me. However, there was a certain indifference in her gaze that felt uncomfortable.

"His name is Azarias."

Another judge started to speak. From the start, he seemed friendlier as he started to recount the scenario to me.

I quietly listened without saying a word.

"A once noble, now fallen, banished from his family for his psychotic nature. From youth, he relished in killing, finding increasing thrill with each life taken. I want you to encapsulate the rage and madness that he feels when killing his first human."

I stood still for a moment and took in the information. 'Encapsulate the rage and madness that he feels when killing his first human.'

Ah—

This scenario...

'It's familiar.'

To the point, it felt creepy.

It reminded me an awful lot of the first time I had killed someone. I could still vividly remember the emotions I had felt back then.

The state of madness I was in. The various expressions I had made. The smells, the sounds of everything around me... And the desperation that led me to that point.

I could still remember everything as if it had been yesterday.

To the point where I felt confident I could call forth those emotions again.

"Do you understand the role?"

The voice of the judge once again rang in my ears, prompting me to raise my head. In a softer tone, he continued,

"Remember, this is just a minor role. You don't have to feel too burdened. I understand you aren't an actor. We won't judge you too harshly."

He smiled slightly.

"You have five minutes. Please take that time to learn your lines and adapt to the emotions the character feels."

Glancing at the script, I shook my head.

"There's no need."

"No need...?"

The judges's expressions changed as they looked at each other. The same was true for the woman who appeared indifferent from the start. In fact, the moment those words came out of my mouth, her sense of indifference appeared even more prominent.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I silently nodded.

There were only a few lines in the script. There wasn't much that I needed to memorize.

The only thing that one would need time for was probably for the emotional adjustment, but...

'I already know it.'

I had experienced it before.

For this reason, I didn't need the five minutes provided by the judges.

"I can start now."

I was ready to begin even now.

Looking at each other, the judges signaled for me to start.

"....Alright, you may begin."

Taking in the expressions of all the judges, from indifference to slight interest, my mind sank into my memories as I closed my eyes.

Gradually, I lost myself in those memories of the past, and when I opened my eyes again, the world was red.

My face twitched, and my expression changed.

So did the faces of the judges ahead as they witnessed me fall into madness.

A madness I barely managed to retain as my mouth gradually opened and I recited the first line of the script.

".....The foundation of all masterpieces is a great start."

Chapter 75 Act [2]

His stoic expression showed cracks and his lips gently pulled up.

At that moment, the atmosphere in the room changed. It was as if an entirely different person had appeared.

Julien's once cold and serious demeanor had vanished, replaced by a deranged and mad persona.

"W-what are you doing....!?"

A random line was thrown by one of the judges. It was to signify the start of the scenario.

"...."

Julien lowered his head and gazed beneath.

The image of a woman appeared in his mind. One that lay on the floor panicking. He soon replaced her image with that of the man in the past.

His first kill.

".....The foundation of all masterpieces is a great start."

The words came smoothly out of his mouth. They came out evenly, and calmly. However, mixed with the calmness was a certain hint of madness. It was subtly hidden, only discernable by the subtle trembling of his voice towards certain words.

It was such subtlety that brought Olga out of her indifference. She felt the hairs on her hand bristle upright as goosebumps ran down her body.

'The subtle textures of his expressions and tone...'

For the first time in her long career, Olga felt uncomfortable. The more she looked, the more she found herself feeling like she was standing before Azarias.

A psychopath who thirsted for the death of his victims.

'Just... Why am I feeling this way?'

Olga wasn't the only one who felt like this. It was the same for the other judges who shifted and adjusted their postures continuously.

They too were uncomfortable by the man that stood at the center of the stage.

And yet...

None of them could take their eyes away from him.

"All artists crave to create their own masterpieces. I'm no different."

Julien scanned the room, his gaze lingering on the judges, his shifting expression revealing the growing madness in his eyes.

His chest heaved up unevenly, and the sound of his breathing took over the air that was swallowed up by the silence that ensued.

"I want to make a masterpiece. A piece that will be synonymous with my name."

He continued to address the judges. f(r)eeweb(n)ovel

His tone started to change, slowly becoming tenser and more hoarse. Gradually, his smile became more intense.

"....And so, the first brushstroke of this masterpiece shall be none other than your life itself."

Tak—

The wood creaked under his steps as he moved forward.

He appeared to head for the judges, his eyes never leaving them. Under his intense gaze, a cold chill went past their bodies.

Their instincts told them to run.

That they were currently dealing with a psychopath.

However, their bodies refused to listen. They continued to stare as he took another step.

Olga sat on her seat frozen. The theater had long disappeared from her vision. An environment had already started to form in her mind.

A medium-sized room that belonged to a well-off-noble and was decorated neatly with all the right furniture.

A figure lay sprawled on the ground. Her expression was one filled with horror. She seemed to want to run, but her body refused to listen.

All she could do was stare up towards the man who slowly bent over to grip her throat.

The madness in his gaze intensified as his expressions underwent several changes.

A fleeting smile of excitement would flicker, only to be swallowed by the engulfing madness that danced in his eyes. Rationality struggled to hold its ground amidst the tumultuous storm within him, as subtle hints of guilt seeped through the wincing of his features.

Olga swallowed her saliva.

"He..."

Had flawlessly captured the essence of the Azarias character she had penned.

A low scream echoed. One that was quickly suppressed by a hand. The furniture scattered, and legs and arms flayed in the air.

But it was all futile.

Under the madness. His madness. All she could do was watch with horrified eyes as her life slowly came to an end.

A heart-wrenching scene.

One that inevitably ended with death.

"Haa... Haaa..."

Azarias's heavy breaths echoed as he stared at his hand, feeling the mix of guilt, madness, and excitement after his first kill. It was perfectly embodied in that moment.

The scene deeply carved itself into the minds of the four judges who remained silent the entire time.

"...I'm done."

A low and cool voice broke them out of their daze. The madness that lingered in his eyes, the sense of joy from the kill, and the guilt had all vanished.

Once again, his expression returned to that of a blank piece of paper.

The performance ended there.

Olga and the other judges remained seated in their seats at a loss for words. The performance had left them all stunned.

From the wide range of emotions he displayed to the expressions he made to mirror them...

It was a flawless performance. There was no denying it, and Olga found herself licking her parched lips.

"What is your name?"

She found herself asking for the name of the cadet.

Tilting his head, the cadet turned his head to meet her gaze. Just as he entered, his expression hardly showed any changes. Taking her in for a brief moment, he eventually answered.

"Julien."

"Julien..."

The name rolled well on her tongue.

Standing up from her seat, she carefully made her way toward him, stopping only when she was a few feet away from him. Getting a closer look at him and liking what she was seeing, she eventually nodded her head.

The more she looked at him, the more she felt like she was looking at Azarias.

'It's as if he's standing right before me... How can someone portray the essence of what I wanted so well? It's gone beyond just copying the character. It's as if he became the character itself...'

If there was one problem that she had with the performance, it was that...

'It's too short.'

It almost felt like a pity for such a great character to only have a few scenes.

The problem was that the script was already perfect as it was in her mind. There was no way she could extend his role, right...?

"Hmm "

Her brows furrowed as she once again turned to look at Julien.

Slowly, she extended her hand towards him and said.

"Congratulations on making the cut. I'll sign your name up for the play. For now, I will take some time to make some adjustments to the script. I will send you the finalized version by tomorrow."

"Please come this way. There are a lot of things that need moving."

Aoife, Leon, Evelyn, and several other cadets were brought into the Leoni Hall where they were immediately put to work.

Because their applications had been rejected, they had

"Make sure you line the lights properly."

"Cadet please be careful with that. It's very expensive. You will be held liable for the damage."

The situation was chaotic, but Aoife didn't bother and followed the instructions diligently.

'....I didn't get the role.'

Her mind was still thinking about the role she failed to get.

"How?"

Realistically speaking, she was the most deserving of the role. Not only was she an extremely well-known figure given her family name, but she was also well-acquainted with most of the members attending.

She knew their likes and dislikes.

There was no one more perfect than her to tend to their needs.

So why...?

Why didn't she get selected?

However, Aoife wasn't left discouraged for long. Looking around, she realized that this was another opportunity for her.

'If I can get into the play then I can get extra credits...'

Her acting was quite good. Having participated in several plays in the past, she was somewhat confident in her skills.

Furthermore, she was quite familiar with the members of the collective.

If all went well, then there was a chance of her getting selected.

Aoife was so immersed in her thoughts that she didn't realize someone was standing in front of her.

"Ah, careful!"

A voice warned her in the distance, sounded like Evelyn's, and before she knew it, she bumped into something hard.

Bang—!

Despite her fast reflexes, Aoife was unable to completely avoid hitting whatever was in front of her and fell on her butt.

"Uh..!"

Thankfully, she was able to keep the items on her from hitting the ground.

But that came at the expense of herself.

'....That hurt.'

Feeling the pain on her butt, Aoife tried her best to not show it on her face. She prepared to raise her head to apologize, but when she did, her expression froze.

A figure stood before her.

Sporting the same unchanging expression of his, he looked down on her.

Aoife half-expected him to say something along the lines of, 'What were you doing?' or something like 'Watch where you're going', but contrary to her expectations he, extended her hand towards her.

"Uh...?"

The sight was a shocking one for her.

'He's trying to help me?'

She almost couldn't believe it.

And yet, staring at the hand, the unbelievable sight was unfolding before her eyes.

Still...

"I can help myself up."

Aoife rejected the offer and helped herself up. It wasn't as though she didn't appreciate the gesture, but she felt uncomfortable with the idea of touching another man's hand.

"...I appreciate the—"

"No. You're misunderstanding my intentions."

Her words were cut by his cool voice.

Turning around, she saw him reach down for a piece of paper that had fallen down on the ground.

Picking it up, he briefly glanced at her.

".....I just wanted this."

"Ah, uh..."

Weird sounds came out of her mouth all of a sudden as her eyes lingered over the paper in his hand.

"...Eh?"

For the first time in her life, Aoife felt her face burn.

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 76 Advancing [1]

"Huuu."

I tossed the script on my desk and let out a long breath.

The situation had spiraled in a direction I hadn't expected it to move towards. In a way, it was a pleasant situation.

Not only would it guarantee me extra credits, but it also wasn't dangerous.

"I think I'm starting to get tired of all the danger."

I needed a little bit of a break from that.

However, there was a slight problem.

".....I don't know if I'll be able to handle the other parts."

The only reason I was able to do so well so far was because I resonated with the character, or to be precise, the scenario.

All the emotions he felt in the script. Scene. I could perfectly resonate with them as I had experienced them before.

It was also for that reason that I was able to put on such a performance.

But...

"That's the extent of it."

What would happen if I were to be put in a scenario I was completely unfamiliar with? How was I going to replicate the scenario?

I wasn't very confident in my acting.

"Ugh."

My head throbbed the more I thought about the situation.

In the end, I decided to leave things be.

I was going to receive the script soon. When that happened, I'd be able to tell if I was screwed or not.

"For now, I should focus on training."

I checked my experience bar.

"Ten percent."

...That was about two days of training. Following that, I'd finally be able to advance to the next tier.

I couldn't wait for that to happen.

To the point where I immediately sat down on the ground and started to practice the manual.

I made a vow then.

Tomorrow or the day after...

"I'm going to advance towards the next tier."

Late into the night.

Kiera stood in her usual spot, staring at the night sky from the window. Her gaze reflected the stars that shone brightly in the sky.

"....What a mess."

It had been a day since she had that strange vision, and for some reason, it had never left her mind.

It was as if it refused to leave her thoughts.

She tried to act like nothing had happened during class today, but the images and emotions continued to haunt her until now.

"The fuck is wrong with me?"

It was already 1 A.M. and she was still up. She had tried to sleep, but the images and emotions continued to flash in her mind preventing her from doing so.

Sitting by the window, her gaze continued to wander towards the outside.

It was quiet outside. The faint glow emitted by the lamps softly illuminated the pathway below, while the grass and foliage gently swayed in the night breeze.

As Kiera let herself sink into the sight beneath, her eyes caught a particular image reflected in the windowpane. It was a sight that made her brows furrow.

'How many times has it been Ki? Clean up after yourself!'

'Look at this mess!'

'Why do you never listen to me, Ki? Is it so hard to clean?'

'Wait until you grow old and have children in the future. I want to see how you tell them to clean.'

"Ugh, fine... fine..."

Taking her eyes away from the window, her gaze fell on a misplaced sock.

Clicking her tongue Kiera got out of her spot and tossed it in one of the baskets for dirty clothes.

Her eyes darted across the room, looking for anything that was out of place.

Only when she was certain that everything was in place that she let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank fuck."

There was nothing that irritated her more than disorderliness in her room.

It had to be perfect.

Scanning the room one more time, Kiera eventually plopped back on her bed. Her ruby-red eyes blankly stared at the ceiling above.

Her thoughts once again drifted towards the vision, and her expression couldn't help but crumble.

"Again..."

For how long was this going to continue?

It was starting to get annoying. No, it was already annoying. To the extent that she contemplated doing something she typically avoided doing.

"...Should I?"

The memories and feelings resurfaced again.

It was memories like these that propelled her to do something she abhorred.

Closing her eyes, the world around her began to be engulfed in pitch darkness. It crept out from her body, enveloping the surrounding area.

In the darkness that started to take over her surroundings, Kiera's eyes shook. So did her body.

"Haa... Haaa..."

Despite her best attempts at keeping her breath in check, Kiera was having a hard time keeping herself from keeping her breath even.

With each passing second in the dark world, Kiera found herself increasingly unable to conceal the lingering traces of panic and fear that were slowly starting to grip her mind.

Her palms started to feel sweaty, and her vision started to blur.

'Hold on... I need to hold on.'

Kiera fiercely bit onto her lips. A metallic tang clung to her lips as she bit down with force. A sharp pain invaded her mind, but she kept a firm mind.

'I have to hold on...'

More.

Longer.

"Haa... Haa..."

With each passing second, the rhythm of her breath grew more strained, laboring against her chest. Her vision blurred as beads of sweat multiplied upon her brow.

Drip...! Drip.

Despite that, Kiera continued to persist.

'More... Not now. Not yet....'

The darkness...

It was something that Kiera feared and despised. It brought terrible memories to her mind. Ones that she wanted nothing more than to forget.

However, darkness was also a part of her power.

Rejecting the dark was the same as rejecting half of her.

"F-for the sake of finding more, I need to..."

Her aunt was merely the start of her hunt. Even now, Kiera could vividly remember the past. An image conjured up in her mind. It was an image of a certain room. Her room.

The room was destroyed and in chaos.

Shattered glass littered the floor as the furniture lay overturned, their contents spilled and scattered across the room.

Drawers had hung open, their contents rifled through and discarded on the ground.

The once-cozy atmosphere she called her room was completely taken over by chaos and disorder.

"...They were definitely looking for something."

Of that, Kiera was sure.

But that wasn't the only thing she was sure of. She was also sure of the fact her aunt didn't do this by herself. Someone or an organization had helped her achieve this.

Kiera didn't know anything about the organization. Regardless of how much research she put in and how deep she looked, her efforts brought her nothing.

The reason why she visited her aunt was because she wanted answers.

Answers to who the organization was and why they had done what they did. Of course, what would come after was their destruction.

Kiera's mind was firm on that.

Her life goal was to take revenge. At any cost, she planned on eradicating all members of such an organization.

"Kh...!"

It was for this reason that she pushed her fear aside and endured the darkness that surrounded her.

It felt cold.

...And lonely.

But even when she was under such stress, Kiera's mind remained firm.

'More.'

At the same time, in an unknown location within the Mirror Dimension.

"You're in luck. It looks like the higher-ups are quite happy with your performance."

A tall woman with long flowing blonde hair and red eyes, Rose, addressed Robert with a smile.

"You're not half-bad for an ex-professor at one of the most prestigious academies in the Empire."

She patted him on the shoulder.

"Anyways, follow me, I've got a present for you."

"A present?"

Robert tilted his head in confusion.

He was still trying to get accustomed to the new environment. Everything felt new to him, and the scale of the place left him astounded.

Looking around, it felt as if he had entered a new world.

A large dome that covered the entire space.

Buildings that seemed to reach the tip of the dome.

Moving boxes of metals, and colorful lights.

The place appeared like a completely different world.

"You'll get used to it."

Rose reassured him while continuing to walk forward.

"I too was like that the first time I came. Most probably, everyone was the same. None of us really know the origin of such technology and its place beside our leader. It isn't even a very large space. However, it certainly leaves an impact, doesn't it?"

"...Yes."

Robert nodded absentmindedly.

Everything felt so new and fresh to him. But at the same time, it also felt rather convoluted. The noise was quite intense.

"The only one that probably knows the answer to all of this is our leader. He's the one who created this space."

"Leader?"

"Mhm."

Rose nodded and didn't say anything else.

Robert followed her quietly from behind until he was eventually led into one of the tall buildings. The door 'swooshed' open, leaving the poor professor frightened as he moved back.

"Hahaha."

Rose laughed upon seeing his reaction.

"It won't bite you. Come in."

"...Ah."

Swallowing his saliva, Robert nodded his head and followed along. 'Swoosh' The doors closed behind him, but unlike last time, he didn't have time to worry about the doors as his attention shifted elsewhere.

With polished marble flooring and bright overhead lights, a multitude of people wearing various types of clothing lingered around the floor, engaging in conversation with each other.

Once again, Robert was left at a loss for words, but yet again, Rose's voice forced him out of it.

"Follow along. The elevators are here."

"Elevator...?"

Ding—!

The wall split open, and Robert's eyes widened.

Rose stepped in and dragged him along.

"Don't ask too many questions, and just follow along. You'll get used to what you're seeing eventually."

The doors to the elevator closed, and Robert felt a sinking sensation. The sensation frightened him, but he chose to remain quiet.

"Oh, right."

Recalling something, Rose rummaged through her pocket before taking out a small object and handing it to him.

"What's this...?"

"It's called a phone."

Rose started to explain as Robert fiddled with the device.

"It grants you communication within the headquarters. It won't work outside. I'm not too sure about the details, but it is what it is. You can use the device to call me or anyone that you may be acquainted with."

"Yes...?"

Blinking, Robert filled with the 'phone'. He had a hard time understanding its functions. He was prepared to ask Rose, but before he could do that, the elevator doors opened to reveal a large room where several people wearing white robes appeared.

"Oy, Rick!"

Rose called someone's name.

Eventually, one of the white-robed individuals appeared. Their features remained obscured by an unfamiliar cloth draped over their face, making it hard to tell what gender they were. Yet, based on the resonance and timbre of their voice, as well as the name Rose called them, they seemed to be male.

Robert felt Rose's gaze as she turned to look at him.

"We've got a new one. Pass me a vial."

"...A vial?"

"Yeah."

"Understood."

With a nod, Rick left. He came back shortly after holding onto a small tube that contained a strange red liquid.

Robert squinted his eyes to get a better look.

"This is?"

"For you."

Rose handed it to him, leaving Robert in a state of surprise.

"For me?"

"Yes. It's your reward."

"Ah..."

Looking at the liquid, Robert hesitantly asked,

"But what exactly is it?"

At this question, Rose flashed a smile. It was an eerie smile that sent shivers down his spine.

"...Would you believe me if I told you this was the blood of a god?"

Chapter 77 Advancing [2]

"The blood of a god...?"

Robert stared at the vial with deep apprehension and a little bit of disgust. Seeing the look on his face, Rose laughed.

"Haha, I was joking. There's no such thing as gods."

Her laugh sounded almost eerie.

"...Well, at least not that I'm aware of."

Robert quietly nodded his head and waited for her to continue. Picking the vial, Rose casually glanced at it.

Rather than explaining, she asked a question.

"What do you know about the age before the Era of the Shattered World?"

It was a sudden question that Robert hadn't expected.

He stared at her for a moment before shaking his head.

"I'm not quite well-versed in such matters. But from what I've read, our civilization wasn't developed enough to create records of it."

The Era of the Shattered World occurred approximately three thousand years ago. It was the Era where the first recordings of the Mirror Dimension occurred.

That was as far as Robert knew.

Was there perhaps more to it...?

"I guess you wouldn't know."

Stroking her chin, Rose tilted the vial, allowing the liquid to move from one side to the other. The more Robert stared at it, the more uncomfortable he grew.

It really did seem like blood...

"I also don't know very well. Only the big shots know the full story. The one thing I do know is that..."

Rose slowly turned her head away from the vial to meet Robert's gaze. Suddenly, as if two hands had gripped his throat, he found himself struggling to breathe.

"...The Mirror Dimension is not a natural phenomenon. It was something that was created by what we call an 'unrecorded' or in a sense, 'gods'."

Unrecorded? God...?

"The deeper you venture into the Mirror Dimension, the more things you end up finding. Our organization has existed since the Age of the Shattered World until now, and even now we still don't know much about the Unrecorded. The only thing we managed to pick up is that there are seven of them."

Tak—

Rose gently placed the vial on the table next to her.

"Some texts suggest that there had been a fallout between the Unrecorded, leading up to a massive fight which resulted in the shattering of the known world, and hence the Mirror Dimension while other sources say it was the doing of one Unrecorded who had gone against the others to seek Immortality."

"Immortality?"

"Oh, yeah... We call them gods, but the unrecorded weren't immortal. Well, all except for one."

Frowning, Rose stroked her chin while mumbling, "I believe the first one to die was Oracleus? He died not much after he received his powers."

Oracleus?

She shrugged.

"The fragments are scattered so the information is still not there yet, but we don't really need to dwell too deeply into the ancient history."

Rose went on to continue.

"Our goal is to collect information and relics."

"Relics?"

Robert raised his brow.

Relics were items that were imbued with mana and had special properties. They could be created by hand, or found in the mirror dimension.

Rose nodded her head.

"Four in particular: the Extractor of Containment, the Astral Mirror, the Oracle's Eyes, and the Chalice of Collection. Our mission is to find and collect all four relics. Their importance is fundamental. They'll be the key to achieving our goal."

"Which is...?"

Rose smiled and shook her head.

"The full expansion of the Mirror Dimension."

Robert's eyes widened at the sudden revelation. Though he had somewhat guessed, it still came to him as a shock.

Why? For what reason did they want the Mirror Dimension to fully expand? Before he had the chance to voice out his questions, Rose started speaking again.

"We've yet to find any so far, but we're getting there. We've managed to narrow it down to a certain location."

Yet again, Robert was left shocked. A certain location came to his mind as he subconsciously mumbled,

"Haven."

".....That's correct."

Rose smiled.

"Their scent... They're all there. All four artifacts are in Haven. Hidden somewhere or in someone's possession."

"Ah."

Robert felt his body grow cold at the sudden revelation. The pieces finally started to piece together in his mind all of a sudden as he swallowed his saliva.

"I've seen your files. The one you were assigned to kill... He had the scent of one of the artifacts. It's a pity you weren't able to kill him, but you don't have to worry, there will be plenty of other opportunities."

Fiddling with the vial, she handed it to him.

"Drink this. It's your reward."

Hesitant, Robert reached out to grab the vial.

"....Is this really blood?"

"Hmm, who knows~"

With a smirk, Rose's heel clicked against the marble ground as she turned to head for the elevator doors again.

"It could be or could not be. It doesn't really matter. Just know this..."

Her steps slowed briefly.

"...The moment you drink that, your life expectancy will increase."

The days continued to pass.

It was now the weekend, and I was still stuck in my room. Today was an important day for me.

Staring at the bar and seeing it at 99%, I knew that it was only a matter of minutes before I finally ranked up to the next tier.

It was an exciting day.

"Huuu."

Taking a deep breath, I felt the mana inside of my body flow smoother and smoother. It was a weird sensation.

One that felt rather addicting.

Time continued to pass and the flow became smoother with each second that ticked. Not only that, but I could feel my mana core expand gradually as more and more mana started to seep into my body.

"Hmmm."

At some point, I started to frown.

I felt weirdly bloated as more mana entered my body. It was as if I had eaten a full-course meal and then immediately headed to a buffet.

It felt... Uncomfortable.

But amidst the discomfort, I felt power surge through my body.

That feeling...

It blew all the discomfort out of the water as I persisted through it. Then... Amid my struggle, I felt something crack.

Cr-Crack!

It almost sounded as if a piece of glass had shattered. The sound was subtle and nearly imperceptible.

However, I caught it.

And it was from that moment that something within me changed.

The flow of mana inside of my body became faster and smoother. The core expansion stopped, and my perception of my surroundings changed a little.

It was an odd sensation.

I extended my hand forward and scooped it.

As expected, there was nothing, but...

"It feels like I'm grabbing something "

Was it the mana that lingered in the air? Or was it something else?

My mind didn't wander on those thoughts for much longer as I focused my attention on my hand where a magic circle started to form.

Clank. Clank. Clank.

Chains formed, wrapping over my arm.

"....It's faster."

To my pleasant surprise, the time it took for the chains to appear was faster than before. It wasn't by much, but it was definitely noticeable.

"Hahaha."

I laughed then.

It was a pleasant situation. Thinking about the fighting style that I had developed, this was certainly a massive boost for me.

"...Would I have been able to win against her in my current state?"

I thought back on the incident at the prison.

Back then, I had been able to contain her with my abilities. Had I been in the same situation in the past, but with my current abilities, would I have been able to achieve more...?

"There's no use thinking about it."

I eventually shook my head.

There were no what-ifs and the goal had always been to let her escape. There was no use dwelling on hypothetical scenarios.

"Finally..."

A sense of relief washed over me all of a sudden as I leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

"....I did it."

I had ranked up.

My chest felt light, and my lips pulled up. It was hard for me to contain my smile. I felt happy, and proud of myself.

The struggles weren't for nothing.

"Huaam."

Yawning, I squinted my eyes repeatedly. Having neglected my sleep to achieve such a result, I was starting to feel tired.

I glanced at the time. 1 P.M.

"It's still quite early."

Although I did want to sleep, I had classes tomorrow and I didn't want to mess up my sleeping schedule.

For that reason, I decided to go out and take a walk.

"Oh, right."

I suddenly recalled something and a destination appeared in my mind. Without a second thought, I headed there.

Since the nearest city to the Academy was located about two hours away, the academy established a shop where the cadets could purchase basic necessities and food.

It was a famous spot with it being always full every weekday. The only times it was empty was the weekend when most cadets left the Academy to go to the city.

Currently, Kiera was facing a problem.

"What do you mean, you can't sell me any more cigarettes?"

She smacked her hand against the counter.

"What sort of bullshit is this?"

"I apologize, but that's Academy policy."

"Policy? What policy?!"

Standing behind the counter was a middle-aged man with squared glasses and black hair. He stood stoically, unbothered by Kiera's fit of anger.

It was as if he had grown used to it.

"I've received reports of you littering the buds all over the campus. Not only that, but you've purchased nearly all of the supplies that come each week. For those reasons, the Academy decided to put your rights of purchase on hold."

"Ah!?"

Kieara almost lunged over towards the other side of the counter. It was taking every bit of her willpower to stop herself from doing so.

"I swear... You... This is nonsense...!"

How could she accept this?

Sure, yeah... She did throw away the buds everywhere, she did indeed always buy all the packs available, but...

"I can't accept this."

Smoking was like medicine to her.

Without it, she'd be...

"Fuck!"

The thought of not being able to smoke was starting to get to her. Just as she was about to scream again, a cool and even voice echoed behind her.

"If you're not buying anything, step aside."

"Which fuc-"

Kiera's words remained stuck in her throat the moment she turned around. Standing taller than her, Julien glanced at her with his usually detached gaze.

She stood still for a moment, staring at him without being able to say anything.

Her thoughts continued to wander towards the time back in the prison. The time he had helped her.

And...

"Uh, wait!"

He moved past her before she could realize it.

"How may I help you?"

The cashier greeted him with a smile.

"Fuck, this... Ah, whatever."

Kiera ended up letting it go. 'I guess I owe him and shit...'

Julien's gaze wandered around before settling to the right where the sweets were.

Tak—

He picked up a chocolate bar and placed it on the table.

"Is that all? "

Without answering, Julien reached out again and took another one.

Tak.

And another one.

Tak.

And another one.

Tak. Tak. Tak.

Gradually, chocolate bars started to pile up on the counter as he continued to grab bar after bar.

"The fuck..."

Kiera stood behind completely dumbfounded.

Tak.

"S-sir...?"

Even the cashier was left dumbfounded by his actions. Just then, Kiera met Julien's gaze as he placed the last chocolate bar on the counter.

As their eyes met, she managed to pick up his low mumble as he went on to say,

"Bribe. I'm getting bribes."

Chapter 78 For Growth [1]

Tak. Tak. Tak—!

'...Is this enough? Or should I add more?'

It was a situation that left me stumped as I added more and more chocolate bars to the counter. It was slowly starting to pile up into a small mountain.

"C-cadet."

My actions seemed to have startled the cashier who looked at me with a flustered look.

I ignored it and placed another chocolate bar on the counter.

Tak.

This was an investment.

An investment for the future. Putting another chocolate bar on the counter, I met Kiera's gaze. Judging from her widened eyes, she too appeared to be at a loss for what I was doing.

I didn't feel like explaining everything, so I just said a few words.

"Bribe. I'm getting bribes."

It wasn't exactly a lie.

These were indeed bribes. Or perhaps a means to build up favor?

'Well, whatever... It's not like they're expensive anyways.'

It was about 0.5 Rend per bar. Doable.

"...Tsk. Whatever, I'm leaving."

"Hm?"

I turned around to see Kiera turn around and leave. Wasn't she going to buy something...?

'Is it because she doesn't want to wait for me to buy everything?'

That did make sense, but...

"Whatever."

Tak.

Not my problem.

I placed another chocolate bar on the counter. The pile became bigger. But is it enough...? It was an interesting question. I closely examined the pile before me and shook my head.

'Not enough.'

I was just about to place another one when the cashier stopped me.

"Cadet, that's enough."

He appeared quite flustered. Even more so than before.

I stopped then and looked up.

"Is there a problem?"

"Ah, yes..."

The cashier went on to explain.

"...If you end up purchasing so much, we won't have enough for the other cadets."

"So?"

How was that my problem?

"It's Academy policy. Like the cadet from before, if you buy too much, we might have to ban you from purchasing goods. Our store was established for the well-being of cadets, not profit."

"Hm? Ban?"

I thought back to the time when I had just arrived at the store. Kiera had indeed been arguing with the cashier over something.

I didn't expect it to be because of this.

"Yes, you will be banned. She's currently banned from buying any more cigarettes."

He tried to explain as politely as possible, but his voice came out rather stent. As if he was warning me.

I didn't put particular thought into his words.

My eyes wandered to the back where the cigarettes were.

'So she's banned from buying them...'

It would indeed do good for her to smoke less. Regardless of the world, it was bad for the body.

There would definitely be benefits to her restriction...

"If you're willing to stop here, it will be 102 Rend."

The cashier's voice snapped me out of my thoughts and I looked up to him. From his expression, it was clear that I couldn't buy any more bars.

I looked at the pile in front of me and decided that it was enough.

'Worst case, I'll buy more when the time comes.'

I rummaged through my pocket and took out my wallet. There, I took out a bill and a coin. Just as I was about to hand it over to the cashier, my hand stopped.

"Cadet?"

I pursed my lips and looked up slightly.

Thinking about it for a good while, I clenched my teeth slightly and sighed.

".....There's something else that I want to buy."

Only this time.

"Ugh..."

Sitting outside the store, Kiera groaned.

It was a shitty day.

Fiddling with her pockets, she touched the empty cigarette box.

"...I hate this fucking addiction."

Rather than smoking out of pleasure, she smoked out of necessity. For that reason, the thought of not being able to smoke was already starting to trigger her symptoms, and she had smoked just an hour ago.

"Damn, bullshit... It's not that big of a deal. What's wrong with me buying everything? Aren't I giving you business? Plus, what about the cigarette butts? Don't I pay the Academy enough to clean up after me?"

Kiera's rumblings went on for several minutes.

It was good that no other cadets were around to see her. In her current mood, she was certain she'd beat any of those who would try to hit on her.

It was a daily occurrence.

"Also, if we're talking about someone buying too much of the same thing, that fucker got over a hundred chocolate bars..."

Amid her grumbling, Kiera thought back to Julien.

He came into the store with his usually stoic expression and ended up with all the available chocolate bars.

In fact, he was still adding more.

It was a sight that left Kiera at a loss.

"....Does he have some sort of chocolate addiction?"

Or was it sugar?

"Whatever, I don't care."

Ruffling her hair, Kiera looked up towards the sky and grimaced.

There were bigger problems she had to deal with. Glancing at her hand, she could already see that it was starting to shake.

"Can I last a week...?"

She already knew the answer at heart. The thought made her sigh, and her body limped back.

Ding—!

The chime of the door rang and a figure walked out. Kiera briefly glanced at him before shifting her attention back towards the sky.

There was nothing that she needed to say to him.

Or so she thought.

"Here."

"...Um?"

Kiera raised her hand and caught something. When she looked down, her eyes widened at the sight that greeted her.

"What the..."

"I'm not getting you anymore. Make do with what you have."

He left after parting those words.

Kiera stared dumbly at his back. Her mouth opened and closed repeatedly. There were many things that she wanted to say, but couldn't find the words.

'Weren't you the same guy who looked at me in disgust the last time I was smoking? Weren't you the same guy who told me to stop?'

Fiddling with the pack in her hand, Kiera gently nestled a cigarette in her mouth. She didn't light it up and just savored the taste.

Staring into the distance, her expression changed a little.

The more she thought she knew about him, the more layers she started to unravel. It was strange. He was strange.

Nibbling on the cigarette, she mumbled,

"Why are you...?"

'Did I make the right decision...?'

I was a little conflicted about my actions. On one hand, I thought it was rather hypocritical of me given how I had acted before, but on the other, knowing the struggles that came with the addiction, I caved in and decided to help her out.

Smoking was sort of like a therapy for most people.

Some smoked for pleasure, while others smoked to forget or numb a certain pain.

....I didn't know her circumstances, but for her to be smoking so much, rather than addiction, I felt that she was trying to ease something.

In a way, I saw my past self in her.

"It'll be the only time I'll do it."

Think of it as a form of apology for how I had acted during the first time.

"Haaa..."

I took a deep breath and stared at the sky.

With no clouds in the sky, it was a clear day. A sight I was starting to grow accustomed to.

Holding onto the bag that was filled with bars, I put them in my blazer and headed towards a certain destination.

"Bribes..."

Indeed, I hadn't gone to buy all these bars for nothing.

I had a goal in mind today.

Though I wasn't sure whether I'd be able to succeed, I thought that it'd be worth a try.

"The worst that can happen is her rejection."

I could handle being rejected.

At the very least, it meant that I tried.

Making sure that the bars were safely secured with me, I took another breath and headed towards my destination.

"For growth."

I mumbled quietly to myself.

"...This is all for growth."

Deliah quietly sat on her seat. Ignoring the mess that had accumulated around her, her focus was on the paper in front of her.

It was an invitation.

[We would like to extend our invitation to you....]

The invitation was for the Arcanum Gala. An annual festival that involved all top figures in the Empire. It was a big event that was set to take place in three months time.

There was just one problem with the invitation.

".....I don't want to go."

Thinking about all the gazes she'd receive, and all the people that she'd have to entertain, Delilah's mood plummeted.

She'd much rather stay here and tend to the cadets.

Even that was less of a hassle than the Arcanum Gala.

To Tok—

All of a sudden, someone knocked on the door and Delilah tore her gaze away from the letter. She didn't need to see to tell who it was as her lips gently parted open to say,

"Come in."

"Excuse me."

A figure walked in.

Standing tall, and with impeccable features, it was none other than her little assistant.

Julien Dacre Evenus.

"...What's with the sudden occasion? I don't remember calling you here."

"No, it's not that."

Shaking his head, his steps stopped by the end of the desk. As his gaze bore down, Delilah met his gaze and frowned.

There was something odd about him today.

He reached into his pocket and slowly took something out.

Delilha's eyes widened slightly.

Tak.

"A chocolate bar...?"

Her eyes fluttered slightly. Then, recalling the conversation she had not too long ago, she understood and reached for it.

"You didn't have to."

"No."

He stopped her before her hand could reach the bar.

"Hm?"

"...This isn't for you."

Julien's cool voice made Delilah frown.

"Not for me? Then..."

"Not yet."

"...?"

Tak.

He placed another bar on the table and Delilah licked her lips. She looked up to him. Just before she could say something, he cut her off.

"I need help with something."

"Ah."

It was then that she understood.

Her nose wrinkled.

"....Are you trying to bribe me?"

His eyes shifted away slightly.

This guy...

"I'm not someone that can be br—"

Tak.

Delilah swallowed.

"It's not going to wo—"

Tak.

Just how many...

"...."

Tak.

"I-"

Tak.

Delilah swallowed.

There were a total of five bars before her. Five bars...

"Do you think I can't buy them for my-"

Tak.

Her lips pursed.

This guy...

Delilah shifted her gaze away from the bars and back to him. Her face remained plain, with little to no changes.

"What do you want?"

However, her voice betrayed her upheaval of emotions.

".....I'll listen first."

Only then did he smile. Delilah stared at his smile for a moment, her mind unable to process it. He looked... off? The smile. It didn't look very natural.

Why?

"Faster."

He flatly said.

".....I want a faster way to get stronger."

Chapter 79 For growth [2]

Despite having just ranked up, I wasn't satisfied with my current rate of progression.

The moment I reached Tier 2, I noticed that the rate of growth had started to stagnate. If I were to put all of my focus like before on the manual, I'd only be able to gain 3-4% a day. A vast difference from the 8-9% I used to receive.

It made sense in a way, but the progress was too slow for me.

And it was for this reason that I thought about asking Delilah.

Out of all the people I knew, she was the one person I thought would have an answer to my problems. She was the strongest.

Surely, she knew of a way, right?

Tak.

It was for this reason that I invested a lot of my money in the chocolate bars.

Come, you are tempted, aren't you?

"....You want a way to get stronger, faster?"

Her tone betrayed her confusion as her head tilted.

I nodded.

"My current rate of progress is too slow."

"Slow?"

She closed her eyes briefly. I lost control of my body the moment she did. It was as if I was floating in the air.

The feeling was only fleeting, disappearing just as fast as it appeared.

"Wh-"

"You've reached Tier 2."

Her voice cut through mine as her eyes opened.

"Are you not satisfied with your progress? It's in line with most of the more talented cadets."

"No."

It'd be a lie if I said I was. While it was indeed fast, when I compared myself with the top cadets of the Academy, I was hardly scraping by.

I couldn't sustain the unreasonable training schedule that I was currently putting myself through.

The gap between me and the others was getting wider and wider.

If things were to progress at this rate, then I was sure I'd soon lose everything that I had.

I needed more...

"...."

Delilah didn't say anything and just stared at me. She seemed to be in deep thought as her brows slightly furrowed.

I waited patiently for her to speak.

She was the only one I could think of for a solution. The other professors would just tell me to train harder or buy a better manual.

They also gave me a list of several exercises that I needed to follow which I did.

But it was still not enough.

"....You seem rather desperate for growth."

The silence that gripped the room was broken by Delilah's words as she addressed me.

I took note of her expression before pursing my lips.

Desperate?

I wanted to laugh. I had long gone past the point of desperation.

"...."

I didn't answer, but it was as if she could read my expression.

Gradually, her eyes shifted towards my right arm.

"Does it perhaps have to do with what I told you?"

"...."

Yet again, I didn't answer. It wasn't as though I didn't want to answer, but I just didn't think it was wise just yet.

....I didn't want my biggest secret to be revealed.

That I wasn't Julien, but someone else who had taken over his body.

It was a secret that only one person knew, and I planned on nobody ever finding out. It was a dangerous secret. One that I couldn't risk anyone finding out about.

If I were to agree, then there was likely a chance that I might be forced to reveal that I wasn't Julien.

'It also seems like she can tell if I lie or not.'

For these reasons, I remained hesitant.

"Alright."

I thought she'd disagree due to my silence, but to my surprise, she ended up nodding her head and agreeing.

"....You will?"

"Meet me tomorrow at 10 P.M. near the forest at the entrance of the Academy."

Delilah provided me with a date and time.

But before I had the chance to feel happy, she added.

"I won't be doing this for free. I need a favor for you. You're free to agree or not. I won't force you."

A favor?

I swallowed to myself before carefully asking,

"What's the favor?"

"It's nothing big, but before that..."

Delilah extended her hand.

I tilted my head in confusion.

"Yes?"

What did she want?

Following her line of sight, I had a sudden realization and I felt my lips twitch. Reaching out for my pocket, I asked.

"How many?"

"All of it."

"...."

Clank—

Watching the door to her office close, Delilah stared at the pile of bars in front of her.

"....He."

A weird sound escaped her lips as her mouth trembled. Hastily covering her mouth, she looked around.

"Heh..."

Her shoulders trembled.

This went on for several seconds before she took a deep breath and calmed herself down.

Trying her best to not look at the 'goods' in front of her, she leaned back on her chair. Her thoughts drifted back to Julien.

'Greedy'

Such were her thoughts at first.

That he was being greedy. His rate of progression was staggering. She could tell from a quick scan of his body that it hadn't come easy. There were traces of exhaustion all over him, and a lot of his muscle fibers were torn.

Were he to continue this way, he was inevitably going to die of exhaustion.

It was for this reason that she decided to help him.

"Perhaps, rather than greed, he's being chased by something..."

Something that he couldn't run away from.

Like...

"The Inverted Sky."

What if...? He had truly defected from them? Thinking about all the incidents he had been in, it really did seem like something was wrong.

In all the incidents that he was involved, the organization appeared to have suffered some sort of loss.

All besides one...

"The Prison Incident."

It was the only incident where the Inverted Sky managed to succeed. It was for that reason that she ended up visiting him.

She wanted to confirm some things.

"Hmm."

But he was truly a hard man to read.

A blank piece of paper.

...Or at least, that was what she thought until just a few moments ago.

For the first time, she saw something from him. The desperation he had for growth.

Why was he so desperate?

Delilah was curious. There was clearly something that he didn't want to say. She didn't push for an answer.

She didn't think he'd be that naive.

Her answers would come with time. Of that she was sure.

And for that reason, she agreed to help him.

"...I feel like I made a loss."

The favor she asked of him wasn't anything big. She had only asked him to make it seem as though she wasn't doing this for free.

She had her own selfish agenda to fill by helping him.

"It's only fair."

Delilah leaned back on her chair and blankly stared at the ceiling.

Her thoughts were broken by a sudden knocking sound and her body shot up from the chair and she lunged towards her desk where the piles of bars were.

To Tok—

"Chancellor?"

A woman walked in shortly after.

"..."

Only for her steps to stop at the sight that greeted her.

Blinking twice, Jasmine, the Vice-Chancellor of the Academy, stared at the scene before her with some doubt. She had come here to report on the current situation of the festival

Gazing at Delilah who was hunched over her desk with a towering stack of bars before her, she questioned the current view before her.

An illusion?

Jasmine blinked once only for her to see the same scene.

Pursing her lips, she quietly asked.

"...Should I come back?"

The next day.

At the training fields outside the lecture hall.

"Today's class will be a bit different than usual. Each of you will be secretly assigned a cadet's name and during class, your job will be to closely examine their weaknesses and strengths."

The Professor in charge of today's class was a tall and bulky man with a bald head. If there was one class that I looked forward to the least then it was probably this one.

[Physical training and For execution]

It was a class that was mainly dedicated to those who were adept in the [Body] classification. However, just because it tended towards those who were more adept in the [Body] classification, it didn't mean that it wouldn't be useful for the others.

Everyone was capable of practicing the three paths.

Those with talents were just capable of learning it faster.

"Please pay attention."

The Professor's loud voice rumbled throughout the training area as he pointed towards a small hat that rested on the ground next to him.

"If you look over to this hat over here, you'll find the names of all your classmates. I want you to line up in an orderly line to collect the name of the cadet you will be in charge of analyzing."

A long and orderly line started to form while the Professor continued to speak.

I silently moved towards the line and overhead a few cadets speaking. Mainly Josephine and the others.

"Hm~ I wonder who I will get? Heh. If I get that bitch, I'll make sure to give her a low score."

"Bitch?"

Aoife tilted her head.

"Who else? Kiera of course."

"Oh."

She nodded as if she understood.

"I can hear you."

Too bad Kiera heard it all.

"Hiii!"

I ignored them and continued to pay attention to the Professor.

"Remember. This is an anonymous task. The other party mustn't find who you are. If I receive any indication that you've disclosed this information or they've discovered your identity, you will fail the task immediately and forfeit a credit."

The banter and noise that surrounded the place ceased. All of a sudden, everyone's expression turned grim.

To lose a credit over such a task...

"That's enough of me. Pick a name and we can start with the task."

In an orderly manner, one cadet after another moved up to the hate near the professor and picked up a card. The moment the cadets looked at the cards, most of them showed a change in expression.

Some were happy while others showed looks of despair.

I couldn't blame them. Some cadets were simply better than others, and it was therefore hard to understand what they were doing.

I quietly lined up from behind and waited for my turn.

It didn't take long and the moment I arrived by the hat, I reached out with my hand and picked up a card.

"...."

My expression didn't change the moment that I picked the card.

However, the same couldn't be said about how I felt internally. Without looking back, I put the card in my pocket and left for the training area.

In the distance, I caught a glimpse of a figure.

He stood at the center with his sword already drawn. He began to execute a move.

His movements appeared fluid, almost as if there was no lag in them.

....My steps paused as I stared at the distant figure who appeared to have attracted the attention of all the nearby cadets.

[Leon Ellert.]

Why did it have to be him of all people?

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Chapter 80 For growth [3]

'.....I can never get used to this sight.'

I stood on my spot in awe of what I was seeing. It was hard to take my eyes off his movements. They were perfect. Almost like a work of art.

As my knight, I had seen him train before.

I had only caught glimpses of it, but each time, I'd be mesmerized by what I was seeing.

'As expected of the main character...'

Good thing that his actions attracted the gazes of multiple cadets. If not, I would've feared my identity as his analyst would've been exposed.

"Huu."

Taking a small breath, I looked around me and settled my gaze on a training dummy off in the distance.

"I should probably get to work as well."

The point of today's training was to display our skills on the training dummies scattered around. Powered by magical circuits, they could move on their own and could dodge and counter-attack.

They were the perfect puppets to practice on.

I was just about to head to one when I stopped again. My gaze once again fell on Leon.

Swoosh, Swoosh—!

The air whistled with each of his strikes. Leaning forward, the air tore and the sword cut through the air.

It was an instantaneous movement. One that took less than a second.

Picturing myself on the opposite end, the only thing that crossed my mind was,

"...I'd die."

There was no other outcome. The speed and power of his strike was simply incredible. But that wasn't what prompted me to look at him.

For some reason, I couldn't take my eyes away from his feet.

Shifting with every movement, they followed a set pattern.

'Forward, left, forward, left, right, forward...'

Swoosh—!

'Forward, left, forward, left, right, forward...'

Swoosh—!

The pattern was subtle, but it was definitely there. Engrossed in his movements, I didn't notice that I was now the only one looking at Leon.

I only noticed when Leon stopped and looked at me.

Our gazes met and I looked around me.

'Ah.'

Without changing my expression, I looked back at him for a short moment and asked,

"Do you think it's possible for me to be able to do your footwork?"

"Footwork...?"

He looked surprised by the question.

"You want to know if you can do my footwork?"

"Yes."

I quietly nodded.

Then, under his gaze, I started to mimic his movements. Forward, left, forward, left, right, and forward. My movements were rather awkward, but I didn't bother and continued to do them.

I didn't know whether they'd be useful to me, but I felt like I was onto something.

Performing the set of movements, I looked up once I was done.

"...."

Leon stood quietly with his brows slightly furrowed.

"How was it?"

He didn't answer immediately. Sorting through his thoughts, he quietly said.

"It's rough."

As expected...

".....I'll show you one more time."

"Hm?"

"Make sure you watch carefully."

The situation took me by surprise, but I didn't waste it. I stood silently and stared ahead as Leon got into a stance.

He took a step forward.

I stared intently at his actions and deeply engraved every little detail. From the pivot of his foot to his breathing and hand movements.

While my focus was on his feet, I knew that the little details in the other movements were also of importance. The same was true for the mana flow. However, that part was a lot harder to see and feel.

Mainly because I couldn't see the flow. The only indication was from his breathing and the faint glow that traced over his sword.

Swoosh—!

His sword flowed forward. Carrying on with the momentum, he pivoted slightly and stepped to the left. The transition was extremely smooth. It hardly seemed as though he had moved at all.

He continued.

His heel shifted, and he once again took another step.

Forward.

His momentum never ceased. During each movement, the sword would seamlessly follow his movements, carrying forward and striking at the air.

Left again.

I studied everything.

I didn't let anything slip from my mind.

It felt as though I was close to grasping something. It made no sense. This was something that was specifically for [Body] type users, and yet...

Swoosh—!

The air whistled and my hair scattered.

"...I'm done."

Before I knew it, Leon was standing with his sword sheathed. I stood in a daze for a few seconds before closing my eyes and nodding my head.

"Thank you."

Without saying anything else, I headed towards a more secluded area and closed my eyes.

I traced Leon's movements in my mind.

From his leg movements to his breathing. I tried to mimic it but found myself having a hard time doing so.

It took me a good minute to get the breathing correct.

Only then did I open my eyes and step forward.

"Forward, lef-"

I stopped right on the second step.

It was as if my legs had been glued down by massive weights. It simply refused to take that step.

"Why...?"

I stopped and pondered.

Was there something with the movement? No, that was unlikely. I repeated the movement. This time without any mana.

It flowed smoothly this time.

"As expected, the problem is the mana flow."

There was a specific mana flow that I needed to follow. One that only Leon was familiar with.

"Hmm."

This was a bit of a problem...

".....Looks like I'll have to give up trying to copy him."

I thought about asking him about the mana flow, but that was probably too much. Furthermore, it wasn't necessary.

I only wanted to partially mimic his steps, not his entire movement or whatever that was.

He was a sword user, so it would be absurd for me to copy his movements in their entirety. What I needed knowledge of was the principle behind his movements.

How would such movements benefit me?

"Let's settle with three steps first."

I let the mana flow inside of my body and extended my hand.

Clank, clank, clank—!

Chains manifested in my hands, and I took a step forward. I swung my hand at the same time.

Swoosh—

The air whistled.

"Ukh...!"

I was just about to follow that up with another movement when my arm tensed and I was knocked forward due to the momentum.

Clank!

I dropped the chains on the ground as a result.

"Haa..."

I stuck out my tongue and took a breath.

"I rushed." freeweb .co m

The chain on the ground scattered, reappearing on my hand again. Before repeating the movement, I closed my eyes and imagined the path of my feet.

The same was true for the mana flow.

"...."

I didn't know how long had passed but as I opened my eyes again, I took a step forward. My squads tensed, and I swung down with my right hand.

Swoosh—

I followed a similar pattern compared to my first try.

However...

"Scatter."

The moment the chain was eye-level with my chest, I scattered it, and directly stepped to the left, following it up with another hand movement where a new chain appeared.

"Haa..."

My muscles screamed under the tension, however, I ignored the pain and continued the swing.

CLANK!

A loud clanking sound resounded and I dropped on my ass.

"Haaa... Haaa...."

My breath was heavy and sweat trickled down the side of my face. Looking down, I stared at my hands. They were both blistered and bleeding. It felt as though I had just touched fire.

"Haaa..."

However, rather than minding it, I felt like smiling.

"...I did it."

It was still extremely raw, but I had found a way to further improve my new technique.

Clenching my hands and feeling the pain, I let a few seconds adjust my mind to the newfound pain before standing up and getting into a stance.

"Again."

I planned on getting to at least three moves before testing it against one of the puppets.

'It'll probably take me months to completely master or get the hang of, but...'

It was definitely worth the practice.

Of that, I was sure.

"Hmm~ Who did you get? Come on, you can tell me. Pretty please...?"

Josephine rested her chin over Evelyn's shoulder as she continuously whispered in her ear.

"Hey... I know you can hear me. Does my voice tickle?"

"...."

Despite her efforts, Evelyn continued to ignore her.

Her attention was currently drawn towards the distance where a figure stood. With long flowing platinum hair and red eyes, she stood by herself in the distance.

Clank—!

Her weapon of choice was her fists. Or to be precise, her body?

Deftly dodging the strikes of the dummy, Kiera appeared to be bored. Casually stepping to the side, she slapped the dummy's head.

Faintly, Evelyn caught a glimpse of a smile on her face as she did so, but pretended to not have seen it.

"Hmm, so she's the one you're analyzing?"

Josephine's voice once again made it to her ear. It tickled slightly, and Evelyn's brows finally furrowed as she took her gaze away from Kiera.

"Are you done?"

Evelyn pushed Josephine's face away.

"What are you even doing here? Why aren't you doing your job?"

"Hmmm."

Josephine's shoulders slumped.

"I tried, but he..."

She sighed.

"...He was so busy watching Leon that I ended up wasting ten minutes for nothing."

"Hm?"

Evelyn blinked.

"Your partner is Julie—"

"Hey!"

Josephine hastily covered Evelyn's mouth.

"It's supposed to be a secret!"

'But you just said mine...'

Evelyn wanted to say, but couldn't because her mouth was covered. Still, she got her message through her gaze.

With a long and exaggerated sigh, Josephine waved her hand.

"Alright, fine... fine..."

And headed out.

"....It's not like I'll see much."

She ended up grumbling throughout the way.

It was a known fact that Julien was weak. No, he was strong and weak... He was bipolar.

"No, that's not how that works..."

In any case.

He wasn't strong.

"Where is he?"

Looking around, Josephine squinted her eyes. Her body felt lifeless. She was feeling pretty lazy. It took her a moment to spot his figure in the distance. He seemed to be in the middle of challenging one of the dummies.

"Oh."

Her eyes lit up a little.

That was going to be interesting...

"Will he lose?"

It would be pretty funny to watch.

With renowned vigor, Josephine headed towards a better area to get a better look. She had just arrived on her spot when he started.

"Oh."

Her eyes immediately focused on Julien.

'So handsome...'

"Ehm."

Clearing her throat, she put on a straight face.

'Right, right... I'm not here to admire his looks. I can do that later.'

In general, Josephine treated the entire situation lightheartedly. It was how she usually was. She never took anything seriously.

Furthermore, with her father being a renowned knight working for the Megrail family, she was well-versed in these types of situations. After experiencing movements characteristic of [Body] type and weapon arts, she perceived everything around her as rather boring—except for Leon, who stood out.

His swordsmanship was rather unique.

'I wonder where he learned it from...?'

It seemed just as advanced as her family's one.

Her thoughts continued like this for a few seconds, until...

"Oh...?"

Her face changed as her mouth hung open.

Clank, clank, clank—

It was fast. Almost seamless. There were a lot of wasted movements, but it was getting faster and faster.

A shiver gradually ran down her spine...

One that intensified by a loud metallic sound causing her to flinch.

CLANK!

The dummy was still intact, and the figure appeared to warn out. With blood dripping from his palms, and sweat endlessly pouring out from his face, it looked like a pathetic sight.

However, to the only one watching, she found nothing pathetic about the sight.

Especially after what had just seen.

"This..."

The situation left her stumped.

"How am I going to judge this...?"

What even was this?