

## **Advent of the Three Calamities**

### **#Chapter 81 For growth [4] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 81 For growth [4]**

#### **Chapter 81 For growth [4]**

Clank--!

"Haaa... Haaa..."

I felt a lump in my throat as I heavily gasped for air. I felt lightheaded and my muscles were screaming from the strain.

Even so, I felt satisfied.

"It's something..."

I could see myself progressing. There was still a lot of work to do, and I was still far from reaching something concrete, but...

"I'm getting there."

I wasn't sure when, but I knew it was bound to happen. But the question was, "How do I progress from here...?"

I had the concept down in my mind. What I wanted to achieve, and where to begin. However, what I lacked was a fundamental understanding of the concept.

How exactly was I supposed to improve this new technique that I had just started learning?

Step--

I stepped forward and let the mana flow around my body. Unlike last time, I didn't call for the chains and simply moved my feet.

Forward, and left...

The entire time I simply focused on the mana flow. There was a certain mana flow that I needed to follow for this to work.

For what reason was the mana flow necessary?

The answer was simple. To reinforce the muscles and build up power. There was a massive difference between doing a regular punch and punching with a mana flow.

In this case, the flow was necessary to smoothly transition the power of the action between each movement.

Transitioning between each movement without a mana flow typically led to a loss in power and momentum. The mana flow was added to supplement such a flaw.

"Hmm."

I yet again stopped.

"....Something isn't quite right."

Ignoring the pain that was currently gripping my hands, I thought back to the mana flow and movement. I felt like there was something missing from the entire action.

The problem was that I couldn't quite grasp the reasoning behind the feeling.

"Is it the movement, or myself?"

I wasn't sure, but it felt as though something was missing from the entire movement.

An extra step?

"....Is it?"

I tried and frowned. From the left to the right step. It flowed smoothly, but I felt like something was missing.

'The transition can be better...?'

I ruffled my hair.

"Am I being paranoid?"

I tried again, but nothing changed. It was obvious that I wasn't skilled enough to understand. I tried a couple of more times, but the result was the same.

In the end, I could only give up.

"....I'll leave it at that for now."

Such little detail was for the more skilled version of me. Right now, I was far from skilled enough to tell.

'I think the flaw exists, but I'm just too weak to tell... I'll leave it at this for now.'

Stretching my arms, I went ahead and started practicing again.

Swoosh—!

I only stopped when I heard the professor's voice echo from the distance.

"Time's up. Everyone, place your report cards on the table over here. You may collect them after everyone has handed theirs in."

I looked at my report card with a frown. Although I tried my best, I wasn't sure if it was enough.

The report card comprised four categories: observations, pros, weaknesses, and Conclusion.

This task wasn't just to help us learn about ourselves, but it was also to help us better understand how others practiced and learned.

It was an exercise that benefitted all parties involved.

I had a hard time filling the weaknesses area considering that it was an area that was outside of my expertise. Even so, thinking back to the movements that he had shown me, I could deduct a few things.

'Good thing I spent some time observing him....'

I placed my report card on the table where all the other report cards were placed. There were quite a few.

In the end, I was rather grateful for this training session. I was able to learn something due to it.

".....I guess I should start observing others as well."

If I could learn something from Leon, then could I also learn something from the others?

Quite frankly, I didn't care about my pride. If it meant helping me grow stronger, I was prepared to ask those who disliked me for some advice.

Pride was meaningless when one had a goal.

"You may collect your report card."

Once all the report cards were handed over, the Professor mixed them up a bit and ordered us to form a line to pick up our own cards.

I sort of understood where he was coming from by making this an anonymous observation report.

With everyone not knowing who their observer was, they could be as harsh and critical as possible.

The harsher one was, the more critical they were of someone's flaw. In a way, if a cadet took the criticism seriously, then there was a chance that they might be able to improve a lot.

Such were my thoughts as I headed for the desk and picked up my card.

"This one."

[Julien Dacre Evenus - Observation Report]

Picking up the card, I moved the side before carefully opening it.

"As expected."

It was harsh.

[Observation :

Julien appears to be practicing a new movement technique. From how rigid his movements are, I believe that this is the first time that he's tried such a move. There are glaring flaws in almost everything he is doing...

It went on a long rant about how I was doing a lot of unnecessary movements and that I was overreaching.

Nothing I didn't expect.

[Pros :

—Interesting concept.

[Weaknesses :

—Unstable control of mana.

—Poor form and lack of connection between movements.

—Lacks physical fitness to follow up on the movements.

—A lot of wasted movements.

[Conclusion :

Maybe due to his experimentation with a new technique, his manipulation of mana and physical form fell far below par. His actions lacked fluidity, and the mana seemed disjointed in its flow. My recommendation is for him to prioritize refining his control. Once he hones his ability to concentrate on mana flow and prevents it from dispersing between actions, then...

The note ended there.

"Hm?"

Then what?

I flipped the paper over to check if there was more to it, but...

"Nothing."

What?

I flipped the paper again, but regardless of where I looked, the note ended there. I frowned and stared intently at the report card. I thought about reporting it to the professor but chose against it.

".....Are they implying that when I fix this problem it'll be something good?"

That was perhaps what the pause implied. Either way, I knew what to do now.

"Practice my mana flow and control."

I noticed it too while I was practicing. I wasn't quite able to get a grasp on what it was that was making it hard for me to connect the forms, but the report card made it clearer to me.

"Huu."

Taking a deep breath, I put the card away and looked into the distance.

There, I caught a glimpse of Leon.

Staring at the report card in his hand, he wore a frown.

"Hah."

I almost laughed as I recalled what I had written. 'Does he think I'm spewing bullshit...?' He could very well be. I wouldn't blame him.

But I thought it was something that I needed to write.

Perhaps there was some truth to what I had written...?

"Maybe he'll come to thank me later, or maybe he'll completely ignore it. "

That was up to him to interpret.

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Leon looked at the report card in his hands and carefully read it. While he wasn't sure who his analyst was, he had an idea.

He was curious as to what he'd say.

[Leon Ellert- Observation Report]

[Observation :

Leon practices a sophisticated technique characterized by a seamless flow and interconnected movements that focus on small movements and low mana exertion. It's...

The report was long and detailed. Leon was a little surprised by what he saw. However, it was just the standard talk.

There was nothing new to him.

[Pros :

—Seamless transition.

—Well practiced. It's apparent that the cadet has practiced the move thousands of times in the past.

[Weaknesses :

—None that I saw or am capable of seeing.

Leon paused there.

"....I can't fault him there."

The technique that he was practicing was called [The Dance of the Whirlwind]. Unlike mages who learned spells that were ranked from beginner to perfected, users who practiced the [Body] classification learned 'Techniques' or 'Arts'.

They too had ranks to them. From one to five stars.

And unlike spells, they also didn't require a person to have a certain level of strength to practice them.

[The Dance of the Whirlwind] was a secret art that he had managed to chance upon.

The rank was unknown, but Leon was sure that it was high.

It'd be odd if Julien saw any flaws with his art.

Not impossible, but also very unlikely.

He continued to read the report.

[Conclusion :

There isn't much to elaborate on. It appears impeccable in every aspect. It could be my limitations preventing me from identifying any flaws or offering constructive feedback. However, I do notice a concealed issue within the movement

—a segment appears to be absent in the progression from the left to the right step. While some attempts have been made to remedy it, there still seems to be some lag...

"Uh?"

Leon's eyes paused on the last remarks.

His entire body shook.

"Flaw...? Left to right step?"

He found a hard time trying to describe the current situation. It wasn't because he was wrong, but because he was... right.

"How did he know?"

Leon recalled that he had only spent ten minutes observing him.

Had he figured something out in the ten minutes that he had been observing him?

...Or was there something else?

"How does this make sense?"

Leon wasn't shocked because he didn't know about the flaw. He did in fact know about the flaw. The 'Art' was incomplete with a few missing pages. He had already done his best to mend it and cover it.

That being said...

"How did he figure it out?"

It wasn't something that was supposed to be figured out with just a few moments of observation.

An idea suddenly struck Leon all of a sudden.

"Does he...?"

He stopped there and took a deep breath. He didn't jump to conclusions immediately. However, he couldn't stop himself from breathing more heavily.

Perhaps...

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10 P.M.

I reached the entrance of the Academy where all that greeted me was the vast forest that loomed around it. A figure stood waiting for me near it. Dressed in all black, she seamlessly blended with the darkness.

"Do you have it?"

"I've got the goods."

I took out a bar and handed it to her.

She nodded in satisfaction.

No, wait... Why does this feel so wrong?

"Come with me. I'll lead you to a place."

"Where ar-"



Before I could finish speaking, she placed her hand over my shoulder and the scenery changed.

Swoosh! Swoosh—!

The heavy sound of water falling echoed within my ears as a large waterfall appeared in my vision.

"Where..."

"This is where you'll be training."

Delilah said in a flat voice.

I looked up at her unsure of what she was trying to imply. We were perched atop a modest hill overlooking a basin of water below. A waterfall cascaded into it, its steady rumble echoing all around us.

"You said you wanted to grow fast, correct?"

"....."

I swallowed before nodding.

Cracks displayed on her indifferent face as she pointed toward the waterfall.

"There's something beyond there. Beyond the waterfall. It'll be what you're looking for. However..."

She paused and looked at me.

A thin smile displayed on her face.

"It's going to push you to your limit. It might even be quite dangerous. Are you sure you want to do it? I'm not forcing you. The decision is up to you."

"No, I'll go."

I didn't hesitate with my answer. This much was obvious to me.

Delilah nodded.

"Okay."

And nudged toward the waterfall with her chin.

"Go."

I quietly nodded my head.

Without hesitation, I jumped down the small cliff.

Splash—!

...For growth.

New chapters are published on

## **Chapter 82 For growth [5]**

Splash—!

I felt my body sink deeply into the cold water. At first, the cold took me aback, hitting me like a truck and taking my breath away.

However, I slowly started to get accustomed to it.

"Huaaa!"

Emerging from the water, I took a deep breath.

"Huuu... Huu.."

It was extremely dark outside, and I could hardly see my surroundings. I felt an eerie sense of dread floating in the pond.

The water was inky black, and as I circled my hands and legs to keep me afloat, I felt a nagging feeling at the back of my mind.

What if I'm not the only living being on this basin?

The thought sent chills down my spine.

Taking another deep breath, I threw those thoughts away. In hindsight, I was indeed a little hasty with my decision to jump down.

How much could I truly trust Delilah?

...But at the same time, I understood something. If she really wanted to get rid of me, she wouldn't need to go through all this trouble.

It was the only reason why I felt like she wasn't lying to me.

'Go near the waterfall. Beyond it, you'll find a cave. Go there.'

Delilah's soft voice reached my ear from where I was. I looked around me to determine where her voice came from but realized it was coming from nowhere.

It was...

In my head?

"....."

There were so many things that I wanted to ask, but chose to remain silent and just followed her instructions.

'Waterfall, cave...'

I repeated the same two words in my mind.

While I had never played that many games before, the waterfall cave scenario was still something that I knew about.

It was a cliché scenario.

Typically, however, one would find treasures beyond the cave.

Wasn't sure I'd find a treasure.

Roar—

The roar of the waterfall became more pronounced the closer I got to it, drumming loudly inside of my mind as I tried my best to ignore the sound and move forward.

It was loud and I struggled to move forward the current continued to drag me back.

"Shit..."

I found myself expending considerable energy attempting to navigate past the waterfall. My attempt to dive beneath it was short-lived, lasting only a few seconds in the dark and chilling depths below.

"Huaa...!"

Coming out of the water, I took a deep breath.

".....This."

How was I supposed to get past this?

'Go on. What are you waiting for?'

Delilah's voice once again echoed in my head. I wanted to grumble, but decided against it and just pushed forward with all my might.

There was no roundabout way of going about this. I had to get past it through sheer power and stamina.

"Ukh...!"

I eventually did manage to cross the waterfall, but it came at a cost...

"Haaa... Haaa... Haaa...!"

I collapsed onto a small rocky platform, gasping for breath. Movement was difficult, and my body felt utterly drained, limp with exhaustion.

My lungs were on fire and my entire body was cold. My soaking wet clothes made the situation even worse as it added to the cold.

'Probably should've stripped beforehand.'

"Shit..."

The worst part of the situation was that I knew this was merely the start.

As expected, Delilah's words reached me shortly after.

'You don't have much time. Once you've recovered, head into the cave.'

"Uhhh."

Blankly staring up, and hearing the roar of the waterfall not so far from me, I forced myself up and staggered into the cave.

I was tired and almost out of breath.

However, this meant nothing if it meant that I could get stronger.

"I wonder what type of training this is-"

I stopped the moment that I set foot in the cave.

"Ah..."

I didn't know how to react. Looking ahead, my body shuddered. More than a dozen pairs of eyes glared at me with unmistakable hostility.

I felt my skin crawl.

And then...

\*\*\*

Num. Num.

Two slender, childlike legs wobbled precariously at the edge of a small cliff, while two, deep, inky eyes were fixated on the distant cascade of the waterfall.

Num. Num.

The small child-like figure was none other than Delilah who savored the taste of the bar in her hands.

It was sweet, crunchy, and...

"Slurp."

She wiped the corner of her lips.

Just the thought was making her salivate.

There was a reason why she liked to turn into a child. It was so that she could savor the bar better. With a smaller body, she could take more time eating it and enjoying it.

"I'm smart like that."

There was a strict restriction on her that prevented her from purchasing any chocolate bars. It was something imposed on her because of an incident in the past. It was for this reason that the bars were extremely precious to her.

More than any money in the world.

Num. Num.

Her legs continued to wobble.

Beyond the waterfall, she could see a figure.

He was currently struggling by himself fighting against a dozen or so monsters. The cave he was in was a famous training ground for cadets. With monsters belonging to the Mirror Dimension, it served to provide the cadets with real-life experience.

Strictly speaking, the cadets were only allowed to enter the cave after the first half of the first year.

However, considering how much he wanted to improve, she decided to let him be.

Of course...

She had a goal in mind with this.

Observe his skills.

"...Oh?"

Her hands halted as she observed several slender threads extending from his arm. They wrapped around his arm, and scattered around the cave limiting the space available for the monsters to approach him.

Not only that...

"He's merged the skill with a spell. How intriguing..."

It wasn't a unique concept or anything like that. However, it was certainly not something that all cadets knew how to do.

In this case, it also provided him with breathing space as the monsters didn't directly pounce him from all sides.

"Not bad."

Such was her current evaluation.

Not bad.

"....."

Another change unfolded as a chain materialized on his opposite hand.

With one hand ensnaring the monsters with threads to impede their movements, he wielded the chains on his other hand adeptly, simultaneously defending and launching attacks.

Shifting between attack and offense.

What grabbed Delilah's attention was his footwork.

It was... Raw. However, there was something to them. In a way, it appeared to be the key to his transition between his offense and defense.

The more Delilah watched, the more surprised she became.

She fell silent, silently observing Julien in the distance.

It was obvious that he had just learned this method given how rigid some of his movements were, but...

What would happen were he to master everything?

Just how much stronger would he become?

Lost in her own thoughts, Delilah didn't realize that her grip over the bar had faltered.

"Uh...?"

By the time she realized, the bar had dropped from her grasp.

"Ah, no...!"

Delilah reached out for it, but given her small stature, she was unable to grab it. Her little hands were simply useless.

While there were advantages to her polymorph skill, there were also disadvantages.

One such disadvantage was that her powers were reduced and it would take several seconds for her to change back.

"....."

In the silence that unfolded around her, Delilah could only watch in despair as the bar dropped to the ground.

Plop—!

"..."

The bar sank deeply into the water, blending with the darkness surrounding it.

With her ability, Delilah could still see the bar.

It was sinking.

Deeper, and deeper into the basin.

The sweet and savory bar. The rich, smooth texture that melted in her tongue. The satisfying snap that came with each bite...

"Ah."

Delilah leaned back and blankly stared at the sky.

Gaze : Sadness. I've mastered it.

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In a dark room belonging to the 'Curtain Call Collective', a lone figure sat before a wooden desk that was dimly lit by a small lamp.

The sound of her pen scratching against paper reverberated throughout the room, punctuating the intense seriousness etched onto her face.

".....Almost."

A dozen different papers were scattered across the room.

Olga found herself in a very dangerous situation. The script was ready. She had already handed it to the board of admission.

However...

"No, I have to."

It was supposed to have already been perfect.

However, as she recalled the performance of the cadet, she found herself unable to sleep.

His performance...

It was just that impactful. It perfectly captured the essence of Azarias. In fact, his performance added a depth that she herself hadn't seen.

"He's only got three scenes..."

It wasn't enough.

She craved to see more of his performance.



"It might ruin everything, but I can't help myself."

The script was perfect in every way. She was confident she'd be able to receive her first five-star grade, but...

"I need more."

Of Azarias.

Of the cadet who played Azarias.

All writers wanted to create masterpieces. Even if they were confident that what they had was already a masterpiece, if a chance to improve the script further presented itself, they'd jump at the opportunity.

Olga was one such writer.

\*

Olga who was obsessed with her script spent the entire night making adjustments to the script. Adding and removing scenes continuously.

She was a perfectionist. Unless all scenes seamlessly flowed together, she wasn't going to accept the scenes.

Thus, ever since the practice, she spent the entire week holed up in her room trying to improve the script.

\*

Exactly one week after holing herself up in her room, Olga stood up from her seat.

"Done..."

A full script appeared in front of her.

It was at least a few pages thicker compared to the normal script. This meant that the play was going to run for longer than intended. That in itself was going to cause a little bit of trouble.

"It's worth it."

The adjustments were perfect.

Azarias who was supposed to be just a minor character suddenly had a bigger role to play. He was still a minor villain. However, he now had incredible depth.

Not only that, but she hadn't just changed his scenes.

Olga had made minor changes to make the character more consistent with Julien.

"Haha, this is..."

Massaging her eyes, Olga pressed on the small orb beside her.

"Rodney, I need a favor. I want you to call the committee over. I'd like to present a new script, and..."

She paused for a short moment, tracing the new script over with her eyes.

"...I'd like for the committee to grade the play during the festival."

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### **Chapter 83 Preparation for the festival [1]**

The week continued like that.

Each night, at the same time, I'd go to the entrance of the Academy where I would be brought to the cave where...

"Ukh."

I suppressed a groan and wrapped my arm. Blood was leaking, staining the cloth in red.

".....How long do I have to do this for?"

I looked around me. It was dark, but I could see the dozen or so corpses littered on the ground. A putrid smell lingered in the air, forcing me to wince at times.

Despite the many hours I had spent in this place, I could still not get used to the smell.

It was that strong.

"Huu."

Taking a deep breath, I suppressed the pain and stood up. Looking at my watch, I sighed and extended my hand.

Thin, almost untraceable threads spread out from my forearm, circling each finger before moving out the area around me. Hiding around the crevices, and rocks scattered throughout.

It was hard to see in the darkness, but I was getting used to it.

"Ten..."

I started to count down.

"Nine... Eight... Seven... Six... Five... Four..."

For every ten minutes that passed a new set of monsters would appear.

"Three..."

This was the fifth horde of the day.

"Two..."

And, the last horde of the day.

"One."

Hieeeeek—! Hieeeeek—!

A sight that I had started to grow accustomed to. Over several dozen figures appeared at the back of the cave. Their figures blended nicely with the darkness, making it hard to distinguish what they were.

That... However, was of no importance.

I slightly raised my right hand.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Light and rushed steps.

'Small...'

The sound gave away the size of the creatures. Judging from the frequency and weight of them, they didn't seem to be very large in size.

"...."

I waited.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound neared.

They were only a few meters away from me. Their speed was starting to pick up. Even still, I did nothing. I waited quietly for them to come closer.

Clank. Clank.

Chains wrapped around my left hand as I brought it forward.

The dim, purple glow surrounding my left arm offered a fleeting preview of the path ahead. There loomed a colossal jaw adorned with countless rows of teeth curving inward.

"Ah... Fuck."

Clank—!

As soon as my eyes landed on the creature, sparks crackled through the air, illuminating its form for me to get a better look.

Hieeeeeek—!

It snapped at the chains with ferocity, prompting me to instinctively retreat several paces.

Before I could even process the arrival of the first creature, another materialized, adding to the otherwise precarious situation.

"Ukh...!"

I just barely managed to shift my hand to get it to bite at the chains.

Clank—!

I was once again pushed back several meters.

When I managed to stabilize myself, I used the few seconds I had to myself to get a proper look at the creatures.

As expected.

"A rat..."

Fucking rats.

Hie! Hieeeeek—

Their steps hurried and I knew that I was about to be surrounded. It wasn't as though I didn't want this to happen. In fact, I was waiting for it as I clenched my right hand.

Puchi!

Blood splurged everywhere as the beasts shrieked in pain and the threads that I had laid out burst out.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

I was immediately left out of breath the moment I called for the threads. However, I knew that I couldn't stop.

Not yet.

"Kh..."

I extended my left hand, causing the chains to scatter as I pushed away the two rats clinging to them.

Hie! Hieeek—

Their red eyes glared fiercely at me as they crouched on all fours, their fur bristling in warning.

Amidst the chaos, the other rodents either lay lifeless or struggled to regain their footing.

Grazed by the threads, the creatures, already weakened by the curse of [Hands of Malady] intertwined with the threads, seemed to falter every time they tried to stand up.

"Tsk..."

Looking at my left hand and seeing the faint blood marks on it, I clicked my tongue.

"....Still a lot of work to do."

Stepping forward, I raised my right hand and called the chains forth as they hung on my grip.

Sensing the impending danger, the two rodents lunged toward me with ferocity.

Too bad I was faster.

Clank—

With a swift swing, I landed a solid blow on both of the rodents, staggering them momentarily. .com

Without hesitation, I followed up with another strike as I smoothly transitioned the chains to my left hand, maintaining my fluid motion with careful flow and step.

Hieeeeekk!

What came after the strike was one resounding shriek as a familiar silence ensued shortly after as I took heavy breaths.

"Haaaa... Haaa..."

Thud.

I fell on my knees and held onto my chest. My vision was blurry, and I could hardly focus.

Despite that, I didn't let my guard down and continued to look around at the monsters that were on the ground.

None of them were moving and were either in pieces or lying motionless.

Even so, I continued to stare at them.

"...."

The silence felt stifling and I swallowed.

'They're all dead, right...?'

They sure looked like they were.

Hiek—!

But the reality was different from my thoughts. Out of nowhere, as if they had been injected with some weird drug, one of the rodents abruptly stood up and lunged at me with all their might.

"...."

I was prepared for such an occasion.

With a casual swipe of my hand, the rodent separated in two.

Thud.

"Haaaa..."

Only then did I sigh in relief and relax.

"...I've already learned my lesson once."

I recalled the first day of my training. I remembered just how much I had suffered. These little fuckers... They were crafty.

Extremely so.

Had it not been for the fact that Delilah was present, I feared I would've spent at least a few weeks in the infirmary.

Drip...! Drip!

Turning my head, I stared at my left arm which was bleeding from two points.

"I thought I did good covering..."

In the end, one of the monsters still managed to get a bite on me.

It was a bit disappointing, but compared to the first time when I had suffered bites everywhere, I was doing considerably better.

"Huuu."

Slowly, I caught up with my breath.

I was finally done for the day. I felt tired and every part of my body hurt.

Leaning back on the hard ground, I blankly stared at the ceiling of the cave. It was dark, but I could faintly see it.

Drip. Drip.

Softly cascading from the overhanging rocks, water dripped in gentle touches, its calm rhythm punctuated by the distant rumble of the waterfall echoing in the background.

I closed my eyes and let the sounds enter my mind.

A picture formed and I basked in the sound.

Just then, I let my mind sink in deeply into itself. For just a brief moment..

I felt at peace.

\*\*\*

The next day.

The preparations for the festival were in full swing. With only a week and a few days left, the campus was extremely busy.

"Here you go. Make sure you practice this script. I've revised it to better fit you. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me."

"....."

I took the script without saying anything.

Revised it to better fit me?

What sort of...

"You may already have an idea of who Azarias is or was in the script. The concept will remain the same. He's a psychopath who thirsts for the death of his victims, however, there's a twist."

The woman, who went by the name of Olga...? Wasn't quite sure, but I addressed her as 'writer', and started to explain the plot and general idea behind the character that she had written.

The more she started to explain, the more I was convinced.

'....I can't do this.'

It was already a miracle that I was capable of performing the first part of the script, but as I scrolled through the script, I had a hard time visualizing the emotions and expressions of the character.

He was...

A total psychopath. Someone who killed for the sake of killing.

He thirsted for the thrill that came with the death of his victims.

'How am I supposed to play this?'

As I scrolled through the script, attempting to envision myself embodying the character, I encountered a persistent barrier hindering my ability to fully immerse myself in the scene.



Despite repeated attempts to visualize the scenario, I found myself unable to authentically inhabit the character's persona or effectively convey the emotions and actions as written in the script.

"Can you do it...?"

Overhearing the writer's words, I pursed my lips.

Could I do it?

The simple answer was, no. I couldn't do it.

However...

Was I going to do it?

That answer was obvious.

"Yes."

For the credits, I had to do it.

"Great. I can't wait to see your performance."

\*\*\*

Inside of the Leoni Hall.

Things were hectic. With the festival date drawing nearer, the cadets and staff were busy handling all the important props and equipment up the stage.

Given that today the cadets who were going to become extras in the play were going to be announced, there was an obvious air of excitement.

".....Yes, I'm done."

One such cadet who was looking forward to the selection was none other than Aoife.

She had applied a week ago when the auditions were on. Her role was that of an extra who was supposed to die at the start of the story.

Her killer was supposedly a wannabe psychopath.

It wasn't an important role, but to get extra credits she was willing to take on the role.

Her plan to become a Guide had failed, and since she couldn't do that, this was the next best thing.

'I have to get this role.'

"Are you also waiting to hear your results, Aoife?"

"Hm?"

Aoife turned her head. A tall man with soft blonde hair and brown eyes appeared in her sight. He wore a soft smile as he addressed her.

Judging from his uniform, he seemed to also be a cadet. A senior, probably.

"Ah, yes."

Aoife casually nodded her head without displaying much interest.

No, she had no interest. The only thing that was in her mind was the selection.

'I'll get the role, right...?'

She recalled the expressions that judges had at her performance.

It was generally quite positive. At least, that was what she thought.

"Haha, that's nice. I'm also hoping to get a role. I want to be Azarias. It's quite an interesting role. I think I'll be able to play it quite perfectly."

Besides her, the senior started to yap about himself and the role he selected.

"In fact, I'm quite confident in getting the ro-"

"If you would excuse me..."

Without looking, Aoife started to distance herself from him. Along the way, she came up with a random excuse.

"Someone is calling for me."

Aoife left right after that, leaving the senior hanging.

She had no time for meaningless talk that was just going to end up with her finding out he was approaching her with ulterior motives.

Been there, done that.

\*\*\*

As Aoife left, the senior's gaze lingered on her retreating figure, his expression gradually contorting with an emotion difficult to discern.

His left eye twitched slightly, as a certain madness threatened to spill.

"Oh, no. "

He just barely held himself back as he scratched the side of his neck.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

"....Not yet. Not yet."

He quietly mumbled as he stared at the incoming member of the collective. Presumably the person that would announce the result of the roles.

Massaging his face, a warm smile gradually returned to his face.

It wasn't yet time.

He had to remain patient. He was bound to get the role. The same was true for her.

Two contrasting roles, that marked the end of the start of their characters. Such were their roles.

...The stage was being set up.

For he would perform the greatest act at the greatest change.

An act to blow the minds of the audience.

One that would forever be remembered by all.

## **Chapter 84 Preparation for the festival [2]**

"Please be quiet. I will not be announcing the results of the assessment that we had. May the students who have been called up please step forward."

A man clad in dark green attire stood tall, his gaze fixed intently upon the paper before him. Adorned with thick, square-framed glasses, his stern countenance exuded an air of authority as he started reading the papers.

"For the role of Evangeline, the selected cadet will be Aria Parlia from the second year. Please step forward."

A young woman with black hair stepped forward. Her features were rather delicate, and while she wasn't exactly the most attractive of women, she was above average.

The moment her name got called up, her eyes sparkled and her body trembled.

She seemed to be struggling to contain her excitement.

Aoife stared at her with a flat look. There was no hint of expression on her pretty features. She was quietly waiting for her name to be called up. Although she didn't show it, she was actually quite nervous.

She had rehearsed the script for countless hours and thought she had done a good job at it.

They had only been given five minutes to learn the script and act. Had she been given more time, then she would've been able to put on a better performance.

The thought of failing kept nagging at her mind.

It felt suffocating.

'I can't fail... Not again.'

And then...

"For the role of Emily, the daughter of the baker, the selected cadet will be..."

Aoife took a deep breath, silently squeezing her palms which had unknowingly turned sweaty.

"...Aoife Megrail. Please step forward."

A huge sense of relief washed over her the moment that her name was called. If not for the fact that she had to keep her image up, she would've jumped and clenched her fist in front of everyone.

Keeping her usual stoic expression, she glanced around at the other cadets who were looking at her with hints of envy and jealousy, and she stepped forward.

'I did it...'

Her fists clenched tightly.

The organizer started to name the remaining cadets. One by one, Aoife saw cadets either suppress their joy or weep in sadness.

Folding the paper, the organizer eventually, announced,

"That's it for the roles. For those that haven't been called out, there's always a next time, you can disp-

"Ah, excuse me."

A voice cut the organizer's. It sounded calm, but its underlying fluster did not escape Aoife's notice.

When she turned her head, her brows furrowed.

'It's him...'

The senior from before.

He still wore a warm smile and appeared friendly. However, something was unsettling about his smile that made Aoife frown more deeply.

He politely addressed the organizer.

"I've yet to hear about the role for Azarias. I've applied, and I don't think it has been called out yet so I think there's been a mi-

"No, there's no mistake."

The organizer coolly cut him off.

Glancing at the cadets who had stepped forward, Aoife included, he went on to say,

"The role of Azarias has already been taken. He was selected a week ago."

"Eh...?"

Finally, cracks started to appear on his calm face. He appeared to be quite flustered. It was as if he hadn't expected such development.

"Someone took the role?"

"But weren't the selections today? How could this be?"

"Is there some sort of mistake?"

'Azarias's role has already been taken?'

He wasn't the only one that was surprised by the situation. All the remaining cadets, Aoife included were confused.

'Who took the role?'

Aoife was curious. He was supposed to be the one that killed her. They were bound to meet each other and work with one another.

"That's enough questions. You will get to meet him later today if he's present. If not, you'll eventually get to meet him."

"But, then..."

"That's that."

The organizer cut the senior off before settling his gaze over the Aoife and the rest. His tone softened a little.

"Please follow me, I'll lead you all to our writer who will start explaining your roles."

He turned around and left after that.

Aoife didn't hesitate to follow. Losing all interest in the senior whose face turned completely white.

Her mind was somewhere else at the moment.

She was curious.

Just who was the one who was going to play the role of Azarias?

\*\*\*

Alexander Harrington, a second-year Senior ranked within the top hundreds, didn't think things would turn out like this.

The itch intensified, and he began scratching his neck.

"This... A mistake... How...?"

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

As he scratched, a wet sensation began to creep along the side of his neck. He wanted to continue, but the wet sensation prevented him from scratching further.

Dabbing his neck with his sleeve, staining it red, he continued.

"I thought I did good... Everything was perfect... How?"

His sentences were incoherent, hardly making any sense.

—You weren't able to get the role?

"No, I wasn't."

Alexander started to display some anger as he contacted 'them'. How could they lie to him? They promised him the role. What happened?

What happened!!

—There will be a change of plans, then.

"Change of plans?"

Alexander had enough rationality within him to listen.

"You are changing the plans?"

—Find the one who took the role from you. Once you do, send us his information. We'll take care of it for you.

"You will...?"

—Yes.

The voice flatly said. A smile finally returned to Alexander. Ah, yes... They can do it. They'll fix it. Good. Good.

"I'll find him."

The itch stopped, and his expression returned to normal.

He was no longer as panicked.

"...I'll find him immediately."

—Do that.

Alexander ended the transmission. He massaged his face, trying his best to fix his expression. Dabbing his neck with his sleeve, he made sure to clean up the blood as well.

Taking out a mirror, he stared at himself.

"Good."

A warm smile, and a friendly expression.

Such was his persona.

"Yes, this will do."

Fixing his clothes, he turned around.

"Eh...?"

He had just taken a few steps when a figure appeared not far from him. Immediately, he stood out. With tall and overbearing features, his appearance attracted the attention of all those around him.

With his deep hazel eyes scanning the surroundings, he seemed to be looking for someone.

His head turned left, and then right, and then...

"....?"

They locked onto him.

Alexander was taken aback. The distance between the two shrank until he was eventually a few meters from him.

"Yes?"

Alexander addressed him with his usual smile while casually glancing at his blazer.

Distinguishing the year of a cadet was made easy by the stripes adorning their blazers. A single stripe denoted a first-year cadet, while two stripes signified a second-year, and the pattern continued accordingly, offering a visual cue to their progression through the academy.

The cadet had one stripe.

He was his junior.

"How may I help you, junior?"

By addressing him as Junior, he quickly elevated his position to a higher status than his. He thought his 'junior' would understand, but he didn't as he stared at him without saying a word.



"...."

His intense hazel eyes scanned his body meticulously as if he was looking for something.

The more he looked, the more Alexander grew uncomfortable. For a brief moment, his expression almost cracked and his hands trembled. Alexander found himself imagining himself strangling him.

But he held himself back.

He couldn't show such a display. At least, not yet. There were more important things that he needed to do.

"Junior...?"

Alexander called out again. This time, he made his voice sterner. As if he was trying to warn the junior before him.

He seemed to have gotten his message across as the junior finally took his gaze away from him.

Just when Alexander thought he was going to apologize, he asked something that completely took him aback.

"Did you apply for the position?"

"Position?"

"Yes. For Azarias."

"....."

Alexander frowned. Suddenly, he found his lips become dry. It couldn't be that...

The Junior went on to apply.

"I also applied."

"...You, did?"

"Yes."

The Junior nodded.

"A pity he was already selected."

"Ah, a pity indeed..."

"Then."

Lowering his head, the junior excused himself.

".....I apologize for disturbing you."

The apology finally came.

"You would've made for a great Azarias."

As the junior departed, his words hung in the air, leaving Alexander speechless.

Despite the urge to speak up, he found himself at a loss for words, his mouth hanging open.

All he could do was watch as the senior's figure merged into the sea of cadets, gradually fading from view.

For some reason...

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

The itch started again.

\*\*\*

'....It's probably him.'

I wasn't quite sure just yet. It all happened rather fast. I was overlooking the cadet selection for the incoming roles, when...

[ ◆ Side Quest Activated : Final Act.]

: Character Progression + 39%

: Game Progression + 6%

Failure

: Calamity 1 + 12%

A familiar notification popped up in my vision.

"Ha."

It wasn't as if I wasn't expecting it. No, rather I was expecting it to happen. Given how big of an event the festival was, I doubted nothing would've happened.

Without a doubt, something was going to happen. I was proven right.

'It looks like the target is Aoife.'

Calamity 1 was Aoife. That much became clear to me after the prison incident.

"....She also got selected for the role in the play."

The girl that I was supposed to kill. It was a funny thought. What sort of face was she going to make when she realized I was the one who was supposed to kill her?

But that was outside of the point.

No vision accompanied the notification. However, I didn't feel like I needed it this time.

I knew that I couldn't rely on the visions to appear all the time and that I had to figure things out myself sometimes.

Good thing I did.

'I've already found my target.'

Or at least, was more or less confident in my selection.

The event was titled 'Final Act' suggesting that it had something to do with the play. Aoife's selection in the play further reaffirmed my thoughts.

I put myself in the shoes of the organization.

They were strong. Incredibly powerful. However, if they wanted to target Aoife during the play, the most realistic approach wouldn't be through some mass attack during the play.

Let alone the fact that all the big shots were going to be present, but even getting into the Academy was going to be hard.

The only conclusion that I thought was feasible was through either an established guest or a performer.

I wasn't sure if they knew whether Aoife would be selected for the role, but if they knew, then... The most perfect candidate would be a performer.

.....And if there was a character who fit the description the best, then it had to be Azarias.

The character that I was playing.

"Ha."

It was all speculative.

There was no clear evidence for my thoughts. Or at least, not until I observed all the male candidates for the role and spotted a certain someone behaving differently from the others.

It was for that reason that I approached him.

As expected, it might be him.

The more I thought about my interaction with him, the more convinced I was.

"Not yet."

Even so, I didn't act just yet.

Now was not the right time. Not only did I not know how strong he was, but we were in the Academy. It wasn't as if I could do anything to him even if I wanted to.

That would be stupid.

Not only that but if something were to happen to him, then the people behind him could very well change their plans.

Things would become unpredictable then.

I didn't like unpredictability. I liked for things to remain predictable. Only then would I have a certain sense of control over the situation.

For now, I needed to maintain this status quo.

At the very least, until I found an opening.

New chapters are published on

### **Chapter 85 Preparation for the festival [3]**

Thursday. A few days before the festival.

I sat on one of the benches around the campus, waiting for someone. I checked the time. It was just about 3 P.M.

I couldn't stay here for long. I had a place to be in a few hours.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait for long.

He appeared not long after.

"You came."

Wearing the same academy uniform as I did, Leon greeted me with a flat look.

"Did you expect me to ignore your message?"

"....."

His lack of reply was all that I needed to hear. So he did...

"What do you see me as?"

This time, I could see a reaction from him. Disgust? And... A little bit of fear?

"What..."

"No, stop."

He held his hand in front of me.

"I come in peace."

The fuck is this guy on about?? In peace? In peace from what?

"....I need your help."

An unexpected set of words came out of his mouth and I frowned.

"You want my help?"

"Yes."

He quietly nodded his head as he sat down on the opposite end of the bench. He was behaving quite strangely today.

"What do you want me to help you with?"

".....You wrote this, right?"

Extending his hand, he passed me a familiar piece of paper. I took a casual glance before understanding his intentions.

"Wrong person to ask. I'm no-"

"I'll teach you."

"Hm?"

Surprised, I looked at him.

Teach me?

"Why would you....?"

"I think you're talented."

"Talented?"

I almost laughed. This guy... He had really lost his mind. I was just about to stand up and leave when he held me down.

"I'm serious."

I took a good moment to stare at his face. I was really having a hard time taking him seriously, but looking at his expression which seemed absolutely serious, I had no choice but to sit back down.

"So you think I'm talented?"

"I do."

"....."

Perhaps because he had been with me since the start and had seen my progress, he thought that I was talented. But what did he know?

He knew nothing about the struggles that I had to go through to just barely reach an acceptable level.

I was still levels behind this guy, and our gap was only widening.

If there was one truly talented person, then it had to be him.

I still decided to hear him out.

"Let's say that I'm talented. What does that have to do with you wanting to teach me?"

"....."

Leon pursed his lips and briefly looked down. Falling into his own thoughts, he only looked back after a short while.

"I've reached a bottleneck."

"Hm?"

"It's just like you said. I've been trying my best to fix the missing parts that are within the art that I'm practicing. I've spent the past two years trying to fix the problem. I thought I had done a good job at hiding the fact that the technique was incomplete, but..."

He paused there, but his meaning was clear.

"You think I'll be able to think of a way to fix it?"

"...."

He didn't respond, but his expression yet again told me everything that I needed to know.

Haa. This time, I really wanted to laugh. This guy has totally lost his marbles.

"I'm not expecting you to pay me back or anything. I am willing to teach you the technique for free. If you can't perfect it, then that's fine too. I won't blame you for it."

I massaged my forehead.

My head was throbbing.

Of all the people he could've asked, he asked me...

'This is stupid.'

There had to be some sort of intention behind his actions. I refused to believe it was just because he thought I could complete it.

".....Fine."

Despite all the doubts that I had, I still accepted the offer.

It went without saying that I accepted. It was simply an extremely advantageous deal for me.

The only problem that I had with this offer was the fact that I truly didn't understand where this guy was coming from.

Could I truly trust him....?

"...."

I looked at his face.

It looked stupid.

As if perhaps sensing my thoughts, Leon frowned.

"What are you thinking about?"

I was taken aback.

"What are you?"

"...."

'So he really did read my mind.'

"Your face looks stupid."

Oh, shit.

I covered my mouth.

"I wasn't meant to say it out loud."

My true thoughts had slipped.

Leon blinked, and just faintly, his stoic expression cracked. I closely observed his expression. Was it going to crack...?

The answer was no.

With a sigh, he slowly got up from the chair.

"I'll slowly start teaching you the art when we have time. I'll take my leave now."



With a slight bow, he was prepared to leave. I looked at his back which was now facing me, before opening my mouth to say a name,

"Alexander Harrington."

His steps halted.

I continued.

".....Pay attention to him."

\*\*\*

'Alexander Harrington.'

Even as he distanced himself from Julien, the name continued to ring in his mind. He had asked for clarification, but all he was met with was a simple, 'Keep an eye out for me.' before he left.

The name didn't ring a bell, and regardless of how hard he tried, he couldn't recall such a name.

Still, he was planning on finding out.

In any case, the talk went better than expected.

'He accepted.'

Quite honestly, Leon didn't hold a lot of expectations in his attempt at trying to solve the puzzle that had been plaguing him for the past few years.

However, he had grown to a point where he was starting to become desperate.

To the point where he even thought of teaching Julien his technique so that he could help him find an answer.

"Haa."

Leon found himself blankly staring at the sky.

The bottleneck.

It had appeared the moment he reached Tier 3.

The bottleneck wasn't yet apparent. It was faint, but Leon could feel it.

Were he to continue down this path, he was sure that by the time he reached Tier 5 and higher, his growth would completely stagnate.

The fact that Julien had managed to pick up the flaw within just a few hours of observation was enough for Leon to understand something.

'He's talented.'

Perhaps he himself hadn't noticed, but Leon certainly saw it. If he were to train a little further, then...

"It's worth the shot."

Plus, it wasn't like he was going to teach him the entire thing.

Just the movement art which was what he needed.

But...

Leon suddenly frowned as he thought back to something.

The more he thought about it, the more annoyed he became. He tried to ignore it, but the words would just continue to nag at the back of his mind.

To the point where he found himself stopping a nearby cadet.

"Hey, you..."

"Uh, ah yeah? Me?"

The cadet pointed at himself with a flustered look.

"Yes."

Leon nodded with a serious face.

Then, pointing at himself, he asked,

"...Does my face look stupid?"

\*\*\*

Today was the first day of practice.

There were only a few days left before the festival was in full swing, and Aoife had spent the last couple of days seriously practicing her lines.

There weren't many. Just a couple, but she had to perfectly display fear and terror in her expression.

From the tremble of her eyes to the pitch of her voice.

Everything had to be perfect.

"Huuu."

Setting the script down, Aoife took a deep breath.

She was currently inside a small practice room by herself.

Soon she was going to meet the man who was supposed to play Azarias. Today was the first time she was going to meet him. Not only that, but she was also going to meet the other actors in the play.

Today was their first reading.

An event where all the actors of the play would meet to familiarize themselves with each other.

There was an undeniable excitement around the rookie actor.

Rumors had it that he had been selected the moment that he had gone to the audition.

With a godly level of acting, the writer chose him on the spot.

'I'm curious.'

But at the same time, Aoife was also nervous.

Would she even be able to keep up with such an actor?

The mere thought of performing with someone like that made her nervous. If it somehow ended up ruining the play, then...

"Let's not think about it."

Aoife became increasingly nervous the more she thought about it. Right, who knows, maybe I'll be able to hold my own.

Gradually, her mind started to calm down and she felt less stressed.

"Alright."

She slapped her cheeks and stood proudly.

"...I've got this."

Collecting herself, she reached for the door and opened it.

"Is everything ready?"

"Do you have the script with you?"

"Yes, I've got it right here. Please wait a moment. I'll distribute them to the tables."

Aoife was immediately greeted with chaos. The reading was set to take place in several minutes, and the staff was busy getting everything ready for the actors and actresses who were going to take part in the play.

The venue wasn't particularly spacious, roughly half the size of the auditorium. Originally designated for storage purposes, its discreet location made it an ideal choice for hosting the reading, given the secretive nature of the script.

Walking around, Aoife managed to catch a glimpse of several famous actors.

As expected, there was a certain aura about them that stood out from the rest. You could tell at a glance that they were the best of the best.

But it wasn't as though her own aura lacked compared to theirs.

Rather, it shined just as brightly, instantly attracting the attention of the actors present.

"Haha, if it isn't our rising superstar."

Aoife was greeted by a tall and strikingly handsome man who introduced himself as Darius Johns, the main lead of the play.

He greeted her with a large smile.

"Are you nervous? Haha, you don't have to be. With me her-"

Aoife was about to respond when she was pulled back.

A crisp voice echoed right after.

"Get your hands off of her. The gap between you two is too large."

"No, I-"

"No!"

Before Aoife knew it, she was surrounded by the main cast of the play. fr(e)e

"Stay away from our little rookie, Darius."

"Don't you know who you're talking to?"

Everyone started to berate him, as he flusteredly looked around.

"No, I was just trying to be friendly..."

"Bullcrap!"

"How are you holding up?"

While this was going on, Aoife was greeted by a stunning woman, whose presence momentarily caught her off guard.

"Have you memorized your lines? If you need help feel free to ask us."

"Ah..."

Despite her efforts to maintain composure, Aoife couldn't help but feel a flutter of excitement at the sight of Odette Ripley, a renowned actress whose performances she had admired in countless recordings and plays.

Aoife was a huge fan of her works, and seeing her in person almost made her squeal.

"Odette, let her go. Can't you see she's uncomfortable with your touch?"

"No, she isn't."

Odette turned to look at Aoife.

"You aren't, right?"

"...No."

"Ha, see?"

"Tsk."

There was an overall pleasant atmosphere around the place. With all actors familiar with one another, the mood was serene.

"Oh, right, do you know who's the actor that forced that woman to change the script?"

At Odette's sudden question, the atmosphere changed a little.

Aoife tilted her head. The topic interested her as well.

"I don't know to be honest. That woman refuses to say anything. I've begged her so many times, but she just doesn't budge at all."

"Right, the same is true for me."

"...But is he actually good? I mean, I get that he managed to get that woman to change the script, but could it have been some fluke?"

"No, impossible. You know how that woman is. There's no way she would do what she did unless she was confident."

"Ah, yes... I guess. Well, we'll see during the reading. Whether they are truly as good as they say."

The conversation continued in that direction. Aoife listened quietly from the side, occasionally adding her own thoughts on the matter.

That was until someone announced,

"The reading is about to start. May all the actors get seated."

"Eh? Already?"

"That's fast."

"Hm? But where is the rookie actor everyone is talking about?"

"Ah, he's here."

As the assistant spoke, the door swung open, and a figure walked in. Almost everyone turned their face in the direction of the door.

Aoife was one such person. She was curious. Just who was this super rookie?

Only that...

"No, it can't be."

Her expectations were shattered the moment he entered as she blinked several times to make sure she wasn't seeing wrongly.

Blinking again, and seeing the same figure standing before her with what seemed to be a slight curl of his lips, Aoife swallowed.

"Oh, no..."

The godly actor who had taken the show by storm. The person whom she had to try her best to keep up with, and the person that she was supposed to treat like a master...

"Ah, no..."

It was none other than Julien.

### **Chapter 86 Preparation for the festival [4]**

He immediately grabbed the attention of the room with his presence. With looks that put even the best-looking actor to shame, he became the focal point of everyone's gaze.

Behind him, a familiar figure appeared.

She was following him with gleaming eyes.

"There's no need to feel too pressured. Just act as you've done last time, and-Oh, it looks like everyone is here. Sorry for the delay, I was talking with him about something."

It was none other than Olga who waved her hand at the actors sitting across the room.

"Writer, it's a pleasure to see you."

"Hello."

Snapping out of it, the actors went on to greet her.

There was a certain respect in their voice as they talked to her. And rightfully so. Her name resounded throughout the entire Empire, and while all the actors present had a certain fame to their name, it was meaningless when compared to Olga.

"It's nice to see you all again. I apologize in advance for the delay and change in script."

"No worries, no worries... it's indeed better. I'm sure it'll be a hit."

Compliments began to flow effortlessly from the actor's lips, each one more lavish than the last, until inevitably, the spotlight of attention gradually shifted towards Julien.

"Haha, are you the actor everyone is talking about?"

Darius, true to his nature, was the first to approach Julien with his trademark warmth, extending a friendly greeting in his usual amiable manner.

"You might know me, but I'm Darius."

He held out his hand.

But...

"...."

All he received in response was a blank stare. It was obvious from Julien's gaze that he had no idea as to who he was.

And he was right.

Julien really didn't know who the person in front of him was.

'Famous actor...? Who?'

Most probably seemed to be the case. He was just about to hold his hand up to return the greeting when Olga intervened.

"Enough with the greetings. Let's just straight to the reading. I can't wait."

And thus, Julien was never able to return the greetings.

Whispers started to spread.

"Wow, did you see that? He totally ignored Darius."

"That's the godly actor that made her change the script?"

"Well, he certainly has the looks for it."

"...But doesn't he seem rather plain? No, not his looks. But his expression. It's as blank as a piece of paper."

"From the way he was acting, it seems like he's looking down on everyone."

"No, that's not the case..."

Aoife muttered to herself from the side.

"He's just like that."



It wasn't a scene she was used to seeing. She could practically count the many times she had seen a similar scene over the past few months.

'....Does this guy not care about anything else but himself?'

As if sensing her gaze, he turned to look at her and their gazes met.

'What is...'

For the briefest of moments, Aoife noticed a subtle curl at the corner of his lips.

It disappeared as fast as it came, and the writer clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"We will skip the introductions for now. Let's start the reading."

Soon, the large hall, which had become somewhat awkward due to Julien, was plunged into a state of silence.

Flip—

Only for it to be shattered by the sound of pages turning. As heads turned in unison, all eyes fell upon Julien, who sat quietly, his gaze fixed on the script before him.

Everyone wore a strange expression as they looked at him. He really... didn't care at all about what others thought of him.

More whispers ensued.

"Doesn't he seem nervous? Like, he's quite stiff. This isn't a good sign."

"Could just be his personality...?"

"I'm not sure. I was looking forward to seeing the godly rookie that forced Olga to change the script, but maybe we won't see it today?"

"What happens if he sucks?"

"....I doubt he will. And if he does, we can just go back to the old script."

"Ah, I see."

At this moment, while the actors were conversing with each other, Olga stood up and said,

"Let's begin. Act 1. The Bakery."

The story was set in a similar time to their own, focusing on a young man raised in an orphanage who became ensnared in the intricate schemes of the royal family as a result of his job. A detective.

But there was a secret he had. He had a special power. One that allowed him to retrace crime scenes to see what had happened.

In the first scene, the main character 'Joseph' played by Darius visits a bakery.

"Uh... This is where she worked, is that correct?"

It was an introductory scene to the main character. It had to be said, that Darius was a great actor. The moment his scene started, he was able to quickly get into character.

Outwardly, he had an air of laziness, yet an underlying seriousness underscored his demeanor, leaving no doubt about his commitment to solving the crime.

Such was Joseph, the character he was playing.

Darius was doing a great job at embodying such a character.

"Yes, this is the bakery."

Another actor, his assistant in the play, commented from the side.

The scene continued.

"Emily Stein."

The assistant mused, his tone turning somber.

"The owner's daughter. According to the details, she seems to have vanished sometime yesterday."

"Ah, uh, yeah... I see."

With a subtle nod, Darius surveyed the surroundings, idly tracing his finger along the surface of the wooden table they were seated at. With a lazy expression on his face, his actions were merely to make it look as though he was doing something.

The assistant looked around before muttering,

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the place. The crime likely occurred outside of the bakery. Should we..."

"Give me a second."

Darius closed his eyes, and..

Clap—!

"End of Act 1."

The scene cut.

Supposedly, the scene was supposed to cut to a vision.

Aoife observed from the side with admiration that she didn't show.

'As expected, seeing them in person is something else...'

She felt shivers.

But apparently, she was the only one that felt this way. Olga, the writer of the play, frowned and addressed the assistant.

"Ronan, did you read the script properly? Your lines were bland. I need you to be sterner just like in the script."

Olga sighed.

"The two of you are contrasting characters. One is lazy, and the other one is stern. I don't feel any of that from the lines. Change your tone. Make your voice deeper."

".....I apologize, I will do better."

Olga then went on to comment on a few other things that she disliked. Overall, even Darius wasn't spared from criticism.

This went on for several minutes until Olga sighed and set back down.

"Next scene. Act 2. The vision."

Her brows trembled, and her attention shifted towards Julien.

It was Juliens' first appearance.

But not just his. Aoife's as well.

"This is the more detailed version of the scene from the tryouts. Please don't feel too pressured. I just want to see how you'd do in this scene."

Her attention soon turned to Aoife.

"You..."

Frowning, Olga seemed to want to say something, but decided against it and quietly said,

".....Just try to keep up."

"Eh?"

Stunned, Aoife didn't know how to respond. Just try to keep up? What did that even mean? Slowly, her fists clenched together as she lowered her head to stare at her script.

It was only a few pages long but it was filled with creases and notes.

For the past week, she had dedicated countless hours to dissecting the role, sacrificing sleep and analyzing numerous plays in an effort to perfect her tone and expressions.

Now, as she gazed at the script, its worn pages barely holding together, Aoife bit her lips and looked up.

Her competitive spirit ignited.

'Let's see if I really need to keep up.'

"Start."

Compared to the first script, the scene was different. The occurrences no longer occurred in a room, but rather in the open.

"Hah, man~"

Aoife was the first one to speak. Her tone sounded light and crisp. The expressions of many of the actors present changed.

They clearly did not expect her acting to be like that.

"....I can't believe this shop is closed as well."

In the setting, Aoife, or Emily, was visiting the nearby shops to buy missing pieces for their malfunctioning mixer. It was a matter of utter importance since the bakery couldn't run without the machinery.

It was late into the night, and all shops were closed.

In her desperation, Emily found a man in the streets for help.

"Ah, excuse me! Do you perhaps know if any shops are still open where I can buy some parts for a broken mixer?"

That man...

Was none other than Azarias.

With his head lowered, Julien slowly raised his head. He didn't immediately turn into character. At first, his expression was blank.

Aoife stared at it unblinkingly.

Almost as if she was trying to challenge him.

'Come, show me... Show me what you've got...'

All eyes were on Julien whose expression remained blank the entire time. Everyone wore similar expressions as they wandered about him and his acting. Was it really going to be as good as Olga suggested? Was it just a fluke? Overrated?

The thoughts ran through their mind until they didn't.

"....."

Finally, Julien's expression changed and so did his aura. It was as if a different person had taken over.

It indeed was.

Right now, Julien was mixing a few characters in his mind. From the memories of William's madness to the emotions he felt right after he first killed a person.

He solely focused on those experiences and emotions.

In doing so, his entire demeanour changed and he became a completely different person. It was a chilling sight that took Aoife's breath away.

All of a sudden, the world around her seemed to have changed.

No longer did it feel like she was in the reading room. As of right now, she truly felt like Emily.

".... You're looking for a replacement?"

Julien's voice came out dry. However, within the dryness of the voice was a smile. A gentle, and warm smile.

Aoife felt a strange discomfort staring into that smile.

It made her fidgety.

Even so, she had to resist the urge to show it. In the play, Emily, desperate for the missing piece doesn't notice such things.

And so...

"Yes, I am."

"I know, yes... I know of a place."

"You do...?!"

"Yes, please go straight. If you just keep going there, you can find it."

"Thank you so much!"

It was a short interaction. One that ended with her thanking the man before leaving.

Aoife did her best to keep her tone even. Even so, just briefly, her voice trembled. Aoife half-expected the writer to call her out for it, but nobody said a thing.

And how could they?

'Shivers... I'm feeling shivers... From the many expressions he manages to reveal through his eyes alone and subtle gestures, this is even better than what I saw last time.'

Olga found herself once again doubting her own writing abilities. She felt as if she had still not done the character justice.

The other actors were no exception.

'It's no wonder he acted like that. He truly is... Scary.'

'How can anyone act like that? It feels like I'm being sucked right into the scene.'

'I'm getting shivers.'

Julien lowered his head. He scanned the room that was filled with other actors. He was meant to stare just straight. Where Emily's departing back was, but as if he wasn't satisfied with that, he stared at everyone present.

His eyes changed.

Julien, no Azarias's gaze turned intense. A smile slowly crept across his features and his body started to tremble. His eyes changed further, his pupils slowly dilating.

"Haaa... Haaa.."

His breath echoed in rhythm, each exhale tinged with excitement.

He was thrilled.

Adrenaline surged through his veins, engulfing him completely.

"R-red..."

He quietly mumbled.

"....I want to see it."

At this point, Aoife had long stopped acting. Staring at the worn-out script in her hand, she leaned back on her chair and blankly stared at Julien.

"How?"

How am I supposed to compete with this?

### **Chapter 87 Preparation for the festival [5]**

Aoife had a hard time adjusting to what she was seeing.

"...."

At first, she thought that the gap between them wouldn't be at all that big. That maybe, the rumors about the 'godly actor' were a bit of an exaggeration and it was all done for the publicity of the play.

And yet...

'How am I supposed to compete with this? And this is just a script reading...'

Her grip on her script tightened.

She felt a sense of frustration well up deep within her.

Yet again, she...

"This is..."

Aoife wasn't the only one that felt that way. Even the more senior actors felt at a loss for words with his performance. This was especially so for Odette and Darius who remained silent the entire time.

The way they looked at him changed. It went from, 'Can he do it?' to 'Can I keep up?' They could only feel relief at the thought that there weren't many scenes that he was in.

But even so...

They shuddered at what he had just shown them.

"....Ah, this is perfect."

If there was one person that was excited by all of this, it was none other than Olga who resisted the urge to clap.

It felt as if she was standing before Azarias. Right before he let himself fall into his desires and madness.

....It was perfect.

He was perfect.

"...."

"...."

At some point, the entire reading room had turned quiet, all eyes focused on Julien who slowly closed his eyes and returned to his regular expression.

He seamlessly exited his character, and that was when all eyes fell on Olga and understood something.

So that's why she changed the script...

\*\*\*

'Huuu...'

I took a silent breath and let the emotions wash away from my mind. Getting into that state of mind was rather tough. However, looking around and seeing the silent looks that everyone was giving me, I felt like I had done a decent job.

"...."

"...."



The room was silent with everyone glancing at each other with weird expressions.

It went on for long enough to make me frown.

What happened?

Was it possible that I had messed up somewhere?

".....That was great."

Just as I started to doubt myself, the writer spoke as her voice shattered the silence that gripped the surroundings. I sighed in relief then.

"Brilliant, yeah."

"That was amazing."

"Wow, I got shivers. You were amazing."

Praise started to flow out of the mouths of all actors present. I took them in without much of a change in expression. Gradually, my gaze fell on a distant figure who was staring at her script with a deep frown.

As if sensing my gaze, our eyes met and I raised my brow in a manner that suggested, 'Are you not going to praise me as well?'

Her expression cracked, and her lips twitched.

'Oh, no.'

I was doing it again.

"Everyone, please be quiet."

Clap—!

A clap broke the atmosphere as the writer directed all attention towards herself.

"Let's save the praises for later. We still have a few scenes to go through. At this rate, we won't be able to finish on time."

Only then did the atmosphere finally calm down and the reading continued.

"Act 3. End of the Vision."

The script reading continued in its usual fashion. It had to be said that all people present were fantastic actors. It took everything that I had to stop myself from showing awe and amazement at what I was seeing.

Especially the two main leading actors. Their acting... It was phenomenal. Even better than some of the best actors I had seen back on earth.

'...I wish he'd have seen this with me.'

He would've probably been the first person to jump up from excitement.

My brother Noel.

"Act 7. A colorless world."

Suddenly, an act was called up and all the attention focused on me again.

'Ah, yeah.'

I looked at the script with a blank look. Act 7. That was Azarias's last act. After all that had happened, Joseph, the main character finally takes him down, ending his serial rampaging.

It was supposed to be an easy scene.

But that had completely changed after the rewrite.

'Even now, I...'

".....Julien?"

Hearing my name called up, I looked up. Everyone was staring at me. I could see the anticipation in their gazes as they looked at me. Their expressions... I could read them like an open book.

'What sort of acting is he going to show?' 'I can't wait to see him act this part.'

'I'm getting shivers just thinking about it.'

They felt burdensome.

But it was truly unfortunate. Staring at the script in front of me, I silently sighed and closed it before placing it on the desk.

"I apologize."

I silently stood up under everyone's stunned expressions.

"...I can't do it."

Not yet.

\*\*\*

In a remote area within the Academy Campus.

"I've found his name."

Alexander stood with a communication orb in his hand. News of Julien's appearance as an extra and the 'godly actor' that had persuaded the writer to change the script had started to spread.

It was only for a brief moment given that the reading had only shortly ended, but finally, the identity of the mysterious 'cadet' had been revealed.

It was for this reason that Alexander had managed to find his identity.

Otherwise, he would've had to spend a lot more time to find the identity. Given how secretive the collective had been about the new script, the identity of the cadet had been kept a secret until now.

Julien Dacre Evenus.

That was the name of the cadet who forced 'Olga' to change the script.

"Thief..."

Silently muttering under his breath, Alexander connected the communication orb.

A familiar voice reached out from it.

—I've received the news.

"Ah, yes... You must've."

Indeed.

"And?"

Alexander listened with bated breath. Were they going to do something about it? Perhaps kill him? But he was an important figure... Killing him would be a bit of trouble. He could do it if they allowed him.

However...

—We are holding the operation for now.

The answer he received was an unexpected one.

"Uh?"

Scratch.

"That..."

He found himself unable to utter a single word. They just refused to leave his lips.

"I heard wrong?"

Yes, it had to be that. Yes...

Scratch. Scratch.

—We will be the ones to take care of the matter. For now, sit back and wait for me to contact you again.

"Uh, but... Ah!"

The communication ended there.

"No, this..."

And the itching started.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch—!

It just wouldn't stop. Even as he felt blood drip down from the side of his neck, the itching didn't stop. He continued to scratch, silently biting his lips in the process.

"No, this... It makes no sense. How? What happened? Why?"

Pacing around, Alexander bit onto his nail.

Long gone was his warm appearance. What replaced it was a twisted look filled with madness.

"I can't... I must... I need to perform. I need to. Have to."

Gradually, his steps stopped.

"...Yes, I don't need to care."

In the first place, he had no desire to live. His only goal was to put on the best performance he possibly could. He cared nothing for them.

What made them think they could stop him?

"Stop me. Can't."

He made up his mind then.

"I'll perform."

Whether they liked it or not, he was going to do it.

That much was clear.

Scratch, scraaach...

Finally, the itch stopped and he took a deep breath. Taking out a small bottle, he placed it over his neck as his injuries started to heal at a rapid pace.

Massaging his face, his expression returned to its normal one. Then, nonchalantly looking around, he proceeded to leave the premises.

Only that...

Even as he left, he didn't notice that presence that stood not far from him.

Swoosh—

\*\*\*

At the same time.

"Huuu. Huuu...!"

Taking deep breaths, I practiced the blue-ranked manual. The mana inside of my body started to expand at a constant pace. It was slower than before, but the progress was still there.

I took deep and silent breaths while focusing on controlling my mana.

Drip. Drip. .com

Sweat gradually started to pour down from my body as I immersed myself in training. Or at least, for the first ten minutes of it.

A nagging thought persisted at the back of my mind, preventing me from fully immersing myself in the experience.

"...Haaa."

My eyes opened and I took a deep breath.

"I can't focus."

Turning my head, my eyes fell on the script that rested a few meters away from me. The events from before replayed in my mind.

Having left the script reading early, I went back to my dorm and resumed my training.

It was unfortunate, but I had no choice but to leave.

The last part of the script...

I couldn't do it.

Regardless of how many times I tried to envision myself in that scenario, my mind would just blank out.

I was simply... Not able to replicate what the character, Azarias felt during his last moments. It was too much for me.

I thought that in the week that I received the script, I'd be able to think of something, but nothing. My mind was just blank.

The more I tried to immerse myself in the role, the harder it became for me to visualize myself in it.

"How troublesome."

"What is?"

A voice suddenly echoed not far from where I was. Surprised, I turned my head to see Leon sitting on one of my sofas.

As usual, he wore a stoic expression.

"When did you get here?"

"A few minutes ago."

A few minutes ago?

"Couldn't you have knocked?"

"I could've."

"And...?"

"I have a stupid face, so..."

I raised my brow. So he was still hung up about that.

I nodded.

"That's fair."

"...."

"What?"

"...."

Seeing that he was refusing to speak, I took a towel and wiped my forehead. I more or less understood why he was here.

"You've been investigating him, haven't you?"

"...."

"What did you find?"

I sat on the opposite end of the sofa and leaned back. Despite his lack of words, I knew that he had something for me.

I was proven right moments after as he finally opened his mouth to speak.

"He's planning on doing something during the play."

"Figured that much."

"...His target, it seems to be Aoife."

"Oh."

Knew that too.

"You don't seem to be that surprised?"

I looked at him flatly.

"I could more or less tell."

"I see."

Leon nodded before suddenly adding,

"He's not working alone. I wasn't able to hear much, but he was talking to someone with a communication device. I believe there's someone behind him."

"Oh."

Yeah, knew that too.

So far, there was nothing that surprised me. It more or less went the same way that I predicted it would.

Or so I thought.

"There was something odd about the situation. Even though I didn't try to get near him for fear of getting exposed, I did manage to overhear a little bit of their conversation. Something about them taking matters into their own hands."

"....Ah."

Now that was a new piece of information. It took a few moments for me to understand what was going on.

'They're coming for me.'

Why else would they suddenly change their plans?

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

At Leon's question, I pondered for a moment before asking,

"How strong is he? Or... How strong do you think he is?"

Frowning slightly, Leon responded after a few seconds of thought.

"He's about my strength. Tier 3."



"Do you think you'll be able to handle him?"

".....Are you asking me to kill him."

"No, not yet."

As I had said before, killing him now wasn't going to do us any good. Rather, it was probably going to put me in a difficult spot.

"So?"

Envisioning how things would play out, I shared my thoughts.

"During the play. He'll try something. His target will probably be me. His goal is probably to take over my position as Azarias. That's the time when we can act."

I said 'we' because I wasn't confident I'd be able to take care of him by myself. Thankfully, Leon seemed keen on helping on this matter as he quietly nodded his head.

"That sounds reasonable. But what about the ones behind him? I'm sure they'll try something. If that's the case then-"

"You don't need to worry about that."

I cut him off before he could continue.

"I'll take care of them."

Of that I was confident.

Because...

They were coming for me.

## **Chapter 88 Festival [1]**

### 88 Festival [1]

Aoife closed the door to her room. Her room was no different than usual. It was clean, with little to no decorations. It was just bland.

"Huu."

Taking a deep breath, she headed for her desk.

If there was one place that wasn't clean and organized it'd be her desk. With all sorts of colored pens, pencils, and writing instruments, her desk was anything but clean.

Tossing her script onto the desk, she sat down and opened the pages.

For the past week, it had been her routine to spend at least a few hours trying to analyze the script.

Today was supposed to be no different, but...

"....How do I do this?"

His image continued to appear in her mind, sapping away all motivation from her.

The way he acted... From his facial expressions to demenour. It was overwhelming. To the point where she couldn't even find a single flaw.

And the fact that she was supposed to act with 'that' only put more pressure on her.

Her inability to keep up would become glaring to those watching.

Perhaps, they would even think that she didn't put in any effort and that they had selected the wrong person.

But...

"That's not true."

Aoife bit her lips.

The effort was there. But who was anyone to know? They only cared about what was in front of them and not what happened behind them.

She understood this concept all too well.

Therefore, she knew that despite her frustrations, she couldn't rely on excuses.

Flip—

The only thing she could do was put in more effort.

To show them that she could keep up and that she wasn't being lazy. For that reason, she needed to spend even more time trying to immerse herself in the role.

Her image was important.

She couldn't let herself tarnish it due to not being able to perform as well as he did.

Flip—

"I'll do it."

Regardless of how much it hurt her, she planned on perfectly mastering the character.

For the remaining week until the start of the festival, Aoife only slept three hours a day.

Drip! Drip!

"...N-no, why are you doing this?"

Even as her nose bled, she continued to flip through the script while looking at a nearby mirror to check her expressions.

Her face was pale and her hair was a mess, but...

"I-I... Help!"

She never once gave up.

And by the time it was time for the festival, Aoife's acting underwent a tremendous transformation.

\*\*\*

The festival was a week-long event.

With all sorts of attractions, it was an important event that was designed to showcase the Academy's facilities, and their ability to train the elites of the empire.

The main gate of the Academy was flooded with new faces, all of whom handed invitations that the security guards checked at the front.

"Hi! Please follow me, I am Josephine, and I will be your guide for today's orientation."

At the front of the gate was the cheery Josephine who led a group of several important figures around the Academy campus.

'I guess they had a reason to choose her over Aoife.'

Given how bright her cheerful personality was, she was well-

received by the guests from the outside.

Had Aoife been the one to guide them then...

"Hah."

I could already imagine just how stiff the atmosphere would've been.

Looking at the time, 10 A.M. I decided to spend some time looking around at the Academy.

The play wasn't going to start until the third day, and while there indeed were combat exams and mid-terms in the following week, I thought about spending today to destress.

At the rate I was currently pushing my body, it was starting to fail me. For that reason, I had no choice but to spend some time to relax.

Well...

Those were my initial thoughts. However, I knew that I was probably being followed.

'What a pain.'

It was for this reason that I chose to remain outside in public. I didn't know the identity of the person following me. Were they from the organization, or was it the senior?

Either way, I kept my guard up.

"....."

That was until I found my steps halting and I turned to my right.

"....."

Our eyes met and she blinked her big eyes. Holding onto a large pastry, she looked around before nearing me.

".....You didn't see anything."

"I didn't."

Her eyes squinted, and I moved my hands over my mouth in a zipping motion.

"My mouth is sealed."

"....."

From her gaze, I could tell that she didn't seem to believe me, but who would I even tell? It wasn't as if I had any friends to gossip with, and who would even believe me if I told them the chancellor was a pervert who enjoyed being a kid?

".....?"

All of a sudden, Delilah extended her hand in my direction.

I was taken aback.

"You want money? I don't have any to give."

"No."

"If not money, then..."

I patted my pockets and shook my head.

"I don't have any. They're back in the dorm."

"No."

Yet again, Delilah shook her head.

I frowned and thought about what her actions could mean, but I was stumped. In the end, it was her that explained.

"Your hand."

"My hand...?"

I blinked and looked at her hand. It finally clicked, and I leaned my head back.

"You want me to hold your hand?"

Nod.

The hell...

"It'll make things easier for me. My current appearance is too suspicious, and since I can't go in my normal form, I need someone to accompany me."

"....I see."

It made sense if she put it that way.

"But why me?"

"Didn't we have an agreement?"

"Ah."

We indeed had one. It was the price that I had to pay for her to train me. Sighing inwardly, I finally relented and grabbed her hand.

She nodded happily and pointed towards the distance.

"Let's go there. I want to try that."

"Ye-uhk!"

I didn't even have the time to agree before she suddenly dragged me. For such a little body, she certainly had a lot of strength.

"We sell cotton candy! The finest cotton candy~!"

The destination was none other than the cotton candy stand. The line was short, and waiting behind the counter was a rather buff man with a beard.

"Ho, ho! Are you here for some cotton candy? For your little sister?"

I looked down at Delilah and felt my mouth twitch.

Sister? How was I going to respond to this?

"No."

Delilah shook her head and responded with a flat voice. The problem lay in the fact that despite her best attempts to sound mature, the polymorph effect distorted her voice, making it sound rather childlike.

"I'm older than him."

"Uh?"

The shopkeeper blinked his eyes.

On the other hand, Delilah continued.

"I'm his older sister."

"...."

"Oh..."

I exchanged glances with the man and pursed my lips.

"It's as she said."

"Ohhh."

The shopkeeper winked at me as if he had understood something.

No, she really was older...

"Would you like some cotton candy? How many would you like?"

I looked down to see Delilah carefully counting with her little fingers. She seemed to be indecisive between two or three.

"Three."

She eventually settled for three.

"Coming right up!"

Despite his appearance, the man was an expert at this. Within moments, he had three sticks done as he handed them to us.

"That will be ten Rend."

"Oh."

I looked down at Delilah who looked back at me.

"...."

"...."

Seriously?

Closing my eyes for a brief moment, I reached out for my wallet and took out a single bill.

"Here you go."

"It was a pleasure serving you. Next~"

"Let's go."

"Ugh!"

Like that, I was once again dragged around by her.

"Get me that."

Gradually, my wallet started to drain.

"That too."

Whatever had sugar in it, she bought it.

"I want to try that too."

With my money.

"I want-"

"I've run out of money. "

Looking at my empty wallet, I didn't know whether to feel happy or sad. Maybe it was a mixture of both.

Sad that I was broke, but happy that I no longer had to be dragged around by her.

"Oh."

Delilah seemed a little disappointed by the development. In the end, throwing away a wrapper, she patted her hand.

"....I'm satisfied."

"I'm glad you are."

Was I finally going to be set free?

Taking out a tissue to clean her hands, Delilah casually glanced behind as her expression flickered back to her usually frosty one. It was as if her entire demenour had changed.

"You've been followed the entire time, do you know that?"

"Hm?"

Surprised by the sudden question, I lowered my head to meet her gaze.



For a moment, I lost myself in her eyes as they stared back at me, threatening to suck me in at any second.

Quickly recovering myself, I realized something.

"Did you drag me around because you wanted to confirm this?"

"No. I just wanted to eat."

"I see."

For some reason, it felt like she was half-lying. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

In any case, I nodded my head.

"Yes, I'm aware."

There was no need for me to lie.

"....Do you want me to help you?"

"You're willing to help?"

It was a bit surprising to hear this. However, after thinking about it for a few seconds, I shook my head and rejected her offer.

"....I'll have to decline."

Whether she was doing it to repay the favor for buying her the candy and stuff, I didn't need her help. Sure, things would indeed be a lot easier were she take matters into her own hands, but that wasn't what I needed.

There was a certain goal I had in mind.

Her interference would ruin what I had in mind.

"....."

Delilah stared at me without saying anything. I couldn't tell her thoughts at all, and the more time passed, the more uncomfortable her gaze became.

Just as I was about to say something, her small lips parted open as she went on to ask,

"I heard you're going to perform at a play."

"....Yes."

"Is your role going to be big?"

"No, it's not."

"Hmm."

Delilah seemed to have fallen into contemplation.

Eventually, raising her head, she said,

"I'll be watching. Don't disappoint."

Her figure gradually blended with the background. Her actions were subtle, with hardly anyone around noticing her sudden disappearance.

I was a little worried that the person observing me would notice something, but I didn't think Delilah would make things difficult for me like that.

'Perhaps there's still an illusion next to me.'

Who knew?

Either way, I looked down at my watch.

There were still a few hours before the first day of the festival ended. I had lost a few hours but still had some time to myself. For now, I planned on enjoying my day.

"Popping balloon! Pop the balloons and you win a prize!"

"Come here and eat the delicious food that we have!"

"A one-in-a-million act! Come watch!"

Hearing the pitches coming from the stalls, I decided to head to one that interested me.

"A customer!"

My stomach gurgled at the sight that was before me. It looked like a roasted pig, but at the same time didn't. Perhaps a monster from the mirror dimension...

Either way, it looked and smelled delicious.

"Looks like you can't resist the smell. Haha, here, I'll prepare one for you. It'll be 15 Rend."

"Okay. "

I swallowed before reaching out for my wallet. Since I was planning on enjoying a few hours to myself, it wouldn't hurt to try it, right?

Making up my mind, I opened my wallet and prepared to take out a few bills to pay.

Only that...

"...."

I had no more money.

"Here you go, sir~"

**.com**

## **Chapter 89 Festival [2]**

There was a secret that hardly anyone knew about Evelyn.

Not even her closest friends knew this about her.

And that was...

"It lacks flavor, needs extra seasoning, and could use a few more minutes in the oven. I'd classify it as mediocre, just barely meeting the mark. It's alright for filling your stomach, but there are much better choices available elsewhere."

She was the Empire-renowned 'Iron Tongue' a famed and mysterious food critic that judged the most famous restaurants and food stalls within the Empire.

Every month, in the new issues of 'The Empire Daily', one of the Empire's most renowned magazines, a segment would be dedicated just to her critiques.

Having done this for several years now, she had a cult following that religiously followed her every critique. Many restaurants and food stalls have been affected by her reviews, with several stores shutting down or others booming in business.

In any case, with the festival ongoing, Evelyn decided to suit up and get to work.

While it wasn't much, she did receive a small salary each month for her reviews.

"Next up..."

Licking her lips, Evelyn finished the food in her grasp and took out her notepad.

In there, she had a small list of restaurants and stalls that she had to check during the festival.

[Moss's Barbeque]

Evelyn circled it with her pen.

"I'll go here next."

With the decision made, she stood up from her bench and headed towards where the stall was located.

The distance wasn't far. It was about a five-minute walk.

"Hm."

When she arrived, she was surprised to see a familiar figure waiting at the back of the line.

'Kiera?'

Evelyn almost panicked and lowered her hat. It was important that she kept her identity a secret.

If her identity was found out, then a lot of her credibility would shatter. She couldn't allow that to happen.

Even so, as she lowered her hat, she couldn't help but take a second glance at Kiera.

The dazzling sunlight from the sun shone upon her platinum hair, making it shine like a well-polished gem.

With her focus on her wallet, Kiera counted her bills, her expression contorting slightly as she looked up at the price board while muttering, 'What kind of ridiculous pricing is this? You might as well just rob me.'

Words aside, her face—her eyes and nose—held such beauty that onlookers couldn't help but wonder if they'd ever see something similar again.

It was a scene that Evelyn was all too familiar with.

The same was true for her, but with her disguise, she didn't have to worry about such a situation.

Or so she thought.

"What are you doing?"

"....!"

Raising her head, she spotted Kiera looking at her with a weird look.

She silently swallowed.

That's right, she might just think my outfit is weird...

"Evelyn?"

"....!"

Flinching slightly, Evelyn pretended to cough. But that didn't work as Kiera's voice once again rang.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Ha, this..."

Seeing that her identity had even been revealed, Evelyn sighed and took off her hat.

"Yes..."

She almost sounded resigned.

No, she was resigned.

"Uh, the fuck...? I knew it was you, but when I actually see it in person, I can't stop the shivers."

Kiera rubbed the side of her arms.

"What the hell are you doing dressed like that?"

"Uh? I, it's nothing. It's just..."

With a twitch of her mouth, Evelyn glanced around and explained.

"It's just that the stares bother me, so I wear this disguise."

"That?"

Kiera looked at her up and down. Then, as if giving up, she turned back to face the line.

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

"Your actions don't match your words."

"Okay, I do. You look ridiculous."

"...."

Evelyn kept her mouth shut and just waited behind her. She had pretty much grown used to Kiera's venomous tongue over the past few months. Something like this wasn't going to phase her.

Furthermore, she had a job to do.

[Moss's Barbeque] - A unique chain of pop-up barbeque stalls. With growing fame, it was one of Evelyn's main targets of review.

There were several criteria that she used to judge a pop-up store. One of the criteria was the speed at which the food was served and how efficient the service was.

So far the line was quite fast.

Within a couple of minutes, she was already almost at the front.

'Speed, I'll give it eight out of ten.'

By her standards, that was a great score.

"Uh? Why the..."

Just then, she heard Kiera's stunned voice. Raising her head, her eyes widened.

"....Ah?"

Like Kiera, she couldn't believe that sight before her.

"Next up."

Hearing the all too familiar dry and even voice, Evelyn blinked several times to make sure she wasn't seeing things. Once she was sure that she wasn't, her mouth dropped.

"....What in the world?"

Of all the people that she would've expected to serve her, Julien was the last person she thought of.

Wearing an apron, and gloves, he served food with the same stoic expression he always wore.

'How can someone as prideful as him be doing something like this?'

This wasn't the Julien that she knew.

Just what sort of...

"Next."

"Uh, ah? Kiera?"

Feeling his gaze, Evelyn turned around and was shocked to see that she was the next up in line. No, clearly Kiera was supposed to be ahead of her, but where did she...

"Are you not going to order something?"

"Oh, no. I will."

Seeing that she couldn't find Kiera anywhere, Evelyn glanced at the menu. There were many questions that she wanted to ask, like 'What are you doing here? Why are working here?' and so on. However, she held herself back and just ordered.

"I'll take a classic, please. With extra sauce."

"Is that all?"

"....Yes."

"Okay."

Taking a small breath, Evelyn waited as her order started to get prepared. She watched as Julien carefully scooped up the meat and placed it over a bun. His actions were fluid and looked rather elegant.

It was odd, but for some reason, the food started to look even more appetizing.

'No, don't let this fool you.'

Evelyn was quick to snap out of such a state.

She was a professional critic. She wasn't going to let that affect her judgment. With a soft, 'Hoo', Evelyn slapped her cheeks and put on a serious face.

Julien came shortly after with her order.

"That will be fifteen Rend." .c(o)m

"Here."

Handing over the money, she received her order and left. Looking around, while holding onto the steaming hot food, she headed over towards a more secluded bench where she sat down.

Looking around, she took out her notepad and started writing.

"The aroma is enticing, and the overall display is rather pleasing. While I'd recommend incorporating a bit more sauce, Moss's Barbeque has certainly upheld its esteemed reputation thus far..."

For some reason, she loved to narrate over herself while writing, but it had become a habit of hers and it was too troublesome to change it.

"Alright, it's time to try it."

Sniffing the food, and feeling its powerful aroma, her mouth started to salivate.

What a great smell.

Licking her lips, she brought the bun near her mouth, and...

Took a bite.

"...Hmm."

Her eyes immediately squinted with joy as the juices exploded in her mouth and an intense flavor spread into her tongue.

The more she chewed, the more the flavor intensified.

Stronger, and stronger, and...

"...!"

Hold on.

Evelyn's chewing slowed.

Something wasn't...

"Umm."



All of a sudden her lips twisted.

"...Nn?!"

And...

"Pfttt!"

The food flew out of her mouth shortly after.

"Akh...!"

Holding onto her throat, her eyes turned bloodshot as she held her throat with both hands.

"S-salty! H...Help!"

On the very same day, the 'Iron Tongue' left a scathing review on the 'Empire Times'.

[Moss's Barbecue ] - I've never been to the sea, but I know now what it tastes like. Never again! The shop closed shortly after.

\*\*\*

The next two days of the Festival went by in a flash.

Before I knew it, it was the day of the play. Staring at the script before me, I closed my eyes and tried to immerse myself in the role.

I felt my face twitch and a series of emotions flooded my mind. From fear to anger, to sadness... I circulated through all the emotions, but even as I tried my best to find the right combination, I never felt satisfied.

"....It's not working."

Opening my eyes, I stared at my reflection from the mirror positioned in front of me.

I was currently dressed in common clothing. A pair of brown pants, and a white shirt tucked underneath.

I looked like a regular person.

At least in this world.

To Tok—

I heard a knock coming from the entrance of the room and turned in the direction of the door.

"Come in."

"Ah, hello."

The one who had entered was none other than the writer. She had a nervous expression on her face.

"....How are you doing?"

I could tell why she was worried.

"I'm fine."

"Then..."

"It should be fine."

Only then did her face lit up.

"Really?"

"....Yes."

"Ah, that's great."

Placing her hand on her chest, she let out a visible sigh of relief.

"It's not like I doubt you. Everyone has seen your skills, but... The way you abruptly left at the reading and how you haven't shown up for the practices left the others a bit worried. But I know it's because you're trying to practice 'method acting'. For this reason, we allowed you to do what you wanted, but I was still pretty worried."

"...."

I just quietly listened to the side without saying anything.

What Method Acting. I simply just couldn't do it.

I still let the misunderstanding go on. It wasn't as if I could just tell her I couldn't do it. At least, not this late into the play.

"Okay then, the play will start in a bit. I'll leave you to it."

With those words, she left the room and closed the door behind her.

Clank—!

"...."

A strange silence gripped my surroundings as I stood still and turned to face the mirror.

Placing the tips of my fingers over the edges of my mouth, I lightly pushed them up into a smile.

".....Crazy."

\*\*\*

30 minutes before the play.

Aoife stood in her room and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Hi~"

In one moment, her expression was calm and cheerful. It was a stark contrast to her usual self. Her smile was also extremely piercing.

But in the next moment...

"H-ha... W-why are you doing this to me?"

Her face was pale, and her pupils shook. It was a complete change that took less than a couple of seconds.

Staring at the mirror, all Aoife could see was a scared woman.

Fear had completely overtaken her as her entire body trembled. From the little details of her expression to the coloring of her face.

It was perfect.

She was perfect.

"....."

Gradually, her face returned to normal.

Her efforts had finally paid off. Although her role was small, she was confident that she wouldn't be swallowed by his acting like before.

That at the very least she'd be able to keep up against him.

"Huu."

Though she thought like that, she couldn't help but be nervous. Aoife didn't try to push the nervousness away.

Rather, she tried to embrace it.

The nervousness came from the fear of not being able to perform well.

Her performance was a representation of fear. For that reason, she used the emotions she was currently feeling to further fuel her immersion.

"I can do it."

She had to do it.

"...."

Aoife retrieved some makeup and lightly dabbed it underneath her eyes, concealing the noticeable dark circles beneath.

It had been a while since she had slept properly, but to her, it was worth it.

Even if her role was small...

".....I'll take over the stage."

If that was the last thing she did.

Because.

She was Aoife K. Megrail.

The Princess of the Empire, and her own harshest critic.

## **Chapter 90 Play [1]**

News of the newest play by the renowned writer Olga had already made waves throughout the Empire. After a lot of changes, the name of the play was finalized to; [The Enigma of Midnight Manor].

At the back of the theater, Leon stood by as he watched all the seats slowly start to fill.

"There's so many people attending."

There was a certain tension hanging at the back of the stage.

Having worked for the past week to ensure that the project would flow well, all the staff and cadets were eagerly awaiting the final results of the play.

Would their hard work pay off?

"From what I've heard all the seats have been sold. That's over two thousand seats. It's crazy."

"Oh my god! Look over there! That's Jayce Milner from the Black Hound Guild!"

"Ah! That's Clara from the Thorn Roses Guild!"

"I see more! There's so many big shots attending today...!"

Most of the nervousness came from the important figures that were attending today's play.

Glancing around, Leon could see that most of the important members of the major Guilds were present.

Because of how many important figures were present, security was tight. Not that it was required since everyone present could defend themselves.

Unfortunately, what they didn't know was the fact that while they could indeed defend themselves, the same wasn't true for the cadets.

Thankfully, it didn't seem like anyone was a target.

The only target as of right now was Julien who was getting ready to start the play.

'.....He'll probably attack soon.'

Most likely just after the second Act. While his target was Julien, his real goal was Aoife.

For that reason, he was probably waiting for the right time to interfere.

"I should get ready."

Their target was rather strong. Leon didn't think he'd be able to defeat him alone. However, with Julien, the situation might just turn out differently.

Either way, he had a goal in mind in all of this.

Turning his wrist, Leon checked his watch. Sensing that it was about time, he quietly left the premises.

He had a place to be.

\*\*\*

The noise at the theater was starting to quiet down as the play was set to start in the following minutes. Sat the very front were three individuals.

"What do you think? Do you think this play will get a five-star?"

"I'm not sure, but I have faith in Olga."

"We'll see about that."

Dressed in formal attires, they were none other than the critics in charge of assessing the play.

"I've heard that they have several immature cadets participating. I know that this is a criteria proposed by Haven, but to be so confident in having it judged today..."

One of the judges shook his head.

"I don't know whether she's bold, or just delusional."

"Hah, who knows? I've heard that one of the performing actors is quite talented."

"Again with that nonsense? You've been in the industry for as long as I have. You should know very well that it's just standard bullshit to drive the publicity. I can bet you 100 Rend that he's probably just above the mediocre threshold. Don't get your hopes up."

"If you put it like that..."

Expectations were rather mixed. While on one hand, the judges believed that the play was going to be great, they didn't have much faith in the 'super rookie' that was spread all over the news.

"Please disregard the fact that the performers are mere cadets when evaluating. If they happen to make mistakes, ensure to document them accordingly."

This was a serious evaluation.

They weren't going to let the fact that rookies were playing affect their judgment.

"...."

Sat a few rows just above them, and overhearing the evaluation from the critics, Delilah cocked her head slightly.

Today she was in her usual form, and while seated down, she could feel the gazes of all those around her wander to her.

"What do you think about what they said? Do you agree with them?"

Seated next to her was a handsome man with well-polished features and green eyes. He was the current Vice-Leader of the [The Order of the Silver Seraphs], one of the fifteen major Guilds.

He was about her age, and while he wasn't as powerful as her, he was someone who was held in high esteem.

Looking at him, Delilah shook her head without saying anything.

"Haha? So you think the performances of the rookies will be good?"

"...."

Delilah didn't say anything again.

In all honesty, she didn't know. Would Julien even be a great actor? Sure, he was an emotive mage, but displaying emotions was different from influencing emotions...

There was also Aoife.

Was her acting going to be great? Glancing to her side where a familiar yellow-eyed figure sat, she leaned back on her chair.

Atlas Megrail.

It was rare for her to see him attend such gatherings. However, given that his niece Aoife was performing, perhaps he decided to take his time to watch.

Delilah wasn't sure.

He was a hard man to read.

"Personally, I agree with them. We're talking about some of the best actors in the entire Empire. How is it possible for mere cadets to compete with them? I think they'll be carried by-"

His words ceased abruptly as the theater's lights flickered off, plunging the surroundings into darkness.

"It's starting."

"Quiet down."

Swoosh—!

The curtains spread, and the stage lights flickered open, revealing the insides of a bakery.

Tok—

A lone footfall shattered the silence enveloping the surroundings as a figure clad in a brown jacket and top hat strode in.

Following right behind him was a man wearing a gray undervest and squared-frame glasses.

Joseph and his assistant had made their appearance.

[Huaam.]

Yawning, Joseph, who Darius was playing looked around. His voice was crisp, and audible for all to hear.

[Uh... This is where she worked, is that correct?]

[Yes, this is the bakery.]

There wasn't much dialogue to start with, but the audience was already drawn by the start of the play. There was something about the acting, and the sullen atmosphere surrounding the bakery that made one wonder what exactly was happening.

[Emily Stein.]

Fixing his glasses, the assistant unfurled a piece of paper from his breast pocket as he leaned his head back to get a better read.

[The owner's daughter. According to the details, she seems to have vanished sometime yesterday.]

[Ah, uh, yeah... I see.]



With a subtle nod, Joseph surveyed the surroundings, idly tracing his finger along the surface of the bakery, staring at his finger in the process.

With a lazy expression on his face, he ruffled his hair before his eyelids partially closed.

[Place looks clean...]

Perhaps used to the sight he was seeing, the assistant looked around before seriously muttering.

[There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the place. The crime likely occurred outside of the bakery. Should we...]

[Give me a second.]

Covering his mouth and letting out another yawn, Joseph dragged one of the wooden chairs back and sat down.

[....Huu, I'm getting too old for this. Elbert, how about you survey the bakery for evidence while I take a na... Ehhh, recover my energy.]

[....]

Adjusting his glasses, Elbert opened his mouth but held his words back and nodded. He went on the leave the stage, leaving Joseph the only one remaining.

With his back facing the audience, he stared ahead.

No one could truly make out his expression. It was hidden from all to see.

[Emily Stein.]

The only thing they could detect was his voice. A change occurred in the audience when he spoke. There was a sudden change in tone, his voice no longer sounding lazy, but extremely serious and hoarse.

It served to build tension as the lights of the stage flickered and darkness enveloped the surroundings.

Cli Cla—!

[Disappeared yesterday.]

In the darkness, Joseph's voice continued to echo.

[Baker's daughter. Was looking for missing equipment.]

His words, though soft, gently reached the ears of all the audience present as a strange tension suddenly gripped the surroundings.

[What a problematic scenario.]

Cli Cla—! freeweb .co m

The light turned back on, and all audience held their breath at the sight that greeted them.

Still sitting on the wooden chair with his back turned against theirs, the entire surroundings had changed. No longer was he in the bakery. He appeared to be in the middle of a long alleyway.

But the most glaring thing about the surroundings was that...

"Gray."

It was all gray.

Delilah found herself immersed in the play.

But if that wasn't all, standing right before Joseph was another man. With his back similarly facing the audience, he stood tall, staring at the end of the alleyway.

There, a figure appeared.

Wearing simple clothes and an apron, her beauty couldn't be hidden as she instantly captured the attention of the audience.

Her expression was one of helplessness as she moved forward, towards Joseph and the man that stood before him.

For some reason, the audience found themselves frowning at the scene...

'No, you shouldn't go to the man.'

'He's dangerous.'

Even though he had done nothing, and had just stood there the entire time, the audience felt a strange tension coming from him as Aoife moved to him.

Unknowingly, Delilah found herself leaning forward a bit.

She wanted to get a better look at the scene.

[Ah, excuse me! Do you perhaps know if any shops are still open where I can buy some parts for a broken mixer?]

The moment she spoke, everyone held their breaths.

For some reason, there was something about her voice and tone that made everyone forget about her looks. She truly seemed to have embodied her character.

[...]

The sound of heavy breathing echoed out as some of the audience members swallowed under the tension that gripped the auditorium as they all looked at the mysterious figure.  
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Each second that ticked felt stifling. Almost as if someone was trying to reach for their throat and choke them.

That was until he finally spoke.

[... You're looking for a replacement?]

Despite not being able to see his face, just from the sound of his voice, the audience felt themselves holding their breaths.

What sort of expression was he making? How did he look like? Does he kill her?

With just a few words, he managed to bring forth many questions in the minds of the audience.

The play continued.

[Yes, I am.]

Aoife naively nodded her head with a strange glint in her eyes. One that contained excitement and hope.

Such an innocent sight...

[I know, yes... I know of a place.]

It only served to add to the tension that the mysterious character brought.

[You do...?!]

[Yes, please go straight. If you just keep going there, you can find it.]

[Thank you so much!]

Facing the audience, Aoife crossed the man and Joseph before disappearing.

[...]

Yet again, silence gripped the surroundings as all eyes fell on the mysterious man. At the moment, everyone was wondering the same thing.

What sort of expression was he making?

They didn't need to wait for long to find out. Gradually, he turned his head to face the audience, revealing his features.

".....!"

Many held their breaths at the sight that greeted them. His appearance bordered perfection, with a visible jaw, and well-

maintained hair. His hazel eyes shone with a strange intensity that drew the eyes of all present, creating a suffocating atmosphere.

And yet...

Despite his flawless appearance, none of the audience members found it within them to admire it.

With an unfocused gaze and lips that flickered from a smile to neutrality, several of the members of the audience felt their skin crawl.

"....."

If anything, his appearance added to the chill his gaze gave.

[R-red...]

He quietly mumbled as his head lowered to meet Joseph's as he raised his head to meet his gaze.

[...I want to see it.]

Cli Cla—!

The surroundings turned dark.

This chapter is updated by

