

Advent of the Three Calamities

#Chapter 91 Play [2] - Read Advent of the Three Calamities Chapter 91 Play [2]

Chapter 91 Play [2]

Cli Cla—!

When the lights turned on, color returned to the stage as Joseph was again in the bakery.

Compared to the previously oppressive atmosphere, the atmosphere was now a lot less suffocating.

[....]

Sitting in the same spot, Joseph remained quiet the entire time until he lowered his head to rub his face.

[Face... What did his face look like?]

There was one clear disadvantage to the visions.

It was that he couldn't remember the faces of the parties involved.

[Damn it.]

But it wasn't without hope.

[White shirt, brown pants, and undervest...]

He could remember the clothes he had worn and the location of the incident.

Coming down from the stairs was his assistant Elbert who pushed his glasses back up.

[I wasn't able to find any evidence. The place is clean. It's unfortunate, but we might have to look somewhere else for clues.]

His steps eventually stopped not far from where Joseph was.

[What about you? Have you found anything...?]

[....]

[Detective?]

[...Uh, ah right.]

Joseph snapped out of his thoughts and looked back.

[What did you say, again?]

[Did you find anything?]

[Oh, that.]

He shook his head.

[No, not really. I do have some ideas though. Troublesome, but... Haa, I need the money, so I have no choice.]

Finally standing up from his seat, Joseph took a long and dragged out a breath before turning around and heading towards the exit.

[Detective? What are we doing here? This is the fifth house that we've visited. How is this supposed to help us?]

[Just wait.]

The scenery changed. Coming out of the bakery, they appeared before a large wooden door and knocked.

To Tok—

[How can I help you?]

Greeting them at the door was a familiar figure. Instantly, the atmosphere around the theater turned tense. And yet... For some reason, that faded the moment they noticed the warm smile on the figure's face.

To the audience, he looked like a very friendly person. A vast difference from the person in the vision.

The stark contrast made a few uncomfortable.

'Is that really him?'

'It can't be the same person, right...? How does that even make sense?'

Removing his hat, the detective introduced himself alongside his assistant.

[Let me introduce myself. I'm Detective Joseph, and this man over here is my assistant.]

He too greeted the man with a polite and warm smile.

[A detective?]

[Yes. I'm sorry, but could we ask you some questions?]

[...But of course.]

The man invited them in.

But just before he let them in, he introduced himself.

[Oh, before I forget. My name is Azarias. It's a pleasure to meet you.]

[Azarias? What a nice name.]

[Thank you.]

The scene once again shifted.

They were now all sitting around a wooden table. On the table sat a small tray bearing three cups of warm tea.

[I'm sorry for this. It's all I can offer.]

[Oh, there's no problem.]

Taking a sip of the tea, Joseph joked.

[I can't tell the difference between good tea and bad tea anyway. It all tasted like grass one.]

In return, Azarias smiled.

[I can't say I'm any different.]

The atmosphere was lighthearted and warm. It seemed to be a regular and friendly talk between two friends.

That, however, took a more serious turn when Joseph started his investigation. Just slightly, his demenour shifted, becoming a lot more serious.

[I'll start off by asking a simple question. Where were you yesterday night at around 10 P.M?]

[At around 10 P.M?]

Despite the sudden shift in Joseph's demenour, Azarias didn't seem to be phased as he started to seriously ponder.

[Hmm, I'm not sure... I think I was at my store. If you don't know, I'm the owner of a flower shop.]

[A flower shop?]

[Yes, I love to take flowers.]

Glancing around, Joseph did indeed notice that the place was filled with flowers.

[You seem to like roses.]

[...I've been told that a lot. But it's not really the roses that I like. There are several others that I like.]

[Hmm, I see.]

With a nod, Joseph went straight to business.

Opening his coat, he took out a small portrait and placed it down on the table.

[Emily Stein.]

He tapped the portrait with his finger.

[That's the name of the girl that has been missing since yesterday. Have you perhaps seen her before?]

[....]

Azarias only stared at the photo for a couple of seconds, and yet... For some reason, the atmosphere felt suffocating. Even with his warm features and expression, there was something offsetting about him.

Gradually, he picked up the picture and took a look at it.

[I think I've seen her before, I'm not quite sure where.]

[You have?]

[Yeah, but I'm not quite sure where...]

[It's a small town. She worked at the bakery down the street. Perhaps that's where you've seen her.]

[Ah, that's perhaps where.]

Azarias smiled yet again, slowly placing the portrait down and shaking his head.

[I'm sorry, but I wish I could help you out more. If there's anything that I can do to help the investigation, I'd be more than willing to help.]

[That would be appreciated.]

Turning around and staring at the flowers, Joseph had a sudden thought as he voiced out.

[That store of yours... You won't mind if we visit it, right?]

[My store?]

Confused, Azarais tilted his head.

Joseph continued, this time, his demenour was less serious than before as it returned to the friendly one from before.

[I've been meaning to buy a few flowers for my wife. I might as well take advantage of the opportunity. I hope you don't mind. Plus, I can do a small checkaround. If you're innocent, I'm sure you won't mind, right?]

[Ah...]

Azarias's eyes flickered slightly. It was only brief, barely noticeable if one didn't pay close attention. But...

To the audience who was indeed paying attention, it was all seen.

Unfortunately, nobody could tell whether Joseph had noticed or not as he happily smiled and received the keys to the shop from Azarais who didn't follow him out.

[Haha, I will be coming back shortly to return the keys. Please don't run away.]

Though he said that jokingly, Joseph ordered his assistant to stay on guard outside of the house.

Clank—

Once the door closed, Azarias was the only one remaining in the room.

[.....]

Silence gripped the surroundings as he stood by himself with a warm smile on his face. It was a smile that lit up the room.

But gradually...

The smile started to change flavor.

It slowly started to grow unsettling. Almost chilling.

The lights started to dim, and right before the audience, the colors started to fade, gradually turning the entire world gray.

But strangely enough, in the gray world, one color remained.

It was the red from the roses.

With Azarias standing in the middle, the curtains started to close, signaling the end of the first Act. In the last moments before the curtains fully engulfed Azarias, he opened his mouth to speak as a familiar cold and dry voice echoed out loud.

[...I'll see you soon.]

The curtains fully closed then, and the theater turned dark.

....The first Act had ended.

"Huuu."

Aoife stood behind the stage and took a deep breath. The lights slowly turned on for the first intermission as the audience sat with their mouths closed, eyes still fixed towards the front.

From their expression, it was clear that they were heavily invested in the play.

"That's good..."

Aoife sighed in relief.

It was clear that she didn't disappoint with her performance.

But even so...

"...."

Staring towards a certain man, who was currently heading towards his private room under everyone's watch, Aoife lowered her head.

It was still not enough.

She...

Was still not good enough.

'Just how much more do I need to do to keep up with him...?'

She was honestly scared. Especially since their scene was about to come up. Aoife felt like she was in top form, but even that didn't seem to be enough.

'More.'

Her current form was good, but not good enough to keep up with him.

She had to do more.

Especially since 'he' was watching her. Aoife couldn't let herself be swallowed by Julien's acting. With a soft 'hoo' Aoife massaged her cheeks and took out the script.

Swoosh! Swoosh!

"Ah...!"

It was almost falling apart, as she had to try her best to prevent some of the pages from falling.

Making sure that all the papers were in order, she focused her attention back on the script.

Perfection.

She would only stop at perfection.

"Huh..."

Coming back into my room, I sat down and took a deep breath. I was mentally exhausted, and my head hurt a little. Staring at the script, I flipped through the lines before putting on my makeup.

Flip, flip, flip—!

The next scene was the scene where I would kill Aoife.

It was another small flashback scene.

However, this scene held great importance as the play was still in its introductory phases. My role was to 'highlight' Joseph's ability.

My death would come not long after. Compared to the whole script, I didn't have a lot of screen time. Even so, my role was important.

I had to make sure to leave an impact on the audience.

But...

It was that part that stumped me.

"I still can't get a proper grasp on this."

I tossed the script over the desk. It was annoying. Regardless of how hard I tried, I still struggled to come close to understanding the character.

...It was just impossible.

Azarias was a total psychopath. Someone whose mind and emotions were hard to properly understand. For a brief moment, my gaze wandered towards the four-leaved clover tattoo on my forearm.

If there was one method that could help, then...

"No."

I was quick to throw the idea away. The wheel was a gamble. I could very well end up with an emotion that would have the complete opposite effect.

"Huu."

If only I could get into Azarias's mind...

"Ha."

I massaged my forehead.

"What a troublesome situation."

To Tok—!

"The play will start shortly. Please make your way into the stage."

Hearing the organizer's voice, I took a deep breath and adjusted my clothing.

Making sure that everything was on point, I reached for the handle and opened the door.

What greeted me was a long and narrow corridor.

"Hm?"

I looked around.

Where was the organizer...? And why was it so dark?

"...!"

WOOOOM—!

Something streaked past my cheek. I was hardly able to react on time as I tilted my head just slightly to the right.

Drip...! Drip.

I felt a sharp pain by the side of my cheek and frowned.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

From across the space, a subtle and repetitive scratching sound caught my attention as a figure stepped out from the darkness.

"You dodged that?"

His voice was hoarse, almost croaky as I remained silent.

"...."

I stared at him without saying a word. Slowly, his appearance became known to me, and I lowered my head.

So you're finally here...

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Chapter 92 Play [3]

"...."

It wasn't as though I didn't expect this. No, rather... I knew it was coming.

Although looking around and seeing that there was no one present, I found the situation to be rather odd.

How did he manage to get everyone away from here?

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

The only sound that echoed was the weird and unsettling sound of his scratching.

"You.... Ah, I need that role."

He was breathing heavily and uncomfortably. With just a glance, I could see that he wasn't in the right state of mind.

'A psychopath.'

I remained calm.

"You need the role?"

And tried to buy as much time as possible.

"The Azarias one?"

"Ah, yes... That role. I have been waiting for this day for a very long time. An extremely long time..."

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch—!

"It bothers me, it bothers me... I controlled myself for so long. Long. Long. Long. Long. So much control! Ha! I lost my role! Because of you! All that effort! How could that be? Theremustbesomesortofmistake!!!"

I had a hard time understanding the last part of his sentence as he spat those words at a rapid speed.

Perhaps because his anger was starting to rise, he started to lose his mind.

"Ah! This is nonsense! HowcouldtheytellmetostopwhenIhavebeenwaitingforsolong!!!"

The mana started to agglomerate in his direction at a rapid speed. So much that it was starting to feel suffocating.

'As expected, I can't beat him with my current power...'

He was simply too strong for the current me.

Swoosh—!

His figure blurred, and he appeared right in front of me. I was fast to react, moving my left hand in front of me.

CLANK—!

A large metallic sound rang out as sparks flew and I took several steps back. My entire left hand felt numb as the chain scattered away.

"Ukh..!"

I felt a sweet sensation at the back of my throat I coughed several times.

"Shit."

The gap between us was quite large, but it wasn't as though it was impossible for me.

Well, not that it mattered.

I wasn't alone.

"Julien E—"

Before he could finish his words, something smacked him by the side of his face.

——!

With a powerful blow, he staggered forward. In that instant, I clenched my hand, and purple threads burst forth, entwining around his ankles and hands.

His entire body started to spasm as his face paled and his features contorted.

"Akh...! This!"

A figure emerged from the spot behind him. With a quiet step, Leon looked at me with a frown.

"Is this it?"

"....For now."

I still wasn't sure if he had left something else for me.

"I'll take care of him. Go check around the stage."

"...Got it."

Leon disappeared shortly after. Only then did I shift my attention back to the senior.

"Now then."

What was I going to do with him?

It was the start of the second Act.

The audience was already sitting in their seats, waiting for it to start. Throughout the entire short break, none of the members of the audience said a word as they waited for the play to start again.

They were all wondering the same thing; 'What did he mean by see you soon? Is there something in the shop?'

The air was thick with anticipation.

Standing backstage, Aoife took a deep breath.

All the noise drowned out from her ears as she focused entirely on her role.

"Ah.. aH, ah, Ah..."

Massaging her throat, she tried her best to find the right tone and pitch. She spent the better part of the break doing so, and while she was busy doing this, she noticed a certain panic spread throughout the back.

"Where is he...?"

"I can't find him."

"I knocked on his room, but he's gone."

"What? How could this be? It can't be that he left, right?"

When she turned her head, she could see that all the staff was rushing around in panic.

"What's going on...?"

Seeing how distressed they were, Aoife frowned. She was just about to ask what was going on when she picked up the conversation of a few actors beside her.

"Do you think he ran away? Just like the reading room?"

"Damn it. I knew it... Last time he left because he couldn't do it. I guess the pressure got to him. But what do we do?"

"Ah, this. I can't believe this is happening now of all times."

Familiar with the events of the reading room, Aoife understood the subject of their talk. Her frown deepened.

'He ran away? Julien...?'

Aoife had a hard time believing this.

Recalling the scene she had seen a while back when he had been practicing by himself in the classroom and pushing himself to the point where his own body was failing him, Aoife didn't think for one second that he was that type of person.

She knew... because he was just like her.

"Something must have happened."

It was the only explanation.

Cli Cla—

The lights of the theater turned dark, and the play resumed.

"Huu."

Aoife took a deep breath and headed towards the side of the stage. The next scene was her death scene.

"Do something!"

"Look around for him!"

While everyone was still scrambling to find out where Julien was, she cleared her mind and removed all distracting thoughts.

Whether he was going to show up or not, that didn't matter to her right now.

What she needed to do right now was focus on her role.

[Is this the shop? It looks rather nice.]

Darius's voice echoed from the stage, as the play resumed. He was now standing in front of a small flower-shaped.

He was by himself, and inserting the keys into the key socket, he slowly opened it, revealing the vast number of flowers within.

[Hm?]

To the surprise of the audience, and Joseph, the flowers.

They were all...

[Roses.]

No, not quite.

[Red.]

It was an odd sight, one that left the audience in question once more.

[I did think he liked roses, but who would've thought he'd like them so much that he'd have a whole shop of them?]

With a bitter laugh, Joseph walked around the shop. Just as he did in the bakery, he traced his finger across the furniture, seemingly looking for something.

As he was doing this, a voice quietly whispered to Aoife.

"Get ready, your part is about to start soon."

"Understood."

Aoife nodded with a serious expression.

Looking around, she could see that the staff was still panicked. Julien... He was still not in sight.

"Maam? What do we do...? At this rate...!"

"Get someone else to do it. Ugh, ah!"

It wasn't uncommon for incidents to occur during a play. For that reason, 'extras' were used to fill the role in case a situation arose.

While they weren't as good as the main actors, they still knew the lines and what to do.

Staring back, Aoife saw a man wearing similar clothes to what Julien had worn getting ready.

He was most likely going to be Julien's replacement.

"....."

For some reason, Aoife didn't like the idea. Rather, she detested it as her fists slowly clenched tightly.

'I didn't push myself to this point just to have someone else take over your role...'

Besides doing it for herself, another reason why Aoife pushed herself to the point of exhaustion was so that she wouldn't get swallowed by his acting.

Aoife had to admit.

He was far better than her in that aspect. It was for that reason that she pushed herself so much.

...And seeing that someone else was about to take over his role, Aoife felt as though half of her efforts had been for nothing.

It was a frustrating feeling.

One that she could only push down as she felt a gentle push on her back.

"Go, it's your turn."

Nodding her head, Aoife took a deep breath and stepped to enter the stage.

With his entire body weak, Alexander slowly opened his eyes.

He couldn't tell what had happened as it had happened all too fast. His body hung suspended in the air as he felt weak all over. When he looked around, he appeared to be in a storage room.

Alexander had a hard time seeing. His mind was foggy, and his vision was blurry.

"Haa... Where is this? What's..."

Because of how weak his body was, he could hardly get his words out.

"Just in time."

A figure gradually appeared in his vision.

"I would've had to force you awake soon enough."

"Uh... How...?"

Coughing several times, Alexander slowly raised his head. He tried to free himself from the threads, but his body simply refused to listen to him as the energy was drained completely out of him.

"I've been waiting for quite a while for you to act."

With an indifferent gaze, he looked down at him.

"Wha.... How!?"

"It doesn't matter how. Just know that I know you were watching me."

"How did you...!"

Alexander struggled to grasp the conversation he was having. How was it possible for him to know that he was watching him? Furthermore, how was it possible for him to know that he was planning on doing something...!?

His face twitched as his neck itched. If only he could scratch it...

Still, he managed to force a laugh.

"Do you think this is over? There's more co..."

"I know."

"...?"

"There's more coming, right? I know."

"Ah..."

The itchy feeling became more pronounced, forcing his face to twist.

"That, how could you..."

Who, in the world.

"How!!!"

Mustering the little energy that he had remaining in his body, Alexander viciously screamed. His voice cracked halfway through, showing just how desperate he was.

"That's not something for you to concern yourself."

But the man before him seemed completely unfazed.

Just then, he took a step closer to him and lowered his body down. Their gazes met, and Alexander stopped screaming.

"You're a psychopath."

Those were the words that came out of his mouth as he addressed him.

".....I play the role of a psychopath."

"Whaat...?"

A shadow cast over Alexander's features as Julien's hand drew near his face.

"Let me see your world."

Tok—

Under the bright lights that shone down, the sound of Aoife's step echoed.

Tak. Tak.

The color started to fade from the surroundings, and alongside the color, the sound of her steps became more rushed.

"Haa.... Haaa..."

Her chest heaved up and down, and her hands tingled.

Tak. Tak. Tak.

It was quiet, and in the quiet world, a figure stood at its center. It was Joseph. He was looking right at her who was running in the alleyways.

"Haaa... Haaa... Haaa..."

It was really quiet on the stage. The only sound that Aoife could perceive was the rushed sounds of her steps and breath. It was a strange and uncomfortable feeling.

Tak. Tak.

It made her body feel weak and limp.

While she knew that everyone was watching, slowly that feeling was starting to fade.

Gradually, she was starting to immerse herself in the role.

All the lights faded and emotions that she tried to force herself the entire week started to enter her.

But...

'I'm still missing something.'

"Haaa... Haaa..."

Aoife could tell she had entered a zone. An immersive zone that would make all actors envy her.

But it wasn't perfect.

There was still something that she was missing.

But what...?

What could she be missing?

And then, her steps stopped.

"Oh, ah..."

A wall appeared before her. Aoife's expression cracked, and helplessness washed over her body. With a flick of her head, she glanced behind, where darkness swallowed the other end of the alleyway.

A figure stood in that darkness. It remained there, carefully observing her.

Aoife squeezed her chest.

"W-what do you want from me...!"

Her voice came out hoarse, almost screeching. From the tone to the pitch. It was perfect. Almost flawless.

But...

It was still not enough for her.

Something was still missing in her performance.

What was it?

Tak.

She heard a soft step. The shadow inched closer.

"G-get away from me!"

Gradually, the shadow's appearance revealed itself, and Aoife held her breath.

Standing tall, and with the same flawless appearance of his, it was none other than Julien. He looked the same as he usually did, no...

There was something different about the current him.

It made Aoife's chest grow heavy.

"....."

And took the words away from her. It was as if he had stolen her voice.

It was then that Aoife finally understood what was missing from her play.

Fear.

It was real fear.

"Haaa.... Haaa... Haa.."

And staring at the all too familiar figure standing on the opposite end, Aoife swallowed. His eyes, hollow and devoid of any light, and yet filled with a certain madness, stared back at her, sending chills down her entire body.

"Ah.."

Finally, she felt it.

"Gh...!"

Fear.

True fear.

And her voice returned.

"G-g.. Akh... Get away from... me!!"

Chapter 93 A colorless world [1]

The scene took away the breath of the audience.

From Aoife's realistic portrait of a young and helpless female in a panic to the man who stood a few feet away from her.

[Haaa... Haaa... No, p-lease...]

Aoife's voice sounded crisp and smooth. The subtle trembles in her tone, added to the subtle shaking of her body created an extremely realistic portrayal.

Her acting was so immersive that the audience found themselves sitting upright.

But while her acting was phenomenal, the man who stood before her was the true centerpiece of the play.

Standing a few meters away from her, he gave off an oppressive feeling.

Within the gray world, he alone sucked the eyes of all present.

[.....]

By just standing there, it felt as though the entire room was gripped under his hands, slowly squeezing down at their throats.

Tok--

The quiet sound of his footsteps shattered the silence that overtook the theater as some of the audience flinched.

True was also for Aoife who stepped back, her back pressing against the wall behind her.

[W-what are you doing....!?!]

Portraying helplessness, Aoife's eyes shook.

[.....]

Yet, again, there was no reply.

The only thing that the audience could see was the madness in his gaze.

Tok--

With each step that he took, the more tense the surroundings became.

Tok--

For some reason...

Tok--

With each step that he took...

Tok--

The audience felt their hearts speed up alongside it.

[.....]

He eventually stopped before Aoife who seemed to have lost her words. Fear had completely overtaken her.

That was when Julien, no, Azarias finally opened his mouth to speak.

[.....The foundation of all masterpieces is a great start.]

Just like in the tryouts, his words flowed smoothly from his mouth, delivered with an even and calm tone.

Yet, beneath the calmness lurked a hint of madness, subtly veiled but discernible in the slight tremor that accompanied certain words.

It sent chills down the spines of the audience.

Aoife too felt the same way as she looked up at Azarias, feeling all hints of Julien disappearing from him. She truly was... standing before a psychopath.

'Ah, this...'

The fact that she found it so hard to speak was perfect proof of this.

He was simply...

Overwhelming.

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

His face changed subtly as he looked around.

He seemed to be talking to someone. Emily? The audience?

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

...Or himself?

Lowering his head, he stared at his hands.

They were trembling. In the silence that took over after his last words, he raised his head to stare at Aoife who suddenly lost her breath.

How could...

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

For the first time since the start, his expression morphed completely.

His chest started to heave up rapidly, while the trembling of his hands became more pronounced.

From where they were seated, the audience could tell exactly what he was feeling.

"Excitement."

Delilah muttered unknowingly.

Before she knew it, she too had become absorbed with the play. Usually, these types of things bored her. Who would've thought?

'It's interesting...'

Not only the acting but the storyline. Even now she didn't understand the reasoning for why Azarias acted the way that he did.

It was indeed clear that he was a psychopath, but even psychopaths had certain goals and motivations.

She was sure that Azarais had his own reasoning for his actions.

But what exactly was his motivation?

Pleasure?

[Akh...! Akh!]

The expected death scene came soon enough.

With both hands gripping Aoife's throat, he squeezed down at her. Many of the audience members turned away from the sight that was before them.

There wasn't much noise, but the sight spoke volumes to what was happening.

[Ukh ... Hel-p!]

The struggle continued as Aoife swayed her hands and scratched Julien's arms. Even then, her struggle was futile.

[Kh! Akh!!]

Gradually, her movements slowed down, and her face turned purple.

The sight was heartbreaking. Especially when one saw the utter sense of helplessness her face had.

Until...

She limped over.

[.....]

Azarias remained still, his hands still gripping at her throat without saying a word.

Finally, he let go of her.

Thud.

And she slumped to the ground.

[Haaa.... Haa....]

The sound of his rough breathing echoed throughout as he stood in silence, his head lowered to stare at the lifeless body.

It became clear to the audience that his breathing wasn't rough because he was tired, but because of something else...

Madness.

A clear-cut madness that was on the very urge to consume him.

And then...

Clank. Clank. Clank.

The rushed sounds of footsteps echoed. All of a sudden, several figures appeared on the other end of the alley.

Four, five?

Wearing armor, they appeared to be knights.

At the exact moment they appeared, Julien's head turned and he came face to face with them. No, he was smiling...? The corners of his lips gently pulled up, twitching slightly as he eventually let out a soft chuckle.

[So, you're here.]

It was a laugh that contained both mockery and disdain. At that, the audience tilted their heads to question.

'He was expecting them?'

'...What's going on? Why does it seem like he is already aware of the fact that they were coming?'

All of a sudden, Azarias's gaze turned hollow as the madness that was threatening to spill out started to really spill out from him.

It was a sight that chilled the ears of the audience.

Immediately, one of the knights lunged at him, swinging their sword down.

Clank--!

The loud metallic sound echoed throughout as the blade came into contact with the hard ground.

'What's going on?'

The audience was stunned by the loud sound of the sword. For a brief moment, they thought that he had swung for real.

But in reality, the knight had truly swung for real.

'.....They're starting.'

The only one who wasn't stunned was Julien who stared at the approaching knights with an indifferent gaze. Facing them, he could tell that there was something wrong with their gaze. It lacked any substance, seeming rather detached.

'They've come for her.'

It was obvious that their target was Aoife who was slumped on the ground behind.

Shiiiiing—!

Unveiling a dagger he kept hidden, Julien faced the knights.

As he did, a genuine smile spread across his lips. It wasn't a fake smile. But one that came from deep within him.

[Ha-]

He pointed the dagger forward and whispered his lines.

[...A supplementary piece to my masterpiece.]

Thin, almost imperceptible threads sneaked out of his forearm, moving down on the ground and moving towards the knights.

With their senses numbed due to whatever state they were in, Julien was able to get the threads to circle around their ankles and arms.

The process took no longer than a couple of seconds and in no time, the knights rushed towards him.

[Hahaha!]

A laugh escaped Julien's lips as he took a step back and avoided an incoming slash.

Swoosh—!

He ducked and avoided the next.

His movements were fluid, almost seamless as he evaded all the attacks with a certain grace.

Staring at the scene, some of the members of the audience gripped tightly against the armrest of their chair. The choreography was spectacular, with the slashes narrowly avoiding him each time.

If only they knew that everything was currently being orchestrated by Julien.

Pulling the threads at just the right moment, he was able to slightly alter the course of the attacks at the right moments, orchestrating everything as he saw fit.

Such a scene was only caught by a few individuals in the audience as they frowned.

Swoosh—!

Dodging another attack, Julien's lips trembled as he came face to face with one of the knights. He swung his dagger, and...

Puchi!

Blood sprayed out.

Suddenly, a burst of red broke through the gray monotony, creating a stark contrast that teased the eyes of the audience.

Staring at it, Azarias's lips trembled even more. A strange wave of excitement was coursing down his mind. More... He wanted more. The madness that engulfed him started to consume him as his face twisted.

Puchi! Puchi!

[More....!]

Red splashed across the gray world.

In his madness, Azarias seemed to have lost himself as he continued to stab and slash. His expression twisted into one of inexplicable pleasure, reminiscent of a child gleefully playing with a new toy.

Slash. Slash. Slash—!

"This..."

Unable to take the scene, some of the audience members covered their mouths and whispers started to follow.

"He's not actually killing them, right?"

"It can't be..."

"But why does it feel so real?"

The audience wasn't the only one that thought this was real. The writers and organizers were seemingly lost in the performance.

"This... Are you sure they're acting?"

"That."

Olga looked at the stage in a trance. Although she felt that something was wrong with the scene, she couldn't take her eyes away from Azarias.

He was...

"Perfect."

The scene was...

"Perfect."

Everything was...

"Perfect."

There were no other words she could use to describe what she was seeing. To perfectly encapsulate the madness, as well as the ecstasy that he felt from his actions... It was just perfect.

The only ones who knew that something was wrong were the more powerful individuals who frowned at the sight.

"Is this some sort of new method of acting?"

They could tell at a glance that the slashes were real.

Delilah too could tell as she closely examined Julien. He appeared to be lost in his madness as he continued to manipulate the knights with his threads.

It wasn't the first time that she had seen them, but seeing how he had used them to cleverly manipulate the knights to move as he wished, Delilah was impressed.

What an interesting power...

"....It should be fine."

The only reason why nobody reacted was because none of his slashes appeared lethal. Rather, they were all superficial.

[Hahaha!]

With each slash, he delved deeper into madness, losing himself further. The once-gray world gradually transformed, tainted by spreading red.

It was an uncomfortable sight.

Especially when...

Thud. Thud. Thud.

[Haa...]

It became hard to tell whether he was acting or not.

Standing still at the center of the alley, his head gradually lowered and the world froze.

The entire time... Another person was present.

It was none other than Joseph who had seen the entire scene from where he stood. Julien's presence had been so overwhelming that almost everyone had forgotten about him.

[.....]

An unsettling, almost suffocating silence ensued shortly after.

With his gaze directed toward Azarias, the detective's hoarse voice broke the silence that gripped the frozen world.

[...It was you.]

Cli Cla—

The lights turned off shortly after.

It lasted for a few seconds before they turned back on.

When the lights returned, the scenery had changed. No longer was the world gray, and Azarias was long gone.

Joseph was now back in the flower shop.

The vision had ended.

Standing in the middle of the flower shop, he remained silent for a few seconds.

[Haa.]

As he took a deep breath, his body trembled. It was clear to the audience that he had been affected by what he had seen.

They similarly understood where he was coming from.

What they had just seen...

It was hard for anyone to swallow.

But it wasn't over yet. Now that he had found the culprit, he had to go.

[...I have to go.]

Although he said that, he didn't move.

It became clear to everyone that his body was refusing to move. Fear had taken over his mind.

[I need to go.]

Only when he repeated the same words over and over again did he finally exit the flower store, and trace his steps back to the familiar house.

The moment he reached the door, he was surprised to see it already open.

[Elbert.]

He called out for his assistant but got no response back.

Taking another deep breath, he stepped into the house. He needed to act calm. Azarias didn't know that he knew he was the culprit. .com

Or so he thought...

[Ah...]

Entering the house, Joseph's steps stopped as his body froze.

It wasn't just him. The entire audience froze too as they stared at the man who stood by the center, a figure lying motionlessly beneath him.

Casually rolling up his sleeves, Julien looked directly at Joseph, no, the audience, and smiled.

[...You're finally here.]

The final act had begun.

Chapter 94 A colorless world [2]

If there was one thing that I learned after entering Alexander's mind, it was that everyone's perception of reality was different.

It was a simple concept.

Everyone perceived things differently.

In society, individuals who shared similar perceptions were more likely to form connections and get along.

But...

There were outliers.

People whose perception of reality was so different that they couldn't fit it anywhere.

Alexander was one such person. His world...

It was boring.

Completely devoid of anything. Usually, I'd be able to perceive the emotions of the person I used the skill against, but the moment I entered his mind, all I perceived was emptiness.

It was a strange feeling.

But at the same time dangerous. Addicting, almost. Once I saw just how peaceful a world without emotions was, I started to lose my sense of reality. I just wanted to bask in such a world for as long as possible.

But...

Such a peaceful world didn't truly exist.

It was merely a fake sense of tranquility. A world without emotions was a bland world.

Alexander's perception of emotions was much lower than a regular person's. It was for that reason that he sought to feel them.

It was to...

Not feel so alone anymore.

It was this fundamental understanding of his mind that made me immerse myself in the mind of Azarias.

His story wasn't much different from Alexander's.

He was a man who lived in a colorless world—someone whose world was entirely painted in gray.

....It was hard for me to understand a world like that.

But now I understood.

Blinking my eyes, I looked around. Everything was gray, and monotone. The more I immersed myself in Alexander's emotions, the more I realized just how bland his world was.

I started to feel insignificant.

But within that insignificance, I spotted something.

'Red.'

A single rose that stood by the window of the room.

It was red.

And I could see it, starkly contrasting the monotonous world around me.

"...."

My lips trembled. I wanted to see more of it. I wanted to get rid of the gray that surrounded me.

"Haa... Haaa..."

I felt my breathing quicken the moment the thought entered my mind.

Looking around, I found a brush. I traced my finger over it, feeling its texture at my fingertips.

I started to paint the walls.

Stroke. Stroke—

My hands moved on their own. They danced across the gray walls, splashing the walls with the newfound color.

It was a refreshing feeling.

I didn't feel so lonely anymore.

?| Lvl 1. [Joy] EXP + 0.2%

Notifications appeared within my vision. I paid them no mind and basked myself in the feeling the red gave me.

"Haa... Haaa..."

Red had different shades to it.

?| Lvl 1. [Joy] EXP + 0.05%

From the textures to the shades, I wanted to see more.

Stroke. Stroke—

As if possessed, I started to move around while painting the walls by myself. I was fast, I was fluent, and I was free...

"Haa."

But...

That fleeting sense of joy didn't last for very long as I stopped my hand.

"....I need more."

I had run out of red.

Scratch. Scratch.

My neck felt itchy all of a sudden. I felt myself grow frantic as if a part of me was being snatched off and thrown away.

"No, no, no..."

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

I needed to finish this. I needed to feel alive again.

I needed to...

"Ah."

Then I remembered.

There was someone else here. Outside of the room. It was the detective's assistant.

"Right, that will do."

The scratching stopped, and I headed for the door. In my hand, I held a dagger. One that I used the moment I opened the door.

"Hey, ho-"

Puchi!

"Haaa..."

My lips trembled at all the red that dyed my world. It felt orgasmic. And I wanted nothing more than to bask in such a feeling.

?| Lvl 1. [Joy] EXP + 0.05%

Slowly but surely, I could feel it.

I was slowly starting to lose myself to the pleasure.

Stroke. Stroke—

My wrist flicked as the brush danced across the wall. With the concern of no longer needing to find more red, I focused all my attention on the masterpiece slowly unraveling before me.

"Ah, yes!!"

At that moment, I lost sight of myself.

I... let Alexander take over a part of me, and just basked in the joy and excitement that I was feeling. It was such an addicting feeling.

Joy.

When was the last time I had felt so happy?

I wanted more.

Bask in it more. I just wanted to savor the happiness, even if it was fleeting.

Stroke. Stroke—

That feeling inevitably came to an end when I painted the last stroke.

"....."

In the silence that took over my world, I looked up.

I looked towards the masterpiece on the wall.

It was perfect. In almost everything. But there was still something about it that felt like it was missing. I wasn't sure what.

An audience perhaps...?

"Ah, that might be it."

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

Clank—!

The door opened and a familiar man entered the room. I looked at his stunned expression and a new wave of excitement washed over me.

?| Lvl 1. [Joy] EXP + 0.1%

Yes, it's probably that.

He wasn't the only one that I looked at.

"Ah..."

In his direction. Right behind him, I could see thousands of different faces. They were all staring at me.

It was a sight to behold.

Their expression. They were all so vivid, and real that I felt my legs tremble as my lips twisted up.

"...You're finally here."

My audience.

Welcome to my world.

The atmosphere in the theater was indescribable. Silence enveloped the space as everyone's gaze remained fixed on the man standing at its center. With just his presence, he sucked the attention of all those watching.

His lips twisted into a smirk, his expression filled with nothing but pleasure as he stared at them.

It was sickening.

"He's a psychopath..."

"He didn't kill him for real right? This is acting, right?"

None of the audience could find the right words to describe the scene they had just witnessed.

It was brutal and hard to stomach.

They looked around the room and held their stomachs. The once-gray world now bled red, saturating nearly every corner.

[I... What have you done?]

It was Joseph's voice that broke the silence. Yet again, he had been forgotten by the audience who had been so absorbed by the man standing opposite him.

Turning their attention towards Joseph, they could see his shoulders shaking.

His gaze was directed towards his assistant whose eyes were closed.

[You...]

[Do you like what I've drawn?]

Azarias's voice trembled slightly as his eyes gazed at the audience. For some reason, it felt as though he was looking at every one individually.

It sent shivers down the spines of some of the audience members, causing them to swallow nervously.

[Y-you're crazy. A monster.]

Joseph's words echoed the thoughts of all those watching.

His voice was smooth, and the audience could see the emotions contained in his tone. From anger to sadness.

It was all so vivid.

If only they knew...

Such were the true emotions Darius was feeling as he stared at the cadet before him. He was simply overwhelming.

It was taking every ounce of his experience to keep up.

[A monster]

Azarias curiously tilted his head as he swapped his gaze between him and the painting on the wall.

[Do you not like it? Is something missing?]

[....]

[Tell me.]

Gradually, Azarais's face started to twist.

[Is something missing?! Tell me!]

His powerful voice bellowed throughout the entire theater as some of the audience members flinched at the unexpected change.

His desperation was made clear to the audience.

Scratch. Scratch.

[What is it missing? What? I've done it well. It's good. There's not-]

Bang.

Azarias's voice stopped.

Looking down, he stared at his clothes where a small hole appeared. Gradually, red started to stain his clothes.

[Ah...]

In the silence that suddenly took over, he looked up.

Joseph met his gaze.

His expression was twisted as his body trembled. Pointed at him was the barrel of a small gun.

[...]

With trembling lips, Joseph stared at Azarias. His expression contorted as his face showed nothing but hatred and disgust.

Thud—

Azarias's body fell shortly after.

In the gray world, he stared blankly at the ceiling as red began to stain his shirt, pooling around him and seeping toward the wall where he had painted.

Joseph's figure faded out of frame as all that remained was Azarias and the painting on the wall.

Gradually, the red coming from his body connected with the wall.

In the last moments, Azarias looked at the wall. His previously ecstatic expression changed.

"....."

What replaced it was a blank look. It was as if his breath was being taken away from him.

The audience held similar expressions as they stared at the painting on the wall.

It was a rose.

A thorny rose.

One that slowly connected with Azarias who lay on the opposite end. The rose now had a stem, symbolizing his integration into the painting.

It all clicked then.

[S-so that's what was missing...]

There was something poetic about the rose that the audience had a hard time describing.

Especially within the monochrome world. It stood out, and almost felt blinding, making one unable to take their gaze away from it.

And then...

Drip.

As something dripped down the corner of Azarias's eyes, his quiet voice still managed to reach the ears of all those present.

[It's... so beautiful.]

In death, he basked in the only color that gave meaning to his life.

It was...

A masterpiece.

His masterpiece.

Cli Cla—

The lights turned off.

A Colorless World.

Such was the name of his final Act.

Chapter 95 Phecda [1]

—While Julien was performing. Before the final act.

Backstage.

Clank—!

Sparks flew as a sword met against another. Swiftly twirling his sword against another's, Leon twisted it down and brought his fist forward, hitting his opponent right in the face.

Bang!

"Ukh!"

He followed up his attack with another.

With a swift and decisive blow, his opponent fell down face flat against the ground.

Thump!

"Huuu."

Taking a deep breath, Leon looked around. There were a total of four people lying down on the ground unconscious.

Wearing knight uniforms, they were part of the actors that were supposed to show up on stage. He had been waiting for them at the back, in an area where the staff couldn't see.

At the same time, he made sure to use as little mana as possible when fighting against his opponents.

Given the powerful individuals sitting in the theater, he knew that his actions would alert them.

For that reason, he held himself back to a certain degree. Thankfully, he was a knight and he could fight without mana.

It was for that reason that he was able to suppress them.

"Where are they?"

"Where did they go?"

In the distance, he could hear the frantic voices of the staff as they looked for the remaining members of the knight groups.

"Weren't they just here? What happened?"

"Agh...!"

In the end, they ended up sending the remaining knights to the stage where Julien was.

".....You should be able to take care of the rest."

They weren't particularly strong.

At least, they shouldn't prove to be much of a struggle for Julien.

And he was proven right.

"....."

Coming out of the room after he made sure that they had all been properly taken care of, Leon headed backstage to stare at Julien's performance.

It was hard to describe.

The brutality and madness of his gaze carved itself in his mind and the minds of all spectators.

It was a chilling sight.

One that closely reminded him of a certain past.

Staring at the scene, a figure overlapped Julien's and his lips pursed as he mumbled something inaudible.

Cli Clank—

The stage turned dark, and the scene ended.

In the brief interlude, the background started to fade as the relic used to project the background shifted towards the next scene.

Glancing around, Leon headed towards where the bodies lay and placed a small salt over their nose, jolting them awake.

"Uh!? Ah, what's going..."

As expected, the moment they were jolted awake, they acted as if they didn't understand what was going on.

"Akh, this...!"

"Ah!"

Their faces twisted as the pain from the stabs sunk in, and as Leon glanced around to see the staff quickly clean the 'fake' blood, he covered their mouths and beckoned them to follow him.

"Follow me."

Thankfully, because of Julien's performance, none of the staff thought weirdly of their actions.

They were all too busy setting up the next scene and attending Julien.

In the meantime, they treated their 'shock' as something that came with Julien's overwhelming performance.

Plus...

Given the unapproachable aura that Leon was giving off, none dared to go near him.

It was for this list of reasons that Leon was able to get them to follow him without anyone suspecting a thing. But even if they did, Leon didn't particularly care.

The higher-ups were most probably already aware of the fact that something had happened.

It was for that reason that he didn't put much effort into hiding the fact that something had gone wrong.

The only reason he helped them out was because he needed to closely monitor them.

In case they lost their minds again, he'd be ready to act before they'd be able to do anything.

Looking back, and seeing that they were still confused, he nudged them with his chin.

"Follow me, I'll bring you to treat your wounds."

Following Azarias's death, the play continued.

It turned out that Emily, the baker's daughter was actually an illegitimate member of the royal family, and her death had caused several chains of events to start.

It was a fact that Joseph came to learn too late as he was suddenly entangled in a large set of conspiracies.

The story was filled with intricate twists and turns that would normally capture the audience's attention.

However...

[You may persecute me as guilty, but here I stand, in all my glory, declaring my innocence!]

Nobody could truly focus on the play.

In the back of their mind, the previous performance continued to replay within their mind. From his gaze to the last scene. All their minds could think of was about Azarias's last act.

To the point where the colors before them started to feel uncomfortable.

They just... Seemed out of place.

This continued until the end of the play where it took several seconds for the audience to notice. What followed was a modest round of applause.

Clap. Clap. Clap—

As the claps went on and people snapped out from the performance, only then did the genuine claps burst forth and discussions began.

"Wow..."

"That was insane."

Several of the audience members found themselves hugging their arms as they talked about the performance.

It was thrilling and mesmerizing.

From the plot twists to the storyline. Everything was perfect. But even then, a certain performance took it to the next level.

"Chills. I still feel chills."

It was Julien's performance.

He had taken over the minds of all the spectators.

[Let's welcome our lead actor, Darius Johns who plays the role of Joseph.]

Within the claps, a crisp voice echoed through. It was the voice of the organizer who started to introduce the actors.

Clap. Clap. Clap—

Stepping up onto the stage, Darius was welcomed by a warm wave of applause.

"Amazing!"

"Well done—!"

[Next up, let's welcome our lead actress, Odette Ripley who plays the role of Amelia Wilnie.]

Clap. Clap. Clap—

"You were amazing!"

"I love you, Odette!"

"Your acting was phenomenal. I'll continue to follow you until the end!"

The claps continued as one actor after another entered the stage. One by one they entered the stage and bowed with smiles on their face.

To the actors, such a scene was something that they had grown used to. However, to the cadets who had played the 'extra' roles, the scene felt overwhelming.

Especially for Aoife who stepped up on stage and heard the thunderous applause that was directed towards her.

"Amazing!"

"You were great!"

"You killed it!"

Taking in the praise, Aoife found herself struggling to keep herself from showing any emotion. Clenching her fists, she felt her heart prick with a certain emotion.

All of a sudden, she thought back to all her efforts over the past week.

How she had reduced her sleep, and the constant headaches she had to ignore just to perfect her role.

Seeing the looks of the audience, Aoife felt that it was all worth it.

That her efforts had been worth it.

And then...

[Next up, let's welcome our next actor. Playing the role of Azarias, let's welcome Julien Evenus.]

"...."

The moment his name was called out, the claps stopped and the stage fell silent.

Tok—

Shattering the silence was his calm step as Julien's figure emerged from behind the stage.

At that moment, all eyes fell on him.

He was different from the man from before.

The madness that he contained before was long gone, and what replaced it was a stoic and detached look that seemed fitting to that of a high-ranking noble.

The difference was to the point where the audience was starting to question whether they saw the same person.

Within the silence, whispers started to spread.

"Are they really the same person...?"

"Why does he seem so different?"

Such stark contrast in demenour threw a lot of the audience members off. All but a certain few who knew him.

"...."

Staring at him from her seat, Delilah didn't say anything.

Gradually, her eyes closed and her lips pulled up.

"Not bad."

Truly.

Not a bad performance.

And in that moment, the claps returned.

Clap! Clap! Clap—!

The audience erupted in applause as they centered their attention on the calm man at the heart of the theater who took the applause for granted.

Almost as if he knew they belonged to him.

"You were amazing!"

"I can't believe I've got to witness something like this!"

One by one, the members of the audience stood up and the applause intensified. At the center of it all, Julien looked around and lowered his head as if to express his gratitude.

"Amazing!"

"Great...!"

The applause was overwhelming, surpassing that which any other actor had received.

"...Wow."

Standing in the middle of the stage, Aoife looked at the audience. She could tell that the applause was directed towards Julien.

That all of this was because of him...

And in that moment, staring at the man who was standing beside her, she raised her hand and followed the audience.

Clap. Clap—

Because she too had been captured by his acting as the audience had.

Even in her jealousy, Aoife had to admit.

He was great.

"Huuu." freeweb .co m

Coming back to my dressing room, I sat down exhausted and took a deep breath. Recalling the claps from the audience, I felt like smiling.

It felt gratifying to see that so many people had appreciated my performance.

It was unfortunate that I couldn't quite enjoy the feeling for too long.

"Ah...."

I clenched my chest as I took another deep breath.

It wasn't as if I was exhausted, but the emotional toll that the skill had taken over my mind wasn't something that I could get rid of quite easily.

"Huh... Huh..."

Even now, my chest trembled as I tried to rid myself of the ecstasy that I was feeling.

It was hard, but I was still in control.

Most of it was because I was able to run rampant on the stage.

If not for that, my struggle would've been worse.

In the midst of my recovery, my mind couldn't help but wonder about the feelings that I was currently experiencing.

"Joy... Joy... Ecstasy. Excitement."

I found myself repeating the same words over and over again.

"Joy... Ecstasy... Excitement."

It felt as if I was on the verge of grasping something important about my powers. A breakthrough.

"When I think about it, even though what I felt were ecstasy and excitement, my experience increased for 'joy'."

What did that mean?

What was joy? It wasn't simply happiness. There was more to it, and it became apparent to me after reading Alexander's mind.

'The same must be true for the other emotions.'

There were six basic human emotions.

Love, fear, anger, joy, sadness, surprise.

However, when thinking carefully, there existed a further classification.

More fundamental ones that branched from the six main ones.

"Anger, wrath, fury..."

I found myself immersed in my thoughts as I suddenly felt a more concrete direction to head with my emotive magic.

An idea suddenly entered my mind.

"What if instead of making someone just sad, I can target something more concrete? Maybe like..."

I paused before muttering,

"...Guilt?"

I opened my eyes wide at the realization.

"Wait, this can work."

If I were to delve more deeply into this, then I was sure I could further deepen the power of my Emotive Magic.

"Yes, this can—"

To Tok—

Halting all thoughts, I turned to look at the door with a frown.

Who could it be?

I wasn't expecting any guests.

'Perhaps, it's Leon?'

I had still not heard from him yet. The last time I had seen him was just before the last act, right as he led the 'knights' away from the stage.

"Haaa."

Either way, I stood up and opened the door, expecting a familiar set of gray eyes to greet me.

"...."

But contrary to my expectations, what greeted my sight was an unfamiliar pair of yellow eyes.

My heart dropped.

Looking up slightly, a calm voice echoed out.

"...It's nice to see that you're doing fine, Phecda."

Chapter 96 Phecda [2]

I stood motionless without saying a single word. Looking at the man who stood before me, it felt as if all the hair on my body stood.

He was...

'Very strong.'

Too strong for me to imagine.

Just standing before him felt suffocating.

But it wasn't his power that got me. No, it was his eyes.

'Megrail.'

Yellow pupils...

The symbolic trait of the members of the Megrail family. I knew well because of Aoife. Her eyes were also of the same color. In fact, taking a closer look, he appeared to look similar to her as well.

But... for what reason was a member of the Megrail family, calling me Pechda? It couldn't be that the organization had seeped its fangs into the royal family of the Empire...?

"Are you not going to let me in?"

"....."

Staring at the warm smile of the man before me, I almost found myself losing sight of myself. Something was unsettling about him that I couldn't explain.

Snapping out of it, I took a step to the side without saying a single word.

Either way, I needed to focus.

It was important that I didn't show anything that could give away the fact that I wasn't Julien.

"Thank you very much."

Coming into the room, the man looked around casually before sitting on my seat and our gazes met.

I stared at his intense yellow pupils.

"It was a wonderful performance."

He started off with a compliment. One that I took with a nod.

"Thank you."

".....Oh?"

But it seemed like I had already made a mistake as he raised his brow.

"You're not very talkative today."

I froze at his statement. It took every ounce of my willpower to stop my heart from beating faster. I was afraid he'd notice. Thankfully, I was quite adept at controlling my emotions.

Looking around, I found a spare seat and sat down.

Massaging my face, I mumbled,

"The performance took a toll on me."

"Ha..."

With a subtle chuckle, the man nodded.

"That's understandable. You've always had a hard time controlling your emotions. It must've felt great to finally let go for once, right? I almost saw your old self in there."

".....Yes."

Just faintly, I felt my heart skip a bit.

I was walking on thin ice. Extremely thin ice. One wrong step, and I felt everything would shatter.

But...

Within the danger, there was also opportunity.

'So the real Julien acted like that...?'

Information.

It was a great opportunity for me to learn about the previous Julien and the organization that I was dealing with.

But before that, I knew that I was far from the clear.

And as expected, in the next moment, the atmosphere turned extremely oppressive as I lost my breath.

"I've been wondering for quite a while, Phecda, but why is it that you've been acting on your own recently?"

My entire body tensed at his question.

"...From your interference with the professor to everything else that came after. You've been meddling a little too much, no?"

While his voice came out calm, I could feel the underlying rage hidden within his words as the air felt even more suffocating.

"...."

For a brief moment, I struggled to speak.

"Well?"

It was hard to speak when it felt as though a massive boulder was resting over my chest.

Gritting my teeth, I forced my head up to stare and meet his gaze.

Finally, I spoke.

"You should know why."

The atmosphere froze then. With my head raised, I kept my focus on his intense yellow eyes that stared back at me with a certain coldness that made me shiver.

Just as I noticed that his lips were about to part open to speak, I cut him off and continued.

"She's been watching my every movement. She suspects me. For that reason, I can't contact anyone."

"....."

"I've helped when I could, but there's a limit to how much I can do before my identity is compromised. For that reason, I chose to interfere. I'm trying to buy her trust."

I knew this day was going to come. I had been preparing for it for quite a while now. It was for this reason that I was able to act rationally.

I was merely following the script I had prepared in my mind.

".....But don't get me wrong. I've helped when I was able to. You should be aware of what happened at the prison."

I pointed towards myself.

"I was the reason they were able to escape. I'm sure you of all people should be able to confirm this."

It was true, and also a calculated risk that I had taken.

From the moment that I realized that the previous Julien was part of the organization, I knew that something like this was bound to come.

It was for this reason that I took the calculated risk of failing the quest mission.

I knew that it was important to have allies within the organization. For that, I helped out the Professor. But that wasn't the only reason. The other reason was because I knew that something like this was coming.

I needed a sort of alibi to prove that I was still doing things to help the organization.

It was a risk I was willing to take to make my story more believable. And I was starting to believe I had made the right choice.

"....."

"....."

Seeing that the sense of oppression that was lingering in the room was disappearing, I knew that my story was working.

I finished my speech with a question.

"I did interfere in several missions, but the damage that I've caused is meaningless on the grand scope of things, am I not right?"

"..."

Yet again, he remained silent as his yellow pupils traced over my body.

Silence gripped the room as I felt his gaze on me. Silently swallowing my saliva, I stared back at him without moving my gaze away.

It felt suffocating, but I knew that I couldn't look away.

Not yet.

The entire time, he remained silent, without saying a single word. From where I sat, I couldn't tell what he was thinking or what he was feeling.

He just had an air of detachment.

But the silence didn't last for long. Opening his mouth, he finally spoke again.

"How is your relationship with her?"

The air instantly felt lighter and I secretly sighed in relief.

".....Shouldn't you already know?"

A smile finally spread across his features.

"I know, but I still want to ask."

".....It's nothing concrete just yet."

The subject of the matter was none other than Delilah.

Given that the organization seemed to have eyes everywhere, I believed that they knew about how she had been keeping a close watch on me.

I chose to use that to my advantage and make it seem as though I was laying low so that I wouldn't be discovered while at the same time building a relationship with her.

It proved to be the right decision.

"I can't tell at all what she's thinking. For now, it seems like she's keeping me close to observe me. My movements are limited. You should understand why I am doing what I'm doing."

"I know."

"Then why did you send those knights after me?"

"Ha..."

With another smile, the man slowly stood up.

"Call it a warning. I just wanted to see the extent of your commitment to your new role."

"....."

I looked at him wordlessly.

See the extent of my commitment to my new role?

What did he mean by this?

"There's no need to be so displeased. I only used mild hypnosis on them. They shouldn't have posed a threat to you, to begin with. On the bright side, it spiced up the play, didn't it?"

This bastard...

"For now, keep doing what you're doing. What you told me is more or less in line with what I've been suspecting. If you need any help, you can always reach out to me. Otherwise, I will find a new way to contact you. Report to me everything that you notice with her."

Heading towards the door, the man turned around and our eyes met again. Though his smile appeared warm, all I felt were chills.

"Keep up the good work, Phecda."

Clank—!

The room fell silent again after his departure.

But even as he left, I remained tense. It felt as though I had years shaved off of my life at that moment.

Our talk had only lasted for a few minutes, but it had felt like an eternity to me.

"Huuu."

It was only after a few more minutes had passed that I finally let out a long breath and let my body relax.

"...Fucked."

My situation was fucked.

But...

"Haha."

Someway, somehow, I was able to bullshit my way through it.

Even so, things were far from over. This was merely the start. I knew that much. Things were going to become a lot more problematic for me in the future.

Despite that, I wasn't afraid.

Gradually, my strength was increasing, and so was my awareness of my situation.

In the future, I planned to make full use of my circumstances to achieve my goals. It was for this reason that I needed to remain patient.

My time was coming, and all I needed was a little bit more time.

[The Final Act: You have overcome the event.]

The expected notification finally came as my vision flashed.

[You were able to prevent Aoife from getting targeted during the play, stopping her from getting seriously injured.]

■| Game Progression EXP + 6%

Game Progression : [0%-[7%]—————100%]

■| Character Progression EXP + 39%

Exp : [0%—[11%]—————100%]

"Haa..."

I closed my eyes and let the power seep into my body. A warm current flowed as the density of my mana increased.

It was a familiar feeling. One that I was slowly starting to grow addicted to.

I wanted to bask in the feeling for longer, but it didn't last much longer as it soon stopped.

When I opened my eyes again, I stared at my experience bar.

"Level 22, 11%."

Not bad at all.

With all the training I had done over the past few weeks, I had seen a large increase in my strength.

Not only that, but so was my proficiency in my emotions.

Shortly after, a new notification flashed.

[Calamity Progress]

Aoife K. Megrail 1 : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

Kiera Mylne 2 : Slumber

: Progress - 9%

Evelyn J. Verlice : Slumber

: Progress - 0%

I silently stared at the new notification for a few moments before waving my hand.

"....Alright."

I closed my eyes and leaned back on my chair. The exhaustion from everything finally started to take over as my consciousness started to blur.

With everything done...

I could finally rest.

Chapter 97 Phecda [3]

".....Is this them?"

Entering a certain room, Delilah glanced around before settling her gaze over the bodies sprawled on the floor. They weren't dead, but judging from the bruises on their bodies, they were obviously passed out.

"Did you detect anything?"

"Yes."

Standing up, a man with blonde hair and green eyes, Dr. Gabel Wright, lazily rubbed his hair.

"There's no trace of any spell being used on them."

Pinching his fingers together, which were currently covered by a blue glove, he rubbed them together.

"I believe Xyron powder was used. It's a rather weak hallucinat that can be used to turn people into mindless zombies for several hours."

The Doctor looked up to meet Delilah's gaze.

"...Of course, when I mean weak, I mean that it doesn't affect those that have reached a certain strength. I'd say above Tier 3."

Dr. Gabel went on to give Delilah a more detailed description of what the drug did.

In the end, his assessment was,

"It's good that it was taken care of before they could go out. Either way, this was no accident. That's probably pretty obvious to you already. While I am unsure who, I don't think their goal was grand. My best bet is that they were giving a warning, or testing something."

Mumbling to himself while pinching his chin with his hand, he frowned.

"...But I could just be overthinking. It's just that I have a hard time thinking they'd try anything big when you take into account that Xyron powder only turns them into mindless people who can hardly think for themselves. Even the weakest mage can take care of them."

Standing by the side, Delilah didn't say anything and just listened to the doctor's analysis.

But if one paid close attention, they'd notice a slight curl at the end of her lips.

'Finally.'

They had made a move.

She had been waiting for quite a while now, and it proved to be the right gamble.

The organization that she had been hunting for the past years, and had trouble looking for, had finally stepped away from their burrows. At the center of it all was a young cadet that she had taken as an assistant.

While they were probably aware of the fact that she had their eyes on him, they were probably also planning on using him as a means to monitor her movements.

Delilah was fine with that.

It was a game of patience, and Delilah was confident in her patience.

Whether she'd be able to get them to slip up, or she slipped up, Delilah was willing to gamble.

Because...

She had that much confidence in her strength.

"So as I was saying, we should take some time to properly investigate the situation. I believe that if news gets out that-

Clank--

Cutting the doctor's words off, the door to the room opened and a figure walked in.

Immediately, the atmosphere around the room changed. It wasn't oppressive, but there was a certain air of regality and nobility that made one want to bow down before them.

Turning her head, Delilah made contact with the man.

His yellow pupils immediately stood out to her as he returned her gaze with a smile.

"I'm done on my end."

Closing the door behind him, he walked in and scanned the room, briefly pausing his gaze on the four cadets on the floor.

"Xyron Powder, am I right?"

"Uh?"

Stunned, the doctor looked at him. Atlas chuckled in return.

"The ones that did make it out to the stage also were affected by the powder."

"They were...?"

The sudden revelation stunned the doctor who blinked his eyes repeatedly.

"Haha, yeah. You probably didn't notice, but we all did during the play. I got several questions asking me whether something had happened. I had to tell them that it was all merely part of the act and a new way of 'method' acting."

".....Is this true?"

Turning his head, the doctor faced Delilah who blinked her eyes once before nodding.

"Yes."

"Ah, this...!"

"There's no need to worry."

Atlas reassured in a calm tone.

"They're being taken care of by others. They are currently unaware of what happened to them. A talented cadet had noticed that something was off during the play, and had the cadets escorted away to keep an eye on them."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

Delilah watched the entire exchange from the side.

The entire time, her gaze wandered over to Atlas. He was an enigma to her.

As a member of the Megrail family, a very high-ranking member at that, one that could compete for the throne, he chose to work at Haven.

It was a choice that didn't make sense.

While it was also true that people thought the same way about her, she had also made her ambition rather clear.

'We don't have much time.'

The speed at which the Mirror Dimension was expanding was rapidly increasing each year, and Delilah knew that it wouldn't take long before the entire world was swallowed up.

For this reason, she chose to work at Haven.

With her strength, she wanted to help out and nurture the future generation.

It was also because of her ambition that she stood on the opposite end of the Megrail family.

Their tyrannical laws that stunted the growth of the younger generation were something that she wanted to be removed at all costs.

For them to survive in the future...

She had no choice but to oppose them.

And for that very reason, Delilah treated Atlas with the utmost caution. Was he here to monitor her, or did he have another goal in being here?

"Hm?"

As if sensing her gaze, he turned his head and their gazes met.

"Ah, right. You want to know about Julien, right? I had a talk with him like I told you before."

"....."

"He is doing fine. There are no injuries on him. He said he was a little startled by the situation, but hardly noticed it because he was so immersed in his role. Thinking about it, he did a wonderful job."

"....."

"In any case, you don't have to worry about him. He doesn't seem to be involved in this matter."

".....I see."

Delilah quietly nodded her head. Keeping her usual composure, she took one last glance at the bodies beneath before heading out of the room.

She felt uncomfortable in Atlas's presence.

Even though he was weaker than her, he gave off an unpleasant feeling.

Passing by him, she heard a few parting words from him.

"I heard he's your assistant. Do take care of him. He's quite talented."

Those were the last words she heard before leaving.

As she left, her lips gently opened as she quietly mumbled.

"I know."

The Festival was an event that hosted many attractions. In particular the play, and the combat experience by the cadets.

Unfortunately, due to some circumstances, it was postponed by the Academy for the next month. While some of the guests were understandably annoyed, there was nothing they could do about it.

...And with that, the festival neared its end.

"Haaa...."

It was dark outside, and I sat on a bench. Leaning against it, I stared at the night sky. It was filled with stars, and the moon shone brightly.

The sight was one that always took my breath.

In the last moments of my life, the only thing that I remember seeing was the ceiling lights of the hospital room.

The air I now breathed felt refreshing. A stark contrast?to the stifling one in the hospital room.

Every day, I'd just take a few moments to appreciate what I once took for granted. It was weird, but losing everything made me understand just how important the little things were to me.

"...A dumb thought."

"What is?"

A figure appeared beside me all of a sudden. When I turned my head, I saw Leon standing on the other end of the bench.

With his hands in his pockets, he similarly stared at the moon.

"I took care of the ones that were probably going to give you a hard time."

"Oh."

"...."

"...."

He turned his head.

"A word of thanks?"

I tilted my head.

"Aren't you my knight?"

"I am."

"Okay."

"....."

"What?"

".....I'm thinking of resigning."

"What a pity. I'm not paying for your severance fee."

"....."

"....."

None of us said another word as the surroundings were engulfed in silence. I thought it'd be like that until one of us spoke again, but strangely, the silence was shattered by Leon who covered his mouth with his hand.

"Pfft."

"....?"

Was this guy...

"Are you laughing?"

For some reason, just faintly, my lips pulled up into a smile.

There was something about Leon holding his laugh back that felt contagious. Shaking my head, I looked up at the sky again.

It was Leon who spoke first.

"You're different compared to him."

"I know."

It became clear to me after my last talk.

"....You know what he told me the last time I told him I would quit?"

"What did he say?"

"Nothing, he just slapped me."

"..."

Blinking, I looked back to Leon.

"Should I have done that too?"

"You can try."

"Hmm..."

I thought about it for a good second before shaking my head.

"I'm not into that stuff."

It's definitely not because I was afraid he'd slap back.

Staring at me for a brief moment, Leon shook his head and leaned back on the bench. As his smile started to fade, he started to speak.

"Do you miss it?"

"Miss it....?"

Miss what?

"Home."

"Ah..."

Home... Right, I had one. Or did I?

Thinking back, I never truly had a home. I wasn't rich enough to be able to afford a proper one. I was only able to rent a small studio apartment while I paid for my brother's education.

The reality of the matter was that I had no home.

But even so.

"I do."

Because my home was wherever my little brother was.

"...Is that so?"

I turned to look at Leon.

"What about you?"

It had been a while since I knew him, but in actuality, I hardly knew anything about him. Besides the fact that he was my knight, he was a complete enigma to me.

I was a little curious.

"Do you miss your home?"

"...."

At first, Leon didn't say anything. I thought I had touched a sour spot, but just as I was about to speak again, he spoke over me.

"I don't remember."

"....?"

"I see it sometimes. When I sleep."

"In your dreams?"

"...Yes."

Leon nodded his head.

"My youngest memory is that of when I first joined the Evenus household when I was young. I think I was ten, or twelve. Been a while now."

"Is that how you met Julien?"

"Yes."

Frowning, Leon continued,

"He was a lot milder back then. He used to smile a lot and was quite talented. He was the pride of the family."

"Then...?"

Leon's voice changed, lowering a bit.

".....He changed."

Right. That much I expected.

"It wasn't a quick change. It happened gradually. Over the years. I told you before, but he used to smile a lot. At some point, he stopped smiling, and he turned into a completely different person."

With a subtle laugh, Leon shook his head.

"....And just as I had started to get used to his new self, he changed again."

Turning his head, our eyes met.

"You came along."

"Ah."

Right, I did.

I opened my mouth to reply but closed it a moment later. In the end, I didn't really know how to reply to that.

"Don't worry."

Eventually, Leon shook his head and stood up.

"I'm not interested in trying to find a way to bring the old Julien back. He's probably long gone. Maybe it's good that way."

Brushing his hair, he took one last glance in my direction.

"I didn't expect our conversation to spiral this way. Originally, I was just planning on telling you about the situation with the cadets that you took care of. In the end, I ended up rumbling about myself. I'll leave now."

He was just about to leave when his steps halted.

From the tilt of his head, he appeared to be struggling to say his words until eventually, he lowered his head to mutter.

"....It was a great performance."

"Hm?"

And then he truly left.

Did he just...

"Ha."

Staring at his back which slowly started to fade from my view, I shook my head and looked up at the sky.

It was at that moment that my chest prickled slightly. The emotions from the performance were still lingering in my mind.

They weren't as pronounced, but they were clearly there.

"Emotions, huh."

I think...

I was slowly starting to understand them.

Volume [1] - End

A rather short volume, but it was the introductory volume for the story. To get an understanding of the characters, and the power system before the story can start flowing more smoothly.

The next volume will be a little bit different.

And no. I'm not taking a break.

The *most* up-to-date s are published on *.com*

Chapter 98 Faceless man [1]

The festival came to an end.

Haven's educational department had its hands full with dealing with the aftermath of postponing the mid-term exams. With the Exams used as a means to assess cadets for the draft, their annoyance was understandable.

Each year, the Guilds only had one chance to pick a new recruit. For that reason, they needed to pick the right one.

A mistake could cost them their future for the next few years. Hence why it was important for them to gather as much information and data as possible before the draft began.

In the end, however, despite their protests, Haven refused to budge and they remained firm with their decision.

On another note, there was a certain piece of news that was starting to spread within the Empire.

The Empire Daily — Breaking :

[The Enigma of Midnight Manor] has risen to claim the coveted 5-star rating as the Empire's latest sensation in the theater!

In a stunning display at Haven, the judges were left utterly mesmerized by the play. Brimming with complex plot twists and surprises, it held its audience spellbound throughout.

However, if there was one standout performance, it undoubtedly belonged to the Black Star of Haven, Julien Dacre Evenus. A dark horse in the Jovinc award! Will he be able to make it?

*

"Huuu."

Putting the newspaper down, I took a deep breath.

"The Jovinc award..."

I had been made aware of it just a few moments ago. Apparently, it was a very prestigious acting award. As the clips of the play started to spread, my voice started to spread, and all of a sudden, I had become a candidate to win the 'Best Supporting Actor' award.

It was rather burdensome.

However, thinking about the money that I would receive from the award...

—I also place my vote on him. He was phenomenal. Some of the best acting that I've ever seen. Julien D. Evenus.

I started to push the narrative.

'.....I need the money, so.'

I placed my vote down and sent it to the post office.

I was just coming out of the post office when a figure appeared in front of me. The two of us stooped at the same time.

"...."

"...."

For a brief moment, silence ensued.

The first one to break the silence was Aoife who alternated her gaze between me and the post office.

"Were you placing down your vote?"

".....Yes."

"Oh."

"....."

I looked down at Aoife's hand where a small letter was nestled. For some reason, she seemed to be fiddling with it. Perhaps she was embarrassed with her choice?

"You're also placing a vote?"

"Uh, ah... Yes."

Seeing how her eyes avoided me at all times, it was perhaps true that she was embarrassed by her choice.

I was just about to leave when she asked,

"....Who did you vote for?"

My face twitched at her question. Keeping myself composed, I looked straight into her eyes before saying,

"You."

"...Uh?!"

As if not expecting such an answer, her eyes widened.

"I felt like you did a good job. I can tell that you've put a lot of effort into your role. It was impressive."

"Uh, ah..."

Just slightly, her body trembled and her head lowered. I couldn't see her expression, but I took that moment to leave.

'It's not like I lied...'

Well, the part where I voted for her was indeed a lie.

But outside of that, her acting had truly been great. I could see that she had put a lot of effort into it.

I didn't want to take that away from her.

'.....I'll vote for her next time.'

If the opportunity presented itself.

Even as Julien left, Aoife remained standing on the spot with her head lowered. Even now, she was struggling to understand what had happened.

Recalling her previous conversation with him, Aoife found herself clenching her fists.

"Me..."

His words. They were a form of acknowledgment.

Acknowledgment of her efforts. It made her body flush with heat. It had been a long time since she had felt like this. The joy of knowing that someone was acknowledging her efforts.

Even if it came from the unlikeliest of people, no, perhaps it was because it was him that Aoife felt the compliment meant more.

He was clearly better than her.

He was the star of the show and someone who was probably going to win the award.

For him to tell her that he had voted for her...

"Haha."

It was enough to make her laugh. Especially when she looked at the letter in her hand.

—I thought she was great. Captured my attention. I place my vote on her. Aoife K. Megrail.

Thinking about it now, it was shameless of her. For her to vote herself...

"....I thought no one would vote for me."

Given Julien's performance, she thought she'd be without any votes.

But who would've thought...?

"Haa."

Staring at the letter, Aoife let out a long sigh.

It dawned on her how shameless her actions were. Aoife hated to admit it, but she had to be more mature about this.

"He was great."

Way better than her.

And for that reason...

Riiiiip—!

Aoife ripped the letter apart.

".....It was immature of me."

Moving toward a nearby table, she wrote a new letter. In it, she wrote.

—The only possible winner. Julien D. Evenus.

Once she was done writing, she folded the paper and placed it in the letter which she then handed over to the post office.

"Thank you for using our services."

"...."

Coming out of the post office, Aoife stared at the sky. She felt liberated. To her, the acknowledgment of her effort meant a lot more than a single vote. Especially since that vote came from herself.

Thinking about her actions, she started to feel secondhand embarrassment.

"...How shameless."

For her to even think about voting for herself...

Aoife shook her head.

"Pathetic."

The days passed like that.

With the upcoming examinations, a serious atmosphere took over the Academy. The once bustling place was now empty as the training grounds and library became full.

It was to the point where they became overcrowded. Such places started to become impossible to frequent.

Thankfully, I studied at my dorms most of the time.

In the next two weeks, I followed the same routine.

Take lessons, study back at the dorm, train my spells, and train the blue-ranked book. My progress wasn't anything fast. At least, not compared to how it had been in the past.

However, it was certainly better than nothing.

More than anything, I was just waiting to see what would happen once my spell reached the next level.

Would they evolve? If so, how...?

"Ugh."

Stretching my body, I rubbed my haggard face and closed the book before me.

"...Feels like I'm back at my job."

There were so many things that I needed to memorize and understand. It was awful, but I had no choice but to do it.

The mid-terms were important.

Not only would failure mean expulsion, but the ranks would be re-adjusted. That meant that I could very well lose my position as the Black Star.

I couldn't allow that to happen.

The position was very important. While so far it had yet to do much for me, I knew just how important the 'name' was to the Guilds and outsider organizations.

For that reason, I had no choice but to indulge myself in my studies and practice.

"....."

Standing up to stretch my body, I suddenly paused and looked towards the corner of the room.

There, a black box rested.

Thinking about the box, I frowned. It had been a while since I had opened it. No, rather, I hadn't touched it ever since coming to Haven.

Stepping forward, I headed for the box and bent down.

Click—!

With a 'click' the box unlocked and I pulled the lid upwards. Instantly, my gaze rested on the sword that rested within.

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

Right, I still have the sword with me. The one that had punctured my chest the very first time that I came into this world.

I still didn't understand why that had happened, or for what reason the sword had been imbedded in me, but if there was one thing that I was sure about it was the fact that the sword was important.

"....."

Tracing my fingers over its body, I could tell just how sharp it was.

"It's a very high-quality sword."

That much was true at first glance.

Placing my hand around the hilt of the sword, I tried to lift it, but...

"...Hmm."

It was heavy. Really heavy.

"Ugh."

It took both of my hands for me to be able to even lift the sword up.

"What the hell..."

I didn't remember it to be so heavy.

"Ugh."

The more I tried to move with the sword, the more I found myself struggling. How can a sword be so heavy?

In the end, unable to hold for any longer, my grip faltered and the sword clattered on the ground.

Clank. Clank. Clank.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

Catching my breath, I looked at the sword with a frown.

How could anyone hold a sword that heavy?

"Is this the difference between a mage and a knight?"

If so, it became clear to me that the sword would be of no use to me. I sort of expected for this to happen so I wasn't disheartened.

"Hmmm."

But a thought suddenly crossed my mind.

"What if I injected mana into the sword?"

What would happen then?

I was quick to put my thoughts into action as I went on to grab the hilt of the sword and channeled my mana into it.

"Ha...!"

Almost instantly, the sword became lighter and I was able to lift it up. I had only done it to test it, but I hadn't expected it to work.

It was a pleasant surprise.

"This is—"

But the surprise was short-lived.

Blink.

With one blink, my surroundings changed. All of a sudden, I found myself standing on a rocky plain.

The landscape stretched endlessly in shades of bleak gray, with jagged formations rising and falling like the frozen waves of a turbulent ocean surface.

Above, the sun, though familiar, cast a hollow light, its shine muted by the heavy shroud of gloom that seemed to envelop everything.

Stunned, I looked around.

"What's this...?"

Blink.

Blinking again, I found myself back in my room.

And then...

Blink.

Back in the space.

Something gripped my heart all of a sudden as it started to beat dramatically. Looking around without blinking, I secretly swallowed my saliva.

"Wh-wha..."

Swoosh—

The very fabric of the space around me started to twist as a hand slowly emerged from behind me, grasping my shoulder.

".....!"

As my head flicked in that direction, my heart stopped.

"Ah, this..."

With a wide smile, it looked at me.

As if the very fabric of space had wrapped around its face, I stared at the featureless creature.

And...

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

I found the beat of my heart again.

Chapter 99 Faceless man [2]

".....What do we have here?"

The voice reached the depths of my mind, sending shivers down my entire body. It was rough, almost gravelly. As if a broom was scraping broken glass.

My skin crawled at the sound of it.

Blink.

The world around me changed again.

I was back in my room.

I kept my eyes firmly open. Something told me, no I knew that if I were to blink again, I'd be back in that world.

'...What was that?'

I questioned myself, staring at my surroundings as I felt sweat drop down on the wooden floor beneath me.

My pulse quickened, and my chest started to rise and fall rapidly.

....I felt my eyes burn.

What was happening?!

There were so many questions in my mind that I wanted the answer to. However, if there was one thing that I knew the answer to, then it was that whatever that faceless person was, it was dangerous.

Extremel-

"....!"

My inner thought stopped the moment I noticed the fabric of the very space before me bend in the shape of a hand.

Blink.

The world changed again.

"Haa..."

All my instincts told me to run, and as I looked around the landscape before me, I felt a sense of helplessness as I realized.

All I saw were endless jugged rocks and mountains.

The air was cold and dry.

....There was nowhere for me to hide.

As if it could read my thoughts, a voice tickled my ears, sending shivers down my entire spine.

"There's nowhere for you to hide."

Blink.

I blinked again, in hopes of getting away again, but...

"That won't anymore. I've temporarily locked the space around us."

I remained in the world.

Blink. Blink.

Regardless of how hard I tried, I found myself unable to return back. Panic started to settle within my mind, but amidst the panic, I forced myself from showing any of it.

I couldn't allow fear to overtake my mind.

"Hmm, your mind is rather resilient."

The space before me folded, unveiling the faceless figure from before. Though I couldn't see its true appearance, I could tell that whoever the figure was, it belonged to a man.

Bedding the fabric of space as if it were a plastic wrap, he walked around me, closely observing me. Or more like sensing me?

It was hard to describe.

...From the way he moved, it didn't really seem as though he could actually see me. It was more like he could sense my presence.

Or was I overthinking things?

Either way, I refrained from making any irrational movement.

"You're a cautious one, aren't you?"

"...!"

The space next to me folded and a hand grasped onto my shoulder.

When did he...?

"Your heart is beating rather fast. Are you nervous?"

I swallowed my saliva.

"Oh? It's beating even faster now... Did my words scare you?"

"..."

"There's no need to be scared. I can't truly harm you. We're too far apart. The best I can do is seal the space for a few minutes. I just sensed a familiar smell coming from you. An intriguing one."

His gaze lowered towards the sword in my grasp where he leaned and sniffed slightly.

"Haa... Yes, a familiar smell."

In the blink of an eye, he was next to the sword, tracing his finger over its body.

"It feels the same length, but..."

With a sudden pause, the faceless man looked up.

"...It's been used. Hmm."

As if understanding something, the faceless man smiled.

"What an interesting thought."

His words confused me, but even as they did, I remained silent. My instincts told me that the less I spoke, the better things were for me.

But even then...

"Hmmm."

Appearing once again beside me, the hand went on to grasp my shoulder.

"The Consortium."

His voice echoed within the surroundings. Listening to the words he spoke, I remained quiet.

In the off-chance that he could hear me, I didn't want him to memorize my voice, or possibly reveal something I shouldn't have.

"...."

"No? Doesn't ring a bell?"

Looking a little disappointed, he continued.

"Hmm, then... Nocturne Order?"

"...."

Again, I kept my mouth shut.

He continued.

"Inverted Sky."

"....!"

All of a sudden, the atmosphere became oppressive.

My thoughts froze but I refrained from making any movements or sounds.

How did...

Just as I thought he had picked up something, he went on to say a different name.

"Stygian Cabal?"

"....?"

He didn't notice anything?

I was just about to sigh in relief when he let go of my shoulder and muttered,

"You must be in the Nurs Ancifa Empire."

My mind blanked at that moment. It was as if all thoughts had been stripped away from my mind, preventing me from thinking at all.

How...?

How did he know?

I had been quiet the entire time, so... How?

....I was able to hear the answer shortly after.

"The Consortium, Nocturne Order, Inverted Sky, Stygian Cabal..."

Listing the names again, he continued,

"They're the name of the organizations that I created."

"....!"

Yet again, my eyes widened.

But if that wasn't enough, the man continued.

"Each organization lies within one of the Empires. To the world, they are different, but to me, they're all the same. Why do you think I've named them differently?"

I swallowed my words but knew the answer.

'Because it's easier to figure out who is from who...'

"Because it's easier to figure out who is from who."

As if he could read my thoughts, he muttered the same words I muttered in my mind. All I felt were chills as sweat unknowingly started to build up by the side of my face.

The air felt suffocating, and I had to take each breath carefully.

"....It would've been problematic had you not known the name. However, there's still enough information for me to work with."

Casually blinking away, he appeared before me, walking around leisurely as he started to speak.

"The way we operate between each Empire is different. You see, we don't want to feel too similar between each Empire, do we?"

Pausing, he pinched his chin.

"Making them think they're all the same would defeat the entire point, wouldn't it?"

He flicked his head to face me.

"Between the four Empires, we made sure that within two, everyone, be it the commoners or high-ranking nobles knew about the organization."

I was quick on the uptake there. I instantly understood what he was trying to say, but even so, I remained silent as I listened to his words.

While I wasn't exactly sure why he was saying all of this, I knew that he had a goal in all of this.

For that very reason, I just listened and took in every word carefully.

"Had you not known any, then you were merely likely going to be a citizen of one of the other two Empires. The ones where we made sure to keep the organization under wraps with only a few knowing."

Suddenly, his empty smile widened.

"....You knew about the Inverted Sky. I felt it from the beat of your heart. That's the name of the organization that resides within the Nurs Ancifa Empire. And the fact that you know means that you're at least a noble. Hmm."

Falling into thought, the faceless figure walked around. The entire time, he exuded a demenour of casualness.

However, staring at him, I could only feel utter dread.

My entire body shivered under his presence as notifications flashed before my very eyes.

?| Lvl 1. [Fear] EXP + 0.1%

?| Lvl 1. [Fear] EXP + 0.01%

They just continued to flash before my eyes.

Never before had I experienced such terror in my life. Not even when I had first used my powers.

This was just...

Overwhelming.

"What are you thinking about?"

A soft whisper tickled my ear again as he appeared right beside me. I felt my body twitch at his touch. But even as I tried to distance myself from him, I found that my body refused to budge, almost as if it was glued on the spot.

"Hmm."

He appeared in front of me again. This time, with his wrist raised in a way that made it seem as though he was checking his time.

"Well, it looks like we're running out of time."

His head turned, and I met his empty face.

"Just so you know, I can't hear nor see you. I can only sense you. But you probably already figured that out."

Lowering his wrist, he smiled yet again as he pointed toward the sword in my hand.

"I'll be needing that real soon. Keep it well. I'll be coming for it soon."

Blink.

Blinking once, he appeared just a few centimeters away from me.

"...Oh, and don't think about running away."

My entire body tensed at his appearance. And especially his smile.

"You'll never be able to escape me."

Blink.

The scenery changed again.

This time, I was back in my dorm.

"....."

But even so, I held my breath back and looked around me. Touching the sofa, I made sure to check if everything was real.

For some reason, even though I knew that it was, I still felt the need to check.

I went on like this for ten minutes before sitting down on the sofa and setting the sword down.

"....."

I sat there without saying a single word.

Looking down, I saw that my legs were still tensed. My jaw too... Every part of my body was tense. Even as I looked around me and saw that nobody was present, there was still this nagging feeling at the back of my mind that made me grow wary.

Finally, I had found my voice.

"What just happened?"

It sounded unfamiliar to my mind as it came out hoarse.

"Where was I...? And why did he tell me everything?"

It made no sense. For what reason would he...

"Ah."

...But it also clicked inside of my mind.

The reason why he told me everything like that.

I covered my mouth and felt chills run down my body. In the chance that I was to spill everything out, then...

"He'll have a concrete idea of who I am."

It was a trap.

A carefully interwoven trap that one wouldn't be able to notice were they not paying extreme attention.

And the sense of dread that I felt intensified.

"This..."

I leaned back and stared at the empty ceiling.

All of a sudden, I felt the energy drain away from my body. Glancing at the sword that rested beside me, I had the urge to suddenly throw it away.

What if he could detect its presence and find it? What if...

"Haa."

I covered my eyes with my forearm.

The feeling that the faceless man gave off... It was one of utter helplessness. It felt as if there was nothing that I could do to stop him.

The fleeting sense of control that I had so desperately clung to in the past... It was utterly gone.

In its place was only helplessness.

Just who in the world was he?

This content is taken from [f\(r\)eeweb\(n\)ovel.com](http://f(r)eeweb(n)ovel.com)

Chapter 100 Team [1]

"The Midterms will be starting next week. I do hope that everyone is prepared for them. During the first week, we'll have your theoretical examination."

Professor Bridgette's voice echoed throughout the otherwise silent classroom.

"After that, we will be moving to the combat-related examinations. I hope that all of you are ready for what is to come. There will be a lot of people, scouts included. They will be closely examining your performances."

She was currently giving us a brief rundown of the upcoming exams.

"It is important that you do your best during the examinations. Not only will you receive a new rank, but you will also have an evaluation given by the scouts who will use the information for the draft."

It was just general knowledge. I more or less knew most of the information that was being given. But even then, I didn't have it in me to pay attention to any of the words that she was saying.

The only thing that was running through my mind were thoughts about the faceless man.

Who was he?

No... I already had an idea of who he was. The leader of the Inverted Sky. But... Not just that. He was also the leader of several other organizations that resided within the other Empires.

The sheer idea of the power that he held sent shivers down my spine.

Not only was his influence in this Empire but in the other Empires too. What sort of concept was this?

I desperately wanted to do some research on the organizations that he had named, but I refrained from doing so.

That... also felt like a trap.

Knowing just how powerful the Inverted Sky was, I could tell that he had eyes and ears everywhere.

One wrong move and I was likely going to expose myself.

I needed to tread carefully.

"Ah, this..."

Yet again, this sense of helplessness...

The worst part of this was that I knew what his target was.

The sword.

'I shouldn't have activated it.'

It was the whole reason why he was able to detect me.

Had I not...

'No, it was bound to happen.'

One day, or another, I was going to do the same thing. It was something that was bound to happen. But...

'...If only I had done it a little later.'

I knew that it was too late for me to regret it. For now, the only thing I could do was find a way to buy as much time as possible.

The only thing that he knew was the Empire I was from, and that I was a noble.

I was still in the clear.

What he didn't know was the fact that I was part of that very organization.

At least, on paper.

That meant that I only had one true path to take.

'Have more control within the organization.'

"Julien."

"Hm?"

Suddenly hearing my name getting called up, I raised my head. When I looked around, I found that everyone was staring at me.

"...."

I remained quiet and waited for the Professor to speak. I had been too immersed in my own thoughts. I had no idea what was happening.

"Who are you going to choose?"

"...."

Choose?

I blinked my eyes.

I had to choose? Choose what?

"Haa..."

As if understanding that I wasn't paying attention, Professor Bridgette sighed and shook her head.

"Never mind, I will select your team members for you."

"Uh?"

Looking around the classroom, the Professor's gaze fell on several people.

"Your team members will be, Anders, Kiera, Luxon, and Josephine."

*

It turns out that for the midterms, the combat sequence was divided into two parts. Team, and individual performance.

According to the Professor, cadets needed to know how to work well together.

It was one of the traits that the Guild's scouts looked forward to the most given that they sent extraction teams into the Mirror Dimension all the time.

For that reason, a draft prospect needed to know how to work and lead in a team, outside of their individual power.

To Guilds, powerful cadets were useless if they didn't know how to work together with other members.

At the training grounds.

"Haaa..."

"Stop it."

"Haaa...."

"I said stop it."

"Haaaa-Hiek!! Stop! I'm sorry!"

Ignoring Kiera and Josephine who were bickering with one another, a sight which had started to become the norm within the classroom, I took a look at the other two cadets in my team.

'Anders and Luxon.'

Both were ranked rather high.

...I knew Anders a little. Ever since the incident back in the forest, he had mellowed out a lot.

Rather, you could say he was on friendlier terms with me.

Even so, it wasn't as if I was extremely familiar with him.

The only one that I wasn't very familiar with was Luxon. With brown hair and blue eyes, he was rather handsome. Last I recalled he was also ranked five, and a knight.

A powerful team member.

No, all of them were strong. I couldn't complain about the team composition.

"Uht!! H-help!"

There was only one problem.

"Are you dissatisfied with something?"

Luxon didn't seem to be satisfied with the current arrangement. He appeared to be the only one like that as he had been wearing a frown ever since we left the classroom and came into the training area.

Turning his head, he met my gaze.

"....."

Though he didn't say anything, I could tell at a glance what his problem was.

'So it's me.'

Right...

".....I don't like this."

His deep voice echoed throughout. Though it wasn't loud, it was enough to stop Kiera and Josephine by the side.

"What's going on?"

Ignoring her, he continued.

"Since this is a decision made by the Professor, I won't argue. I'm just stating that I don't like this arrangement."

"...."

As expected, I was right.

It wasn't as if I hadn't expected such a scenario. In fact, I had thought that everyone on my team would be in disagreement with the current arrangement, but it was surprising to see that he was the only one who was displeased.

"What do you want to do about it?"

It was a simple question.

One that wasn't filled with any malice.

But deep down, I already knew what he wanted. Still, he shook his head and turned his head.

"Nothing. Since the arrangement is like this, I won't argue."

"Oh? You seem rather reasonable."

It was surprising, but at the same time, it made sense. He was a high-ranking noble who had been trained to enter a Guild.

While he had his pride, he knew the importance of teamwork.

A rather impressive person.

"....Do you want to spar?"

It was for that reason that I offered to spar with him.

"Uh?"

"Hm?"

Perhaps taken aback by my sudden proposition, everyone looked at me. I could also feel Kiera's gaze from the side, but compared to Josephine's and Luxon's expressions, hers contained a different meaning.

Ignoring it, I continued.

"If you're dissatisfied, then I have no problem sparring with you."

I didn't mind it to be honest.

There was something that I wanted to test. It was something that I had discovered during the play and hadn't had the chance to properly test it.

A new ability perhaps.

I wasn't quite sure what to make of it just yet.

But it was certainly an interesting idea...

As if still stunned by the sudden proposition, Luxon's gaze changed.

"...You, are you being serious?"

"Serious."

Unbuttoning the buttons of my shirt, I slowly rolled my sleeves up and tossed my blazer to the side.

"....."

Still stunned, he remained motionless on the opposite end.

But I didn't care and started to stretch my body.

'Rank five...'

Though his rank was high, it was mainly due to the fact that Kiera wasn't very good at academic studies. She was in fact stronger than him. The same was true for a few other cadets.

In terms of raw combat power, he was within the tens.

Even so...

He was certainly strong.

My strength had increased quite a lot over the past few months due to everything that had happened to me.

I wanted to test the extent of my skills.

.....and the new technique that I was trying to grasp.

"Are you ready?"

Once my sleeves were fully rolled up, I looked in his direction. He too had removed his blazer and had rolled up his sleeve.

In his hand was a wooden sword.

When did he get that...?

"How are we going to do this?"

At his question, I looked at the space around me and massaged my shoulder.

"....It's a light spar. Just enough to familiarize ourselves and to please you."

"And the victor?"

"Naturally he'll be the leader."

"....Okay."

Positioning himself in a stance, a thin veil of mana started to cover his body.

"I'm ready."

"...."

Nodding quietly, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"Huuu."

'Let's see how this goes.'

There was a high chance it could backfire, but I didn't really care about that. I was more interested in knowing if it was possible.

And thus...

With my eyes closed, I immersed myself in a familiar set of emotions and memories.

As Luxon and Julien stood on opposite ends, Kiera, Anders, and Josephine spectated from the side.

"This is so exciting~"

With her body leaning forward, Josephine alternated her gaze between Julien and Luxon.

"As expected, nobody can beat Julien in that department..."

"Uh?"

Kiera looked at Josephine in confusion.

What's this bitch ranting on about?

"But, hey."

Josephine's head turned to face hers.

"Who do you think will win?"

"...Who?"

The obvious answer was Luxon, but...

"I don't know."

Kiera didn't feel so confident in him. It was strange, but she just didn't see him winning against Julien.

"Anders?"

Turning her head, Kiera saw that Anders was also silent. Judging from his expression, he seemed to have similar thoughts to her.

Would you look at this...

Smirking slightly, Kiera reached out for her blazer pocket and took out a small box. Retrieving one out, she was just about to light it up when she stopped herself.

"..."

Her gaze fixed on Julien who stood motionless with his eyes closed.

Feeling her hand grow antsy, she had the urge to light the cigarette. However, despite her mind telling her to, her body refused to.

"Tsk."

In the end, clicking her tongue, she put the cigarette away.

'...Whatever.'

"You, did you..."

Her action seemed to have stunned Josephine who looked at her with widened eyes.

For some reason, Josephine's gaze annoyed her, and she pushed it away with her hand.

"Go away."

"But, you...!"

"Fuck, stop. It's starting."

Indeed, the moment Kiera said those words, Julien opened his eyes. However, the moment he did, the atmosphere around him completely changed.

"What the..."

Scratch. Scratch.

A scratching sound echoed.

All of a sudden, a familiar figure appeared in their vision.

One that everyone present had witnessed once before. Be it live, or through recordings... Everyone was familiar with the figure that stood before them.

Especially when staring into his eyes which contained a hidden madness.

Opening her mouth, Kiera mumbled,

"How does that make sense?"