

CLEAVER OF SIN

Chapter 148: Empress

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Asher closed his eyes as he felt a sort of spatial energy wash over him, enveloping his entire being. With his newly acquired Spatial affinity, he allowed himself to bask in the sensation, letting it seep into every fiber of his existence.

Space itself seemed to twist and ripple around him, reality bending and warping as if the world were being reshaped. Soon, the distortion ceased, and he felt the familiar solidity of ground beneath his feet.

Maintaining a calm and composed expression, he opened his eyes, a faint yet noticeable smile gracing his lips. However, the moment he did, a chorus of groans and strained noises slammed into his ears from every direction.

All around him, other students were collapsing to their knees, their bodies unable to handle the sudden spatial shift. Some began vomiting violently, expelling whatever food they had eaten earlier; others could only spit weakly, their stomachs too empty to produce anything more than saliva.

The sounds were unpleasant, yet unsurprising.

Even William had fallen to his knees, one hand clutching at his chest while the other braced him against the floor. His breathing was labored, each inhale and exhale ragged, as if the very fabric of reality had been torn apart inside him.

Standing apart from the chaos, the woman who had teleported them here showed neither concern nor amusement. She did not speak nor offer any comfort, instead remaining completely composed as she observed the students' varying reactions.

Her gaze eventually shifted to Asher, the lone figure standing tall without even the faintest change in expression. A single eyebrow arched in mild surprise before her face returned to its usual mask of indifference.

For her, this was nothing out of the ordinary.

Such reactions were expected, even inevitable, for those experiencing teleportation for the first time. Most of these students had never traveled via spatial transfer in their lives, and the disorienting effects could be overwhelming.

Still, she knew they would adapt in time; repeated exposure would train their bodies to withstand the strain.

Asher, however, was different. With his space affinity and his countless uses of Virelass' Position Marker, he had experienced spatial travel an uncountable number of times. This was nothing to him, merely another step, another shift, another ripple in reality that barely stirred his equilibrium.

The woman, Jane, the instructor, did not rush anyone. She simply waited in silence, patient as a stone, for the chaos to settle. She had been through this process herself, long ago, and understood there was no need to hurry.

Within a few minutes, the groans began to soften. Students pushed themselves upright, some wiping their faces with handkerchiefs, dabbing away tears, sweat, saliva, or the remnants of their stomach's contents. Their movements were sluggish, but they were recovering.

Once Jane was satisfied that everyone could move, she spoke with simple authority:

"Let's move."

With that, she turned and began walking toward the only visible exit, a plain door set into the wall of what appeared to be a square, four-cornered room. The students took a few moments to steady their breathing before following in her wake.

They stepped through the door, and a new scene unfolded before Asher's eyes. A hallway stretched before them, long and narrow, with smooth walls and an ordered design. The atmosphere suggested they were inside a larger building.

Jane guided them down the hallway, leading them into another room. Inside, over twenty men and women stood in neat formation, their collective presence calm yet authoritative.

"These instructors will search your belongings to ensure that nothing harmful has been brought in," Jane announced plainly, her voice carrying no room for negotiation.

A ripple of discontent passed through the group. Several students frowned or muttered under their breath, clearly displeased by the idea of having their possessions inspected.

Jane, however, remained unaffected. The instructors were equally unmoved; they had neither the time nor the inclination to indulge such trivial complaints.

Asher offered no objection. In fact, he had already anticipated this precaution. A separate dimension such as this one required strict safeguards, if even one student had managed to bring in an artifact capable of mass destruction, it could spell disaster for everyone within.

In his opinion, this inspection should have been done before the teleportation had even occurred.

Those without space rings placed their physical luggage on a long table. Those who possessed space rings handed them over for inspection.

When it was his turn, Asher passed his own space ring to one of the instructors. The man instantly sent a wave of Astra energy into it, scanning through the stored contents.

Asher, of course, had nothing suspicious. His space ring contained only clothing, he owned little else. As for his platinum coins, those were secured within his System's inventory, beyond the reach of any ordinary or unordinary search.

What did surprise him, however, were the contents of some of the nobles' rings. A few contained bottles of aphrodisiac potions, as though their owners intended to turn the Academy into some twisted private brothel.

Even more surprising was the instructors' complete lack of reaction. They showed no disgust, no amusement, nothing. Their expressions remained as unreadable as stone. It was as if they had already seen the full extent of human depravity and had long since ceased to be shocked by it.

They confiscated nothing. Every strange and questionable item was promptly returned to its owner. Asher did not comment; he kept his silence, merely observing.

The inspection process concluded within minutes. One instructor gave Jane a small nod, and she turned back to the students.

"Follow me," she instructed.

They left the inspection room as a group, their footsteps echoing softly against the floor. Moving down another hallway, they eventually exited the building and stepped into the open air.

The world outside was... startling.

It looked no different from the world they had left behind. The same warm sunlight poured from above. The same fresh air filled their lungs. Even the Astra energy in the atmosphere felt pure and natural, entirely devoid of artificiality.

If this truly was a separate dimension from Cymora, Asher could not detect any falsehood in it. Every one of his senses told him the same thing, this place was as real as the world he had always known.

He did not understand how such a thing was possible, but he did not waste time trying to unravel it. Overthinking would not magically grant him the ability to create a separate dimension of his own.

Jane's voice cut through his thoughts.

"What you are seeing now is the outer area of the Academy. For today, you are free to walk around here. If you have coins, you may use them to purchase anything you want or need."

Asher's eyes scanned the surroundings as they walked. Numerous stores stood open, their shopkeepers calling out to potential customers. The air was alive with chatter and laughter, as though the tragedies that had befallen Cymora did not exist here.

Children darted between the streets, their laughter ringing out like bells. Horses trotted along, pulling carts laden with goods.

'No wonder the so-called principal can fund the Star Academy from her own pocket,' Asher thought with faint amusement. 'She's an Empress within this place.'

Many students around him walked wide-eyed, staring at every detail as though they had never seen a house or a horse before. Of course they had, but this was the Star Academy. To them, even the air itself seemed different, cleaner, richer, more potent.

Their path eventually brought them to another building. It stood tall, its outer structure bearing a resemblance to an inn. Without a word, Jane led them inside, her strides steady, her face expressionless.

Chapter 149: Lobby

"Listen very attentively, for I will not repeat what I am about to say, not even once," Jane's voice sliced through the air, cutting short the tour as though a blade had severed the calm.

The gentle murmur of awe that had filled the lobby moments earlier faded instantly. Every student halted mid-step, eyes darting towards her, their ears sharpening to catch every syllable. Even the sound of their breathing seemed to soften in the sudden stillness.

"This," Jane continued, gesturing lightly to their surroundings, "is where you will be sleeping for tonight. Each of you will proceed upstairs and claim a room for the day. Food will be delivered to your rooms at exactly eight o'clock this evening. Anyone who is not in their room at that precise time will forfeit their supper." She paused, giving the words time to settle and sink deep into their thoughts, before resuming.

"There is to be no fighting between students, none whatsoever. Should a fight break out, the instigator and the one who dares to throw the first punch will be expelled from the Academy immediately, without exception. You are free to explore as much as you wish, but be warned, your coins will only be valid here for a short time before becoming utterly useless. And, of course, I trust I do not need to tell you this, if anyone so much as blinks the wrong way at any of the residents here, the Principal will have your head... noble or not." Her voice lowered into a slow, almost chilling tone as she delivered that last line.

Many noble children had, in years past, sought to flaunt their status before the residents of the Separate Dimension, forgetting entirely that their rank and heritage meant absolutely nothing here. They had all paid the same price, the Principal had personally executed every single one of them, without so much as a moment's hesitation.

The noble children present now swallowed hard. Their families had already warned them before they arrived: abandon your pride, set aside your ego, and learn to survive, or perish swiftly.

"Now, to the most important matter," Jane's voice rose slightly, reclaiming their focus. "The examinations begin tomorrow at exactly 7:30 a.m. You are required to be standing in this very lobby no later than seven o'clock. If you are even a second late, you will be left behind, automatically disqualified. Remember this clearly, you must be within this lobby, not anywhere else." Her tone carried the sharpness of a warning carved into stone.

"Your rooms are equipped with sponges, soap, and all basic necessities, in case some of you arrived without any. That is all." Jane's delivery softened only slightly, regaining its calm.

"Any questions?" Her gaze swept across the gathered group. "And I dislike stupid ones," she added, her tone firm.

The silence was heavy. No one dared to speak, until Asher raised his hand. Jane's eyes shifted to him, and with a small nod, she granted him permission.

"Does the reality of Crymora reflect upon this place?" Asher asked plainly.

At his question, Jane's brow furrowed slightly, as though weighing the reason behind it. Murmurs of confusion spread among the others; many tilted their heads, clearly not understanding what he meant.

After a few moments, Jane responded simply, "Yes."

With no further elaboration, she turned on her heel and walked away. No one else had anything to ask.

Asher's gaze drifted downward toward the floor beneath the lobby. Beneath the polished surface, he could sense it, a powerful, concealed Astra radiating from below. Though hidden from ordinary perception, Astra could never be concealed from his Star Energy or his perfected Astra energy.

His eyes swept slowly across the entire lobby, memorizing every detail, the light fixtures, the high archways, the subtle carvings in the wood, before turning and making his way up the grand staircase, following the stream of students heading to claim their rooms.

Opening the door to his assigned room, Asher was greeted by a well-furnished interior, a neatly made bed, a small couch, a table and chair, with lamp holders hanging on the walls casting a soft glow. Stepping into the bathroom, he gave the place a brief inspection before returning to the bed and collapsing face-first with a deep sigh.

Rolling onto his back, he stared at the ceiling, not in contemplation, but in a kind of quiet emptiness, his mind still and detached.

Eventually, his eyes shifted toward the alarm clock on the table beside him. It was clearly placed there so students could wake up in time for the exam, though he knew full well that some would oversleep, forget to set it, or simply ignore it.

He didn't bother with it. He already had his own way.

'System, set an alarm for 6:30 a.m.,' he commanded mentally.

[Ding]

[Affirmative, Host]

With that settled, Asher rose from the bed and headed for the door. He intended to at least get a look at the outer areas of the Academy before returning to rest.

He had no real concern for the food that was supposed to arrive at eight o'clock. Lyra had already filled his space ring to the brim with dishes, fruits, and drinks, fussing over him like an overprotective mother sending her only child away to a boarding school notorious for serving bare, tasteless rations.

Of course, Asher had transferred all of it into his system inventory, better hidden there than sitting in his ring for others to see and assume he was some kind of obsessive foodie.

Stepping out of the building, he pushed open a side door and found himself inside a quaint restaurant. Without hesitation, he took a seat with an air of calm composure.

Almost immediately, a waiter approached with a menu. Asher flipped through it, scanning the selections before placing an order for several items. Even though Lyra's preparations had given him more food than he could possibly eat in a day, he still wanted to sample the local offerings.

Within minutes, his order arrived. He ate slowly, with the kind of unhurried ease befitting his status, savoring each bite.

His earlier question to Jane, about whether the reality of Crymora reflected here, had not been a random curiosity. What he truly wanted to know was whether Emovirae, the monsters and beasts of Crymora, still existed within this Separate Dimension.

If the Principal was the undisputed sovereign here, a god-like force within her own domain, could she simply will such creatures out of existence? Could she dictate that no emotion could give birth to Emovirae?

If that were possible, this Separate Dimension would have easily become one of the safest places in all Crymora.

When he finished his meal, Asher placed a single gold coin on the table and left. Outside, he saw many of the other students wandering about, exploring shops, streets, and the edges of the Academy's expansive grounds.

He spent the remainder of the evening doing much the same, strolling along stone pathways, observing hidden corners, noting exits and routes. The sky gradually darkened, and by the time he returned to his room, it was already 10 p.m.

A quick night bath left him feeling refreshed. Dressed in his pajamas, he sank into the bed, closing his eyes and letting the quiet consume him. Whatever exam awaited tomorrow, he would be ready.

Chapter 150: Separate

Asher could be seen lying on the bed on his side, a small blanket draped lazily across his frame. The luxurious comfort of the room was a far cry from what he had been accustomed to within the Wargrave estate.

At the same time, it made perfect sense.

Why would the Star Academy expend vast amounts of funding on accommodations for individuals who had not even proven themselves worthy by passing the entrance examination?

It would have been a monumental waste of resources. Some of the candidates would only remain for a single day, and the moment they failed, they would be teleported away, leaving behind the fleeting taste of what they could never claim. For such people, the Academy had no reason to go beyond the bare minimum.

Some might not even spend another hour within this Separate Dimension once their failure was confirmed.

Suddenly, something stirred Asher's consciousness from the endless abyss known as sleep.

[Host, wake up. It is already 6:30 a.m.]

The mechanical yet clear chime of the system resonated within his mind, dragging him out of his slumber.

Asher's eyelids fluttered open, and his striking purple eyes scanned the mildly familiar room.

A wide yawn escaped his lips as his body stretched, enjoying the satisfying sensation of muscles pulling and relaxing. For a brief moment, he simply lay there, one hand rubbing his eyes groggily as if he were trying to collect the scattered pieces of his consciousness and align them with reality.

'Should I have brought the bed from my room, like Lyra suggested before?' he mused internally, a hint of amusement in his thought.

Eventually, he sat upright and rose from the bed. He had only thirty minutes to prepare and be downstairs. No, twenty minutes, by his standards. He preferred to arrive ten minutes earlier than instructed, anticipating that sudden, unforeseen changes might occur.

With light yet unsteady steps born of lingering drowsiness, Asher made his way toward the bathroom. Another wide yawn forced its way out of him as his gaze landed on the mirror.

For a few moments, he simply stared at his reflection, as though studying the faint traces of sleep still clinging to his face. Then, with a deliberate motion, he bent down toward the sink-like structure and splashed cool water against his skin.

Within minutes, he had brushed his teeth and moved toward the bathing structure, which resembled a refined version of a bathtub. Warm water cascaded over his body, washing away not only physical weariness but also the fog that clung stubbornly to his mind.

The sensation of water tracing down his skin was refreshing, almost invigorating, and by the time he was finished, his senses were sharper and clearer.

Minutes later, Asher stepped out of his room, his posture carrying a calm steadiness. A towel was wrapped securely around his waist, while another rested over his head as he dried his damp hair. With a casual wave of his hand, his luggage appeared before him, summoned directly from his system space. He sifted through its contents carefully, selecting appropriate clothes and shoes before returning the luggage to storage.

He chose not to wear anything extravagant or restrictive. There was a chance today's exam might involve combat, and he had no intention of donning some stiff noble uniform that would hamper his movements or diminish his performance. Functionality outweighed appearances, at least for this occasion.

Taking a seat on the chair provided in the room, Asher pulled the table closer and retrieved a light meal. Bread, fried eggs, a glass of juice, and an apple, nothing more, nothing less. Simplicity had its own elegance, and besides, he didn't need anything heavy weighing him down during the exam.

'System, what's the time now?' Asher asked mentally.

[...]

Asher raised an eyebrow at the string of ellipses the system projected.

'Is the system malfunctioning?' he thought, puzzled.

[Host, there is a clock literally sitting in front of you. You do not even need to turn your head. All you have to do is look]

Asher stared at the words speechlessly. Yes, there was indeed a clock positioned directly in front of him, but that wasn't the point.

He had a personal system that served as his very own timekeeper, a luxury no one else in all of Crymora possessed. Why should he rely on something as mundane as a wall clock?

'System, shouldn't you feel honored? I don't even look at other clocks. I only ever ask you,' Asher replied in his mind, lips twitching with amusement.

[...]

[Host, I am a system, not a clock. Host should please take note of this distinction. The system does not possess emotions, and thus it cannot feel honored]

Asher chuckled softly, his smile widening as he countered, 'If you have no emotions, then why do you sound frustrated?'

[The time is 6:48 a.m., Host]

The system's voice chimed again, this time carrying the faint undertone of resignation, as though it had finally accepted its fate as nothing more than an overly advanced timepiece.

'Thank you. That wasn't so hard, was it?' Asher teased mentally as he rose from his seat. He cleared away the plate and utensils he had used, an action that might have seemed unusual for a noble but perfectly sensible to him. He couldn't bring himself to place dirty dishes into his system space simply because Lyra wasn't here to do it for him.

After all, unlike other nobles, in his past life he had washed plates millions of times.

Once everything was in order, he turned and left his room. The moment he stepped into the hallway, he realized he wasn't the only one awake. Others were emerging from their rooms as well, though that hardly surprised him.

Walking down the hallway with measured steps, Asher soon descended the staircase and found himself seated on a couch within the lobby.

He had half-expected at least one fight to break out despite the warnings they had been given. Human nature often led to conflict, and in a place brimming with prideful geniuses and peacocks... nobles, it wouldn't have been surprising.

But, the atmosphere remained calm.

Apparently, the heavy punishments dealt out in the past had left a strong enough impression for most to restrain themselves.

Glancing around, Asher estimated the number of people present. Yesterday, there had been over three hundred students. Now, barely two hundred and eighty remained, the rest, clearly were still sleeping in their rooms.

Some students leaned against the staircase railing, while others stood directly on the steps, ignoring the specific instruction to wait in the lobby. Their impatience was written across their faces, though Asher himself remained perfectly composed.

His gaze shifted as he noticed someone missing. William had yet to appear, and only five minutes remained before the hour struck. Two minutes later, however, Asher caught sight of him descending the staircase, yawning openly.

"Good morning, Tenth Sun," William greeted casually as he dropped onto the couch beside Asher.

Asher gave a small nod before replying, "You do realize that if you'd been a few minutes later, you would've been left behind, right?"

William smirked and shrugged. "I'm sure there's always a little time left on the clock. No need to come an hour early like you."

Asher said nothing further. Instead, he chose silence, waiting patiently as the final moments ticked away.

Then, suddenly his purple eyes sharpened as he felt a familiar energy stir beneath them. The Astra energy hidden underground roared faintly to life, he had sensed it the day before. The very air shifted, space trembling as though preparing to unravel.

'Another teleportation,' Asher thought, bracing himself.

In the next heartbeat, a flash of blinding white light enveloped everyone within the lobby, and they vanished.

Those standing along the staircase and those leaning lazily against the railing stared in shock.

Their mouths hung open in disbelief as they realized they had not been taken with the others. Confusion swept across their faces, but before any words could form, another blinding flash erupted, swallowing them along with those who had still been sleeping in their rooms.

Two separate teleportations.

Two separate destinations.